

# **WOMEN'S LIFE IN A FIJIAN VILLAGE**

Submitted by

Tamarisi Yabaki

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To all the women in Marama Village

*Vina valevu na yalo ni vitokoni qei nia lemuchu holia  
lemuchu gauna qeinia lemuchu i yau i na kea  
qwaravi rewa na vuli levu okwe.*

I dedicate this, my major academic attempt to  
my husband Nete and my children  
Ima, Mili, Boni and Lani  
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Their prayers and constant encouragement  
and support over the years have been everything  
a woman could wish for.

## **ABSTRACT**

The impact of the market economy is a significant challenge facing Fijian rural communities. It is especially challenging for indigenous rural women who are managing the shift from a subsistence way of living to engagement in money generating activities. The challenge is more acute amongst disadvantaged populations such as women in rural communities who lack the resources and the political power to manage these challenges. The thesis provides a critical ethnographic, action-research study of the daily socio-economic experiences of a group of Fijian village women, at this time of significant change. It provides an in-depth case study of a rural Fijian village located in the upper reaches of the Sigatoka Valley. The case study focuses on the women's perspectives about their daily lived experiences and actions that followed from reflection on these, drawing out from these implications for indigenous Fijian women's social progress and development. Herself, a member of the community, the researcher gathered data by a combination of participant observation, survey, diaries, focus groups and interviews. The researcher's observations and understandings were fed back to the participants in the form of a workshop with the intention of confirmation and to provide an opportunity for action based on this reflection. It is argued that the success of managing the influence of the market economy on the villagers is to create social and political spaces and opportunities to hear and understand local epistemologies and daily lived experiences, reflexively.

As an indigenous scholar, the researcher interrogates and deconstructs her own academic epistemologies and positions as a knowledge broker in order to co-construct new practices with her people. The research promises to make public Fijian village women's knowledge, values, practices and experiences so that they can be understood by local scholars and local government development officers. Privileging the village women's knowledge and bringing it to the core is a significant political act that might form the basis of proceeding political encounters that women will face in the development process.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis is a story shared by indigenous Fijian women about their lives in a rural village in Fiji. It is the story of their daily lived experience and how they perceive it in the context of their Fijian village community. It is a community where change, due to external market forces and modernity, is affecting the lives of these women and their families. There are new ways of living and behaving that have emerged as a result of this change; however, in this Fijian village, there are old ways that retain their credibility and influence. This ethnographic study focuses on the women's daily lived experiences through an in-depth case study of one such rural village, which – for the purposes of the study – is called Marama Village. The researcher gives voice to these women and hence shines the spotlight on the women's practices, beliefs, values and concerns through their daily lived experiences at a time when their village community is experiencing great change from market forces with its capitalist values and practices.

This thesis is not only about sharing and privileging women's stories and experiences, but it is also about gaining insight into the research process as it unfolds in the field, one which involves an indigenous woman researcher interacting with her own people.

The researcher also hopes that this research matters to indigenous Fijian women in ways that are both culturally appropriate and academically valued. The research process, although academic in nature, has simultaneously evolved into an ethical undertaking to make these indigenous Fijian women visible and audible not only in this thesis but more importantly within their families and village community. The study concentrates on the women's own perspectives and draws out from them implications as to how the rural village community, with its social system and infrastructure, might need to change to be more future-oriented and more inclusive of the potential interests of the women of the village.

This thesis emerged out of a collaborative relationship between the indigenous Fijian women in the village and an indigenous Fijian woman scholar using a framework of ethnographic action- and narrative-based research from a feminist research stance that addresses women's socio-economic experience. Action research evolved as a result of the collaborative relationship between the women and the researcher resulting in the Women's Own Fish Pond Project that was planned and implemented by the village women with the support of the researcher in the crucial initial stages. The meaning and substance of the research evolved through a multi-method approach as the researcher allowed the critical ethnographic approach to develop into new spaces of negotiation, interaction and relationships with the village women.

There was a conscious attempt to use these relational spaces to encourage the women to share their stories and to realise that, as women, their stories are meaningful and important. The research process provided meaningful opportunities for critical reflection for myself as I confronted existing stereotypical views and assumptions about this group of village women. As the fieldwork progressed, the researcher further encouraged women to take a critical stance and to voice their views on their needs, challenges and opportunities.

This study is situated within current research on the socio-economic and political dimensions of gender equality, training and empowerment in Third World countries and explores ways in which critical ethnographic interventions and participatory action research can be used to promote gender equality, rural empowerment and training (UN, 2005a). The research process is a vital platform which provides the space and time for these indigenous Fijian women to share their needs, perspectives, beliefs and concerns with other women. The thesis can be seen as part of the attempt by local female scholars, particularly in Third World countries, to improve the livelihood of local women to live their lives, love their families, work purposefully and have a connection to their community.

The thesis also includes a critical examination of the conceptual frameworks used for women's development and social progress, especially for grass roots women in the Third World.

My argument is that 'development theories', with their one-size-fits-all formulae for women's social progress and development, have created more crises than gain, for peripheral populations such as women in the Third World, including the Fijian village women in this study. The negative impacts of these growth-based developments have heightened doubts about the authenticity of the development programs for women in Third World countries because the outcomes do not appear to result in enhanced livelihoods for the majority of women and their families. Instead, there are manifestations of serious flaws which have critical consequences for rural women: poverty, an increase in socio-economic inequalities, declining living standards, environmental degradation and community fragmentation and violence. Despite gender sensitive documents and development initiatives, these women in the main are still marginalized because socio-economic infrastructures and systems are dominated by patriarchal values and persuasions.

Within this thesis, I argue that these village women need to be offered negotiated frameworks and concepts of training and development that are sensitive to their daily socio-economic experiences and challenges. The first part of this negotiation process involves the creation of space and opportunities for women to share their stories, to express their needs, challenges and opportunities. People ought to listen to understand but not necessarily respond immediately to women's stories. This will result in professionals and scholars fostering a process of conscientisation (Freire, 1985), leading to critical reflection of their respective standpoints as brokers of

knowledge and of whose interests they serve in any situation. This is a vital prerequisite to any meaningful co-construction of local frameworks for village women's development and training. In-built into this negotiation, is women's empowerment first and foremost at the individual and personal level.

Negotiations and development processes must include strategies that help Third World women develop the confidence to be more audible and visible in their own local communities. Perhaps women will then feel a sense of ownership and as a result be engaged in processes of development and training/education that are authentic and practical for their village context. Such development frameworks need to expand women's opportunities to access money and resources within workable social and traditional infrastructures.

The moral challenge and accountability rests with all those who live, work and relate to these village women. This includes the village men with their dominating patriarchal system; it includes the professionals with their mainstream development focus and privileged position that seem to be in need of a focus on conscientisation and reflexivity (Maynard & Purvis, 1995). Because of their power and privileged position, the indigenous men and developers and indigenous scholars are in need of a combination of reflexivity and a process of conscientisation that enables a critical interrogation of their privileged position, values and practices. This privileged position provides a power base for people to be influential and powerful, with the

consequences that others are disadvantaged and often become invisible and inaudible. The other critical question to ask is 'whose future, story and interests are being represented?' (Freire, 1972).

As an indigenous Fijian woman doing research amongst my own womenfolk, the challenge of an action research process was twofold. First, it was to create the opportunity for these women to identify and critically interrogate traditional cultural attitudes and prejudices regarding indigenous Fijian women's participation in the economic and social life of their village community. This was achieved principally through my daily relationship with the women throughout the course of the fieldwork. Kinship relationships in such a Fijian community are the social glue that binds people together and thus it is not unusual for Fijians to sacrifice economic and political mileage for the sake of maintaining their social relationships. Hence, my focus was on building relationships with the women because this was critical to this action research process. The second challenge was to examine and seek to understand the various aspects of how the women collaborated within the research process. In order for empowerment to be effective and meaningful, the women need their own political platform within their village community from which to work. This meant that a power base for women at the village level needed to be created to render their action meaningful and effective. The power base for these women was constructed through the researcher-participant interaction with individual women via the various research methods used in the fieldwork.

This process was enhanced throughout the six months of the fieldwork on which this thesis is based. Within the period, the women rekindled their individual confidence as well as their communal unity, which in turn provided a cohesive and authentic power base. This allowed instigation of practical ideas and the generation of development initiatives that were appropriate for this group of women.

In addition to caring for families and homes, women are the powerhouse of developing countries. They produce a staggering 60 % of all food, run 70 % of small-scale businesses and make up a third of the official labour force (Oxfam, 2000). Yet women are the casualties of the world's capitalist system and of economic progress and they remain invisible and inaudible in communities throughout the world. Women make up nearly 70 % of the world's 1.3 billion people living in poverty. Furthermore, women make up 65 % of the world's refugees and two-thirds of the world's illiterates (Oxfam, 2000). Women constitute two-thirds of the exploited workforce, own just one percent of the world's resources, and earn one tenth of the world's income. Less than one seventh of administrators and managers in developing countries are women and they hold only 10% of seats in the world's parliaments (Oxfam, 2000). This means that women have very little say in the political and decision-making platforms of nations and communities around the world and are far from equal with men. Women are not only poorer than men, but face social, economic, political and cultural discrimination on the grounds of gender.

Much development work is done without taking gender inequality into account, so that women and the children for whom they are most often responsible often lose out.

### **Introducing the researcher**

This research is not only the story of indigenous Fijian women in a rural village, but also the story of an indigenous woman scholar as she reconnects with her maternal relatives and *koro ni vasu* ('your mother's village') through the research project. Undertaking the research project was an opportunity to reflect and to think seriously about my status as an indigenous scholar in relation to the development and social progress of my people, especially the women.

I am the second eldest in a family of seven, including five brothers and a sister. Because my parents were teachers in a remote rural school, my grandparents looked after us in the city where I attended primary school for six years. My mother was a firm believer in providing the best education for her children, so my parents invested much of their finances in providing us with a good education. After primary school, I spent the next seven years in a prestigious boarding school for indigenous Fijian girls. This boarding school not only provided excellent education but was staffed by Fijian women professionals who were excellent role models for the girls. I was particularly attracted to the status and power of the school principal, an indigenous Fijian woman in her mid thirties. This became my dream and aspiration. The seven

years in boarding school provided an important platform where I gained confidence and a sense of security as a young educated Fijian woman. After gaining my first degree in education and now with three children in tow, I began my career as a teacher alongside my husband in a rural town. Starting off my career with a small family was a challenge; however, I found valuable family support from my mother and a grand-aunt. As a woman, I continued to appreciate and respect the important role that other women relatives had provided for me and my young family.

After ten years of teaching, I was transferred to the curriculum and advisory section of the department of education as an education officer. One of the principal roles of the section was school visitation where officers would spend a week visiting remote rural schools throughout the nation. It was during one such visit to one of the remotest schools that I began to realise how remote and isolated some of these schools were. There was certainly an enormous gap between the school curriculum we planned in our urban offices and the daily lived realities of these rural students. Questions began to flood my mind as to how we could lessen the gap so that our rural communities and their needs could be made more visible and audible. I realised that someone needed to bridge the gap and to be a voice for these invisible and inaudible communities. This provided the impetus for me to search for some solutions and, in particular, to explore how our national school curriculum frameworks can be tailored to the context of these rural school communities. The search for solutions brought me to Australia. I was awarded a UNESCO scholarship

to study in Australia and, after two years at university, I was particularly interested in women's empowerment and advocacy at the grassroots level.

As an indigenous Fijian woman, I decided to explore this issue as a case study which involved me working with women in my mother's village in Fiji. It seemed that such a study would prove very useful for many reasons. One of the important reasons is that by using an ethnographic research approach, I wanted to provide the space and opportunity for these village women to share their stories, hence providing much needed voice both at the village and national level. Women are the backbone of the village economy and, via this research; I aimed to help the women reflect on their roles in order to expand their socio-economic and political power base. By reflecting on their socio-economic status, the women would then be encouraged to become agents of change and progress in their families and community.

Very few Fijian women are blessed with the educational opportunity I have had to study abroad. Therefore, I believe that I have a moral obligation to offer my knowledge and resources to help improve the socio-economic status and livelihood of people in my community. I am fully aware of the expectations that my people have of me, given my academic qualifications, and I am equally aware that my people do not care how much I know, until I show them that I really care. To carry out this research in my mother's village was a great privilege because the women allowed me into their lives and shared their knowledge, values and practices without

demanding any reward or payment for this. As an indigenous researcher, such research is not as simple as it looks, however. The whole research exercise is a humble and a humbling activity (Smith, 1999).

### **The research question**

The thesis was a critical ethnographic, action-research study of the daily socio-economic experiences of a group of Fijian village women, at a time of significant change. It provides an in-depth case study of a rural Fijian village, that I have called Marama Village, located in the upper reaches of the Sigatoka Valley, Fiji. The case study focuses on the women's perspectives about their daily lived experiences, actions that followed from reflection on these, and it draws out from them implications for indigenous Fijian women's social progress and development.

The major research question for the study is: *How do indigenous Fijian women in a rural village perceive their daily lived experiences and how do these perceptions inform the process of gender equality, empowerment and development initiatives of indigenous Fijian women?*

## **Aims of the study**

The ethnographic study involved an initial six-month attempt to explore and to understand the daily challenges and needs of a group of indigenous Fijian women in a rural farming village via an in-depth case study. The study also provided the space and opportunity for the women and an indigenous local woman researcher to dialogue and critically analyse the women's socio-economic experiences and to work out ways to better address these challenges and needs. Finally, the study documents women's suggestions of the ways in which their lived experiences can be better reflected in the development, education and training initiatives for indigenous Fijian village women.

A series of sub questions that guided the research process are:

- a) What are the daily needs and challenges of this group of indigenous Fijian women?
- b) How are these constructed in a rural Fijian village context?
- c) What, in their view, are ways in which these needs and challenges may be addressed?
- d) How may these views be effectively reflected in development and training initiatives for indigenous Fijian village women?

As will become clear in Chapter Two, the research is significant because it addresses a gap in the literature on the daily socio-economic grass roots experiences of indigenous Fijian women within their local rural community. It is also significant in that it documents the return of a local indigenous woman scholar to work alongside the women in her own community. The project was made possible because the researcher is fluent in the local dialect and this became a powerful tool in engaging women in the research process in a meaningful way. The 'educational capital' of the local researcher was employed to serve the local village women, providing space for them to bring their gendered perspectives into a communal context and in acting as a bridge for external views to be mediated into and to inform village debates. The women themselves have significant perspectives already, which need to be heard, yet their views are also partial without the opportunity to share these perspectives both locally and nationally. Additionally, their education background and position means they do not have the confidence to take a stance on issues that concern them as women. As a result, it is hoped that the conduct of this project will heighten the level of their debate on local economic, cultural and educational issues, and empower the women to take further action as locally appropriate. In addition, the family unit of the Fiji village, as well as the communal aspects of the village, can be strengthened by such debate. With the recent political upheavals in Fiji, the indigenous people in Fiji have had to engage in critical self-reflection regarding their national identity as they ponder their social and political futures. The time is perfect to take the role of socio-economic progress more seriously at the local level. The research thus contributes to

building a more stable society and to being more reflective about the links between training, the economy and leadership.

As indicated, the project is also important to the researcher personally. The issue of women's training and development is particularly significant for a woman who has benefited from education and would like to share that benefit with women who have the potential to be just as capable. However, the colonial legacy and local cultural mores have tended to relegate the development of women to the periphery of society. The opportunity for a local woman to spend a significant amount of time in an in-depth study is a gift to me personally which I would like to share with my own village. Since I am also a senior government officer, the implications of the research, though not its confidential details, can be brought directly to inform professional practice as well as central policy in women's development and social progress in Fiji.

Over the last two decades it has become increasingly clear that a preoccupation with defining development in predominantly economic terms has frequently resulted in policies and programmes that have produced negative social outcomes, especially for women in the Third World. Social development, as a discipline and profession, is not just concerned with development planning that prioritizes social sectors (i.e. health and education) or social policy goals but more importantly with the need for a cross-sectoral, women-centered approach to development. An awareness of the social must be an integral part of all development policies and programmes and this means

an emphasis on socially sensitive policy formulation and implementation. It is a growing discipline that aims to refine development through its concerns for national and global diversity and social justice in order to better ensure development outcomes that are contextually sensitive, socially accountable and equitable. From the social development perspective, the primary goal of all policies and programmes must be the improved well being and dignity of all individual men and women. The bridging and vital component here is the professional practice of officers, practitioners and researchers who engage village women in development programmes and projects. With regard to professional practice, the over-arching vision in this thesis is to develop and inform skills of reflective practice particularly in the area of gender and empowerment at the village level. The complex challenges of global poverty and development are making ever greater demands on those working in aid agencies, governments, NGOs and policy and research institutes. Meeting these challenges calls for development professionals who can apply and integrate critical thinking and practical experience from a wide range of perspectives. Also important are leaders who are innovative in seeking meaningful solutions for women's development and social progress at the village level.

The research is timely, given the various global and regional commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment. It can inform current debates on whether Pacific women have made real progress. The newest of these commitments, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000), has issued a challenge on the

need to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. The obvious question for Fiji is whether our women specifically have made any progress and, if not, what aspects of our current policy and practices are not working?

In a global economy, the danger is that those who are already economically marginal and educationally remote will be even further left behind. The research focuses on the nexus between education and the economy in a rural setting, with a particular emphasis on women's development and training. This can contribute to globalisation literature, which is largely still the province of advanced western economies and cultures. If the world is to be truly 'global', then the perspectives of those positioned on the periphery in small island nations need to become as central to definitions and understandings of the 'global' as those in other countries.

### **Thesis structure**

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. This chapter has provided an overview of the thesis by outlining the aims, rationale and content of the research represented by this thesis. Chapter Two is a summary of the literature on current development frameworks and approaches that are implemented to address key issues in women's socio-economic progress and training. The chapter includes a summary of various development approaches and their impact on women in the Third World and also in the Small Island Developing States in the Pacific.

Chapter Three provides an outline of the major overall research methodologies and the specific methods that were used as research tools to gather information from this group of indigenous Fijian women. The research methodologies chosen centred on critical ethnography and action research, but included a combination of concepts from feminist research and narrative research. The chapter also discusses the challenges and paradoxes that the researcher experienced as an indigenous scholar during the fieldwork. Ethical issues are also addressed.

Chapter Four introduces the reader to Marama Village and includes a description of its physical and socio-economic characteristics. This provides an essential context for understanding the women's lives.

Chapter Five portrays a week in the life of these Fijian village women. The stories here are, in the first part, based directly on the women's diaries. I then enter into a reflection phase as I re-present in narrative form, through the lenses of my observations, the same week.

Chapter Six, extends the women's stories of what it is like to live in their village community by focusing on their experiences, thoughts, beliefs, hopes and concerns. The reflection embodied in this chapter is organised around a number of broad themes that have emerged from the analysis of the women's narratives. The themes

include: the woman and the family; the woman and the *vanua*; the woman and the church; the woman and the school; and the woman and the market place.

Chapter Seven takes the action research process into the action-upon-reflection stage. It outlines the women's workshop, the village clean up day and the resulting Women's Own Fish Pond Project. These were the participatory action components of the research. These activities provided a practical experience for the women to translate their views into action. Parallel to this is creating the political space for women to be able to make decisions and to co-construct their own concepts of development processes.

Finally, Chapter 8 weaves together the different strands of the research and discusses its implications for the development, training and empowerment of indigenous Fijian women, at both local and national levels.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **WOMEN, DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERMENT: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The literature addressed focuses on Third World development and specifically women's issues. It draws heavily on United Nations documents and commentaries on these, as well as on feminist analyses of development and empowerment. In addition to major reports from a range of relevant UN agencies, key authors discussed include the work of various researchers. Attention is paid to illustrations from current Pacific island literature and also to ways in which this research project implements some of the ideas in the literature.

Women's development and empowerment as they apply to Third World women at policy, research and implementation level continue to attract extensive debates on its ideologies, intent and nature. These debates take numerous forms because women throughout the world define and construct their identities, realities, experiences and values from different socio-economic and political contexts. Moreover, women characterize their identities based on their cultural, racial, sexual, and class backgrounds. These characteristics are further complicated by the inevitable effects of colonialism and imperialism with its capitalistic values which have perpetuated the peripheral position of Third World countries in the world economy. Given these complexities, there is no simple definition of this term and there is no clear cut set of

expected outcomes of its processes. The terms carry no simple definition because of the dynamic and problematic nature of the processes involved, as well as the complexity of the local socio-economic and political contexts within which women in the Third World find themselves.

Interest in the concept of development has advanced considerably since the United Nations' First Development Decade in the 1960s. One of the notable aspects of the development debate has been the effort to consider women as a key element of development policies and frameworks in all nations. The First United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975 adopted a World Plan of Action and established the overall vision for women's development and progress: Gender Equality – Development – Peace, and this continues to guide thinking about women's development, progress and empowerment today. Other milestones for women's development and progress include establishment of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Additionally, in March 2003, 171 countries ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), obligating governments to take action to promote and protect the rights of women. In 1995, governments across the world signed the Beijing Platform for Action. The emphasis of the Platform for Action (PFA) is on the integration of women as full and equal partners in decision-making processes, and increased attention to their rights in all areas of development.

In fact, the PFA represents the most extensive set of commitments ever made by governments to advance women's equality and human rights.

Much of the relevant literature on women's progress and development in the Third World tends to be guided by one of the following three general approaches to development and progress: the modernisation approach, women in development (WID) approach, and gender and development (GAD) approach. The modernisation approach asserts that development requires the emergence of rational and industrial man who acknowledges different opinions and is receptive to new ideas. This approach has marginalised women and their contribution in the Third World (Boserup, 1970). Mainstream development processes, therefore, largely benefited men and displaced women in the development scheme at all levels (Moser, 1991 b). During the 1970s, it was thought that the development process affected men and women in the same way. The focus was on economic productivity and this was equated with the cash economy and so women's work and contributions to the economy was ignored. However, it became apparent that economic development with its 'top-down' approach did not eradicate poverty and there remained an unequal distribution of the economic benefits of development (Momsen, 1991). For example, if commercial agriculture is introduced into the land as part of the development agenda, men have tended to be the ones to whom the benefits and inputs have been offered, yet women are still expected to maintain subsistence agriculture and offer their unpaid labour to men on the land where cash crops are

being grown. In many developing countries, increased cash-cropping has placed a high demand on women's labour. In Gambia, for example, women spend 159 days per year in work on the farms while men spend only 103 days (Mosse,1993). In addition to this work, women have to put in the extra hours for household maintenance and childcare.

The growth of feminism and the search for practical solutions to the failure of development resulted in the emergence of Women in Development (WID) as a transitional movement (Newland, 1991). The WID group had its impact on the development industry. They were seeking greater equity between women and men. Their efforts and advocacy led the policymakers to review women's role in the development process. Pressure on the United Nations resulted in the decision to hold a world conference on women and development in 1975. One of the main themes of this conference was equality between men and women. The meeting adopted a World Plan for Action. It listed its objectives relating to improved educational opportunities for women, better employment prospects, equality in political and social participation, and increased welfare services (Young, 1990). The United Nations General Assembly declared 1976-1985 the UN Decade for Women. 'The declaration of the International Decade for Women, with the official themes of Equality, Peace and Development signified the new visibility of Women in Development (WID) in international forums' (Kabeer, 1994: 4). The WID approach focuses on women as a group in their own right, whereas GAD approaches call for 'gender relations' (rather

than women) as the primary analytical tenet. Although the last three decades have seen an increasing range of analytical and policy approaches to gender and development, their original concern with women's disadvantage (and for the most part in feminist politics) has remained forceful in both research and academic writing. However, the irony remains that gender and development challenges are about improving the lives of women in the Third World (the periphery), whereas much of the conceptual framework and analysis on gender and development is based on the knowledge and practices of the so called powerful economies of western societies (the core).

Many Third World countries are ex-colonial states of powerful industrial nations and many parts of Africa and South-East Asia have experienced long periods of direct control by colonial rulers. One theme that has become vital to Third World feminists and scholars is the extent to which the colonies, their raw materials and their population were seen as natural resources to be exploited (Mosse,1993). Hence the exploitative economic and political frameworks that powerful nations used on less developed countries and much of these framework still form the basis of development programmes today ( Mosse, 1993).

### **The Women in Development Approach (WID)**

The Women in Development approach is based on liberal feminism which generally

treats women as a homogeneous group and assumes that gender roles will change as women gain an equal role to men in the development of education, employment, and health services. This approach is also closely linked to modernization theory which is associated with improved technology, an increase in divisions of labour and literacy, growth of commercial facilities, urbanization, and the decline in traditional authority. Modernization theory dominated mainstream thinking in the international development agencies from the 1950s to the 1970s. It was assumed that higher standards of living would benefit the entire population and reach the grassroots through a trickle- down effect. For women, however, this did not occur.

The Women in Development (WID) approach, better known as the ‘anti-poverty approach’, was developed as a result of the rising concern by academic research which revealed ‘gender blindness’ in the design and execution of development projects resulting in women being overlooked, sidelined and even harmed by such interventions (Moser, 1993). Ester Boserup introduced the approach of Women in Development in her book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*. She argued that modernization in agrarian societies resulted in a gendered division of labour which relegated women to carrying-out subsistence tasks. Boserup found that a shift from subsistence agriculture to machine- based economics did not liberate women; instead it often intensified their oppression.

According to the UNESCO’s gender mainstreaming implementation framework, the WID approach aimed to integrate women into the development process by targeting

them in women-specific activities. One of the major emphases of WID projects was to make women more efficient producers of goods and services, thereby increasing their personal or collective income. Although many WID projects have improved health, income or resources in the short term, many were not sustainable because they did not address the unequal relationships between men and women. In this approach, there was an initial concern for equality between men and women that was based on the emergence of liberal feminism in the Western world, but this lacked sensitivity to the perspectives and contexts of Third World men and women. Consequently, the interest in WID shifted to poor women and poverty alleviation, and women were constructed as vulnerable, as victims and as invisible. In the 1980s, the WID focus shifted to economic efficiency in which the emphasis was on capturing women's productive capacity and women's labour input.

A common critique (Kihoro, 1992) of the WID approach includes three major points. One is that it has taken little account of the long work hours and onerous nature of the work undertaken by recipients in their triple role as domestic workers, farmers and wage-labourers. Studies have shown that in developing countries women, especially poor women, work an average of 12 to 18 hours a day compared to an average of 8 to 12 hours a day for men (Jacobson, 1993; Momsen, 1998). Most women in the Third World have a longer working day than men and are often used as a reserve supply of labour that can be called on at periods of peak demand in the agricultural calendar. For example in Sri Lanka during the peak season, women work

as much as 18 hours per day and in a month women can work up to 569 hours while men work 420 hours (Wickramasinghe, 1993). Further, income-generating projects for women have actually increased the workload for many of them and the additional workload for women has been ignored. Also overlooked is the low status put on women's lives which in turn greatly affects the women's families and communities. For women, this limits their access to land, resources, credit, machinery, markets for their products and control over income raised. The low status of women is rooted in the male dominated traditional institutions and socio-economic infrastructures where power and decision-making has remained in the hands of men in all communities throughout the world.

Colonialism with its capitalist economy has marginalized women and has significantly contributed to the double burden of work on women by establishing a capitalist economy that is foreign to the semi-subsistence livelihood of local women. Consequently, this type of market economy created urban migration and left women to carry on their own workload plus the workload of their absentee males who had migrated to urban areas in search of better-paid work. For example, a particular feature of urbanization in Africa is that often it involves young men migrating to towns, leaving women who are already burdened with huge domestic responsibilities, to do the farming as well (Morna, 1992). United Nations figures show that African women work an average of 65 hours a week and compared to their male counterparts the gap can be as high as 12 to 13 hours (Morna, 1992).

Another flaw is that WID projects tend to ignore men's roles and responsibilities in women's (dis)empowerment. The biggest difference between WID and GAD is that WID projects traditionally were not grounded in a comprehensive gender analysis, whereas the GAD approach is gender-analysis driven. However, there is definitely a need for women-specific and men-specific interventions at times, because these complement gender initiatives and are especially appropriate for the patriarchal social systems of Pacific communities. Research shows that the success of both sex specific and gender activities has a direct link with the depth of the gender analysis that informs them (UNESCO, 2003/4).

Despite its drawbacks, the Women in Development approach is still commonly used by international organizations including the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

### **The Gender and Development Approach (GAD)**

The Gender and Development (GAD), or empowerment, approach interrogates the underlying causes of women's subordination to race, class, colonial history, as well as the position of developing countries within the international economic order (King, 2003). GAD is located within a feminist framework in which the objective is to empower women to be agents of change and to transform the structural norms that

oppress and suppress their potential and capabilities. GAD encourages a broader conceptual and more practical approach to development in which there is a move from primarily women-centered development projects to a broader focus on gender relations that fosters gender equality. This involves the recognition that women's practices, experiences, beliefs and values are grounded in their relationship with men (Pearson & Jackson, 1998). GAD also recognizes that men must commit and agree to meet the strategic as well as practical needs of women (Moser, 1993). One of the major arguments in this approach is that, for effective training and development to occur, the women's local realities and contexts should be taken into account. Identifying what works for local communities of women requires consultation with stakeholders – both men and women – on key issues and actions. The focus of this thesis extends this notion further by exploring and documenting specifically the local contexts of women's experiences, in this case a rural Fijian village, rather than assuming broad engendering experiences and contexts.

Action research for empowerment has grown considerably since 1994 and there is now a better idea of both the successes and failures of this methodology and approach. GAD approaches accept that gender relations are social, historical, cultural and religious and as such can be altered (Pearson & Jackson, 1998). There are also recent 'success' stories in developing countries. However, certain problems continue to hamper this approach both in theory and practice, particularly as it relates to women. For example, the gap appears in understanding and interrogating both the

local and national power structures, discourses and practices so that they are conducive to the empowerment and emancipation of the local women populace. Initiatives for local women's empowerment and development have tended to ignore the impact of national and regional power structures, discourse and practice (Parpart, 2000b). Perhaps there is so much focus at the local level that developers and researchers fail to weave or contextualise these into the much broader national and global power and socio-economic structures. Moreover, government bureaucracies and government officials have little understanding of local village systems and power dynamics (Thompson, 1995). Related to this is the fact that development practitioners and researchers have reservations about the knowledge and potential of local community, especially women. I believe that this stems from the limited knowledge and understanding practitioners have of the daily lived realities of women at the local level. Many practitioners enter local communities with genuine motives and intentions, but much of the research and empowerment process is done on their own terms and conditions. For example, in Zimbabwe, Goebel (1998: 25) discovered that many practitioners failed to acknowledge the socio-economic realities of the local community and integrate their knowledge into these realities. This challenge is acute amongst practitioners who come from cultures where women's subordination and need for direction is taken for granted (Parpart, 2000b).

Participatory and collaborative approaches and practices do not always fit in with the women's daily lived experiences. For example, in the research conducted for this

thesis, it was not easy to get women together for discussion until late into the night as for most of the women this was their only free time. Doing research with local village women meant asking a big favour on the women's part as their days were filled with domestic, social and economic chores as well as their own farm activities. For some of the women, participating in research just became another duty or burden.

Another major flaw with this approach is that local women often do not have the necessary knowledge and skills, let alone the power base to make them effective participants in this research process. Yet we know that women, especially local village women, need specific skills to be critical and to be able to interrogate and challenge traditional norms and stereotypes of inequality that make up their lives.

Critics such as Arturo Escobar (1995) and James Ferguson (1999) have pointed their finger at the authoritarian, top-down approach of development practices used by western trained development experts, criticising them for their reluctance to listen to the voices and experiences of the people, including those of women. Established approaches for the development of women, such as WID and GAD, have also been criticised for implementing western-based notions of development and progress and for their tendency to ignore the voices of marginalised women and men (Marchand & Parpart, 1995). However, difficulties in overcoming traditional cultural attitudes and prejudices regarding women's participation in the socio-economic and political

spheres have marred the success of women's development projects and training in most Third World countries. Related to this is a lack of knowledge of the nature and characteristics of development processes that engage and integrate women. Basically, it springs from the fact that developers have a very superficial idea of how local people do things. More importantly, the poor status of Pacific women also stems from the lack of a concrete and unified framework for locally constructed indigenous epistemologies and understandings of women, development and empowerment.

These critiques have facilitated a shift towards a focus on the empowerment approach and a rejection of the top-down approach to women's training and development. The empowerment model emphasises respect for the knowledge and experiences of the local women and calls for participatory development practices that will empower women (and men) (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). In the twenty-first century, participation and empowerment have become the watchwords for women's development and progress including mainstream institutions such as the World Bank as well as grass roots non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Consequently, methodologies such as Collaborative Action Research and Participatory Rural Appraisal have become popular amongst Third World communities because of the empowering nature of these approaches (Chambers, 1994; Wadsworth, 1998).

However, the extent to which these methodologies make a genuine attempt – that is,

developing methodologies that respect and privilege local women's knowledge, experience, practice, feeling, thinking and being, to understand how local communities function and do things – remains problematic. In this respect, external knowledge and skills of informed women leaders and scholars ought to be seen as catalytic and conducive to meeting the local women's real needs and challenges. Following this is the need to weave these research processes and outcomes into the broader national and global power structures, discourses and practices, because most development projects have to deal with local government structures and officials at one point or another.

### **The Women, Environment and Sustainable Development Approach (WED).**

Women, Environment and Sustainable Development (WED) is a theme that arose in the early 1980s as a result of the increasing environmental destruction and the overall feminization of poverty in the Third World. In many communities in developing countries, women and men continue to have different needs and interests in the natural environment (Dankelman and Davidson 1988). These arise out of particular cultural traditions, various experiences of colonial rule, specific impacts of the global economy, and other locally relevant factors, such as climatic patterns (Stamp, 1989). They are reflected in the prevailing gender-based division of labour; in the various responsibilities and rights that women and men have in the use and ownership of land, trees, animals, plants, and water; and in the different knowledge that women and men may have about the sustainable management of particular natural resources

and ecological zones (Dankelman and Davidson 1988). As a result of these factors, women's and men's environmental perceptions, their interests and rights in the natural environment, and their environmental awareness and knowledge may differ significantly from one another, and from one cultural or ecological context to another, even in the same country.

As producers of food, energy, fodder, water, medicines, and income, women rely heavily on cropland, animals, trees, and common property resources in forests, rangelands, rivers, and lakes. Even urban women may continue to rely on natural resources in the city (especially in the form of urban agriculture) and from the countryside (fuel wood and charcoal) to meet their basic household needs (Lee-Smith and Trujillo 1992). In their involvement with the natural environment, women act as local environmental managers and decision-makers, and they have a keen interest in, and often substantial knowledge of, strategies for environmental conservation and protection (Kettel, 1995).

Two decades of "women in development" research have demonstrated that women are central in the production of food and the provision of energy, water, health-care, and income in the developing world (Dankelman and Davidson 1988). They produce at least 80% of all food crops in sub-Saharan Africa, 70–80% in south Asia, and 50% in Latin America and the Caribbean (Jacobson, 1992). Fuel collection, as long as it is not commercialized, is mainly a task for women, with some help from the children. As the ecological situation deteriorates because of deforestation, women have to

spend more time and (human) energy collecting fuel. Depending on the ecological characteristics of the area in which they live, women may spend up to five hours a day on fuel collection (Dankelman & Davidson, 1987). New coping strategies, for example the use of alternative energy supplies as dung and crop residues, can lead to further deterioration of the environmental situation by affecting the soil fertility. The poor in the Third World have no choice but to destroy their own environment: they are trapped in a vicious circle.

I believe that the goal of sustainable development can be achieved if women's participation in environmental projects is supported by strategic policies to ensure women's representation and involvement in all stages of development projects.

### **Women's development in the Third World**

Development programmes for women today have evolved out of two mainstream development approaches: the conservative 'modernization' approach and the radical 'dependency'/underdevelopment approach (Hoogvelt, 1976; Blostrom & Hettne, 1984; Webster, 1984). The basic assumption of the conservative 'modernization' approach is that with a certain level of industrial production and education combined with a certain proportion of population in towns to supply labour, Third World countries will 'take off' into sustained economic growth (Rostow, 1990). Similarly, the 'dependency/underdevelopment' orientation positions Third World countries as structural dependent on First World markets to purchase their produce (mainly primary or agricultural products) in order to buy the foreign exchange needed to

finance infrastructure and services required for development of schools, transport networks, hospitals, etc. (Brydon & Chant,1993). From the point of view of women, these development frameworks have little or no place for them. This flaw was first identified by Boserup (1970), who seriously challenged the argument that benefits from development projects would automatically “trickle down” to women and other disadvantaged groups in Third World nations. Boserup advocated incorporating women into development programmes especially those that enhanced women’s economic independence and status in their families and local communities.

A persistent problem for Third World women around the world is the deep rooted mainstream ideology and institutions of colonialism and imperialism that is incompatible and foreign to their social and political experiences and context. (Jayawardena,1986;Mohanty,1991;Aguilar,1998). This problem has been highlighted by the works of noted Third World feminists such as Kumari Jayawardena (1986), Chandra Mohanty (1986, 1991) and Uma Naraya (1997) all of whom integrate issues of race, class, colonialism, and imperialism into their view of the struggle for gender equality and empowerment. Mohanty (1986, 1991) is well known for her decades of engagement with feminist struggles. She has, through her belief in the power and significance of feminist thinking, brought to the international arena the particular struggles of Third World women as she interrogates and deconstructs the notions and processes of decolonization, anti-capitalism and feminist commitments to economic and social justice. Naraya (1997) focuses on the notion of nation, identity and tradition to show how Western and Third World scholars have misrepresented Third

World cultures and feminist agendas. Jayawardena (1986) is another noted Third World feminist who reconstructs the history of women's rights movements in Asia and the Middle East from the 1800s to the 1980s. Her research illustrates that feminism was not a foreign ideology imposed on Third World countries, but instead, was indigenous to Asia and the Middle East as women struggled for equal rights and against the subordination of women in the home and in society in general. Much has been achieved through the works of these feminists to be the voice of Third World women in international agendas of social progress and economic development.

In spite of three decades of attention by state government and international agencies to 'integrate women into mainstream development, women especially from the Third World women have either been left out of the development processes or have derived little benefit from these projects. Women throughout the Third World face enormous socio-economic and political challenges that are external to their local communities while other challenges are deeply inherent in their local socio-economic and political cultures and institutions. For example the mainstream development policies and infrastructures of rich and powerful countries promote only economic growth and profit which often bypasses and ignores the national interests and needs of Third World countries. On the other hand in most Third World countries, local cultures and indigenous ideologies have deep rooted values, beliefs and practices that discriminate women which has made them invisible and inaudible. For example, in the highly patriarchal social system in Fijian villages women may be present at village meetings but are not expected to voice their opinions. They can only voice their opinions

outside this forum within their family household. However, in the urban areas and in professional arenas, Fijian women are visible and audible because of their socio-economic and professional security and status.

The 1980s was a decade of economic crisis for many Third World countries because of the changing political and economic agendas of powerful nations and international financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB). These political and economic agendas led to a marked increase in the dominance of monetarist, market-based economies at the national and international level (Afshar & Dennis, 1992), which in turn forced major social and economic structural adjustments in Third World countries. Many Third World countries had no option but to align their economic and social policies accordingly. One of the serious effects of these structural adjustments policies was that Third World nations have had to reduce public sector expenditure on welfare, education and social programmes. Women who rely heavily on welfare and public sector services to sustain their families suffered the brunt of the ensuing hardship. Frances Stewart (1992) noted that a higher burden of work can result in poor attendance at school for girls who may be sharing the burden with their mothers, resulting further in lower levels of concentration, more resentment and a breakdown of family and subsequently of social cohesion. In Jamaica, for example, real expenditure on education per head fell by over 30 per cent in the period 1980 to 1985 and on health by 20 per cent (Boyd, 1987).

In Zambia real expenditure on health fell by 22 per cent from 1982 to 1985 (Stewart, 1992). Women shoulder the heaviest burden of poverty and stress resulting from these cutbacks (Afshar & Dennis, 1992).

Although the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and newly industrialized ones (NICs) recovered from this crisis, the Third World did not. The worsening debt crisis, deterioration in terms of trade, as well as weakness in state policies, worsened the situation in Third World nations. As a result many people in Third World countries became poorer, faced greater unemployment resulting in less money to spend, worked longer hours, had fewer benefits or social support systems, and generally faced bleak and uncertain future (McMichael, 1996). In Latin America for example, the 1980s were known as the 'lost decade' as the countries' economic gains had been indirectly eaten away by the preceding global economic system (Branford & Kucinki, 1988). Development and all its promise was not providing better living conditions for people; in fact poverty came to be seen as a necessary evil to development itself!

In the late 1980s, female academics from First and Third World Countries joined with researchers in major donor institutions, such as the Asian Development Bank, to assess the development challenges of Third World women and to formulate new directions in women's development and empowerment. One major challenge identified was the tendency to relegate Third World women to a homogenous category of passive, backward and ignorant women. This denies the fact that Third

World women come from a diversity of social and economic backgrounds based on gender, class, ethnicity, age, marital status and so on at different points of time and in different contexts (Rai, 2002). Another problem identified was the belief that simply extending education and employment opportunities to these women would solve their problems. Furthermore, treating women as “add-ons” in development activities meant they are of secondary importance resulting in women receiving token funding. There is much evidence to indicate that Third World women were marginalized and disadvantaged by development policies and practices which often stemmed from a lack of knowledge regarding the complexities of women’s subordination (Pearson & Jackson, 1998). Therefore, in development initiatives for women, there is a need to for collaborative efforts to empower women to critically interrogate these challenges. Hence, the need for a gender lens to be used to understand the dynamics of change in societies.

The combined efforts of the United Nations, international donor agencies and women’s advocacy groups in Third World countries, since the 1990s, have brought renewed hope in managing these deep seated challenges and to improving both national and local strategies for gender equality and empowerment especially amongst grassroots women. Two major development thrusts in the 1990s are likely to have an impact on the lives of women in Third World Countries in the coming years – the globalization of the economy and the localization of political processes (Murthy, 2001). Two major problems seemed to confront women in since the 1990s in the context of globalization. The first is the issue of poverty particularly affecting

women from economically and socially marginalized groups. The second relates to the broader issue of human rights violations affecting all groups of women (Murthy, 2001). These processes inevitably come at a cost for Third World nations, where people have had to face socio-economic and political fractures and upheavals. However, there are several barriers to women really exercising their powers in these processes including the harsh economic realities of women's lives, male resistance to women exercising political power, women's lack of knowledge about the functioning of current political processes including their rights and their lack of access to literacy, numeracy and other functional skills. Therefore the challenge in this century is to work towards the economic, social and political empowerment of women from the marginalized sections. Women's empowerment may be referred to as a collaborative process of 'exposing the oppressive power of the existing gender and social relations, critically challenging them, and creatively trying to shape alternative social relations' (Wieringa, 1994:833). Crucial in this process is to identify and challenge the economic, social and political aspects of gender based oppression. According to Ranjani Murthy (2001), Third World development programmes for women's empowerment are working to:

...enhance women's access and control over productive endowments; expand women's access to extension services, credit facilities, education, information and training; increase women's control over their income, and their able to use it for their own survival and security and for that of other family members; increase the ability of women to gain control over their bodies, fertility, sexuality and identities ;and increase the women's ability to exercise their political power in their local communities as well at the national level.

(Murthy, 2001:19)

Murthy further suggests a combination of strategies to bring about these changes and these include advocacy strategies, capacity building strategies and organizational strategies.

### **Women, development and empowerment in the new millennium**

The endless disenchantment with established mainstream development policies has spurred the increase in research and work on participatory empowerment approaches. This has gradually gained popularity in the development community resulting in huge efforts and development activities carried out amongst poor and grassroots women in the Third World. As a result women's advocacy groups, professionals and scholars have gained a deeper understanding and have learned vital lessons on women's progress and empowerment in the Third World which in turn has provided a secure and meaningful platform to propel their efforts into the new millennium.

The first platform is the understanding that women in the Third World are not passive victims of poverty and human rights violations. Experience from the field clearly indicates that women in the Third World are actively engaged in a struggle to meet their family needs daily, to survive despite their disadvantages and to gain

control over their economic, social and political resources and to live a life of dignity (Murthy, 2001).

Second, initiatives for women's empowerment may begin at different points. Women's empowerment can begin with economic strategies, social strategies, social strategies or a combination of these strategies. For the past fifty years, developed countries and donor agencies have provided the capital, personnel and resources for women's social progress and development programmes. As such these countries provide pre-defined guidelines and the terms of reference for development programmes and in most cases incompatible with local women's needs and priorities. Ideally, guidelines and framework should be defined by the women themselves based on the socio-economic and political context of the communities in which they live (Murthy, 2001).

Third, any effort at women's empowerment would need to recognise that women have multiple identities based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age, marital status, education achievement, and social status and so on (Murthy, 2001). Women's empowerment strategies should therefore be context and temporal specific. Finally, empowerment of women cannot be effective in a top-down approach and neither can standard models be simply modified to achieve women's empowerment (Murthy, 2001).

Murthy suggests that the process of empowerment is ‘iterative, non-unilinear and perhaps never complete’ (Murthy, 2001 : 351). Frameworks such as the Gender Analysis Frameworks, the Gender Roles and Needs Framework, or the Gender Analysis Matrix are dominant gender equality frameworks that may need to be used discreetly depending on the local context in which women find themselves. Meaningful and workable processes are those in which the goals are worked out by the local women themselves and the responsibility of planning, monitoring and evaluating the approach is also carried out by the women. Last but not the least, it is important and wise to work with men on gender issues as this will expand women’s empowerment

### **Gender mainstreaming**

In July 1997, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) defined the concept of gender mainstreaming as follows:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality.

(UN, 1997:2)

The annual reviews on women's development and progress produced by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the last decade have focused on different themes of women's lives across the globe. For example, UNIFEM's Report on The Progress of the World's Women in 2000 focused on a number of common themes that have emerged regarding women's lives at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These included: a closing but persistent gender gap in education; the fact that women's lives were shaped by the decisions they made in their reproductive years; women's continued effort to seek influence at all levels of decision-making; the need for a more comprehensive approach to women's work and economic activity; the daunting toll of HIV/AIDS on women around the world; and the dissemination of gender-sensitive data and information for planning and evaluation (UNIFEM, 2000). While the UNIFEM 2000 report highlighted these themes, UNIFEM's 2002 report on Progress of the World's Women highlighted improvements made towards women's empowerment within the context of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNIFEM, 2002). The MDGs were created and adopted by 147 head of states and governments in 2000 and these eight goals became the development agenda for these countries. The agenda focused on the current concerns of global development. These include peace, security, development, environmental sustainability, human rights and democracy (UN, MDGs, 2000). Goal Three of the MDGs directly addresses gender mainstreaming, calling on nations to

‘promote gender equality and empower women.’ While gender equality is stated explicitly in that goal, the report states that it is necessary to recognise that gender equality is critical in achieving all development goals (UN, MDGs, 2000).

### **Analysing with a gender lens**

In 2003, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) produced a report which analysed the reports from thirteen countries in relation to the MDG’s. The analysis identified whether women’s concerns were visible across reports from each country regarding the eight MDGs. One of the findings of the analysis indicates that gender was not a cross cutting concern in the eight MDGs. In other words, gender concerns were not addressed across all the eight development goals. Of the thirteen reports studied, seven reports mentioned gender concerns in Goal Five (maternal mortality). Six of the thirteen country reports include gender issues in Goal One (poverty). Gender issues were neither reflected in Goal Seven (environment) nor Goal Eight (development cooperation). The analysis report also indicated that reports on implementation of the MDGs for Armenia and Tanzania showed the greatest degree of gender interaction across the sectors, having gender mentioned in five of its eight Millennium Development Goals. Ten of the thirteen countries addressed gender concerns in Goal Six (HIV/AIDS). In Goal Two (education), gender concerns were mentioned in eight of the thirteen reports. Under Goal Four (infant mortality), women’s concerns were mentioned in only four of the reports. Mozambique was the

only country that mentioned women under Goal Seven (environment), while Mauritius was the only country that included women's concerns under Goal Eight (development cooperation). Women's concerns are heavily mentioned within obvious sections of the MDGs, including women's empowerment and maternal mortality, but they are not given the same emphasis in the other sections of the MDGs (UNDP, 2003).

Emerging global challenges such as worldwide poverty, terrorism, violence against women and the alarmingly high incidence of HIV/Aids have made gender mainstreaming an ever present socio-economic and political challenge for many countries throughout the world. It is argued in the 2003 UNDP Report that the challenge for bringing gender issues to centre stage of the MDGs can be addressed 'through the use of disaggregated data and qualitative information on critical gender issues across goals and targets' (UNDP, 2003:24). Additionally, for gender mainstreaming, it is wise to devise strategies that are within each nation's capacity to implement. A crucial avenue is education.

### **A closing but persistent gender gap in education**

Education and training are seen as vital to women's progress and empowerment (e.g., Chambers, 1994, Parpart, 2000a). Research (e.g., Mayo, 1997; Velkoff, 1998; Foley, 1999; Huybrechts, 2002) shows that for women and girls secondary education is

associated with improved economic prospects, better reproductive health, improved HIV awareness and altered attitudes towards harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting. Educated girls are more likely to delay marriage and childbearing, and instead acquire skills to improve economic prospects for themselves and their families. Their children also benefit: every year of a mother's education corresponds to 5 to 10% lower mortality rates in children under the age of five (UNFPA, 2005).

It is stated in the UNICEF 2004 *The State of the World's Children Report* that 'the global number of children out of school remains undiminished at 121 million and the majority are still girls, in fact 65 million girls. Of this staggering figure, 83% of them are found in sub-Saharan Africa, South and East Asia and the Pacific (UNICEF, 2004). Despite evidence that clearly shows that the education of girls, and — in particular — secondary education, is critical to poverty reduction and development, the world has failed to meet the MDGs target to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 (UNFPA, 2005). The gender gap in education has left illiterate nearly twice as many women as men. In the poorest regions, more girls than boys are out of school and the gap widens at the secondary level. While access to primary education is increasing, only 69% of girls in Southern Asia and 49% in sub-Saharan Africa complete primary school. At the secondary level, the gap is even wider with only 47% and 30% enrolment in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, respectively (UNFPA, 2005).

While the numbers may seem grim, there are pockets of good news. In 2004, it was found that ‘nearly two-thirds of developing countries improved on girls' enrolment over the decade, with the biggest improvements seen in Benin, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan and Sudan. In Morocco, the proportion of girls' enrolment in rural areas shot up from 44.6% from 1997 to 1998 to 82.2% from 2002 to 2003’ (UNICEF, 2004). But ‘girls’ primary school completion rate still lags way behind boys’, at 76% compared with 85%’, which means that ‘millions more girls than boys are dropping out each year’ (UNICEF, 2004). On the other hand, ‘although there are signs of progress at primary level, there is still a noticeable gap at secondary level. Overall, gender parity on entry to lower secondary education has been reached in 60 out of 133 countries reporting data.

In 46 countries, most of them in Africa and Asia, girls are less likely to enter lower secondary school than boys’ (UNFPA, 2005). Improvement in school enrolment over the years has resulted in higher literacy rates among young adults. In higher education, women in general have achieved significant gains in enrolment (Grown, 2004). The gender gaps in education and health have been reduced between the 1970s and 1990s. However, the number of women in the economic and political arenas has changed very little. There is a need to tailor educational and development initiatives so there is a better and a more authentic ‘fit’ between women’s socio-economic realities and development frameworks. Gender equality in primary school

enrolment has been nearly achieved in most developing regions. However, Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia lag behind, with ratios that remain low in spite of progress between 1990 and 2002. These regions will most likely miss the target of closing the gender gap in primary education by the year 2015. Of some 65 developing countries with full data, about half have achieved gender parity in primary education, about 20% in secondary education and 8% in higher education (United Nations, 2005 a).

In Fiji, national statistics indicate that school enrolments for girls in terms of access and participation have improved both at primary and secondary school level. The Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel in 2000 reported an increase of 19.8% of girls' access and participation in primary schools, and a 405% increase in secondary schools between 1970 and 1999. The Commission also reported that, from 1995, there have been more girls than boys in secondary schools. However, the 1996 Census showed marked gender differences in the educational attainment of those aged fifteen years and over. The census indicated that 4.4% females over fifteen years have never attended school compared to 1.7% for males. There is also a difference when one looks at post secondary school attainment where females record 8.6%, while males record 11.1% (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 1999).

Literacy rates indicate that the educational status of Fijian women is not significantly different from that of men, except in terms of science and technology areas of study

where women lagged behind. Therefore, career choices in these fields for most girls and young women are still restricted. One of the factors is the gender stereotyping of subjects that schools offer to boys and girls. Schools predominantly offered home economics and typing to girls, while technical and vocational subjects were offered to boys. For example, in male dominated fields such as engineering and marine studies, the Fiji Institute of Technology in 1996 showed a 3% enrolment for females, while enrolments for secretarial studies and office administration had over 98% females (Government of Fiji, 1998). These statistics illustrate the prevailing attitude of gender stereotyping which will require continued and persistent effort to deconstruct.

Efforts for gender mainstreaming – the integration of the gender perspective into every stage of policy processes – by government and various women’s groups in Fiji is clearly an issue and there are still many areas to be interrogated in the field of gender equality. For example, mainline ministries have yet to embrace and construct gender policies and guidelines to authenticate national efforts on women’s development and empowerment.

### **The active participation of women in decision-making arenas**

The goal of increasing women's political participation is a long-standing challenge. Despite global recognition of the fundamental right of women to participate in

political and public life, women are underrepresented at most levels of government and have made slow progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies. UNIFEM's Report in 2003 indicates that women are still on the whole largely absent from parliaments. They account for about 14% of members in 2002 overall. Given the target of 30% representation in parliament, only 11 countries had reached the 30% benchmark in 2002 – Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Norway, Iceland, the Netherlands, South Africa, Costa Rica, Argentina and Mozambique. All of these countries have used quotas to improve participation (UNDP, MDG Report, 2003). Furthermore, the indicators of progress show systematic differences between wealthy and poor countries and an undeniable link between poverty and gender inequality. There are no such differences in terms of women's participation in national governments. This is the only indicator that is not affected by national poverty, resulting in the fact that in some wealthy countries, women's political participation is well below that achieved in many developing nations. The United States, France and Japan, where women's share of parliamentary seats are 12%, 11.8% and 10% respectively, lag behind 13 developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, an area which is experiencing the greatest poverty in the world. In South Africa and Mozambique, women's share of seats is 30%, while Rwanda and Uganda have 25.7% and 24.7% respectively (UNDP, 2003).

Fijian women have made progress in gaining positions of decision-making within their society. In Fiji, the right to stand for election and to vote was given to women

and men in 1963. The first woman in Parliament was elected in 1970. Women in Politics Group, initiated by the UN Development Funds for Women, was a good start in raising awareness for women in politics and decision-making. Through the program, women got together to co-ordinate efforts to improve participation in the political process and election (Caucu, 2006). In Fiji's national elections in May 1999, for instance, the women in politics programme achieved a great deal in that for the first time in Fiji's political history, and in the history of the countries of the Pacific islands, five women out of twelve who contested the election won seats in Parliament. Three women were given ministerial positions. This is a 7% representation in a Parliament of 71 members (Williams, 1999).

Despite the Fijian government's clearly stated intentions to promote gender equality in development processes, the general participation of women in important public decision-making bodies remains minimal. Although the equal right of women to political participation is recognised in the Constitution of the Fiji Islands, this has not resulted in equal representation on decision-making bodies.

Additionally gender participation in the upper echelons of the civil service continues to be skewed in favour of men. Women comprised only 22.8% of government boards and committees. Women make up 46% employed in the public service. Of that, 14% are at senior executive level, 13% at deputy secretary level and only 8% (3 out of 23) are chief executives (Caucu, 2006). According to Caucau, women were vastly underrepresented in most decision-making levels of the government and other

statutory bodies, despite the government's continued emphasis on promoting women's participation.

### **Knowledge and approach to women's work**

Statistical information around the world provides a poor representation of the reality of women's work and their participation and contribution to the economy. The labour of rural women accounts for 60-80% of food production in developing countries (United Nations, 2005a), yet many face restrictions on the rights to own, use and inherit land. Research in some sub-Saharan African countries found that output could increase by up to 20% if more women had equal access to and control over farm income, agricultural services and land. As part of the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995), statisticians were called to generate and disseminate gender disaggregated data to support a more comprehensive approach to women's work. Women's participation in economic activities continues to increase, the largest increase being recorded in South America where the rates rose from 26% to 45% between 1980 to 1997 (United Nations, 2000).

In the past two decades, women's economic activity has increased in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Oceania. The lowest rates were found in Northern Africa and Western Asia where less than one third of the women were economically active. An important aspect of this increasing

rate of economic participation is that women have to juggle their family and household responsibilities with market or paid work outside their homes. Moreover, women often take up a range of jobs with poor work conditions and usually receive less pay than men. In manufacturing for example, in 27 of the 39 countries with data available, women's wages were 20-50% less than those of men in similar work. Another important aspect of women's work is that women are in the labour force during their reproductive years and today an increasing number of women remain in the labour force during their child bearing. Therefore the presence of small children requires women to allocate more time than men to unpaid work of cleaning, caring for children and preparing meals (UNIFEM, 2002). Hence, the world of work is not gender neutral and, unless there is accumulation and dissemination of gender sensitive data, women's work and economic participation will continue to be misinterpreted.

### **Women, development and empowerment: Fiji and Pacific Island countries**

The period 1970–2000 saw many traditional Pacific communities struggling to cope with the new economic order of their new democracies against a backdrop of colonialism, traditional politics, values and institutions. Pacific Island nations were challenged to reorient large semi-subsistence communities to become more commercially productive in order to meet the emerging social, economic and political expectations, yet without eroding their rich traditional and cultural values

(UNDP, 1999). The struggle to achieve this is exacerbated by the fact that many of these new Pacific island democracies have limited social, economic and political capital and infrastructure to keep pace with the outside world. The struggle is even more critical at the grass roots level, particularly with disadvantaged groups such as women, who reap fewer of the development benefits and suffer more of the drawbacks (Booth, 1994). However, for the past thirty years, global feminist movements have expanded rapidly, creating much political space for women both locally and globally.

The United Nations *Decade for the Advancement of Women* (1976 – 1985) created the political platform for women to be more visible. For the United Nations, this involved a drive to develop projects and programmes that improved the social, economic and political role and status of women. To achieve this, there was a need to increase women's participation and improve their share in resources, land, employment and income relative to men (United Nations, 1976). This research is part of this movement that brings to light the daily lived experiences of a group of indigenous Fijian village and to privilege women's knowledge, practices, skills, values and concerns. Also important is the opportunity and space provided in the field research for this group of village women to focus and reflect on their own needs and perspectives as individuals as well as a group of women in their village community.

Interest in women's issues in the Pacific came to light at the first Pacific women's conferences held in Fiji in 1975 where many Pacific women were exposed for the first time to women's issues and about women's organisations (Griffen, 1989). Since 1975, numerous workshops, meetings and seminars were held which culminated in a landmark report on a Pacific feminist framework in 1987 (Griffen, 1989). This framework was based on the visions and ideals of twenty-six women from eleven Pacific Island countries who shared their respective knowledge, values, beliefs and practices as women in their local communities (Griffen,1989). The framework defined and owned by Pacific women provided an initial guideline for interrogating and voicing women's concerns on the living conditions and status of women in the Pacific. This workshop provided the impetus for improving the status of Pacific women.

Although Pacific women's issues began surfacing in the 1970s, academic research on Pacific women and development is a relatively new phenomenon. For example, it was not until 1994 that a statistical account on the situation of women in Fiji was actually documented by Heather Booth (Booth,1994). However, the increasing number of Pacific women leaders, scholars and professionals has resulted in much being achieved for women at both policy and local level. Today, women in Pacific Island countries such as Fiji have become more visible in their country's social, economic and political systems. This has resulted in various Pacific Island countries setting up their own ministry of women and also the creation of national women's

organisations. In Fiji, for example, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement are two prominent non-government organisations that have a commitment to human rights, feminism and democracy. These two organisations are managed by highly professional feminists, such as human rights lawyer, Imrana Jalal, who are also well connected to international women's movements.

Much has been achieved at women's conference tables throughout the Pacific, with guidelines, recommendations, and 'commitments' from Pacific Island countries and territories to improve gender inequality, empowerment and women's development amongst all Pacific women at all levels. Since the Beijing Platform of Action ten years ago, there has been a growing realisation of the importance of women's rights, women's issues and gender equality. In 2005, United Nations Secretary –General Kofi Annan, reiterated that ten years on, women were not only aware of their rights, they were more able to exercise them (United Nations, 2005 a).

To date eight Pacific regional conferences have been held which brought together representatives from government, development partners, NGOs and academics to deliberate on issues related to the place of gender in the development process. The Second Ministerial Meeting on Women, convened in Nadi, Fiji in 2004, acknowledged that, although some progress have been attained towards gender

equality and empowerment in the Pacific, much remains to be achieved (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004).

### **What has been achieved amongst Pacific women?**

Pacific Island countries have used two platforms as guidelines to gender equality and empowerment. These are the Pacific Platform for Action (1994) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). These platforms are used within the context of other international agendas on women which include the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and the recent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. The greatest challenge for women leaders throughout the Pacific today is the task of implementing conference guidelines and recommendations at the local community level for women and their families. For example, ministers at the Second Pacific Ministerial Meeting on Women, held in Fiji in 2004, acknowledged the need to modify the MDGs to suit Pacific women's local socio-economic, cultural and political situations, needs and challenges (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004).

The challenge is further complicated by the constraints faced by Pacific Island Countries. These include small populations and small local markets, limited resource base, the remoteness and physical dispersal of the island nations, and their susceptibility to natural disasters especially cyclones. In addition, Pacific Island

nations have limited access to capital and foreign investment and the recent political instability within the region has made these Pacific Island countries economically vulnerable and susceptible.

The report submitted by Fiji's Ministry for Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation at the 49<sup>th</sup> Commission outlined ways in which effort and resources have been put into constructing and implementing legislation to mainstream and privilege women's perspectives and challenges for gender equality in Fiji (Government of Fiji 2005). In 1997, the Fiji Law Reform Commission commissioned the review of laws in relation to the family, including marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody and affiliation. This resulted in the Family Law Act, which is now in force in Fiji. The Social Justice Act of 2001, created a special recognition for the disadvantaged in society, including increasing the participation of women in socio-economic development. Fiji has established a Human Rights Commission under the Human Rights Act 1999 and the country has received a positive feedback on its first report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). There is also the new Industrial Relations Bill, currently before Parliament, which will provide for equal opportunities in employment by ensuring equal rates of pay for work of equal value.

The Fiji submission to the 49<sup>th</sup> Commission also referred to initiatives such as the Domestic Violence Referral System, the Mental Health Act, the Criminal Procedure

Code and the Penal Code which in principle will provide a legal platform for mainstreaming women's concerns in these areas (Government of Fiji, 2005). These pieces of legislation have provided a political and legal environment that is conducive to gender mainstreaming in Fiji which has consequently improved government's attitude to and concern for gender equality in Fiji. More importantly, the legislation will undoubtedly promote the political will necessary to improve the pace of women's progress not only in Fiji but in the Pacific as a region. In Fiji, the increase in government's partnership with NGOs has been an important aspect of assisting women to understand their human rights and protection in law.

However, the legacy of inequalities faced by Pacific women has been reinforced over the years by attitudes, customs, traditions and structures in society that continue to disadvantage women both locally and nationally. This was reconfirmed after the Beijing Conference in 1995 and consequently resulted in a Platform for Action, by the Ministry for Women and Culture, Fiji (Government of Fiji, 1999). Over the last two decades, the potential of women and the strength they bring to the life of a country have been seen as one of the survival factors of a nation. With Fiji's ethnic, racial and cultural diversity, women have different experiences and different needs and there is no single standard upon which women's issues can be assessed. It is also recognised that the needs of rural and urban women differ. Although these differences are acknowledged, all women are commonly portrayed as inferior and their role is largely confined to the domestic and family sphere.

In their quest for social progress and development, Third World nations such as Fiji inevitably become part of the market-driven economy whose capitalist values have led to increasing incidence of poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, landlessness, insecurity and violence. For example, the Fiji Poverty report 1997 indicates that 33% of the 44,800 households studied lived in relative poverty which is a cause for concern for family welfare and security. These social ills are even more acute amongst disadvantaged groups such as village women, who remain invisible and inaudible at all levels of development (Government of Fiji & UNDP, 1997). Despite past decades of gendered policies in development, for example, the women in development approach, WID, and gender and development approach, GAD, and professed commitment to women's empowerment at all levels, women are still marginalised and subordinated. These gendered models of development have well-meaning and honourable intentions. However, these models for women are implemented into socio-economic and political infrastructures and institutions that are deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and values. Women in the Pacific need to sustain their commitment to continually interrogate male dominated social and political frameworks, because these patriarchal frameworks and values are still linked to the multiple crises inherent in dominant models of development.

Enhanced concern for equity and access is within the reach of Pacific Island countries, although meaningful head way can only be made if we (local women and

women scholars) co-construct knowledge, beliefs and practices that are culturally rooted and equally progressive in form and function. Such an exercise and such a process should also counteract the dangers that cultures can and do oppress, as well as liberate (Thaman, 1998). The challenge now for Pacific Island women leaders is individually and collectively, and in partnership with their men folk, to sustain their will, commitment and energy to implement legislation, policies and plans to improve the plight of the most disadvantaged women in the villages and rural communities. This is the acid test for Pacific women's development and empowerment where the most disadvantaged women find concrete meaning and hope in their daily lives. The aim of this research is to add to what has been achieved amongst Pacific women, particularly Fijian women. This will be achieved by documenting the lived experiences of a group of village indigenous women with the intention of adding to what is known in the field about their needs and challenges. A critical stance will be taken in regard to this ethnography as will be outlined in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

This chapter addresses the general methodology and methods used within the research project and provide an overview of the research design (including data production and analysis) as well as ethical issues related to the research process. Issues related to being an indigenous researcher working with her own people are also addressed. The methodologies drawn upon for the research include ethnographic and feminist research principles, action research and a case study approach with each approach adapted to the needs of the research project and the context of the study. Part of the discussion in this chapter centers on the challenges of being a local indigenous woman researcher doing fieldwork amongst her own people.

#### **Ethnographic case study**

An aim of the research was to provide, first and foremost, an interactive opportunity for the women of Marama Village to share their stories and daily-lived experiences. Hence, employing an ethnographic case study approach was important especially at a time when these women are managing significant changes to their way of life which is steeped in the traditional Fijian culture. Ethnography literally refers to ‘writing about people’ while recognising that people are makers of meaning and the work of the ethnographer is to place

emphasis on ‘how people *interpret*’ the cultural world in which they live (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005: 16). The focus in such research is on the everyday behavior of a community or group of people in order to identify cultural norms, beliefs, social structures, and other cultural patterns (Leedy & Omrod, 2001). As an absentee indigenous woman, and having completed my education, I wanted to reconnect and be of some use to my people but more especially to the women in the village. One way of doing ethnography is to become a ‘participant observer’ in the ‘everyday lives’ of whichever society or group s/he is studying’ (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005:16). If we do not understand the lives of these women who we wish to help, how can we bring effective and appropriate transformation in their lives? Damage can be done by those well meaning to do government and non-government officers who wish to help but base their actions on misconceptions and stereotypes.

My attraction to an ethnographic case study was that it is respectful of the local culture of the indigenous Fijian rural women and culturally sensitive to the particular context of a Fijian village community. The approach allowed for women to be seen as the main actors of the research process in contrast to approaches that have made local women passive objects of research. The past two decades have seen changes in the use of ethnographic research (Chambers, 2000) and hence it’s various definitions (Smith, 2000: 243), moving it beyond the province of anthropologists. Two key changes, amongst others, have included the development of ethnographic research methods and techniques to enhance issues of intervention and problem solving and the application of ethnographic methods

to participatory action research (Chambers, 2000). This shift in approach changes the position of the ethnographer from one of participant observer to one who is interested in being involved in bringing about change, hence the notion of critical intent. Ethnography with a 'critical' intent is a style of ethnographic research in which the researcher is interested in advocating for the emancipation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Thomas, 1993). An ethnography of women in Marama Village with a critical intent matched well with my research objectives which focused on privileging and documenting women's voices and socio-economic experiences in a Fijian village at a particular point in time. As the fieldwork progressed, the exciting and challenging relationship with the women became an incubator for our progression into action-based research that later resulted in an intervention project which addressed some of the needs and challenges facing the women. The relationship with the women also brought fresh perspectives on collaboration at the grassroots level, currently an under explored theme on women's empowerment and advocacy.

The ethnographic approach used in this research was employed in the following manner. I adopted the role of participant observer, at first aiming to be as passive and unobtrusive as possible to avoid influencing the behavior of the women, although I became a more active participant of the research in the later course of the fieldwork especially during the action-research process. Being a participant observer was made easier because I speak the local dialect and am a family member of the village community. The second ethnographic method involved

creating a detailed rich account of what was observed by taking daily field notes. This thick description (Geertz, 1973) constituted much of the raw data for the research which was then examined and interpreted for various themes and patterns. Writing up the observations was the final element of this ethnography, thereby forming a summary of the interpretations and addressing the question that drove the observation in the first place: *What are the daily needs and challenges of indigenous Fijian women in a rural village context?*

Ethnographers stress that people exist and move within social worlds (Massey, 1998) and in order to understand the practices, values, beliefs and experiences of any individual or group, one need to take into account the local cultural context. Researchers who work with indigenous communities value the inevitable influence of the local culture on people's way of life and wise researchers take heed of these cultural nuances. For example, while working amongst these women, I discovered that I could not apply mainstream knowledge, values, beliefs and practices *carte blanche* to the context of the Fijian community (Madraiwiwi, 2005). As a Fijian woman scholar, I respected the cultural norms and practices in this Fijian village community and this respect was conducive to our relationship and understanding as researcher and researched. Therefore, I had an obligation to modify the research methods and methodologies so that they were culturally appropriate and authentic and reflected Fijian reality. Some Fijian cultural values that were keys to guiding this research methodology and process include:

<i>na vakarokoroko</i>	showing respect
<i>na veiciqomi</i>	being tolerant and accommodating
<i>na veikauwaitaki</i>	to notice, to take care and to show concern
<i>na veirogorogoci</i>	listening and respecting each other's views
<i>na veivakararamataki</i>	enlightenment
<i>na veivakaduavatataki</i>	to bring together, conciliate and harmonize
<i>veivakayalovinakataki</i>	creating goodwill all around
<i>veidinadinati</i>	being faithful to a consensus agreement
<i>veisolisoli</i>	to be generous, to give freely of each other
<i>veivosoti</i>	act of forgiveness
<i>vakaqacotaka</i>	make secure, to consolidate
<i>vakanuinui</i>	expressions of best intent
<i>i vakarau</i>	a way of behaving
<i>tabu</i>	restriction
<i>dina</i>	truth

(Adapted from Nabalarua, 2005).

For example, in showing respect (*na vakarokoroko*) for my people's culture, I presented my traditional *sevusevu* (a presentation of kava to the village headman and elders acknowledging community) on the day I arrived in the village. The *sevusevu* was also a major part of negotiating access into the village. In addition, the *sevusevu* was an indication that I still noticed and was aware of the importance of Fijian cultural practices, even though I had been an absentee village woman for more than twenty years. In recording the ethnography of the

women's lives, as well as in our daily interactions, I listened to the women and showed them that I respected their way of life and was careful not to be judgmental in the initial stages of the research work. It did not take long for women to reciprocate these behaviours because their way of life was entrenched in these Fijian values. This enhanced the women's confidence to share their stories and experiences which, in turn, fueled our intentions for action research later resulting in the Women's Own Fish Pond. Although the research process was challenging and complicated, these values were the social glue that unified our spirits as Fijian women working for our advocacy and empowerment and provided the *mana* (a supernatural omen and energy) that sustained the research project.

A case study strategy, with its emphasis on an in depth description of one setting, was considered appropriate for this research since it placed women's daily lived experiences in context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The case study approach also allowed for in depth discussion and interaction between the researcher and these Fijian village women. As a form of research, the ethnographic case study of Marama Village was a choice that reflected my intrinsic interest (Stake, 1995) in understanding and appreciating the social realities of this group of indigenous Fijian woman. Although the lives of women in this village may be ordinary and similar to lives of other village women, the lives of these indigenous Fijian women as market gardeners in their traditional yet increasingly global village community is of great interest to this researcher. As an indigenous woman scholar, I realised that indigenous Fijian women in our rural villages face

insurmountable development and training needs, however, despite these challenges, taking up an ethnographic case study with these women has allowed them to simply share their stories and for the researcher to listen. The women's stories without doubt provide a genuine initial insight into their daily lived realities and these realities provide vital reference points for any proposed development or training programs for indigenous women in other settings.

### **Feminism and participatory action research**

A feminist research approach formed a vital part of this research project and the approach was based on the village women's own perspectives and experiences. For the last three decades, feminist research has contributed to the development of many methodological frameworks which include positionality and reflexivity, as well as critical enquiries into gender, gender relations and society (Schratz & Walker, 2005). Central to the notion of feminist ethnography is Eric Lassiter's *Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (2005) which has undertaken fresh readings of the collaboration between the researcher and the people or community being researched. Feminist ethnography by definition is collaborative and as a local researcher, I had the moral obligation to work with the village women in Marama Village. In addition, I could not possibly carry out the fieldwork without actively engaging in the everyday lives of the village women. Therefore, collaboration with this group of women was an *explicit* and *deliberate* part of not only the fieldwork but also of the outcome of the research process itself. As a local researcher living amongst my own people, collaboration and becoming a

voice for these women was a crucial aspect of my fieldwork. Another important aspect of this collaboration is that collaboration is emphasized at every point in the ethnographic process, from project conceptualization to fieldwork through to the writing process. Collaborative ethnography invites commentary from our consultants and seeks to make that commentary overtly part of the ethnographic text as it develops (Lassiter, 2005). Much of the text in this thesis came from the commentaries and discussions of the women themselves in their local dialects. This indeed is a powerful approach to the collaborative process in feminist ethnography because it brings women's voice to the centre stage. Importantly, this process yields texts that are produced and written with local communities. These texts may often include multiple authors; but not exclusively so. Collaborative ethnography, then, is both a theoretical and a methodological approach for doing *and* writing ethnography. Community collaborators thus become a central part of the construction of ethnographic texts which shifts their role from informants (who merely inform the knowledge on which ethnographies are based), to consultants (who also interpret culture and its representation along with the ethnographer) (Lassiter, 2005). But increasingly, collaboration is no longer viewed as merely a consequence of fieldwork; instead collaboration now shapes research design as well as its dissemination.

A fundamental aspect of this village or community-based project is that it is about the women and it is for the women. Community-based projects commence with the challenges that a group of people face and its main objective is to help people understand their situation in order to manage the challenges that they face. This

project was initially born out of my interest in and concern for the disparity between government development agendas and the current situation of women in Fijian villages.

The action research approach, used in the research as the methodology, incorporated four characteristics of community-based action research suggested by Stringer (1999). Stringer suggests that action research is *democratic* (enabling the participation of all people), *equitable* (acknowledging people's equality of worth), *liberating* (providing freedom from oppressive conditions) and *life enhancing* (allowing the expression of people's potential (Stringer 1999: 9-10). Opportunities were provided for women to be active participants in the research project and this was enhanced by their management of the Women's Own Fish Pond Project. The project was equitable in that the establishment and conduct of it acknowledged and respected the socio-economic and cultural values of the women in the village. A necessary pre-requisite to this was the need to establish amongst the women a sense of individual self worth and to encourage them to recognise that their values, knowledge and skills were important and valuable. The project also provided opportunities for women to critically reflect on their daily socio-economic experiences in relation to the dreams they have for their children, family and village community. The research provided scope for them to express themselves and to realize that they have the capacity and potential to affect change and progress in their lives and their community.

Aspects of participatory action research were also incorporated into the research methodology which ‘embraces principles of participation and reflection, and empowerment and emancipation of groups seeking to improve their social situation (Seymour-Rolls & Hughes, 2002). In the practice of participatory action research, a key objective is to develop a critical analysis to guide the change process rather than simply to generate facts or information. Participatory action research provided space for this group of village women to be active participants in the research process and also provided the opportunity to critically reflect on their social and economic conditions. I wanted to do research in which the women were active participants and research that had action outcomes as decided by them. As the fieldwork progressed, the women and I forged a collaborative and meaningful relationship which in turn built a sense of confidence amongst us. This confidence provided a platform from which to engage the women in an action-research project. This had an immediate and meaningful impact because it was in collaboration with the women themselves and it was research from *within* the village setting (Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

The participatory action research project (the Women’s Own Fish Pond discussed in Chapter Seven), privileged the indigenous women’s collective knowledge and capacity to reflect on their experiences and practices. This in turn led to a practical outcome. It also illustrated to the village community that the women can manage socio-economic challenges and consequently improve things for their families and community. Engaging the women in this process was a necessary political and democratic exercise. Women’s research that does not privilege

women's voice and perspectives through a critically conscience-awareness process, is benevolent feminism which does nothing more than pay lip service to improve the position and status of women in their communities. I wanted the research process to critically connect women to the research so that they could identify those aspects of life that disadvantage them and ultimately to take action to bring about critical change in their socio-economic conditions.

The Women's Own Fish Pond was not only the culmination of the participatory action approach of the research process but a tangible and empowering exercise for the women to be critically engaged in the planning, implementation and management of their a project that they called their own. The whole project was left to the women to run with the researcher acting as facilitator to the project. The women also worked closely with the local government fisheries officer who advised the women on the technical aspects of the fishpond.

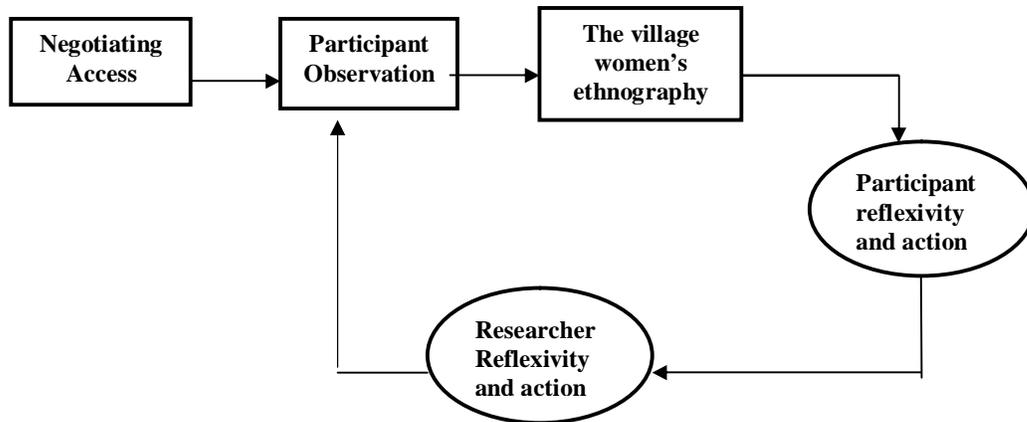
Narrative research design was also used as part of the research methodology as it fitted well with the research objective which is to record and describe the daily personal experiences of a group of Fijian village women. In narrative research, researchers describe the lives of individuals, tell stories about people's lives and write narratives of people's experiences (Cassell & Symon, 1994). As a distinct form of qualitative research, narrative research involved several key characteristics. First it involved gathering data from the stories of the individual village woman within a time frame and for this research it was a week in their life

as village women. This was followed by a narrative analysis of the women's stories and experiences which involved transcribing and coding the stories into themes. The details of this analysis are elaborated later in this chapter. Factored into the analysis of the women's experiences is a time frame which in this research was a week in the life of the Fijian village women. Also factored into the analysis is the physical and socio-economic context of a rural Fijian village. Themes in the women's stories provide complexity of the women's experiences and also add depth to understanding the women's stories and experiences.

### **Overview of the research design**

The field research involved two stages (Table 1). The first stage is identified in Table 1 by the boxed activities involving the women sharing their stories and experiences. The second stage, identified in Table 1 by the circled activities, involved the women critically reflecting on their socio-economic experiences, as well as the researcher critically reflecting on her own values, knowledge and practices as a local woman scholar. The Women's Own Fish Pond provided an action project for the women to gain some practical experience the basics of women's empowerment and advocacy.

**Table 1: Research Cycle Activities**



(Source: University of South Australia, *Issues and Methods in Research Study Guide*, 2000.)

The cyclic nature of this case study work enabled the researcher (and participants) to reflect on the ongoing and continually changing sense that was made of the emerging findings at the site. The women's needs, challenges and experiences were fed back to them through various methods discussed in the following section.

### **The fieldwork**

Various research methods were used during the fieldwork including participant observation, a household survey, diaries, focus groups and semi-structured

interviews. Consistent with feminist methodology, the methods were chosen to address the research questions and to reflect the chosen research methodologies. The methods also accommodated the individual characteristics of the village women as well as the various socio-economic experiences they experienced in their daily lives. These methods helped diffuse the popular notion of women being objects of any research with little or no regard for them as individuals (Oakley, 1981; Smith, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). The various methods complemented each other and acted as nets that captured a range of information about the women's socio-economic experiences. The multiple methods produced rich data that was cumulative and elaborative while facilitating the collaborative process of knowledge sharing and construction which was a major tenet of the research process.

### **The Household Survey**

The Household Survey (Appendix A) was adapted and modified from the United Nations Department of Technical Co-operation for Development and Statistics Office's, *National Household Survey Capability Programme - A Household Income and Expenditure Survey* (1989). The adapted Household Survey was comprehensive and gathered a range of information about village demography, household amenities, the socio-economic and cultural activities, education, the annual farming calendar and the women's priorities in their social progress and development. The survey was completed by twenty-five households (70% of total village households) that were randomly selected (Miles & Huberman,

1994:27). I administered the survey directly to each selected household, assisting the women to answer the questions and it took a month to complete the process. The survey was also used as a method to initiate conversations about the women's socio-economic experiences and it provided rich and supportive data about their daily-lived experiences. In this way, use of the survey was *purposive* rather than random (Morse, 1989; Kuzel, 1992). It was purposively used in that it provided a collaborative groundbreaking exercise for both the women and me (Schneider 1992). It was used to encourage and provide space for the women to simply talk about various aspects of life in the village, and to feel comfortable and privileged about it and as a way for me to begin to develop an authentic relationship with each woman, so we could begin to dialogue.

When administering it, I was fully aware of the position of authority and power I had over these women and I took it as a personal obligation to check my superiority so that the women could respond in a non-threatening environment. How did I achieve this? My questions often proceeded from the known to the unknown and my response was always to acknowledge and validate women's perspective and standpoint. Through my interaction with the women, I emphasised the notion that the women were the experts in village knowledge, practices, values and skills. This was not easy to achieve at first, as the women had lived a culturally monopolized way of life, where there was hardly any opportunity or space provided for the women to be reflexive, let alone tell their stories or to have their standpoint and perspective validated.

### **The women's diaries**

While living in the village, I realised that asking the women to keep a daily diary would provide an interesting account of their daily activities. I used the diaries to validate and complement other field information that I had gathered. As with most of the methodological approaches, I had to coax and encourage the women to share their stories by affirming that their knowledge as indigenous women was just as important as any other knowledge. I gave them an exercise book and a pen and requested that they recorded what they did for one week which was during the key farming period. I encouraged the women to pen everything and anything they did as this information was very important to the research. However, there were drawbacks in the use of diary entries as a method of collecting information from the women. For example, some village women found that making written entries in their diaries was challenging because they lived in a predominantly oral culture where the opportunity for writing things on paper was limited. Some women found it tedious and time consuming especially given their very busy daily lives in the village. The diaries were basic activity data and hence contained very little on the women's reflection and cognitive experience.

### **The focus groups**

Collective stories shared by way of focus groups have the potential for 'impacting directly on individual and collective empowerment' (Benmayor, 1991:159). There was much potential in establishing focus groups for this research because

the opportunity for shared dialogues, stories and knowledge helped and encouraged the women to develop a sense of identity, self-validation, bonding and commonality of experiences. Although the focus groups had challenges, such as continually coaxing the women to share their views on various issues, the method was well suited to them given their low socio-economic status and their communitarian culture (Madriz, 2000).

The focus group (referred to while at the village as 'chat groups') consisted of nine women, in three groups of three. I chose women who were vocal and well informed about life in the village and represented a good cross section. Two women had completed college education but now had families of their own. There were two women in their fifties who once played leadership roles amongst women in the village. Two women came from other villages but married men from this village. The groups also included a widow in her late forties, a single mother and women who left school after completing primary school, all of whom have families of their own. The women organised the time and the house where we would meet (they decided on meeting in one of the women's homes). I started off the discussion with the questions from my semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B). Most of the groups met late in the evening, as this was the only time when the women were free. All the focus groups were conducted in the local dialect and this was a great incentive and empowerment for the women. The focus groups allowed the women to further explore and discuss important aspects of their socio-economic experiences, needs and challenges on various aspects of their daily life in the village. The focus groups also provided an opportunity for

women to support each other, to be empowered by listening to each other's points of view and to consider these different opinions as important and valid. Although the women lived together in the village, the groups provided a rare opportunity for them to get together and just chat about issues that concerned them.

After spending two months in the village, I approached the women and asked if they would be willing to be part of a focus group. Their initial response was: What will I say? They positioned themselves as one who has no useful knowledge. I then had to ask myself: Why did they respond like this? Perhaps my presence meant that their contribution had to measure up to the expectation of a woman like me? In addition, I hypothesized that the women may have low self-esteem, largely a product of the social system they live in. Perhaps they regarded their knowledge, values and skills as inferior and of no significant value to anyone let alone an educated woman like me? Because of this I had to explain the objective of my research in a nutshell and how crucial it was for them to talk about their needs, challenges and opportunities. While the questions were semi-structured and focused on the research questions, the women were given the space to be flexible about their answers and to talk about what interested them. The women were given the questions a week before the group meetings in order to assist them to feel comfortable in responding to them and comfortable in the situation and, to some degree, to know what was going to happen.

## **The interviews**

The interviews involved three women as key informants who were selected because they had a high profile of involvement in the community. One interviewee was one of two women who had completed high school, one was a staunch Methodist person who took a lead in organizing communal work activities (such as catering for visitors, fundraising and school working bees) while the other woman offered her larger than usual home for regular community meetings. I also interviewed three men who have official leadership positions in the community: the chairman of the committee of the local village school; the Methodist church deacon in the village; a well informed village elder.

Interviewing is a common method of collecting qualitative data and it is known that the use of semi-structured interviews is an effective way of prompting people to tell their stories (Graham, 1984). The interviews included both semi-structured and open-ended questions designed to be culturally appropriate and respectful, providing opportunities for the women to gain further confidence in talking about their challenges and needs and for the men also to share their views on these matters. The questions (Appendix C) focused on the unique challenges they face as women dealing with their village traditions and the influence of a market economy.

### **The women's workshop**

The aim of the workshop was to re-present to the women their stories and perceptions, especially regarding their needs and challenges as women in their village community, which I had gathered in the research process. It provided a final opportunity for them to check and give their approval to the information I had gathered. It was intended to bring the fieldwork to a closure.

I designed the main theme of the workshop as: Women are effective and meaningful agents of change and progress for their families and community. The workshop content was organized around broad sub-themes drawn from their shared stories including: the women's definition of a good life (listed as needs and priorities); critical reflections on the women's definition of a good life given their current socio-economic experiences; things that need to change or modified in order to attain this good life. These topics were dealt with at personal, family and communal levels.

The workshop provided an opportunity for them to discuss ways in which their needs and challenges can be managed given their role and status as women in their now global village. This, in turn, provided some leverage for the women to come out of their shells and be critically engaged in discussions regarding their social status. Consequently, the workshop was the major breakthrough in our collaborative action aspect of the fieldwork and it was during this workshop that the women actually decided to initiate a project of their own.

They proposed a clean up day and all unanimously agreed to spend the following Monday cleaning up the village compound led by the local district nurse. As will be discussed in Chapter Six, many of the women were unhappy with the amount of rubbish that surrounded the village. This initiative was a powerful activity in which the women and I continued to cement our bond as local women, reconnecting our dreams and visions for our families and community. Given this outcome from the workshop, it seemed significant that it was during the workshop that the women also heard the good news that the sum of \$3,600 had been granted by the New Zealand High Commission (Fiji) for the Women's Own Fish Pond Project.

### **Fish pond questionnaire and letter**

I sent a questionnaire for the women to answer after their first fish harvest (Appendix D). Six women completed it with the assistance of the village nurse (a woman who had completed high school and handed out the village medical supplies although she was not a trained nurse). The information attained from the questionnaire was added to my discussion with the women when I returned to the village at the end of the project in 2003 as well as a letter the leader of the project wrote to me about what had happened after I left (Personal Letter, June 2002). I returned to the village in March 2003 immediately after their third and final harvest for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to stay in touch with my women folks and to sustain our relationship, secondly the women and I needed to reflect on

their two-year fishpond project and thirdly to present to the women information I had collected during my stay in the village. Sustaining our special connection and our relationship was important because we had more things that we dream and hope to engage ourselves in, in years to come.

### **Limitations in methods and methodology**

The various qualitative methods and methodologies used to record and gather the women's stories are partial and tentative. There are weaknesses in the methods and approaches which were due to departures from the original objectives of the research in response to the changing nature of the context (Cassell & Symon, 1994). This resulted in difficulties and inconsistencies in the quality and quantity of information leading to inconsistent conclusions. I also used different probing questions in response to the context which may have partly been because of my limited research experience. Finally the women chose to tell some aspects of their stories and to ignore other aspects.

### **Conducting the fieldwork: exploratory discussions**

Before embarking on the trip to the village, I spent a month in Suva informally discussing my research with indigenous Fijian women I knew and who had a direct interest and connection with the welfare of indigenous Fijian village women. The women I talked with included a professional Fijian woman of chiefly birth, a high school principal, a professional woman who married a man

from Marama Village and my mother, a retired teacher who spent approximately thirty years teaching in rural Fijian communities. All these women easily identified various challenges faced by rural Fijian women ranging from the challenges of being an individual woman in a traditional Fijian community to the lack of income generating activities particularly for women. In addition, these women expressed strong views that women in rural village communities require much support and input from local women scholars and professional who now reside and work in urban areas. They considered that the responsibility for women's empowerment and development lies with these professional women in reconnecting with their local community of women, creating spaces and opportunities for collaborative action, playing a catalytic role and providing a sense of direction. These women also argued for the need to build women's self esteem and confidence through education and training thereby creating platforms of power that are conducive to women's empowerment and progress.

When I arrived at the village, an extensive amount of time was also spent just chatting with the village women who made their weekly trips to the city to sell their crops and vegetables. The purpose here was twofold. First, I wanted as much advice as I could get about the local village culture and protocol because this is a crucial yardstick that villagers use to judge absentee indigenous Fijians or outsiders like I. Secondly, I was keen to get an update about women's lives in Fijian villages and insight into some of the more pressing challenges they face given the inevitable onslaught of the market economy in which money and profit

are penultimate. During this time, I also read more literature on grass root women's socio-economic challenges and development.

### **Negotiating access**

Besides being daunted by the amount of fieldwork I had to complete in a relatively short time, I was, for many reasons, excited but equally anxious to return to my mother's village. I was no longer the boarding school girl on vacation, but a mature Fijian woman offering to be of some value to her own people. I was anxious because I saw myself as an outsider and also an absentee indigenous woman who had left the village to see the world beyond. However, after twenty odd years, I was now returning to do my field research amongst my people and to reconnect with my people at a deeper and critical level. For the past twenty-five years, I have had no direct involvement with my people except for the occasional return visits for traditional obligations such as deaths or wedding ceremonies. It would be a challenge to find out how my own people perceived me. I anticipated that some of my people would ask many questions regarding my return visit to the village. Deep within me I had the quiet confidence that I would encounter these challenges with an open mind and humble heart.

First and foremost, I wanted to have a sense of belonging with my community because I had been absent for such a long time (Brayboy, 2000). I knew how crucial it was to repossess that sense of belonging and to be counted as one of

them before I could offer my knowledge and skills and act as a catalyst in assisting them fulfill their dreams and visions.

Therefore, I did what was culturally appropriate for a visitor to do in the village and that was to present a *sevusevu*. On the day I arrived, I presented my *sevusevu* to the elders in my mother's family. This traditional presentation was my personal request to gain access into the village. After sharing a few bowls of kava, the women prepared a sumptuous dinner to share with me. I felt honored yet humbled by this welcome dinner because it meant that my people, especially the women, acknowledged and approved my arrival. Interestingly, the idea of reciprocity immediately came to mind and this, in turn, triggered off the need to leave something tangible, useful and meaningful for the women after completing my fieldwork.

### **Cultural immersion: becoming a village woman**

Like many ethnographic accounts, this initial *sevusevu* provided the green light for my *cultural immersion* as a participant observer in the Fijian village landscape. This immersion was important because it allowed me to have a 'feel' and to understand the rhythm of life in the village once again! Like a sponge, I was at liberty to breath, smell and feel like the village women. This attempt to reconnect was not only for the purpose of the field research, it was also carried out so that I was actually connected to the women both emotionally and spiritually. In many instances, I had purposively become one of them

emotionally, at times, took on their mindset in order to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of their socio-economic experiences. I saw this as very important in helping me tone down the pre-conceived ideas I had of indigenous Fijian women in their rural village communities. This cultural immersion started off with my getting reacquainted with my mother's relatives especially the women. I would spend the morning preparing breakfast with my female cousins and generally catching up about life for them. It was that time of the year when the whole village was busy farming vegetables and selling them at the market. After breakfast, when the children went off to school, I would walk with them to the farm to prune crops or clear the weeds or down to the river to wash clothes. As an ethnographic researcher, this was important as understandings emerged from this activity and allowed me to theorise about the women's stories. Going back to the women for their reaction later (in the women's workshop), validated these original concepts. I began to reflect deeply on gender issues concerning the women in my community and I began to realise the potential for social progress.

### **Reflections on insider and outsider positions**

The standpoints I adopted were based on the constructed positions I took, given the different situations of the research process. These positions or standpoints were influenced by the interplay of my positions as an insider and outsider. Aside from my position as a researcher, my standpoint as an indigenous woman was based on the ethical and moral obligations and accountability I had to this

community of women. As an indigenous woman researcher, doing research in my community was challenging for numerous reasons, particularly the tensions faced in the duality of my position and obligations as a local woman and also as a researcher (insider/outsider). This was a complex issue to work through, especially as I related to and lived with the women's daily experiences. The moral obligations and accountability in the duality of this standpoint was challenging yet rewarding because it provided an avenue to be tentative and inventive as the research process unfolded. As a researcher, I felt we had a confidence in each other. All the above augured well with Shulamit Reinharz's (1992) idea that in feminist research, learning must occur on three levels: the person, the problem and the method. My various encounters with the village women had allowed learning to occur at all these levels but more powerfully because all these levels have for me involved challenging yet rewarding relationships with my own Fijian women.

The women's knowledge, perspectives and values were grounded in the story of their lives (hooks, et. al. 1993) and as an indigenous researcher I recognised that the village women's knowledge, practices and beliefs were distinctive and a vital component of their existence and survival in the their village community (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). The women's knowledge and practices were privileged and were at the core of this research while those of 'others' were at the periphery.

This research was designed not to be exploitative of the women's knowledge and practices (outsider view taking what I wanted from them). Therefore, I took on

the responsibility that the research would be worth the women's involvement, that at the end of this fieldwork, the women would have gained something that was tangibly relevant and meaningful for the social progress and development of their families and community.

The other standpoint that I took, as an indigenous feminist researcher, was to respect and validate the women's socio-economic experiences and the feelings and emotions that were embedded in their stories. Feminist scholars attune to the personal experiences and emotions of their research participants because the process of feminist research links emotion and knowledge that must be acknowledged throughout the research process (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). This was made easier because I came from the village and therefore had insider knowledge and positioning. I had an ethical responsibility to use their stories to shape the empowerment process in a way that suited these village women, building on their local knowledge, experiences and practices. One of the major outcomes was that through this framework, women would be critically reflexive of their own socio-economic conditions and experiences and be encouraged to work out alternative ways that would alleviate them from their disadvantaged positions. Much space and opportunity was provided for these women to realise the capacity and potential they have to change and improve things for their families and village community.

### **Using the local indigenous dialect**

One of the most empowering aspects for me was using the local indigenous dialect. It was an important first step in gaining access to the conceptual world of the village women (Geertz, 1973). Sharing their stories and experiences in their own language was re-assuring and they seemed at ease to express themselves. I encouraged them to state their issues with no reservations, especially those about which they felt strongly. For example, a woman stated that the cultural obligations need to be reduced so that they can have breathing space to focus on other areas of responsibilities, especially their families. Another woman expressed her disappointment at religious denominations that levied huge financial contributions from its members while parents were hard pressed in meeting the needs of their children and family.

The use of the local dialect allowed the women to talk about and discuss complex issues and ideas without the researcher having to rely on translations that have the potential to lose meaning. For example, the village women had definite visions for the future and were aware of the increasing tensions brought about by the duality of their domestic and economic role as moneymaker. The use of the local dialect boosted the women's personal ego and improved their self-esteem and dignity, as they displayed a certain boldness and vigor in their conversations and discussions. It quickly helped establish rapport and trust which in turn facilitated a very open and personal relationship between the women and me. As a result, both the women and I invested our personal experiences and emotions in the

research process, which boosted our sense of connectedness to each other (Oakley, 1988), thereby facilitating the exchange of ideas.

As a critical feminist researcher, the use of the local dialect was conducive to the values of critical ethnography and feminist ethnography which included critical consciousness, women's empowerment, privileging women's voice and making women more visible and audible in their village community.

### **Data analysis**

Analysing the data was based on a multi-framework of qualitative analysis, which included narrative analysis, data analysis strategies (categorizing or coding) and contextualising women's narratives. The rationale for using these strategies followed closely with the methodological scheme utilised in this research, that is, critical feminist ethnography and collaborative action research. The narrative analysis tools used in analyzing the women's narratives were adapted from a combination of Catherine Riesmann's (1993) and Carolie McCormack's (2000) approaches to narrative analysis. The women's narratives or responses were analysed in ways that focused on the elements of the research questions as well as the re-presentation of the women's socio-economic perspectives, knowledge and practices.

The first stage of the analysis involved development of categories and themes and the second stage involved linking these themes to existing theories and practices.

Data from the men's and women's interviews were transcribed and then analysed using the two stages described above while leaving the texts still intact to preserve the 'soul and spirit' of their stories. The analysis involved the five following steps, which are based on Powell and Renner's (2003) ways of analyzing qualitative data:

1. Knowing the data: The woman's responses were developed into English transcripts. Then there was the familiarisation and immersion phase in which the researcher gets a feel for the overall meaning of the text. This was done by reading through the women's narratives several times, making notes and diagrams and brain storming ideas.

2. Focusing the analysis: The next step involved grouping the responses and refocusing on them in relation to the major research questions.

3. Categorising information: This involved identifying points of interest or bits of meanings (ideas, concepts, behaviors) and merging them together into coherent categories that bring meaning to the text. Some categories emerged from the women's narratives, which were then combined, with some earlier categories. Some initial categories changed as the data analysis proceeded. At this stage, data was broken up in analytically relevant ways.

4. Inducing themes: The categories identified in Step 3 were then linked so that patterns or themes emerged. Patterns and connections within and between categories were identified based on the research questions as well as those categories that women considered as important to their socio-economic experiences. There was the continuous attempt to connect patterns in a holistic way.

5. Interpreting the data: The final step in the analysis process involved synthesising and giving meaning to the emergent themes and patterns. Like any qualitative research, interpretation is subjective because it was based on the researcher's own standpoint. Alternative interpretations and perspectives were also brought to light. An important component was that the researcher reflected on her role in creating the interpretation (reflexivity).

### **Analyzing data with multiple lenses**

The method used to analyse women's narratives was borrowed from McCormack's (2000) multiple lenses approach. The process involved the use of several lenses namely, the active listening lens, the narrative process lens, and the context lens. According to McCormack, 'these lenses are the dimensions people use to construct their identity and to give meaning to their lives' (McCormack, 2000: 282). These lenses were appropriate because the 'soul and the spirit' of the women's narratives were not disrupted and the narratives remained embedded holistically in what McCormack termed 'in their spoken and heard context' (McCormack, 2000: 282). The lenses also accommodated both the individual and the communal complexity of the Fijian way of life. The multiple lenses were used to zoom on to each woman's narratives in a microscopic way and to pick out appropriate aspects while still privileging the voices of this group of women. Analysis in the context of this thesis in relation to each lens is as follows:

a) The active listening lens: This is a basic level analysis in which I listened to the tape several times to reconnect both to the village women and the stories that they

shared and my response to these. I reflected on my positionality, in relation to the women and their narratives, and how this might influence my interpretations.

b). The narrative lens: I identified the different narrative processes used by the women to share their socio-economic experiences. First, I identified the main ideas, issues and challenges the women had shared in the focus groups. In order to interpret these ideas/issues, I had to find out why these ideas were shared by the women (evaluation), then the 'what', 'who', 'where' of the idea were identified (orientation). Next, I focused on the descriptions, augmentations (things that the woman talked about more), and theorising (things that women reflect on, their opinion or something that they try to work out) which helped identify other themes in the women's narratives.

c) The context lens: Under this lens, I identified the unique cultural influences that shaped the women's experiences, values and practices. I also focused on how these experiences, values and practices positioned the woman in her contemporary Fijian village. Given these experiences, values and practices, which of these does she conform to, which does she resist or challenge and which do she attempt to reconstruct? In the context of situation, I tried to tease out what she had learnt from her interaction with the women, that is, the women's responses and reactions.

### **Establishing research validity**

I addressed the issue of validity in two ways: validity in the content analysis of the women's narratives within the framework of qualitative research and validity

as authenticity such as fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, tactical authenticity as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989). In qualitative casework, researchers employ various procedures so that data interpretations are valid. In this case study, triangulation was used to validate and confirm the women's narratives and stories of their socio-economic experiences. Triangulation was carried out through the collection and analysis of data from varied sources, which were compared with each other. This comparison helped overcome the intrinsic biases in such research and increased the soundness and the trustworthiness of the research analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1993:144).

An important aspect of validating this field data and information was the issue of catalytic validity, a term used by noted feminist, Patti Lather (1991) According to her, catalytic validity means ideas that are not necessarily empirically sound and well argued but they are inspirational, catapulting persons into activities (Lather, 1991). The inspiration or the 'driving force' in this research was to privilege and make public the village women's knowledge, values, practices and experiences and sensitizing these to local scholars and government officers. In addition to this was the inspiration to actively engage the women in a successful development project as an illustration that they as women in the village have the capacity and potential to be agents of change for their families and community. As an indigenous researcher, I was inspired to share my vision that 'a better world is possible' for these women. Therefore those committed to this notion of a better world whether as policy makers, community workers, activists, scholars or action

researchers – work with ideas that do not paralyze but activate energy for change, individually and collectively (Lather, 1991).

Another important aspect of validating data was addressing balance and fairness in the stakeholders' interests with regards to this thesis. This included the voice of the Fijian village women, the local Fijian woman researcher and government. This fairness included a conscious attempt to make women's voices and stories audible and visible and to represent these narratives with balance and fairness, followed by affirmative action (see Chapters Five and Six in particular). Ontological and educative authenticity involved active participation of the village women in the research process. There was a strong ethical and moral obligation to make the research worthwhile, useful and meaningful for this group of village women. In my role as a catalyst, I provided space and opportunities for the women to meet as a community, to share their concerns, and I encouraged them to take collective actions to address their urgent needs and challenges.

## **Ethics**

A good researcher is an ethical researcher (Shank, 2002). Therefore, ethical considerations were an important aspect of the research process, especially doing research with a vulnerable and disadvantaged group (Schram, 2006). Embracing these ethical considerations was conducive to the spirit and soul of our collaborative effort for the village women's reflexivity, advocacy and empowerment.

The university ethics committee in the institution in which I completed my doctorate, stipulated clear instructions regarding ethical issues such as informed consent, risk and benefit analysis, confidentiality and reciprocity. Research students must submit an ethics proposal to the committee and receive a formal letter of approval before proceeding with their fieldwork (Appendix E). Using this as a basis, a credible feminist ethnography on Marama Village, not only privileged women's voices and women's advocacy and transformation but also adhered to critical research ethics (Smith, 2000). In research with critical intent, the central ethical contention is advocacy and empowerment for this group of village women offering them support to take some collective action for social change. However, the ethical considerations associated with such an approach were underpinned by the social context of this rural Fijian village, as well as the researcher's personal ethical position. As a local researcher, I believed that I honestly had the interest of this group of women at heart and, as such, I needed to be open, respectful, honest and careful working from their needs as well as mine.

### **Access and informed consent**

Negotiating access and obtaining permission to access the women's knowledge, values and practices was not only vital in critical and feminist methodologies but was also important given the traditional context of a Fijian village community. As required by Fijian traditional protocol, the initial consent was sought from the village headman through the traditional *sevusevu*. As a mark of respect to my

own clan, I made a similar presentation to my maternal relatives who would be looking after me during my period of fieldwork. After three weeks in the village and prior to commencing my fieldwork, a second *sevusevu* was also presented to the village women where permission was sought to gather information regarding their daily-lived experiences in the village. The village headman and the women were also briefed on the objectives of the fieldwork, the reasons for choosing my mother's village for this research, the nature of my involvement and interaction with the women, what I intended to do with the findings, what the women would get out of this research and how the formalities of western university requirements could be met locally in the village. A participant's information sheet was used as the basis of this discussion (Appendix F). A similar discussion on these issues, using the same information sheet, was conducted on a one- to-one basis through the Household Survey. A formal consent form was presented and discussed with individual participants and those who agreed to participate signed one (Appendix G). A release form was also signed by the participants giving permission to use their narratives (Appendix H). These necessary documents were transcribed into the local language and time was taken to explain the ethical issues to the participants.

Participation was entirely voluntary and I respected those who did not wish to be part of the research for reasons best known to them. However, I did make it clear to all the women in the village that they were at liberty to join in and be part of the research whenever it was convenient for them. Many of the women joined in the later stages of the fieldwork, especially for the women's one-day workshop

and the fishpond project. I also wrote to the local provincial Fijian administrator informing him of my fieldwork in the village.

It was discussed with the women that their names as well as the name of the village would remain confidential for ethical reasons. The women's village is referred to by the pseudonym, Marama Village and the names of all the women participants are also pseudonyms. On my return to Canberra, the identities of the women and the village remained anonymous and I have been careful not to mention the women's lives in vain.

### **Empowering and caring**

Because the village was an agglomeration of houses in one locality, I kept my work visible and was available to the women or men at all times for any queries or questions. The fact that I lived in the village made a lot of difference because I was quickly absorbed into its daily life. I was particularly happy when the women and other village elders informed me of various protocols that I needed to be aware of as I progressed in my fieldwork. For example, one of the women informed me that we had to ask permission to dig the Fish Pond from the appropriate family land owning unit and this was done accordingly. The women informed the men what we were doing at different phases of the field activities and this was not because the men had demanded this but because the women themselves had taken the initiative to keep the men informed.

## **Conclusion**

The multiple methodological approaches employed in this research were applied flexibly and transparently to accommodate the socio-economic and cultural nuances of the indigenous Fijian women in their village community. In addition, the multiple methodological approaches provided the fluidity to co-construct and modify aspects of the approaches as dictated by the field situation. The fieldwork commenced with an ethnographic approach that allowed the women to speak first and share with the researcher the way they do things in their village. Commencing with the ethnography of the Fijian women privileged the voice of the Fijian women. This required openness to learning from the women and a willingness to see everything and suspend a premature judgment on what should be selected as data. It is the quality of this openness that lies at the heart of ethnography, in its processes, motive and ethics (Massey, 1998). The use of many methods generated a rich description of the women's lives as experienced by them and thereby allowed myself and those who read this thesis to gain a multi-dimensional appreciation of the Fijian village context.

The critical and feminist stance of the research evolved from the ethnography as a result of the positive personal relationship between the researcher and the women. The resulting confidence and security that the women gained from this relationship was a necessary stepping-stone towards the women's critical engagement in the research process.

The chapters that follow reflect different aspects of the research methodology. The knowledge outlined in the next chapter, which provides an introduction to Marama Village, is reflective of the early stages of the research process when I spent time simply living in the village, working with the women in their daily lives and using the Household Survey as a way of learning about and making connections with the people and their context. Chapters Five and Six grew out of a deeper immersion in the context when I had the confidence of the people to interview some of them, asking others to keep a diary and/or to join a focus group. Chapter Seven reflects the final process when I met with the group to give feedback to them regarding their perceptions of issues related to gender equality, empowerment and development. The collaborative feeling that arose from a shared understanding amongst them, regarding these challenges, provided them with the agency to initiate and to sustain actions that were important to them.

These research methodologies complimented each other especially when used in the actual field work because one methodology provided a vital platform for the next methodology.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **MARAMA VILLAGE**

This chapter introduces Marama village and includes a discussion of the physical characteristics of the village, basic demography of the village community, its social structure and organization, the farming calendar, sanitation and health, home amenities, religion and the local village school. The information contained in the chapter is designed to provide a background context for the women's lives discussed in later chapters. Information included in the chapter was gathered through participant observation, field notes, informal interviews and the Household Survey.

#### **Physical features**

Marama Village is situated 245 kilometres or four hours inland by road from Nadi International Airport. Travelling from Nadi airport, as I did, involves a one-hour bus trip to the village situated closest to Marama Village, then a three hour bus trip on a gravel road. It is normal that, when you get off the bus, most of you are well covered with road dust. The village is located in Fiji's largest market gardening area, the Sigatoka Valley, often referred to as the 'salad bowl' of Fiji. The valley is drained by Fiji's second largest river, the Sigatoka River. The meandering road to the village passes through this large river valley covered with huge patchworks of vegetable and crop plantations.

Marama Village was relocated fifty years ago from the old village site, called the *rara makawa* (local dialect term referring to the old village site). The new village is located about 900 metres from the river and is situated right next to the main arterial road that serves this vast rural hinterland. The village proper covers an area of approximately 70,000 square metres and, like many Fijian villages; there is a village green in the centre of the village. Homes are built in a close-knit fashion around this village green. The largest building is the church, the next largest is the village meeting house and then the chief's home or *bure* (traditional Fijian village thatched house). The chief's *bure* is located at the top end of the village while the other houses are randomly located around the village green. The homes are close to each other and in most cases you will not have to walk more than 15 meters to enter another home. The school building and the teacher's living quarters are at the edge of the building. Opposite the school is a medical dispensary in which the district nurse and her family live. There is also a 'village nurse' who is a woman who completed high school and gives out minor medicines when the district nurse is not available. The village nurse is not a trained nurse.

### **Climate**

Like the rest of Fiji, Marama Village is blessed with a warm tropical climate throughout the year and is devoid of lethal tropical disease germs associated with the wet tropics. The summer months from November to April are generally classed as the hot-wet season with a maximum temperature of 30°C. They are followed by the winter months or the cool-dry season from May to October when the average

temperature is 26°C. The humidity is quite high during the hot wet season and gets very uncomfortable at times. Flash floods are common during the rainy season and river flats are often flooded restricting crop cultivation to the rolling hills. In Marama Village, climate is the major factor influencing the economic livelihood of this village community. Due to its rich alluvial soil and equitable temperatures, the villagers are market gardeners who cultivate a wide range of commercial vegetables and crops, with the increase in village population, farmlands have become increasingly important as families redistribute areas to cater for their increasing numbers. The village population has increased due to better access to health care, although family planning remains a taboo subject and family planning services and facilities are not accessible.

### **Basic demography**

Marama Village, with a population of about 322 people, is a medium sized village in Fiji. There are fifty-two households in the village and a common household would include a married couple with their children, grandparents and one or two extended family members. Families can be large and the largest household has twelve people while the smallest has three people. According to the Household Survey, the average number of individuals per household is six. There are fifty-four children under the age of five years in the village, an equivalent of 16% of the population. The village has a youthful population and 124 of the villagers are aged between six and twenty years (seventy girls and fifty four boys), an equivalent of 38.5% of the village population. Hence girls make up 56% of the youth population. The productive age

group (that is, twenty one to fifty five years old) make up 35% of the village population. Of this age group, there are fifty-four women and fifty eight men. According to the Household Survey, there are 183 females in the village, an equivalent of 56.8% of the village population, while the males number 139, an equivalent of 43% of the village population. Of the total village population, eight are aged sixty years and over and the oldest person in the village is an eighty year old woman. The elderly are usually cared for by their children.

### **The village houses**

The traditional Fijian home is called a *bure*. It is built of local hardwoods with the walls made of bamboo layered with thick grass and a thatched roof made of reeds. Bamboos are in abundance and the villagers use plaited bamboo for walls and floor coverings. As in most villages throughout Fiji today, modern concrete houses have replaced the traditional thatched *bures* in the village. According to the Household Survey, 75% of the houses in this village are made of concrete while the rest are either made of wood or aluminium. Mili, one of the participants, is a single mother with four children who lives with her eldest brother and elderly mother. The concrete-block house with a corrugated iron roof was built with assistance from her sister-in-law who works as a teacher in the city. The house is approximately ten meters by fifteen metres with two bedrooms that are separated from the open living area by a wooden wall. The rest of the house is one living area with thick grass matting covering the cement floor. The adjoining kitchen area has a dinner table, a food cupboard and an elevated fireplace made of concrete slabs.

The kitchen is detached from the house and is a simple four-walled structure also with a corrugated iron roof. The kitchen walls and floor are made of plaited bamboo. Cooking is done on an open fire with old iron frames that hold pots over the fire with the woman seated on the floor at the same level as the fireplace. Though the women cook in an open fire, meals are delicious. Food preparation takes a fair amount of the woman's time and energy, but she often enjoys this activity. A typical breakfast consists of lemon tea, plain tea with rice, pancakes, roti or root crops (such as cassava, taro, breadfruit or sweet potato). The staple foods are root crops and vegetables and the major root crop is cassava or manioc. However, taro, which is the more expensive root crop, is in abundance in the village as a result of an agriculture project launched in May 2001.

Most of the women stated that a concrete house is cheap and easy to maintain. The women also mentioned that their concrete homes are more durable and solid and can withstand the ravages of cyclones of the season from December to March. Thus, compared to the traditional Fijian bure, concrete houses are the very popular in this village community. A few women said that, once people build their concrete houses, families would not have to worry about maintaining them. Unlike the *bures*, that have one open living room, today most these concrete homes have either one or two bedrooms.

### **Household furnishing**

The homes have basic furniture, and in most homes the furniture may include one or two beds, a wooden table, a food cupboard and one, two or three armchairs. According to the Household Survey, one of the important pieces of furniture is the food cupboard. The food cupboard is important to a woman because this is where she stores her groceries, left over food and her dishes and utensils. A prized possession in these homes is the transistor radio, which provides vital connection between the villagers and the outside world. Fiji's radio stations have excellent Fijian programmes for rural communities. However, these radios are used sparingly because radio batteries are expensive. The batteries cost \$2 each. The larger more commonly used batteries cost \$4 each and may last up to two and a half weeks on the radio. One household, which has the only television set in the village, operates it by an electric generator and, because of the cost of fuel, the television set is used only occasionally.

### **Household energy**

The women use a variety of household energy sources, which include kerosene, firewood, white benzine, electric generators and gas. However, according to the Household Survey, the two most common sources of energy are firewood and kerosene. Women use firewood daily to cook and prepare family meals. Kerosene is also a major source of energy and the women use kerosene lamps to light their homes every evening. A litre of kerosene is worth \$1.50 and this amount of kerosene in the lamp may last up to a week depending on the size of the wick and the hours used. Most families turn off their lamps as they go off to sleep for safety reasons. White

benzine is also used for lighting the house in the evening but is used only for special occasions. For example, tilly lamps are used for village meetings or evening prayer meetings. A litre of white benzine is more expensive than kerosene and will probably last for two to three evenings. Three women own gas cookers, but these are hardly used because of high costs of gas. Two families own electric generators and these are used only for special family occasions such as weddings or birthdays.

### **Sanitation and health**

Most of the women stated that the level of sanitation and hygiene in the village is poor and badly needs improvement. In the Household Survey, twenty-four of the twenty-five women who took part in the survey, expressed their disappointment at the very low level of sanitation in the village. One of the women stated that there was much rubbish strewn around the village, especially along the village fence where people have tended to throw their waste. The women offered various reasons for this low level of sanitation. Some were forthright stating that some villagers are just lazy and careless and are not putting in the effort to keep the village surrounds clean. They also think the water-supply, sanitation and waste disposal need improvement. They suggest that a village committee be created to oversee the digging of proper rubbish pits and that people practise good hygiene daily at the family level. The women consider that home surroundings need to be improved and families ought to work hard to achieve a decent level of hygiene within their households. Most of the women recommend that practical education on hygiene and sanitation be carried out at the

community level to help improve hygiene and sanitation in each household. They believe that what is needed is a genuine effort to make things happen and that the strength of their communality needs be harnessed and used effectively to solve and manage such problems.

Many women agree that their cooking practices, diet and infant care need to be improved. As for childcare and family diet, many women stated that this depends a lot on what they can provide and afford for their children. The increasing prevalence of cardio vascular disease, diabetes and hypertension in Fiji is directly related to lifestyle changes, poor diet, smoking and a decrease in physical activity (NCD Survey, 2002). Obesity and overweight are potential risk factors for diabetes and obesity is common among Fijian women. The prevalence of obesity among Fijian women has been reported at 63% (Becker, 2005) and this places additional and unacceptable burden on health care resources in the country. These health problems indicate the influence of the outside world as the villagers are influenced to adopt a diet that is less healthy than their traditional diet.

Smoking marijuana and tobacco is increasingly becoming a problem especially amongst teenagers. Like the other challenges that they face, women have practical solutions to these problems, however, they are unable to carry them out for many reasons. For example, there is no leadership figure to lead and encourage women to work on the solutions they suggest. Women feel that most of the men and boys

consume grog excessively which then leads to other social problems such as a lethargic male population and low productivity.

### **Water supply.**

Although there are heavy rains during the hot wet season, much of this water is not harnessed and water supply still remains the biggest domestic problem for women in this village. Quite often the taps run dry during the dry season. There are some points in the village with communal taps for running water and basic cold-water outdoor showers. According to the Household Survey, one quarter of the all households have their individual water taps while the remaining households share ten communal water taps. The water system has been plagued by real and challenging problems. Local village men did build three cement water reservoirs to store and supply water for the village, however, these failed because the men have very little technical knowledge regarding tap water systems and their mechanics. Many times the taps do not have enough pressure to get water through the pipes. Of the ten communal taps, only four taps have water. During periods of heavy rainfall, the pipelines get clogged with silt and there is no one to repair these clogged pipelines. As a result, women resort to using the river for most of their domestic chores. Apart from the river, the women use nearby water creeks for washing and for drinking water, especially during the wet season when these stony creeks get filled with clear running water from the mountains. However, during the dry months the water creeks dry up and the women are back in the river. One woman expressed the view that water was a big problem because the weather

gets really dry so there was very little water in the reservoirs. Another woman said that there was a need for huge water tanks as the current ones were small hence, the water supply does not last. The same women stated that most of the water reservoirs were incomplete and, quite interestingly, suggested that an Indian carpenter would do a better job.

There are a number of designated areas in the village for toilets separated from the houses. Families dig their own pit and build their own latrine structure. This is padlocked to keep other villagers from using it. A majority of the households use pit latrines while four homes have water seal latrines. Eight of the homes that have pit latrines and share their toilets with other families. However, with some motivation and encouragement, these women have the capability and motivation to improve sanitation within their household and the village community. This was easily illustrated when the village nurse, the village women and I organised a clean up day for the village, which turned out to be a great success.

### **The village community**

The village community is based on a predominantly patriarchal and hierarchical social system. Like other Fijian villages, Marama Village is socially organized along patrilineal kinship units with the men holding land titles of land units called the *mataqali* which gives access to the village's natural resources including the land. Fijian men hold leadership positions and are visible and audible in the social institutions such as the church, the *vanua*, (the land) the family and local government

institutions. This basically means that in principle women are invisible in most of these social and cultural platforms having very little say in decision-making in the village. In any village meeting, whether it is in the church, village or school, it is the men that do the talking and the discussion, while women look on and simply listen. As a consequence, women are hardly involved in any decision-making arena and therefore have no real political influence in the communal affairs of the village. However, women can be very powerful at family level as the women do most of the management of the daily socio-economic affairs of the home. However, this power is not carried out or allowed beyond the family unit because relationship dynamics change at the communal level.

At the communal level, the men are in control of all major decision making. Fijian women over the years have not interrogated this norm because of the absence of a power base from which to operate. Perhaps a major drawback is that these Fijian women have not been encouraged, mobilised and helped to create political spaces where they are audible and visible in their village community. This does not mean that women do not work together in the village. They do, but most of their combined efforts are geared for the communal good under male dominated institutions. Very little is done by the women for their own special benefits. Perhaps the same can be mentioned about our Fijian men, who have not had the spaces created for reflexivity and critical thinking.

Under the Fijian administration, Marama Village is externally connected to a *tikina* or district administration and the district as part of the larger *yasana* or province. Fiji has

fourteen major provinces, which in turn form three major traditional Fijian governments called *matanitu*. Internally, the village has two *yavusa*, the largest social unit for Fijian communities. The *yavusa* is basically a family group going back to one original member of that migration. The next social sub-unit to the *yavusa* is the *mataqali* basically made up of a family of brothers of a land owning unit. The *mataqali* acquire a distinct name and identity and become the custodian of a particular task. These units form the basis of the village's social organization. For example, these *mataqalis* form the working unit of many of the village cultural and socio-economic activities. These social units are headed by men or groups of men who manage the structural organization of these social units.

The village is headed by a hereditary chief who passed away just before I began my research and is yet to be replaced by one of his sons who reside in the city. The chief is often the oldest male. Another leadership figure in the village is the village headman who oversees various functions and activities in the village. The headman comes around weekly through the village and tells everyone what the chief wants done this week. The chief may at times use the headman as his spokesman.

The Fijian administrative units have been in place since the early 1900s, however, recent independent reviews of the Fijian administration indicate the need to reconstruct its organisational structure, form and function so that these structures are more conducive to people's social progress and development. For example, general issues from the grassroots as well as specific women's issues hardly find their way up to the top rung of the Fijian administration due to much red tape and the conservative

*vakavanua* mentality that is still common amongst our Fijian male leaders. The *yasana* council meeting, called the *bose ni yasana*, is held annually and often includes senior civil servants, both local and national. One or two district council meetings may be held in the year and representatives from each of the villages will be present. Unfortunately, women are absent from these district council meetings, which means that women's voices are hardly represented or privileged at the basic district level. Given this state of affairs, women's empowerment, advocacy and progress remains at best a political rhetoric unless indigenous Fijian women at the grass roots level are provided with the space and the opportunity to be part of decision-making process.

### **The family**

Fijian society is a communal one in which high value is placed high on the family unit, the village and the *vanua*. Each individual is essentially assigned a role within the community based on three broad and basic principles: age, gender and rank. For example, when women marry their new roles as wife and eventually mother brings to her a new set of responsibilities to a different group of people - her husband's family and *mataqali*. This is in addition to her role and responsibilities to her own family and *mataqali*. Women traditionally manage and coordinate their family affairs and are responsible for feeding, caring, clothing, entertaining and keeping the family healthy and happy. To fulfill their specified social and communal obligations, they are often segregated from the men folk for specific tasks. For example during ceremonial

occasions, most of the women would be involved in the preparation and serving of food while the men would be doing the ceremonial presentations.

Fiji's patrilineal society means that everything is inherited through the male line. For Fijians, this means that the children are born into the same *yavusa* and *mataqali* as the father. Any land, rank and position are passed down to the eldest son from the father. This is demonstrated by many customs. Since the males carry on the family name and are responsible for continuing its existence, male births are a joyous event. Female births are accepted but not highly celebrated. The husband is the head of the household and his word is the last on any matter. As modern times affect the villages, particularly as the women become money managers as a result of market gardening, dual decisions are made, but technically the male must be seen to give permission for what happens.

The Fijian people are family-orientated and, being a patriarchal society, the father is the head of the household. However, like some rural Fijian villages, an increasing number of women are taking up this headship role by default, as they become the main income earners, as market gardeners, in their respective households.

The most respected in the village are those who are older males. This is easily seen in many Fijian customs. For example, the males of the house sit at the head of the dinner table and eat first, although the custom of eating first is in practise becoming less common.

### **The annual farming calendar**

The economic activities in Marama Village are determined by the yearly climatic pattern consisting of two major seasons, the cool-dry season and the hot-wet season. As for their fore-bearers, farming is still the major source of livelihood for the people of this village but today the emphasis is on commercial market gardening. The men are involved in the farming but, as will be discussed in Chapter Five and Six, it is the women, with the help of their children, who provide most of the day-to-day labour. Most of the women's energy, resources and time are centred on market gardening and it is the women who make weekly trips to the urban markets to sell their farm produce. The men plough and prepare the farmlands for cultivation and the rest of the farm work is carried out by the village women. The harvesting, packing, carting and selling of the farm produce in the city is done by women. As a result, the women have become the main income earner and the financial managers of the family finances.

#### **April: the farming season begins for the women**

The cool-dry season commences in April and lasts until October. During the month of April the village comes to life as the women begin to cultivate vegetables and crops both for commercial and subsistence purposes. The season with its equitable temperatures and sporadic rainfall offers excellent conditions for the cultivation of many crops and a whole range of vegetables on this rich alluvial plain of the Sigatoka

River. However, there are the occasional rainy days which can be a nightmare for farmers especially for pollinating crops such as tomatoes. A good harvest of tomatoes can mean an income of F\$300 (A\$240) for the family. However, if the rains come during the flowering stage, they can lose a major portion of their income for the year.

Early in April, all family members clear scrub vegetation from their previously fallow farms and at the same time erect wire fences supported by wooden poles. The fences serve two basic purposes: to mark off boundaries and to keep stray animals away especially pigs and cattle. Most of the families walk an average of half a kilometre to their farms before dawn to begin their day. The families do as much as they can before the noon day heat sets in when they return to the village or remain in their farming sheds until the heat subsides. In the afternoon they continue their farm work. The men do much of this initial clearing while the women provide meals. Land is then tilled and ploughed by the men using a simple steel plough that is pulled by a pair of bullocks. The soil is then left for a few days to 'cook' before it is loosened up ready to be cultivated with vegetables and root crops. The English and Chinese cabbages are often easy to start with as well as cucumbers. Women often prepare special small seedbeds adjacent to their farms where they germinate cabbage and cucumber seeds for two weeks before these are transplanted to the main plot. Cabbages are ready to be harvested within three to four weeks and taken to the market to be sold. These vegetables are easy to grow and may take only three weeks to harvest. The other major vegetables that are cultivated include capsicum, tomatoes, pumpkins, long beans and French beans, and the Indian pea locally known as bora. These earlier crops

may be harvested twice or three times during the farming season beginning in May. They have an alternating succession of crop cultivation and harvesting right up until November. The farming season is a continuous hive of activities in which the women manage both their households and farming activities throughout the farming season. The men contribute with initial ploughing but the rest of farming work is left to the women and children. Some of the men spend this time doing paid work for Indian farmers, some form working bees mending communal buildings or assisting individual families to build a home, while others talk and drink kava.

The commercial crops that are grown on a wider scale include watermelon, corn, tobacco, peanuts and tomatoes. The villagers do one major harvest of these crops in a year season and the crops are often sold to Indian middlemen who collect these crops from the village farms. Minor but important cash crops such as English cabbage, eggplant and cucumbers may be harvested two or three times a year. Apart from these cash crops, it is the women who make weekly trips to the market to sell a whole range of vegetables. Root crops such as cassava, sweet potato and taro are grown all the year around both for consumption by the villagers and for commercial purposes. Cassava is a good cash crop as it fetches about \$80 to \$100 for a sack. Until recently, Taro was not a popular crop in this farming valley, however, there has been a tremendous increase in cultivation as a result of a recent marketing promotion by locally based Asian and American companies. Like many crop-marketing ventures instigated by outside companies, the locals are often encouraged to plant certain crops which at the

time are in short supply only to discover at harvest time that a glut has now occurred and the companies are not in need of their crops.

### **October: the fallow period**

Farming activities ease off in November as the hot wet season sets in with its high temperatures and high rainfall. The rainy season begins at this time of the year and floods are frequent on the low-lying river valley. The heavy rain and flooding during this period makes crop cultivation impossible. According to the women, the soil is very wet during this season and the only crop that some villages may cultivate is rice. Other villagers continue to cultivate English cabbage and eggplant for the market and other hardy vegetables for family use. Most people shift their cultivation to the old river plain on much higher ground, locally referred to as *tovatova*. Staple root crops such as cassava and sweet potatoes are suitably grown during this period for the families' food needs over this hot wet season. The villagers begin to cultivate sweet potatoes in September. Women also plant plantain and bananas and maintain small vegetable plots to supplement the family meals. When interviewed, most of the women expressed the view that the fallow period is a challenging time for them as they must pursue alternative sources of income to sustain and feed their families. One of the women indicated that when the rainy season begins everything stops.

The rolling hills and mountains are a source of a wide range of natural resources for the people's livelihood during the fallow period. For example, wild root crops such as

yams, firewood, forest timber, bamboo, reeds and grass are available all the year round to supplement people's needs. Despite the fallow period, the village women are industrious in finding alternative sources of income and food supply for their families. Three women in the village run small tuck shops while three other women sell special lunches in the village on a weekly basis. Sometimes, some women as a group travel to another village to dive for fresh water clams, *kai*, to supplement their food supply. These fresh water clams can be soaked for days and be eaten over two or three weeks. Some women venture into the forest to dig for wild yams.

### **The local village school**

Most of the women in the village send their children to the local village school, which is located 200 meters away from the village. It is convenient for the women and cheaper as they do not have to pay for bus fare. The teachers in the local school have completed a three-year diploma of teaching while some teachers in schools in larger regional towns may have completed an undergraduate degree in teaching. Five government teachers teach the 120 students who attend the village school from the three nearby villages. All the teachers are civil servants employed by the government. Government provides grants to the school annually and the villagers run fund-raising activities to complement the school's financial needs. The school is managed and maintained by a school committee, which is made up of men from the villages who use the school and who acknowledge that education is vital for their children's future. Fundraising activities over the years have provided a new classroom block, teachers'

quarters and a lunchroom for the students. The school has three buildings, each with two classrooms. By rural standards, the local village school has adequate resources. The 120 students walk to school.

For the past decade, the community has had a heightened awareness of the importance of education and as a result the village organises annual fundraising activities to resource the school. This year, the district community raised F\$19,000 in a one day *solì* carnival. Women actively participate in these fundraising drives and over the last ten years women have begun to realise that a good education can provide a better standard of living for themselves and their families. However, one of the major challenges expressed by the women is meeting the financial obligations of their children's education. It is not uncommon to find that village traditional obligations often take precedence over the educational needs of their children. As a result most families struggle to raise sufficient funds for their children's education.

A majority of the women in the Household Survey completed only their primary education at the local village school. Two women completed high school education and still live in the village while two young women have a university level education and now reside and work in the urban centre.

### **The church**

Like the *vanua*, the church continues to exert a lot of influence on the villager's lives, serves as a major source of values for people in this community and, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, places high expectations on the women's time and resources. The major Christian denomination in this village is Methodist and, as in all other villages, exerts a lot of influence on the lives of Fijian women and their families. According to the Household Survey, more than 50% of the households belong to the Methodist church, while the rest belong to other Christian denominations such as the Assemblies of God, Jehovah's Witness, Apostolic Church and Every Home. For the past fifteen years, these other Christian denominations have been established in the village and exist alongside the Methodist church. The Pentecostal churches, although smaller in congregation when compared to the Methodist church, are quite visible and fervent with their Christian beliefs and practices. Villagers in the Pentecostal churches have been able to modify some traditional Fijian practices based on their Pentecostal belief and values. For example, during traditional ceremonies, these Pentecostals take cordials and fruit juice instead of kava because they believe that kava is 'unclean'.

## **Conclusion**

The villagers continue to live a mainly traditional lifestyle but as they have more interactions with the outside world they want to improve their way of living. They recognise, as is also argued in the research (Mayo, 1997), that this can be achieved through education. The funds developed from the market economy may provide income to bring about better access to education, although as can be seen by the

description of Marama Village there are basic needs which are more pressing (housing, sanitation, water-supply). As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the introduction of a market economy is a double-edged sword with its capitalistic values and ideals. Emerging from it are interesting points of conflicts and tensions for the villagers. These tensions create complexities between the dynamics of the traditional institutions (the family, *vanua* and church) and the new institution of the market economy as the women juggle both their domestic, traditional and new economic roles and responsibilities.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF FIJIAN VILLAGE WOMEN**

This chapter is an ethnographic description of the typical week of the women's lives in the village. The information is presented in two ways. First, there are three verbatim diary entries from three women. The diary entries are broken into time slots of before breakfast (5am – 9am), after breakfast (9am – 4pm) late afternoon and evening (4pm-11pm). I suggested the women use the time/slot approach when they struggled with the diary process and asked for some support. The week in the life of the village women' portrays a week in August (the cool-dry farming season).

The second part of the chapter is a narrative re-presentation of the information from all the diaries and my observations of daily life in the village. This section provides a more comprehensive coverage in that it includes the men's activities. The chapter is designed as an opportunity for the reader to stop and feel the women's lives in motion.

#### **Naula**

Naula is a matured aged woman in her fifties. She left her urban village twenty-five years ago to marry her husband who was from Marama village. She has three grown-up children and one child aged ten.

Monday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

After a short prayer I boil the kettle on the kerosene stove and boiled some rice for breakfast. Then I washed the dinner plates and pots that were soaked overnight from the previous night's meal. I prepare breakfast which is rice cooked in coconut milk. We have breakfast. After breakfast I swept and tidied the house then spread a huge mat outside the house to sun out the pillows and blankets. Then it was back to the kitchen to peel and cook cassava for lunch. I went to the village meeting house because the village headman had called for a village meeting.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After the meeting I returned home for lunch. The family had cassava and 'moca' for lunch. After lunch I washed the dishes and then had a little nap because the weather was quite hot and humid. Refreshed from the nap, I sat down to continue mending my children's clothes as well as my husband's farming clothes. Then it was time to cook dinner again. After dinner we chatted as a family. Then we rested for the night.

Tuesday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up boiled hot water for tea and prepared breakfast *nai lava ni chi*. Washed the dishes and pots and then had breakfast. Prepared lunch and then cleaned the house. Had lunch ready. Then went to the river to wash our clothes. Returned home and had lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I lay down to rest for awhile. I woke up and then went to the water lily pond to fish and returned at night fall. Cooked tilapia fish for dinner. After dinner I rested for the night.

Wednesday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up and had three cups of water. I often drink three cups of water before I have breakfast. I prepared tea, washed the dishes and pots and prepared breakfast. After breakfast, cleaned the house and walked down to the farm to continue to weed the cassava patch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

I had lunch on the farm. After lunch I had a little nap and when noonday heat subsided at about 3pm I continued weeding until dusk. I walked back to the village, prepared dinner and had dinner. After dinner I had a small bowl of kava. I felt so relaxed and then dozed off to sleep.

Thursday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up and had three cups of water. Boiled hot water, washed dishes and pots. Prepared breakfast. After breakfast I went down to Sigatoka Town to buy fish. I returned to the village by the 10.30am bus. Cooked lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I washed the dishes. Did some sewing. In the afternoon I cooked dinner. Washed the fish and boiled it [*vabutabuta*]. I then fried the fish and villagers began arriving to buy fish. Prepared dinner and we had dinner. After dinner I usually wait for those that come and buy fish until I go to bed.

Friday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

When I woke up I had three cups of water, boiled the water and prepared breakfast. Washed the dishes and the cooking pots. Had breakfast. After this, I went to the plantation to fetch spinach or any other market produce to take to the market to sell. I returned home and quickly prepared lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I returned to the plantations to collect more stuff for my trip to the market until dusk. Then its back home, prepared dinner and fried the rest of the fish. This would be sold to the women who will travel with us in the truck later tonight. Had dinner and then walked to the road to wait for our transport to Nadi Town. Our truck arrived in the village at about 10 or 11 o'clock and we started loading our stuff and we set off slowly on the journey. The truck stopped at the Indian shop down the road to pick women up from nearby Tonga village. I then offered fish to the women [a polite way of saying that I sold the fish]. We then headed straight to Nadi Town. Arrived in town at about four or five o'clock in the morning. Did not sleep.

Saturday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

We off loaded the market produce from the truck and began to look for space in the market to display our produce for sale. I thanked the Lord for the safe journey to town. Took my 3 cups of water as usual. After a while I went to have breakfast in one of the local Chinese tea cafes - big cup of tea with freshly baked buttered bun. I returned and started selling my produce. Sale was slow but picked up later in the day.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

At about one o'clock I went to have lunch, returned and continued selling stuff again right until dusk. Then I went for another cup of tea and then brought some bread. Then it was back to the truck for our return journey to the village. We arrived in the village early morning at about one or two o'clock. Then it was straight to bed. At times, I usually just have a bowl of kava as a relaxant and also to chat about our sales at the market. Then it was bedtime.

Sunday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up prepared our special Sunday breakfast of bread and butter. Then I cooked lunch. I heard the church gong or *lali* so I got ready for church. Went to church with the rest of the family and attended Sunday worship service in the village church. After church went home and got lunch ready for the family.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I laid myself down and had a good sleep. When I woke up I boiled the kettle and then had tea for dinner. After this I washed the dishes and then ironed my two children's school uniform. In the evening at about 7pm. I tuned in to the national radio station to listen to the broadcasted Sunday worship service that was being aired live from the capital Suva. I then walked across to Rovoka's home and had a chat with her over a bowl of kava. A good relaxant for the body and soul. Went to bed.

## **Merea**

Merea, is forty seven years old and was born in this village. She has been separated from her husband for the past six years because he left her for another woman in the same village. She lives with her daughter's family and she keeps herself busy with her five grandchildren

Monday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up in the morning, prepared breakfast and then washed baby napkins and hung them on the clothes-line. We had breakfast and after breakfast I went to gather firewood. I returned home and went fishing in the water lily pond for our lunch. Came home and cooked lunch. Had lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I walked to the river to wash our clothes. Dried clothes on the flat gravelled riverbank. Went to our plantation to get plantain leaves for dinner. Cooked dinner, had dinner. Had a bit of chat with the family and then had tea and slept.

Tuesday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up at about 4am and prayed. Lit the fire and put kettle on. Grated cassava and baked this for breakfast. Soaked clothes to be washed. Had breakfast. Walked to plantation to weed taro plot. Returned home boiled cassava and green leafy vegetables for lunch. Had Lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Mended children's school uniform. Cooked dinner. Had dinner. Attended women's fellowship prayer meeting. Returned home at 10pm and slept.

Wednesday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up and lit the fire to boil kettle. Made roti (a flat thinly rolled out dough baked in hot grill which a staple food for Indo-Fijians) and had breakfast. Washed baby's napkins. Attended women's prayer meeting at Aunty Geba's home. Returned home and boiled cassava. Went to plantation to fetch some taro leaves. Returned and prepared this for lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Had lunch. Rested. Went to the water lily pond to pull out some taro shoots to be planted on the farm. Looked for wood grubs to use for my fishing bait in the lily pond. Cooked cassava and vegetables for dinner. Had dinner. After dinner I went fishing in the lily pond. Returned home, bathed and went to sleep.

Thursday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up and did my quiet time. Lit the fire in the kitchen and made flour dumplings. Boiled tea. Washed baby's napkins. Had breakfast. Cooked cassava. Walked to the lily pond to fish. Returned home and cooked tilapia fish for lunch. Had lunch. Had a bit of rest.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Walked to a nearby freshwater stream to catch prawns. Returned home, made roti and had this for dinner. Walked to Sautabu village to visit a cousin. Returned home bathed and went to sleep.

Friday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up and said my prayers. Got into the kitchen, lit the fire and fried pancakes for breakfast. Washed baby's napkins then had breakfast. Walked to Tawatawaji village to look for farm produce to take to the market. Then walked to river bank to wash vegetables and bundled them up ready for the market. Returned home, cooked lunch. Had lunch. Rested a bit.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Went to the water lily pond to fetch some water-cress. Returned home. Cooked taro and spinach for dinner. Had dinner. I got myself ready for market day tomorrow. Walked to the road to wait for truck. The truck arrived in the village and we left for the market at about 10.30pm.

Saturday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Arrived at the market at about 3am and slept in the market. Woke up at about 6am, had shower, got dressed and had breakfast in a Chinese teashop. Returned to the market and set up my produce: cassava, spinach, lemon, chillies, water cress, Hawaiian pawpaw, eggplant, cucumber, corn and bananas. Sat in the market and sold these to people. Had lunch around 1 pm, sausage and cassava, tea with milk.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Continued selling. At about 6pm, selling was over. Went to supermarket and bought some groceries. Had tea at Chinese tearoom. Left the market at about 8.30pm and drove back home. Stopped at Indian shop next to the village. Arrived home at about 2am and went straight to bed.

Sunday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up and prepared breakfast. Grated coconut and boiled rice in lolo. Had breakfast. Washed baby's napkins. Cooked lunch and got ready for church. Attended church, returned home and prepared lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Had lunch. Had a good sleep after lunch. Boiled tea for dinner. Had bath. Walked to cousin's place for meeting with other women in our extended family. The meeting was on our family's crockery collection. Had tea with our women relatives. Returned home and slept.

### **Esilia**

Esilia is another widow although she is only in her late thirties. She has three daughters, two of whom are in the city pursuing tertiary education. Esilia and her only son cultivate their land with another Indian family who provide much of the capital (seeds and implements for the farm) while Esilia provides family land for farming.

Monday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Soon as I woke up I boiled the kettle had breakfast. Then I walked to the cassava plantation to get some for lunch. Cooked lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I walked to Nahou (an Indian man's shop) to make a telephone call to my daughter in the city. Returned by bus and cooked dinner. Had dinner, yarned and dozed off to sleep.

Tuesday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up and prepared breakfast – rice and curried eggplant. Had breakfast and then visited my cousin who had come from the city. I returned home with her. And prepared lunch for her, taro leaves in coconut milk.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch I walked to the nearby creek to wash our clothes. Returned and hung clothes on the line. Boiled the kettle and had tea and biscuits for lunch. Went to my mother's home, cleaned the house and put out beddings in the sun. My sister and her son arrived from Suva to visit our sick mother. Prepared dinner.

Wednesday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up and prepared breakfast. Walked to the road with my sister and her son who had to catch the morning bus to town and return to the city. I came back and cleaned my mother's house then walked to the river to wash my mother's clothes.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Prepared lunch and had lunch with my mother. Rested for awhile. Walked to plantation to fetch cassava for dinner. Cooked dinner and had dinner with cousin and my mother. Slept.

Thursday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

I woke up, boiled the kettle and made *roti* for breakfast. Prepared lunch at the same time, rice and curried tinned fish. Had breakfast and walked to Toga village

to visit a cousin of mine. The river was flooded so we waded across using a huge bamboo trunk. Presented *sevusevu* to cousin.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

We had lunch with my cousin and then returned home late in the afternoon. Prepared dinner. Returned home in the afternoon, cooked dinner. Slept.

Friday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up and fried pancakes for breakfast. After breakfast, I changed into my work clothes and walked to Chuku's place (another cousin), joined her for breakfast. Then we walked to her plantation to fetch some produce for the market. We gathered chillies, eggplants, pawpaws and plantain for the market. Returned to Chuku's place for lunch.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Walked home, got knife and sack and walked to the plantation to fetch some cassava. Carried the sack of cassava to nearby village to be transported to my sister in the city. Returned home and cooked dinner. Had dinner, yarned with my cousin then slept.

Saturday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Woke up and prepared breakfast, rice in coconut cream. After breakfast, chopped some firewood and piled them in the kitchen. Walked to the river with my bale of

clothes to be washed. Dried the clothes on gravelled river flats and returned home late in the afternoon. .

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Then I cooked lunch, boiled cassava, plantain leaves and tuna. Had a bit of rest. Walked with my cousin to nearby village to meet two aunts. Chatted with them, had dinner and then returned home.

Sunday: *Qena qwata* (in the morning).

Prepared breakfast and took this to my mother's home and had breakfast with her. Then I cooked lunch, cassava, fish in coconut milk and *bele*. Walked to church down the road.

*Osi na vahigalevu* (after lunch).

Had lunch. Rested. Women in our extended family came home for our discussion regarding our crockery collection. Had tea and yarned with them until about 2am. Everyone slept at home.

### **A re-presentation of the women's diaries**

Marama village is situated on the upper reaches of the Sigatoka Valley and is the major market gardening area in Fiji's. This is a rural farming community and the villagers are semi-subsistence market gardeners. A large proportion of their farm produce is transported to urban centres for cash while the rest of their crops are

for family use. The village women and their families put much effort into maximising food production and income from April to November when the wet season begins. Towards the end of November, farming activities decrease and food resources diminish. Consequently, life becomes difficult for the women and their families as there is a drastic decrease in the source of income. Food, in this period, is obtained by gathering from the surrounding hills and valleys as well as using any saved money to supplement their diets.

Generally, the week can be divided up into three parts, Mondays to Wednesdays are days in which the village women attend to the communal and families obligations, Thursdays to Saturdays are days when women prepare their farm produce and transport them to the market to be sold. Sunday is a day of rest and villagers recuperate from a week of toil and numerous obligations.

In the following sections, I re-present a narrative of the weekly diaries of a group of women from the village.

### **Monday to Wednesday**

On Mondays, usually there are organised activities for the village that consist of two work groups based on the traditional communal approach to such enterprises. However, a new arrangement for this has been that rather than the men and women working separately, the young village women combine with the older men while the young men join matured women in various activities to raise funds

for the village's annual fund raising. The year I was there, they raised money by taking turns each week for one group to cook a meal for the other group who paid \$5 to \$10 per meal. The money was used the money to build a new teacher's living quarters.

On alternate Tuesdays, the women join the members of their *mataqali* (the primary social division and land owning unit in a Fijian village community) in a traditional work organisation known as *sosolevaki* in which various communal tasks such as an the construction of homes, cultivation of crops, cleaning the village surroundings are completed. In this practice, men from the same *mataqali* combine their efforts to work on a designated task ranging from weeding a plantation to gathering firewood for a widow. For example, the men in Raia's (one of the participants) *mataqali* worked on weaving new bamboo walls for her kitchen. While the men are engaged in the task, the women prepare lunch for the *mataqali*. Later in the evening the *mataqali* members have a prayer meeting and informal discussion, usually on future commitments and obligations. A *tanoa* of kava makes such discussions more rewarding and interesting especially for the menfolk, as these kava sessions are the only form of social entertainment for them. However, such sessions drag late into the night and become tedious for the women, as they have to wait around to serve hot dinner to the men.

On Wednesdays, the women concentrate on their own family livelihoods, basically the cultivation of crops and vegetables and sometimes the odd trip to dive for fresh water mussels as a food supplement for the family. For example, on

one Wednesday about fifteen women and a couple of teenagers hired a truck for \$50 to take them to dive for fresh water mussels in the Sigatoka River. Two women had prepared a huge sack of English cabbage, a sack of corn, tomatoes and sweet potatoes. As customary, these food crops will be presented to the village chief where permission would be sought to dive for fresh water mussels. I accompanied the women and after travelling for two hours we arrived at the riverbank where we will spend the rest of the day diving for fresh water mussels. The day was very windy and the river extremely cold, but the women braved these conditions as they dived for mussels. The women tied cloths around their waist for a pouch to collect the mussels while diving. In waist deep water, women dived to the riverbed and with both hands raked the mudded-gravel, then surfacing and finally sieving the gravel through their fingers to collect the mussels. After lunch on the riverbanks, the women dived for more mussels until late afternoon. Then it was, a two-hour trip back to the village arriving late in the evening. The mussels provide useful meal supplements for the women and their families for the week.

*Na kwa e ri tara na lewa ni drio ho ma* (when night falls).

Night falls and Merea returns from the big waterlily pond where she has been fishing for about two hours for the family dinner. Fishing in the river and the water lily pond is something she has done since she was a little girl. With her fishing line coiled around an empty coke bottle and using the earthworm and wood grubs as her bait, she was able to catch six medium sized tilapias for dinner.

She arrives home and asks her daughter to cook dinner while she bathes her three grandchildren in the open tap outside their home. The children then oil their bodies with coconut oil and then put on clean clothes. The family then sit around the *na yo ni kana*, the dinner mat, to have fish for dinner and then retire for the night. It is 9 o'clock in the evening, the children are asleep and Mereana finally has time to have a shower at the village tap. She returns home, applies oil on her body and changes her clothes and goes to bed.

Meanwhile, Naula, who spent the whole day weeding her cassava patch, packs some cassava and spinach in her coconut basket and walks back to the village. When she arrives home, her older daughter was already in the kitchen cooking cassava for dinner. After dinner she mixes a small bowl of *kava* as a relaxant to calm her weary and taunted muscles. Then she crawls to the bed mat to rest for the night. Next door, her son and his wife, Etasa, arrive in the village after a full day at their farm. Her son unloads their sacks and crates of farm produce from the bullock driven wooden sledge and sets the bullocks free beyond the village fence. Etasa changes her clothes and chats with her husband. The family gather for a quick dinner because they need to pack the farm produce for the couple's weekly trip to the market. Unlike other village women who travel to the market on Friday night, Etasa, leaves the village on Thursday night so that she has Friday and Saturday to sell her produce at the city market.

*O kuru na lewa i na drio ni qwata* (at the break of dawn).

Dawn breaks and Merea, like most women in the village steps out in the cold morning air into her kitchen to light firewood and prepare breakfast. It is another day and life goes on for her in the village: breakfast to be prepared, children to get to school, clothes to be washed, pigs to be fed, the weeding task with other women, firewood to be restocked, hair to be trimmed, the list is endless. As a village woman in a predominantly patriarchal society, she has limited choice but to work through these tasks diligently and faithfully. For her as a woman, these are her daily-lived socio-economic experiences. This is the way it has always been and perhaps there is no other way.

With her plastic container of *dravusa o ravu* (firewood ash) she walks to the water tap and washes the dishes and pots, which were used for the previous night's dinner. Washing the pots with *dravusa* gives the pots a brilliant shine and is as good as steel wool and soap. She stacks the washed pots and pans on the bamboo-thatched shelf beside her kitchen and returns to the fireplace. Merea contemplates what she can prepare for breakfast. There is rice but the family had rice for breakfast yesterday, so she checks the flour jar. There is enough to make some *roti*, a favourite breakfast for most of the households in the village. Perhaps *roti* will do because there is a bit of flour left in the plastic container.

She hopes there is a coconut under the food cupboard, because *roti* with coconut cream just makes breakfast interesting and delicious. She returns to the fireplace and settles down on the bamboo-plaited floor to knead the flour dough for the *roti*. Merea's, daughter, steps out of the house half awake and hears her mother's request to grate the coconut and prepare the coconut cream. Merea cooks the *roti* on the hot grill while Mereana soaks the *roti* in the coconut milk. The *rotis* are rolled up neatly and placed in a large plate.

The boiled tea and hot *roti* are carried back into the house as the family gather around for grace at the *ibe ni kana*. Her husband, Weni, returns from ploughing the field, sits at the head of the breakfast mat while his mother sits at the base to serve food for the family. During breakfast, Merea reminds her husband about their contribution of a drum of kerosene to be taken to Dere's house. The ten or so drums of kerosene will be used as a form of traditional presentation by the men of this village to a bride from another village who is marrying into this village.

Mereana, their teenage daughter, will join fifteen other youth and some young married women to work on an Indian farm for the next three weeks. They will travel daily by truck and work on the farm from 8am to 5pm in the afternoon. Each of them would be paid \$8 a day.

Meanwhile, Esilia with her head scarf still on her hair, steps into her kitchen which is adjacent to her home. Her two children, Jojo, her 18 year old son and Loata, her daughter, are still asleep. She lights the fire and boils tea for her two

children. She has plenty of cooking oil and flour so she decides to make pancakes for breakfast because her children love them. She then prepares lunch for her daughter who attends the local village primary school. She wakes her children and sends them off to wash their faces and be ready for breakfast. They all sit around on the floor and Esilia says a prayer before they tuck into their meal. She reminds her daughter to hurry and not be late for school and asks Jojo to find out from their Indian co-farmer when he leaves for the city so that she can send some vegetables and root crops to her two daughters, Loata and Seru who live and work in the city. After breakfast she walks about 800m on the gravel road to her farm to fetch cassava and *bele* for lunch. Jojo, carries these on horseback and they return to the village. Esilia cooks the cassava and boils the *bele* for lunch.

*Ni osi na homu chi* (in the mid morning sun).

Soon after breakfast, after the children have walked to school, most women (a few accompanied by their husbands) walk to their farms to continue with their farm work; weeding, planting and watering their crops. Most of the farms are located on the rich alluvial flats of the Sigatoka River about 800 metres walking distance from the village. The other farms are located on the older river plain further away from the river, where the more hardy root crops like cassava are cultivated. The river irrigates this fertile valley and is Fiji's largest market gardening area. Other women may remain at home to do a range of domestic chores, some walk to the forest to collect firewood, fish in the river or the water lily pond. Sometimes their sons come later and carry the firewood on wooden sledges drawn by bullocks.

Geba, a staunch member of the Pentecostal church, joins the other women from her church for their weekly prayer meetings on Wednesday. The ladies have fellowship and discussion for about two hours and then later share some refreshments and tea before they disperse to continue with their daily domestic chores. Later that day, Geba will organise the women to cater for people attending the district council meeting in the village. Most of the women will gather at the meeting house to cook and provide lunch for those attending the quarterly district council meeting.

Meanwhile Esilia cleans her mother's home because she is bed ridden. After sunning out her beddings, she walks about 800 meters to the river to wash her mother's clothes. In her kitchen, Raia and her sister in law, Merea, are discussing work done by the village women in the *dalo* (the root of the taro which is the staple root crop in Fiji) plantation on Tuesday. Merea insisted that the \$40 given to the women for this task was too little because for the whole day they worked in two huge plantations in scorching heat. The cash will be the women's contribution towards the village's monthly fund raising effort.

After lunch, Merea heads off to the forest to look for wood grubs for her fishing bait and then later to the huge water lily to get some *dalo* suckers to be planted on the farm near the river. Naula, heads back to her farm to continue weeding in her cassava patch otherwise the weeds and grass will choke off the young cassava shoots.

Her daily chores seem endless to her and these continue quite late into the night. Naula says that a small bowl of kava helps tone down her weary muscles, as she gets ready to rest her soul for yet another day.

*O kuru na lewa i qena yavi* (afternoon).

After the village meeting to discuss catering for the local district meeting, Naula heads back home for lunch. The family has cassava and spinach for lunch. After lunch she washes the dishes and then has a little nap because the weather is quite hot and humid. Refreshed from the nap, Naula continues to mend her children's clothes as well as her husband's farming clothes. She then picks up a pot from her kitchen and makes her way to the huge water lily pond where other village women gather for a fish drive. The fish drive is always lively and exciting for the girls and women because it provides social space for women's companionship and friendship. The women and girls in a line form a human fish net at the base of the pond and then slowly move across the whole length of the pond. As they do this, women catch fish and throw it into their pots that float along with them on the water. There is much chatting and fishing as women cover the whole span of the pond. With their bodies covered with swamp mud from the pond, most women and girls catch enough tilapia for the family dinner and then head back home.

Meanwhile, Etasa, who has been on the farm since daybreak, helps her eldest son cut long bamboo sticks on which to hang tobacco leaves to dry in farming sheds. It is common to find temporary sheds on farms and these consists of aluminium roof sheets propped up on thick bamboo poles. These sheds serve numerous purposes such as storing and sorting farm produce and having meals. After a short nap and determined to finish off her farm work, Etasa continues to weed the family cassava patch before she packs her farm produce to take to the market the following day. She then picks enough tomatoes to fill two wooden crates to take along with her on her weekly trip to the market. She also finds some ripe pawpaws to take to the market. It is late in the evening when Etasa and her son make their way back to the village with her son carrying their farm tools and produce on a bullock driven wooden sledge. Etasa has her bath in the river and then makes her way back to the village.

Merea, a single mother in her late 50s, lives with her married daughter and her five grand children. After lunch, Merea carries her bundle of clothes and walks to the river to wash. She then dries the clothes on the gravelled riverbank. While waiting for her clothes to dry, she walks to the nearby forest and looks for wood grubs for her fishing bait in the lily pond later that afternoon. She also collects some taro leaves for the family dinner that evening. Later that afternoon she collects her dry laundry from the riverbank and heads back home to the village. Dinner that evening is boiled taro leaves with canned fish. After cooking dinner, Merea walks to the water lily pond to fish and was able to catch five medium sized tilapia fish.

It is already dark when she returns home but her daughter has already fed the children dinner and were about to sleep. The fish is then cooked for dinner for the older people in the family. She chats with her brother and daughter, had some tea and then heads off to the women's weekly prayer meeting.

### **Thursday to Sunday**

*Na lewa i na drio ni qwata* (at the break of dawn).

Dawn breaks for another day and Merea makes her way to her kitchen after her morning prayer. She quickly lights firewood to boil tea and prepares breakfast for her family. Like other women in the village, Thursdays and Fridays are busy days for Merea where she concentrates her energy and time to fetch and prepare farm produce to sell at the market on Saturday. Most women get their market produce from their own farms while other women obtain these from other family farms or may even purchase these from nearby Indian farmers. Mereana joins her husband in their tomato plantation to pick their tomatoes and later take them to the market. This is one of their major crops for the year and the harvest is good because the climate has been cool and dry so far. The couple will have to make sure that their tomato crop arrives in good shape at the market which may fetch them a good price. This means that for the couple it will be an income of about \$300 a week for the next three weeks. Meanwhile, Naula travels by bus to Sigatoka Town to purchase mackerel fish and returns to the village by mid-day. She then fries the fish and sells this in the village on Thursdays and Fridays as a source of income.

She normally makes a profit of \$25 to \$30. Two other women sell special lunches on Thursdays and Fridays usually fish or barbecued mutton flaps. The villagers look forward to these days because these lunches are luxury meals and serve as a great reward for a hard day's work on their farms.

Merea soaks her crockery in a large basin of water and heads to the farm to fetch farm produce for the market. When she arrives in *bila* (the locally coined word for the vast expanse of this alluvial river plain), other women were already busy on the farms. Fresh spinach grows haphazardly in freshly ploughed fields and so she fetches some bundles for the market. When supply is scarce a bundle of spinach costs \$1.50 and \$1 when supply is plentiful. It is often in demand by Indo-Fijians as this makes wonderful dish when fried with onions and other herbs. She also prepares a sack of English cabbage commonly coined as *gobhi* because it is in season. If things go well she will be able to earn \$20 to \$25 from this sack of cabbage. Other market produce she prepares includes chillies, pawpaws and eggplant. All these she carries on her back to the village and packs them in plastic bags, carton boxes and sacks ready for the trip to the market. She gets back to the fireplace to prepare lunch, steamed spinach, canned fish and cassava which goes down well with lemon and chilli.

*Osi na va higalevu* (after lunch).

After lunch Merea walks 100 metres to the huge water lily pond, to fetch water cress to take to the market. She hurries back home to prepare dinner so that her family is fed before she prepares herself and her produce for the four hour trip to

the market in Sushil's truck. Sushil, like many local Indian men who own trucks, transport the women to the market to sell their produce and drive them back to the village late on Saturday evening. She hurries back to the village to prepare dinner so that her family is fed before she prepares her produce for the four-hour trip to the market.

Dinner is tea and rice. After dinner she has a quick shower at the tap and puts on her warm clothes as it is usually very cold and windy in the back of the open truck. Then she makes her way to the road, where the other women are waiting with their sacks of farm produce. The children and menfolk are there too, some accompany their wives, others are just there to see their wives off. Children dart here and there while a group of teenagers with heads together burst out laughing at the young *qauri* (locally coined term for gays) who's sharing some jokes with them.

The truck finally arrives at 11.30pm and men help the women load cartons, sacks and bundles of produce on to the truck. The huge sacks go in first and then the cartons. The women then hop in after the sacks and seat themselves comfortably on the floor of the truck...at the back of the truck of course! Conversations fade away as women close their eyes for a much needed nap. Tired and weary, Merea dozes off to sleep but cannot lay her head down as the truck is choc- a-block with women and produce. Every week women take a lot of risk on rugged winding roads with the possibility of accidents.

These weekly trips have become a routine part of women's life. They do not really mind these long and accident-prone trips because they will obtain much cash.

*Na drio ni qwata i na makete* (dawn at the market).

Dawn breaks as the truck arrives at the market in Nadi town at about 5am. The few men who have travelled with their wives help each the women off load their cargo as women begin to find free spaces on wooden tables to arrange their produce. Merea is lucky today as she finds a whole table to sell her produce. She then hurries off to the Chinese Shop to have a big cup of tea with lots of milk and freshly baked buns. This hard working woman deserves butter on buns so she gives herself a treat on these weekly trips; no hassles from kids or chores, just her and her wonderful breakfast. What a relief! She then returns to her table, to begin her long day at the market. She arranges her produce on her table as best as she can. The bundles of spinach, her small heaps of chillies, her piles of tomatoes, bundles of Chinese cabbage, Hawaiian pawpaws and eggplants. She seats herself comfortably on a wooden box and waits in anticipation. She hope things go well today and she is able to collect enough money to buy groceries for her family and pay off her debt at the Indian shop in the village. As the market gets crowded, the atmosphere becomes congested with warm air. The bundles of spinach and the piles of chillies were sold out in no time because they were popular amongst Indian women. The tomatoes were also selling well. By midday, she had sold half of her produce and anticipates that all would be sold by mid afternoon.

She trots off to the Chinese shop again and orders chop suey for lunch, a wonderful reward for her tireless and never ending domesticated chores. At about 5pm, only two heaps of *gobhi* (local name for English cabbage) are left to be sold but she starts packing anyway. She rushes off to the supermarket to purchase rice, sugar, soap and snacks for her grandchildren. In addition, she also buys bread and butter for that special Sunday breakfast. It's getting late, so the women hurriedly buy their groceries and get in the truck for their return trip to the village. The truck leaves at 6.30pm for the village about 200km away. The village is asleep and it's all quiet and dark as the truck arrives at about 1.30am. Exhausted and sleepy, Naula carries her small carton of groceries on her shoulders and makes her way home. Weary and tired she finds her pillow and blanket on the floor of her home and finally rests for the night. Another market day is over but she does not mind because she gains another dollar!

For the rest of the women who remain in the village, Saturday is a day when women flock to the river with their children and dogs to do their weekly laundry. Soon after breakfast, women with bales of clothes on their shoulders and buckets in their hand walk to the river to wash for the week. Scores of children follow their mothers to the river, as this is usually an opportune time for the children to play their hearts out and have a great time swimming and playing with their mates. The women use large stone boulders as washing boards and use a thick wooden stick to beat the dirt out of the clothes. The clothes are spread out on the gravelled riverbank to dry and will be much lighter to carry back to the village.

Apart from washing their clothes, women use this opportune time to chat amongst themselves about anything and everything and sharing the latest gossip. Doing the laundry is often a whole day affair and the women with their children arrive back in the village at sunset.

Sunday mornings are usually serene, signifying the importance of the Sabbath in the village community. Most families in the village look forward to that special breakfast on Sunday morning of bread, butter, jam and milk. It is a traditional practice that Sunday lunch is the most special meal of the week. This is often exciting as women share the fruits of their labour with their husbands and children, and other family members who live with them. Immediately after breakfast, the women prepare lunch as everyone is expected to attend church. The first *lali*, the native wooden drum, beaten with two sticks, summons people to church and the second *lali* is when the service actually begins. The whole village is quiet as everyone, young and old, congregate in the village church for the Sunday worship service, which lasts for about one and a half hours.

After the service, there is a sense of relief knowing that they have come together as a community to acknowledge and thank God for His grace and blessings for yet another week. Next is the Sunday lunch, the most important meal of the week where families sit around to share their sumptuous meal. The Sunday meal may include green vegetables with tinned fish cooked in coconut milk and this is usually eaten with cassava, sweet potatoes, wild yams, taro or breadfruit. Women may also prepare meat dishes including mutton flaps, chicken or sausages, which

they have bought from the supermarkets in town. Meanwhile, Merea prepares the visiting pastors lunch and today she has cooked fish head in coconut milk She takes this to the village meeting house where most village men have met to have kava with the preacher. This grog session takes the whole afternoon and most men return to their homes grog doped. Later in the afternoon, the women prepare supper, which is usually tea and bread, pancakes or the left-over from Sunday lunch. Naula looks forward to the church worship broadcast, which is aired from Suva every Sunday at about 7pm. Merea has supper with her mother-in law and spends the evening chatting with other relatives. She dozes off to sleep in between their chats as darkness descends on the land and the village is quiet once more. The women are grateful for this day of rest. Night has come again, as the women lie down to sleep, for tomorrow is the beginning of another week where life goes on in their village for these village women

### **Conclusion**

The market economy, which has resulted in moving the village way of life from a subsistence economy to one of market gardening, has created a new dimension to women's role - that of an income earner. The experience of the women in this village is in keeping with that of other women in similarly cultural and socio-economic contexts as Kilhoro (1992) has shown: Income generation is done in addition to their duties in their traditional duties and much of this work is relentless and physically demanding.

The village women are still to be found in the same kitchen that I saw them over thirty years ago, still sweating in smoke filled room both morning and night. They are to be found in the same kitchens they have always worked in day in and day out with their grandmothers and their mothers. It is the first place they find themselves in the wee hours of the morning and the last place they leave before they retire.

Acting as a participant observer has resulted in me being more appreciative of the reality of their lives. I did not realise how hard these women toil until I joined them in weeding a cassava plantation for two consecutive days, in scorching heat. With sore muscles, sunburnt face and blistered hands, it took me three days to fully recover from this weeding task. I now appreciate how physically demanding and relentless their daily lives are and how that results in them having almost no time for themselves. I want them to have kitchens that are more time and energy efficient workstations so that more time and energy is available for engagement in other tasks of their choosing.

I realise the women need huge doses of encouragement from teachers, the local nurse and other civil servants who are in contact with them on a daily basis and that these professionals must be excellent leaders. The women need leaders who live with them in the village, who are approachable and sensitive to the women's knowledge discourses, needs, visions and aspirations.

The leaders must negotiate access into the women's socio-economic experiences identifying skills and knowledge gaps where she can make a contribution. Together, the women and their leaders can co-construct knowledge and meanings to provide effective power bases and capital that will enhance women's capacity for social change and progress (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). An aim of this thesis is to provide such leadership and to record the process to inform those who follow me.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE FIJIAN VILLAGE WOMEN AND THEIR LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

A group of indigenous Fijian women have shared their stories on their experiences, thoughts, beliefs, hopes and concerns in their rural Fijian village community as a contribution to this study. Individual interviews, personal diaries, chat groups, household survey and the village workshop provided an opportunity for these indigenous women to share their daily-lived experiences. This is often a wise and necessary prerequisite to any programme or undertaking related to women's empowerment, equality and social progress. The women are semi-subsistence market gardeners who live on the vast alluvial plains of Fiji's longest river, the Sigatoka River. Market gardening is the women's major means of livelihood and women make weekly trips to the urban markets to sell produce. Apart from their traditional and domestic roles and responsibilities, this group of women plays a crucial role as breadwinners for their households and leaders in their village community.

This chapter is organised around a number of broad themes, which have emerged from the analysis of the women's narratives and stories attained through interviews and focus groups. These themes include the woman and the *vanua*, the woman and the family, the woman and the church, the woman and the school and the woman and the market place. These broad themes will be discussed within the context of Fijian traditional institutions of the family or *matavuwere*, *na vanua* or the traditional state or community of people, *na*

*lochu* or the church and *na rara ni vuli* or the school. The market, which has been the major vehicle of Western influence to this village, will also be a focus of discussion. The women's daily lives revolve around these institutions, in which women take on multifaceted roles as producers, household managers, mothers and social organisers (Stewart, 1992.) The women's place and role within their village community is organised through these traditional institutions and a highly structured, male-dominated social order. As will be revealed in this chapter, managing their many community obligations, coupled with their new role of market gardening, against a backdrop of these traditional institutions, creates interesting challenges for this group of Fijian indigenous women.

### **The Village Women and the *Vanua***

#### **The predominance of the *vanua* and its communal spirit**

As noted previously, the *vanua* or traditional state or community among indigenous Fijians, is a major institution that shapes the life and identity of its people. The *vanua* with its traditional norms and practices was established during the colonial era when Fiji was colonised by the British. Parallel to this was the creation of a hierarchical pattern of leadership and organisation in which the leaders, mostly men, hold power. This style of social administration together with the Fijian tradition has constrained social progress and development because it siphons much time, energy and resources way from village households where they are most needed.

Many women agree that current obligations created by traditional institutions ought to be minimised because these are done at the expense of their own family's social progress and development. A common objection and source of frustration for the women is the never-ending social and traditional obligations where the women are expected to contribute their time and money whenever the need arises. Women have used negative statements to characterise these continuous chain of obligations such as:

*Na ogaoga ni lochu qei nia na vanua ena tasi osi rewa.*

(Village woman, 2001.)

(It is a fatalistic lifestyle because of the never-ending communal and church obligations.)

Most women are stretching their time and energy to satisfy both their communal obligations as well the demands of running a market gardening business for cash.

### **Expectations of the village women**

The Fijian village community is a patriarchal system, supported by traditional institutions where males are leaders, and has provided little opportunities for these women to be audible and visible. As a result, most of these women live in the shadows of their male counterparts, fulfilling the men's wishes and expectations.

*E ya valu na rara vavisi na ogaoga koko haraga e ri dereia na lewa. E ri qwaravia na i seisei, e ri volitaki cawa i na makete, e ri kou ma na cawa qe nia na sede i were.* (Village woman, 2001)

(Like many Fijian villages, we live in a village where women are expected to do everything. Women cultivate crops, women fetch food for the family meals as well as selling farm produce at the market.)

The comment above from one of the women is an expression shared by many women in this village community. While both men and women perform a number of functions, women have so many additional demands placed on their time and resources. In this village, women are expected to work hard to meet their families and communal obligations.

The majority of the women in this study were adamant that they bear the brunt of the ensuing hardship because, as managers of household and communal activities, they are expected to do everything for everybody.

The communal way of life is a hallmark of the indigenous Fijians and as such, one's business is everybody's business. When a family organises a function or traditional ceremony, even without being invited, the practice is that other families will voluntarily contribute to this function to show their support and in maintaining that communal spirit in the village. Women state that they contribute both in cash and kind to a whole range of

traditional customs and ceremonies ranging from funeral assembly, various forms of *solu* (a cash offering that is organised to collect funds communally for the village for various collective reasons), presentations for a bride's hand in marriage, initiation ceremonies, birthdays, weddings and burial ceremonies.

*Ya valu na gauna, e levu haraga na kwa ji qwaravia, ia o matou na lewa, machi na hagaia ga me rewa vina nai tavi koko. Kwe tasi hila tale e tara.* (Village woman, 2001)

(Sometimes these obligations are burdensome yet women work hard to meet all their obligations. If we do not do it then nobody else will.)

One of the elderly Fijian women passed away during the second week of the field research and the whole village gathered for the ceremonial mourning. Many women congregated at the deceased woman's home for the whole week to cook and cater for the mourners. For many women it was a matter of juggling their domestic roles and their communal role and expectations in this period of mourning. There is a clear division of labour in traditional ceremonies where men are very visible in the ceremonial presentation of gifts, kava ceremonies and the usual kava sessions, while the women work behind the scenes cooking and feeding people and staying up late, waiting for men to round off their grog session and then have dinner. It is not until the early hours of the morning that the women return to their homes to rest for the night.

### **Women at the crossroad of the market and traditional economy**

The village women live at the crossroads of their traditional Fijian way of life and that of a modern market economy. The women exercise some freedom of choice to buy clothes for their families, groceries and household furniture. from their market gardening activities. However, this has not exempted them from their communal obligations because they are still part of the village community. They still live in the village, physically and culturally.

*E levu na kwa ji hotaqea na lewa ena gauna ni kua, va uahivi na kea  
kaikai na leju vademia na silina ena gauna okwe.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Today women face many tough challenges particularly at a time when women really work hard to earn as much cash as they can.)

The women realise that the greatest challenge facing them is managing the expectations of their communal life with that of the market economy. Many women express the view that they have little choice over meeting traditional obligations because this is part of their culture and traditional identity. The women believe that these are traditional practices of their forefathers and it is their duty to see that these practices are handed on to their children.

The women say that if they do not contribute to these obligations then no one will do it for them. However, some women believe with additional resources and income, women may be able to manage such obligations.

### **Leadership in the village as the women see it**

Women say that the village community is accustomed to having visible leadership from their *vanua* chiefs and leaders and the women actually look up to these leaders for direction and security. They believe that it is important for their community to have good and systematic leadership because it helps the effective organisation of people's lives in the village.

*Na gauna e vina ke ledru viliutaki na churaga na kwa koko balesia na  
rara e toso vina. E matata muni kena lemachu toso na lewa.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(When there is good leadership in the village things function well and this  
has an impact on women's leadership too.)

It is common practice for the wife of the chief to take up the leadership position amongst the village women. According to the women, this leadership amongst women is important as it helps the organisation of women's activities in the village. The women are of the

view that things work out well for the women in the village when there is a woman figurehead. However, the village's ailing chief and his wife have since passed away. This has created a leadership gap for both men and women as there has been no replacement for them. The deceased *vanua* chief was unable able to pass on his role to his sons because his sons live and reside in the city. The absence of a visible and good leader has meant that some of the village youth had dared to get drunk and became loud and rowdy in the village. As a group, the women feel that a visible and capable *churaga ni vanua* helps maintain cohesiveness and a sense of direction for them and their village community. The absence of a traditional leader has meant that women, have no parallel female leadership figure to look up to for direction and for coordinating village women's activities.

Women say that if men are not doing a good job in their leadership role, then women ought to fill in the gap and take on some leadership responsibilities without having to rely on the men all the time. Leadership in this community as well as amongst women is crucial, especially at a time when the forces of change has continued to challenge women's socio-economic status and roles. For example, because of poor leadership qualities, the coordination and management of the village's development activities and projects has been poor, in general.

The women expect good leadership from their village elders and the behavioural expectations that come with it.

*Me kodaki ji no koto i na hila na rara, e no ka lawa, kai tovo e dodonu meju rokovia. Magi e hukai na hila vata ena dredre la viliutaki na churaga ni koro kai balebale na lewe ni rara e ri na vawelegeletaki nia na kwa e kacivakinia.* (Village women, 2001)

(The village has traditional norms and protocols that ought to be respected and village headman must be a strong advocate for these. The work of the village headman becomes very difficult if the villagers do not cooperate.)

According to the women, the village needs leaders with good leadership qualities, which is vital at a time when indigenous communities are experiencing rapid economic change and challenges. A strong *vanua* leadership and family leadership from the menfolk are important to sustain a sense of direction, purpose and security amongst the village people. Two of the women, who have attained secondary school education, openly discuss and interrogate the leadership issues in the village both at family and communal level. These women feel they ought to be proactive and fill in these leadership vacuums if their husbands are not doing a good job. For women this is important because they will continue to provide some sense of direction for children, especially their education and future security. For example the following, was a comment from one of the women,

*Dau levu na gauna nai liuliu ni matauwere e vawelewele chu ga. Na vanua honi e dodonu meju tolavia na lewa balesia kodaki ji vawelewele koko ena tasi hila na kwa e rewa.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Men are often indifferent to their leadership role in the family. This is when women ought to come in and do something.)

It is notable that women in this project did not (yet) see themselves as formal on going leaders but only as filling a leadership vacuum or helping their men.

The position of the chief or *vanua* leader is hereditary, however, through time some chiefly families have given the leadership position to other men because they were well educated. The reason for this change is that within Fiji's modern socio-economic society, educated men's knowledge and professional skills enable them to provide more effective and versatile leadership role for the *vanua*. Despite the traditional power base that prop these *vanua* leadership roles, some traditional *vanua* leaders realise that they do not possess the power base of education, money and a professional career that is necessary for leaders in the modern Fijian society. This shift of power base that is necessary for modern Fijian leadership is one of the greatest teething problems for Fiji as a developing nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## The Village Women and the Church

### The women and their religious persuasions

The women's cultural obligations are as strong as their obligations to their religion or church because the institutions of the *vanua* and the church influence women's values, beliefs and practices. Majority of the women indicate that church obligations are manageable and they cannot really question such things.

*Na oga ni lochu ji na qwaravia ena yalo vina.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(We will do church work with a grateful heart because this is the way we should do these things.)

The women take part and contribute to many religious obligations and activities at the local, district and national level. At the local village level, church activities are many and varied and include those organised specifically for women and those organised for the village as a congregation. These activities include *solu* for the village church where the offering collected is often to meet the district and national circuit annual levies, financial and material contributions to the annual church conference, special fund-raising activities, youth and women's rallies, catering for visiting pastors, weekly prayer meetings and outreach programmes. Women take turns in what is traditionally known as the *talevunau*

(a special lunch prepared by the women for the Sunday preacher) *when* each woman takes turns in providing lunch for the visiting pastor. This usually includes a big pot of the main dish and cooked root crops. A typical Sunday meal for the pastor may include fish in coconut milk or boiled chicken with taro or cassava as root crops. Women prepare meals using the best ingredients out of respect for the pastor and their hopes for God's blessings on such work.

At the district level, women may contribute to various activities and financial commitments as determined by the National Executive Council which governs church activities at the national level. This may involve an offering of about \$30-\$50 per woman per year, an equivalent of 5% of her cash income during the farming season which lasts from May to October.

There is a mixed response from women regarding church commitments and obligations. Some women accept these obligations because they believe that people who serve God have light burdens.

*O au qi vabausia qodaki ji qwaravia vina na Kalou, ena mama ledju i colacola.* (Village woman, 2001)

(I believe that if we serve God, our burdens will be lighter.)

Generally the church's expectation of women's contribution in cash or in kind strains the women's meager resources, personal space and time which she also has to allocate to meet her obligations to the *vanua* the school and her own family. Sometimes the huge financial levies by some churches for *solu* make it very difficult for women to cope with their family and communal role and responsibilities. For example, women in a particular church gave \$300 each towards the church's annual fund-raising *solu*.

Most of the women stated that at times church obligations are manageable because it is based on their belief that God's work should be done with a cheerful heart. They also believe that they cannot question church obligations.

*Na lochu e lea ga na Kalou, e dau lowa leju kwaya e hila na kwa  
balesia na ogaoga ni lochu.* (Village woman, 2001)

(We cannot really question church obligations out of respect for the institution and belief in God.)

However, some women have noted that such obligations can be burdensome particularly those that require much financial contribution and they are beginning to question the demands of this institution.

The church (or religion) with its institutionalised beliefs, practices and norms is revered and is an important source of value for these village women. Fijian communities are often

spiritually inclined and therefore these denominations have a profound influence on women's values, beliefs and practices. The church as an institution with its values and constructs is sacred and respected by the women. It is generally viewed as a taboo institution and women normally do not have the courage to interrogate or question its function and role in their village community. Most women carry out their role and responsibilities because they respect the values of their religious upbringing. It influences the way they construct knowledge and perceive the world around them. For example, a woman understands that she plays a supportive role in relation to her husband, and that in the family she comes under the leadership of her husband. However, women, especially those with secondary level education have started to voice their opinion regarding religious activities.

An interesting development in this village is the recent influx of religious movements, which has resulted in the existence of different religious groups in the village. The influence of these religious denominations on the community is complex but very challenging because the church is an institution whose practices are not often questioned by its members. Some families have lived very secluded and separated lives (from the traditional communal way of life) as a result of their different religious affiliations. However, a few village elders are implementing ways to counteract these differences.

## **The Village Women and the Family**

### **The welfare of the family**

In their multifaceted roles, the village women face enormous tensions between their many traditional roles and their contemporary role as money-maker in the market economy. These women's roles extend far beyond their families to a network of social/community relationships. These include their roles in the traditional social units such as the *mataqali*, *yavusa*, *koro*, *yasana* and *vanua*. In these roles, women contribute to the nature, viability and cohesiveness of their village community. However, this research shows that the village women's predominant interest is the welfare and security of their families. When asked the question - What do you consider as a good life in the village? -many women respond and say that a good life is when women satisfy their role and obligations in their families. The women feel that a woman's relationship with her family provides the bond that binds her to her family, and consequently provides the building block and social glue for her village community. It is the family that provides the women with their personal identity and a sense of belonging. As an institution, the family is a major source of value, which determines to a large extent the way women construct knowledge and make sense of the world around them. For example, a woman is often addressed and defined in relation to her family unit. A mother is not called by her first name, but addressed as somebody's mother, aunty, or grandmother. For example, in the local dialect, Sereima's mother is addressed as "*Hugaya o Sereima*" while Sereima's grandmother is addressed as "*La tai o Sereima*".

Honorific are also recognised outside the family. This in turn contributes significantly to the woman's sense of personal security, self-esteem and status in her village.

### **The women are the backbone of the village economy**

Without women's contribution to farming, the whole village economy would collapse because women are the backbone of the village economy. As discussed in detail in Chapters Four and Five, much of the women's daily life is centered on food cultivation and provision for families. Women cook and prepare meals for the family, they collect firewood for cooking, wash clothes in the river and do other domestic chores and cultivate food.

*O datao na lewa ji lai seisei, ji seia na kwa me rewa kena I lavo, ji kouwa*

*I na makete me volitaki vata I na kwani leju viqwaravi leju matavuwere.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Apart from their domestic chores, women in this village go out to cultivate both subsistence and cash crops, they harvest the crops and transport these to the market to be sold.)

In the busy farming season the women and their families spend the whole day tending their vegetable and crop farms to sell at the market. The community knows that they have

only six to seven months to produce as much crop as they can make as much income as they can before the hot-wet season sets in and where very little can be cultivated.

During the hot-wet season, farming is restricted to the cultivation of hardy root crops and vegetables such as cassava. These crops are usually cultivated on hill slopes far away from the alluvial river flats which are prone to flooding during this season. On top of all these market gardening activities women also must attend to their domestic chores and other communal obligations. These obligations are arduous and require hours of work for the women right throughout the week. According to these village women, men contribute very little to the village economy when compared to the women.

*Na lewa ena vatau koko vua na kwa: na qwaravi ni matavuwere, na wahei ni lavo qei nia na cawa na kea havahava na were, na i hulu,na ledru kana na vuwera, na kwa taucoko hara ga. O ra seigwanena lea ga na veivuke, levu na gauna e dabekara, a tatadre boto la wa.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(It's the women who do everything for the family welfare: managing family finances, food and resources, the general cleanliness of the home, the nourishment of the children, the family clothes, the preparation and provision of meals. All these are taken care of by the women. When compared to women, men in the village are fairly idle and aimless.)

## **Farming activities and climatic fluctuations**

The women realise that they have to put aside enough cash in order to sustain the family during the hot, wet season. In the olden days, farming was predominantly for subsistence, providing food for consumption throughout the year. The cultivated crops were supplemented by a range of wild animals that were hunted for their meat and tropical fruits that were in season throughout the year. However, today much of these supplementary food crops have diminished due to climatic change and various forms of environmental degradation leading to frequent flooding and riverbed erosion. Today, much of the family's food comes from the urban supermarkets including canned fish, Chinese noodles, biscuits, rice and flour. This has contributed to the increasing prevalence of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and hypertension in Fiji which has been directly linked to lifestyle changes, poor diet, smoking and a decrease in physical activity (NCD Survey, 2001.) Obesity and overweight are potential risk factors for diabetes and obesity is common among Fijian women. The prevalence of obesity among Fijian women has been reported at 63% (Becker, 2005) and this places additional and unacceptable burden on health care resources in the country.

An additional pressure is that the women are at the mercy of the yearly variation in climatic conditions such as floods and the unexpected rain during the flowering stage of crops such as tomatoes and watermelon. According to the women, the yearly floods cause much erosion on the riverbanks which leads to the loss of valuable farmlands and a subsequent decrease in crop cultivation.

Because they live in a village where cash is not easily accessible, women know that it is essential for families to be self sufficient in food crops and vegetables.

*Na cola i rara vavisi e lei vinasi ke na seisei valevu na cawa djina qei nia na hahau. Kodaki e hukai na i lavo, me no ga na cawa ji na tasi leqwa ke.* (Village woman, 2001)

(A good life is a life where there is much food. Because we live in a Fijian village, where cash is scarce and income irregular, it is vital that we have sufficient food supply to sustain the family.)

Traditionally, in a Fijian village, a man is respected if he has a vast plantation of food crops and his family is self sufficient in food. However, the influence of the market economy has changed the focus of family livelihood. Although they live in a village community, women now realise that an additional part of their security also comes from cash and the material rewards of the market economy. The cash provides them with a means of providing food for their families when self sufficiency is not enough.

*Hila na kwa ledru cakacaka vakaikai na lewa i na i seisei balesia ni ru vinasia muni me ru dania na i lavo vina i na vimacawa.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Women in this village work very hard cultivating crops because they are determined to gain as much cash as they can from their market gardens.)

The women and their families have extended their crops to include more commercial vegetables such as tomatoes, Chinese and English cabbages, watermelon, corn, capsicum and peanuts. Taro and cassava (manioc) are staple crops but are now also major commercial root crops.

### **Women dream of better homes**

Most of the women agree that life in the village has less pressure because most of what they need is available around them. However, most of the women also dream of having good homes with good kitchens, proper water supply and flush latrines. However, most the women think that they can have good homes, provided that they have bullocks and better farming implements so that they can cultivate the land more productively.

*Okwe e hila na kwa e valeqwania lemachu numia na lewa ni hukai na bulumakau qei nia nai yaya ni seisei.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Women cannot achieve much for themselves and their families because they are no bullocks and farm implements to improve food cultivation and production.)

Most of the fifty-two households in the village live in concrete houses that families have built themselves. A handful of local carpenters built these houses with a very basic floor plan, consisting of a big living area which usually takes up half of the house, a side cabinet and a food cupboard. The women said they would love to have electricity but this is still in the pipeline of the country's rural electrification initiative. For the past fifty years, villagers have used benzine and hurricane lanterns to light their homes in the evenings. Some women have been able to purchase additional household crockery and drapery for their homes. One of the widows confided that one of her prized possessions was a hurricane lantern. She bought the lantern from the money she earned as a farm labourer in one of the neighbouring Indian farms (Village woman, 2001.)

According to the women, water is a crucial item in their domestic role because it is used daily, for a whole range of activities including cooking, washing, bathing as well as for drinking. Access to clean water is very important to the women's daily lives and a reliable water supply makes their domestic chores more manageable.

*Ni ju mata i qena kwata, nai matai ni kwa ji vademia na wai meju*

*verau ke!*

(Village woman, 2001)

(When we wake up in the morning, the first thing we look for is water to wash our face.)

A common concern amongst the women in the village is the poor water supply in the village. A good water supply would make much of the women's domestic chores more manageable.

### **The Village Women and the School**

#### **The village women and their school experience**

Like most Fijian village communities, the villagers place a great deal of importance on communal activities and commitments. This creates differences in values, beliefs and practices between Fijian traditions and those espoused by the school system. Of the 25 women interviewed, three quarters of them had been educated up to at least junior secondary level (Years 9 and 10) and the other quarter managed to complete Year 11.

Young girls in the village were often encouraged to attend school only up to Year 8, when they are able to write their names, and they have no real aspirations for further education. This was considered a good level of educational attainment for village girls. According to the women, their education was cut short for various reasons and most of the reasons given had to do with their domestic role and obligations as women in a Fijian village community. One of the women said that she had to leave school as she had to look after her sister's newborn baby. Other reasons that women gave for leaving school early was that they had failed their national examination and it was easier for them and their parents to quit school and return to the village.

*Ni qu tasi rewasia ga ho lequ vitarogi, qu mata laga ho ma i rara*

(Village woman, 2001)

(I did not pass my examination so I just wanted to return to the village.)

Another woman commented that education was only for the brilliant children and moreover national examinations used to be done in other schools although it is better now because national examinations are held in our own local schools. Other women had to quit school because of physical injury or sickness.

*Qu jua na vuli balesia ni qu majuataki nia na solovari a no qu lala  
taucoko.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(I was ashamed to go to school because I had ringworms all over my  
body.)

However, most of the women have realised that education is very important for their children nowadays because it brings in many good things for their families especially when life in the village is very tough and challenging.

### **The village women's perspective on education**

According to the women, quitting school was an easy thing to do because it had no severe ramifications in the village community for the child or the parents. Staying away from school was less of a financial burden on the part of the parents. Students who leave school early simply fitted back into the rhythm of village life, where the children helped their families with their farming activities and then finally settling down to their own family life.

*Rausia boto ho wa na vuli, la boto ga ma mo la mai vivuke i were.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(That is enough schooling, just come and help out at home.)

However, this view is slowly changing as the benefits of education are becoming more obvious to the women. The Household Survey indicated that almost 75% of the women attended school up to Year 8. Three girls from the village have been able to work their way up to university level education. This is an indication that the importance of schooling and education in general is slowly changing and being acknowledged by women in the village. The women have witnessed the lives of families whose children have full time employment in the city as a result of a good education and they now want their daughters as well as their sons to be educated.

They shared many reasons why it is important to educate girls in the village especially so they can help their parents and families out in the village.

Many women think that it is now very important for girls to be educated because this will enable them to manage and ease up life in the village community which is getting very complicated. According to the women, education will enable their children to become useful in their village especially in a village where life seems to be an endless life of struggle.

*E vina me ru vuli na lewa balesia me ru kua ni la mai vasekuciru na no  
tawa yaga boto chu wa i rara.* (Village woman, 2001)

(Girls ought to be well educated so that they do not end up with other school leavers in the village where life can be aimless and wasted.)

Most of the women expressed interest in having non-formal training especially in areas such as managing small business ventures, basic sewing skills, household management, childcare and basic sanitation. The women said that one of the major reasons for their interest in these courses was that it would allow them to save some money. For example, if they knew how to sew there would be no need for them to buy clothes from the shops. The added knowledge and skills would also open up alternative ways of earning money.

### **The village women's major challenges for their children's education**

The women discussed the challenge to prioritise education because education is basically an individualistic pursuit that was based on one's financial situation. One of the women in the chat group stated that it was a real challenge to meet both educational and communal obligations because of the limited cash flow and resources available to women in the village. To be able to manage this duality in obligations is a real tension for these women because the priority is the communal norms of a Fijian village community. Most of the women mentioned that the major challenges regarding the education of their children were lack of income, the many social and cultural obligations, too many children, low level of education and the general lack of knowledge, geographical isolation and their male dominated Fijian community. The women stated that of these challenges, the three major ones were the lack of income, the social and cultural obligations and the low level of education in the village.

*E yavalu na gauna dredre hara ga na cola i rara, me va levutaki na vuli,  
a no muni na vanua ji tolavia ke na i lavo.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Life in the village can be tough, we need more education and a regular source of income.)

One of the women mentioned that challenges and tough times will always come our way, no matter what. She added that people in the village are lucky because they do not have to worry about paying electricity and water bills like those who live in the city.

This village community is slowly realising the importance of education as they see the rewards of a good education for some families in the village. These families receive remittances from their urban based relatives who have contributed to improve the standard of living in the village. For example, families have had extensions done to their homes and women have been able to purchase new furniture and crockery for their homes. And to achieve this is a dream come true because most of the women dream of good homes with improved home amenities.

Most of the women commented that providing a good education for their daughters means that family needs and wants are more easily available. The women feel that if village girls are educated, they will get good jobs and this means that life becomes more secure and they are able to help out in the village.

## **The Village Women and Agriculture**

### **The village women and the division of labour**

The whole village community comes alive when the farming season starts as families get busy to commence cultivation as soon as possible.

*Ka watoto ga na leju lovolovo ka vina balesia yavalu na gauna e rewa  
ni tavuki vahauri na draki, a rewa ni vavunia hara ga ka bura na i se i.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(The quicker we cultivate the crops and vegetables the better because bad  
weather can set in unexpectedly and the vegetables are ruined..)

In the village there is clear division of labour; indeed the Household Survey showed that the bulk of the farm work was done by the women. The only major task that the village men did was clearing and ploughing the land ready for cultivation. The other cultivation activities such as planting the seeds, watering the crops, weeding and harvesting was, in the main, done by the women often with the help of their husbands but mainly of their children who do watering and weeding. After the crop is harvested, the women pack the farm produce and transport these in trucks to the town centre. Most of the women leave the village either on Thursday or Friday and spend the whole day on Saturday at the market. Women do not return to the village until 2 or 3 am on Sunday morning. After a well deserved rest on Sunday, the cycle of weekly farming activity starts again on Monday.

*Ni osi ga na makete i na Varauleka, machi vavodo tale ho ma. Rausia  
hila na rua he tolu machu keke tale hoi rara.*

(Village woman, 2001.)

(After the market closes on Saturday, we head straight back home and arrive in the village at about 2 or 3 in the morning.)

### **The women's major challenges in agriculture**

According to the village women, one of the biggest challenges they face is the unfavourable climatic conditions especially during the farming season. For example, excessive rainfall causes flooding and this can cause enormous damage to the crops especially the ones that are cultivated close to the river.

Drought is another major climatic problem and at times the droughts are very extreme and as a result crops are completely destroyed. Another common challenge that the women mentioned was that villagers cannot afford to purchase or replace some of the farm implements.

*Machi vinasia na lewa na toso I mata, ia e tasi rewa balesia na ca ?*

*Balesia ga ni hukai na siviya, hukai na yara. Kodaki e no e na taucoko*

*hara lemachu hahaga na lewa. (Village woman, 2001)*

(Many women in the village want a better standard of living. Women cannot achieve much without good farming implements.)

The women cannot afford modern farming implements so they continue to use the old ones they have been using for years although farm bullocks are often replaced after three or four years and each bullock may cost \$350 to \$400 each.

The women also mentioned that transporting their produce to the market was a major challenge especially safety risks involved and the high cost of hiring the Indian trucks. Women pay a total of about \$300 to take their produce to the market every week and a group of 8-10 women pay about \$30 each to get to the market and back. The women have no choice but to take the risk of traveling through rugged terrain on their weekly 4 hour drives to the city market. In 1996, a few women from a nearby village were tragically killed in an accident because the truck they were traveling in had faulty gears. As I penned these lines, I received the tragic news from home that two women from my mother's village died carting their produce to the market. The driver, a young Fijian man from the nearby village, was on his second trip that night and was so fatigued that he fell asleep at the wheel.

### **The women suggest ways of managing their farming difficulties**

Many of the women had clear ideas on how to manage some of the difficulties and were eager to share these ideas. They suggested that something ought to be done to minimise the detrimental effects of the weather on their crops especially the effect of the rain on pollination and flowering stages of their crops. If this happens to their crops they lose so much.

*Kodaki ji lovo tomata qei ku na luvu ina gauna e he ke na tomata, kwe  
hila haraga na luhi levu va i lavo- e rewa ni 300 vacaca na dola.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(If it rains at the flowering stage, this can be a great loss to our tomato  
crop, a loss of about \$300.)

One of the common solutions suggested by the women is irrigation where water is taken into their farms through a series of pipes and sprinklers. Currently irrigating the crops is a very laborious and time consuming task. This often involves carrying water from the river in containers to the fields of crops and using small canisters to water individual plant. If the farm is located further away from the river, then bullocks are used to cart water in forty four gallon drums to the field of crops.

Women consider that the village community needs much help, aid and assistance especially to improve farming methods and farm technology. According to the women, this type of assistance is important especially when much of the crops in the village is now grown as cash crops and this requires the use of more efficient and effective farming methods.

*Machi vinasia valevu na lewa na vivuke me bau vatoroicaketaki na kea*

*qwaravi nai seisei balesia ni vurevure levu ni lavo i rara okwe.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(One of our greatest needs is much aid and assistance in the cultivation of market produce as this is the greatest source of income for the villagers.)

The women also stated that there is an urgent need to reduce crop damage done by stray animals. They suggested that there ought to be better policing of animals which ought to be coordinated by the village headman helped by a group of men. This should involve the introduction of animal enclosures where owners pay for the release of their stray animals. Some women even suggested using poisonous salt for stray animals.

Other women suggested that villagers ought to be smarter in timing various farm activities during the planting season. For example, planting the right vegetables or crops at the right time of the year. With some initiative, a couple of women have ventured into micro income-generating activities to sustain their families during the fallow period (November – March). One of the women sews school uniforms for the village children as an alternative source of income. Two other village women sell fish lunches on Thursdays and Fridays to supplement income they get from market gardening. The women thought it was crucial to improve the means of transportation especially the risks involved in the long journey in over crowded trucks.

## **The Village Women and the Market Place**

### **Tensions between Fijian tradition and the market place**

Fijian tradition and the market place are currently at a crossroad where these village women find conflicting values between their traditional culture and the market economy. The major challenge then for these women is meeting both the demands of their traditional lifestyle (with its traditional values and motives) and the market economy (with its individualistic values and motives.) The challenge becomes problematic when viewed within the context of a rapidly changing society where communal values are at loggerheads with the values of a market place with its new set of values, practices, beliefs and knowledge. For example accumulation of individual wealth is a norm in the market economy but this contradicts with the Fijian communal way of life where wealth is shared amongst people.

*Na i varau ga ni leju cola i rara okwe, e dodonu ga meju va i tavi ke  
balesia kwe hukai tale e tara na oga ni rara.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(But we live in the village and things will just have to be done. It is our tradition and custom and we should be part of it too!)

Some of the women have worked out different ways of meeting both the communal obligations as well as having their families benefit from the material wealth of the market

economy. For example, one of the women shared with me that her family has planned things out so that the older couple concentrate on the financial and material needs of the family, while their married son and his wife are responsible in meeting the village communal obligations. Other families have arranged farming partnerships with Indian families and, according to some women, such partnerships have taught them how to do farming with a business like mentality.

### **Nowadays money is everything**

The women's stories in this village indicate that women's access to finances and resources is a major influence on the women's way of life. In discussions on any issues or challenges regarding women's lives in the village, most women will end up talking about money: there is always a financial angle. Perhaps this is an indication of how money and the market economy have permeated the lives of these women, changing the women's subsistence into a predominantly cash oriented livelihood.

Unlike village life 40-50 years ago, money has now become the pivotal and influencing entity in the women's daily life and women certainly need money for personal, family and communal commitments and obligations. Women feel that the biggest challenge they have is the new market economy which has since become the focus of most of the activities that they do in the village. A common remark made by the women in the village was,

*Ni kua na kwa coko ga ho na i lavo !*                      (Village woman. 2001)

(Today money is everything!)

Money increases the people's capacity to achieve social and economic progress for their families. However, the extra and genuine effort they put in to maximise farm production and cash income is of minimal return. The reason is that traditional institutions and social infrastructure are outmoded and not conducive to the demands of a market gardening livelihood that the women now lead. Much of the women's individual effort to get income from her farm produce is siphoned to traditional obligations. These institutional obligations starve the women of money and resources and as a consequence never have the opportunity to make individual decisions on how their hard earned income and resources is used. However, some women, especially those that have had secondary education, are now beginning to question certain communal practices.

*Ho ni ga lequ vakahama,ke dau rewa ni muhuki re e ri yavalu leju oga i  
rara. Me kodaki na holi.* (Village woman, 2001)

(I think that we ought to cut down some of our traditional communal obligations, like the soli.)

The market place with its financial benefits has greatly influenced the village women's socio-economic experiences and her way of life as a whole and has exposed them to an alternative way of life with its norms, values and practices. Apart from their traditional domestic role and responsibilities, the women have acquired a new role as income earner,

bringing in cash and a range of material wealth. This means that her resources, energy and time is also used in her new role as income earner in the market place. For example, women have diversified their farming from subsistence crops to include commercial crops that can be sold in the market and have enjoyed the financial and material rewards. The market is now centrally connected to the family, *vanua*, the school, church and the life of these village women. Most of the farm produce is sold in the urban markets to pay for school fees, to purchase basic groceries such as sugar, kerosene for lighting and other basic items. Some women have been able to build better homes, purchased basic household items and other consumables goods for their homes and families. The women have found that cash is an empowering entity that can expand and enhance women's capabilities.

*Na i lavo ni kako machi rewasia ke na lewa e yavalu tale na kwa me  
kodaki na leju hahaga na lewa balesia leju tobu ni ika.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(Money we earn from market gardening can be used to expand on other women's activities or projects. For example women contributed cash to open a new bank account for their fishpond project.)

The women cultivate a wide variety of vegetables and root crops as cash crops for the urban market. According to the women, vegetables such as the Chinese and English cabbage are the first to be sown because they can be harvested within 3 weeks and do not

require specialised attention. Other vegetables that are cultivated include tomatoes, capsicum, cucumber, eggplants, pumpkins, long beans and French beans and *bora* or Indian pea. The major commercial crops are corn, watermelon, peanuts and tobacco while the major root crops are cassava, sweet potato and taro. Vegetables and crops are transported to the market on a weekly basis and according to the Household Survey, these village women may earn from \$50 to \$250 from their weekly sales of vegetables and crops. A couple of women stated that a good market day could fetch them \$300. The women considered an earning of \$250 as good earning while \$50 was considered a poor income. The total amount that the women earn at the market, \$10 to \$15 is paid for transport, \$10 for the day's meals, \$10 to \$15 for vegetables bought from Indian farmers. The women may spend up to \$30 for basic groceries like flour, rice, cooking oil, washing soap, sugar and salt. A favourite food item that women buy to take back to the village is bread and butter and this is for the family's special Sunday breakfast!

### **Other sources of income for the women**

One third of these village women stated that they earn cash from sources other than market gardening. Some women work on Indian farms from Monday to Friday and they earn \$8 per day for five days.

*Gauna ni lovolovo machi mei cakacaka muni vuaru na Ijia bau valu chu  
ke na sede.* (Village woman, 2001)

(During the farming season we do work on Indian farms where we earn some cash.)

This provides them an income of about \$40 a week and most of the women use the cash to supplement their cash needs for the week. Three women cook special fish lunches which they sell in the village on Thursdays or Fridays and according to the women they often rake in a profit of between \$30 and \$40. Three women in the village run their own little home-based canteen where they sell basic groceries such as sugar, biscuits tinned fish, matches, washing soap etc. Most of the women said that if they needed urgent cash they often borrow money from people. Some women would either loan money from Indian farmers or from their own relatives. They then repaid this at a later date.

### **The Village Men's view of life in the Village**

The following discussion is based on an in-depth interview carried out with three men who were key informants in the village. These men were the local church deacon, the chairman of the school committee for the local village school and a village elder whose house was frequently used for village meetings and communal activities.

### **The village men's perspectives on women's role and status**

The men agreed that a women's place is in the home and that women were made to be homemakers and to look after their husband and their children. However, the men

acknowledge that nowadays things have changed so much that women in the village can now do things that were previously done only by the men. For example, much of the income for the family comes from the women's market gardening activities.

*Ha ma na gauna ni kua, na lewa e ri rewasia homa e levu na kwa- e ri  
rewasia muni homa na sede me cola ke na matamatavuwere.*

(Village man, 2001)

(Nowadays women too have been able to do more things – they are able to earn cash to support their families.)

As a result of this, the men think that the women have achieved things for themselves and their families and been able to decide things for themselves. However, according to the men, these new roles that women have taken up are not acceptable to some because it is not in keeping with the traditional Fijian village way of life.

Although one of the men had a very conservative and traditional view of woman's roles, two of the men mention that it is time for a change because women are good thinkers and things turn out well as a result of women's thoughts and practical contributions. The men think that the women are capable of achieving more for their families and village community. One of the men suggested that women need to create and form a proper women's group to sustain development initiatives carried out in the village.

### **The village men's perception of the challenges that affect their community**

One of the biggest challenges mentioned by the village men is the difficulty of sustaining the village as a cohesive community because money is now so important factor in people's lives. For example, women are actively involved in market gardening and this has impacted on their traditional-domestic roles and responsibilities. He also expressed the idea that nowadays women are self-righteous and operate with a mind of their own. This array of critical comments about women clearly illustrates the fact that these village men are living alongside women who now step out of the box of traditional norms and exercise some freedom of choice to do things as they see fit.

*O kuru na lewa e levu muni na kwa e ri rewasia balesia ni vina muni  
ledru vakahama.* (Village man, 2001)

(Perhaps its time for change because women are good thinkers and things turn out well as a result of women's ideas.)

According to the church deacon, the village community faces more challenges today than in yesteryears. The church deacon thinks that the recent advent of four new religious groups means that, apart from their communal obligations, the villagers are involved with their respective religious affiliations and commitment. As a result, village elders are facing difficulties in sustaining the communal spirit of their village community. With many religious groups, one would expect village affairs to run smoothly; however, according to

the church deacon, the opposite is happening and he thinks that there are many individuals doing their own thing.

Another challenge is the different perspectives of men and women. The men think that women ought to listen when men express their point of view. However, today women tend to operate with a mind of their own. One of the men cited a classic example at communal level where some women do not attend village meetings. He thinks that nowadays women operate with a mind of their own. Women now look for entertainment and laughter too.

*Ni kua na lewa e ri vinasia muni ho me vuhu medru yaqona ni tara e hila  
na qili i rara.* (Village man, 2001)

(Women in this village now want to have grog while cooking meals for village or ceremonial functions.)

As far as family life is concerned the church deacon is anxious that wholeness and totality in family life is slowly eroding. In addition, he thinks that families ought to spend a lot of time together to discuss and talk things over. He thinks there ought to be more open and honest discussions between wives and husbands. For example his wife ought to acknowledge him as the head or leader in the family. By the same token he thinks that men are not doing their basic role in instructing and instilling discipline in their children.

### **The village men's view of education**

The men mentioned that it is often difficult to meet the education requirements of children because this requires hard cash and at times money is hard to get in the village. They also agree that meeting the education needs of their children can be tough as they have to meet their commitments to the church, *vanua* and own families.

*Dredre ledru qwaravia na vuli na nona i rara balesia ni hila na kwa na  
oga ni no i rara.* (Village man, 2001)

(It is tough to meet the educational needs of children because of the endless obligations of the communal way of life.)

One of the men actually gave a laugh, when it was suggested that villagers earn a lot of money! He agreed but then all the hard earned cash is siphoned into the three institutional obligations of the family, community and the church. The message of prioritising education over communal obligations is continually being shared by communal leaders.

At the village schools annual prize giving ceremony, the chairman of the school board told parents that it was unfair on their own children that they were busy meeting traditional obligations, yet their children's school uniform and other school requirements was in a very poor state. There was a special call for the community to reduce traditional ceremonies and obligations especially with the current increase in the village population.

The men feel that it is very hard to reverse people's attitude and values because nowadays money is everything, an issue that was brought up constantly by the women themselves.

*Na ecola e tasi lovonía rewa na kea cawa, ena tasi kana la matavuwere.*

(Village man, 2001)

(Men who cannot cultivate their food crops will not be able to feed their families.)

The men noted that villagers who do not put in genuine effort to cultivate and produce lots of food crops will have nothing to feed their families with, as well as having insufficient food reserves to meet the food requirements of traditional ceremonies.

### **The village men's view of development**

The village men stated that most of the development in agriculture initiated by outsiders come with apparently wonderful reward tags which motivate the villagers to work hard at these projects. However, experience has proved that the villagers end up getting very little out of these projects as developers walk away with the spoils. Hence current development initiatives need improved profiles as far as the villagers are concerned because past projects have hood winked the villagers with false returns for their hard work. Moreover, the men feel that outcomes of development projects by the government are yet to be experienced by the community. The men say that the government agricultural research station down the road displays the latest in farm methods and technology but has not had

much of an impact on village agriculture and practices because the villagers still use age old farming methods and technology. This village community is still waiting for a version of development and progress that is akin to and user-friendly, given the context of their rural village landscape. According to these village men, individuals nowadays have a disoriented and unbalanced perspective of freedom and as a result have interfaced with traditional norms in the village.

*Na chu gwala e ri tasi gulumia vina na ecola balesiani levu hara ga na  
ecola e ri cakacaka vailoa.* (Village man, 2001.)

(Many have misinterpreted the freedom of our independence and have tended to take things into their own hands.)

As a consequence, there are many uncooperative individuals as people attempt to balance between individuality and the sense of belonging to the larger village community. The deacon is of the opinion that the problem with people ‘doing their own thing’ is partly due to men’s ignorance and an indifferent attitude to their roles and responsibilities in a society that is experiencing the onslaught of a capitalist economy.

The men feel that women pick up new things through development initiatives very quickly. However, they think the women get excited about these things only for a short while and the momentum and interest fades off just as quickly.

## Conclusion

The ways Fijians usually talk about the influences on their daily life has been centered on the institutions of the extended family, *vanua*, church and state. The information contained in this chapters indicates that in recent years the impact of modernisation, particularly that of the market economy, has been significant and has challenged and complicated much of the women's daily-lived experiences. The problem for many of the women in this Fijian village is that it is their life and labour that are most directly affected. The market gardening activity demands much of the women's time energy and resources and yet other work at home, in their extended families, their *vanua*, the church and the state has not reduced. They still have to contribute to the communal *holi* (communally organized cash offerings) or *oga vakarara* (communal social obligations). There are also conflicting beliefs. They want the benefits that the market economy can bring them including education however, the belief, held by both men and women, that woman must put their families first can make the actualisation of this problematic. For example, the needs of the market garden may seen as more important than sending children to school. The woman are aware that their status needs challenging so that labour and decision making is shared more equitably, but again, religious beliefs can stand in contradiction to such a belief. While the empowerment model of development demands critical reflection it is difficult for the women (and men) to reconcile conflicting beliefs.

The interdependence of social and economic spheres is an important issue. By using two different terms, as in western capitalism, we tend to emphasise their separation. However, the experience in this village demonstrates clearly how the two are inextricably intertwined. Nowhere is this more evident than in the women and men working together to meet the financial obligations that the *vanua*/community or church requires. These institutions impose these commitments but there are few opportunities for questioning or coming up with workable alternatives. The danger is that all three of the more traditional spheres will all be unduly influenced by the economic, with the potential to destroy extended family infrastructure (already well underway) in favour of the nuclear family as the economic unit of production, of dismantling the *vanua* obligations altogether, making social cohesion a significant problem. There is no automatic reason why the introduction of a cash economy alongside the subsistence economy should automatically lead to nuclear family or individual economic profit. Why might this not become a means to sustain the *vanua* and its traditionally organised systems of obligation based on the group rather than the individual?

There is a need to create a landscape of interaction and invention about the continuation of certain traditional relationships and means of organisation, strengthening this sphere and its modes of operation beyond that of the ceremonial at the local level and the election system on the wider societal level. The different groups that make up the *vanua* are well positioned, if there is understanding and political/social will, to work to produce new forms of traditions that strengthen the

local ties and feed into broader social institutions without necessarily undermining traditional relationships. New practices to underpin the traditional will be needed. Sometimes this will be difficult as people may see this as undermining old practices. Ultimately, education needs to offer a critical edge in providing people with strategies to deal with such contradictions.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **THE WOMEN'S OWN FISH POND**

Early one morning, as is customary, the village headman walked around the village and announced that a women's meeting was to be held at 9pm that evening. Because the village had yet to construct a meeting house, it was to be held in the house of one of the villagers who had a spacious living room. The village elders and the women were invited to this special meeting because the local village nurse, Nasitodari, wanted to share what she had learnt during a weeklong workshop she had attended with other village nurses from other parts of Fiji.

The meeting commenced with a prayer after which Nasitodari was given time to speak. She thanked the village elders for providing her the opportunity to attend the workshop because she found it very practical and meaningful. She was grateful that she had been exposed to new knowledge and practices and made aware of real challenges and issues that are currently affecting Fijian village communities. To attend such a workshop is a tremendous exposure to the wider world for any village woman and provides an opportunity to become aware of and reflexive about challenges and changes that affect them as women. She spoke about many issues covered in the workshop including the difficult subject of family planning, the problem of young people and drugs, the care of elderly people, health and sanitation.

Towards the end of the meeting, she announced that funds had been made available for projects for disadvantaged community groups such as village youth and women. She handed out project guidelines suggesting that the women might like to think of a project. She then outlined what they would have to do to receive such funding including submitting a proposal. She concluded with the suggestion, previously discussed with me that I take over the meeting to guide the women in discussing possibilities.

I began with further details of the project funding, known as the Tekakano Fund (in the Maori this meant a plant seed), that was available through the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency. The fund directly targeted women and youth in the areas of: organisational strengthening for non-government organisations, community awareness and income generating projects. The women were keen to apply for some funding and I encouraged them to suggest various projects options affirming that ‘as women we can achieve many things for our families because we have the potential and capability’ (Researcher’s diary, 2001). The women voiced a number of possibilities which led to them recalling past projects and their outcomes.

The chapter is based on observations I made during my initial six months field research, visits back to the village in 2002 and 2003, interviews, the Fish Pond questionnaire, and a person letter to me from Elena, the designated leader of the women in this project.

## **Past projects**

The women suggested the following projects including a village shop, piggery, poultry farm and a fish pond. After some discussion they dropped the idea of a village shop because it was outside the guidelines of the funding regulations. The women mentioned that three years ago they had operated a village shop which was very successful until the men decided to take over operating it. Before long the shop had died a slow death of bankruptcy and eventually ceased operation. What caused its demise was that the men allowed people to run up credit beyond what they would repay.

The women then shared a story about another of their projects that had failed, this time, because of the village boys.

*Ha ma a no muni na lemachu ba ni to hewa na lewa. Ka bura boto  
ga ni ru matai na driva to na huravou i rara.*

(Village woman, 2001)

The women had a little chicken coup but the village boys were little smart thieves who stole chicken and cooked them.

I responded that problems and challenges were part and parcel of any success story and as women we have the potential and capability to turn these challenges into opportunities to improve things for their families and communities.

### **The fishpond as an option**

I advised the women to choose a project that was small enough to manage and which involved resources already available within their village. After much discussion, they finally agreed to try a small Fish Pond Project. The reasons for their choice was that there already existed a large water lily pond next to the village and they thought that part of it could be fenced off to breed fish. They also knew of a recently introduced freshwater carp which can be bred successfully and harvested within three months. What attracted them was that this could also be an important source of protein for family meals. They identified local schoolteachers, the district nurse as well as the farming and village community as a ready made market for the fish. Although the meeting ended at about 12.30am, we were all delighted and left with something new and exciting to look forward to.

*E vina ga re okwe no osi e hila na gauna balavu a qei cadra ma e  
hila na kwa ji bulia vata na lewa i rara okwe.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(This is great because we have something new to look forward to particularly for us as women.)

Before leaving, the women agreed to meet the following Friday to discuss the details of the project proposal as outlined in the guidelines document.

### **Helping the women understand the language of the project.**

The project document was in English but I was able to explain the details using the local dialect. Indeed, this was essential because the formal language required in the project proposal was quite alien to them. I would have liked the time to work with the women explaining the finer details of the proposal and scaffolding them in completing the documentation but there was a time constraint as we had to submit it within a week. This aspect of the research revealed a factor that makes development projects difficult at the local level: the required language, the formality of the language, and time frames given that the remoteness of many villages means they are late in finding out about such initiatives and then have little time to respond.

The women asked me to write the proposal document for them and I enlisted the support of my sister who was visiting me in the village. We spent two days writing up the project proposal and we gave it the following title: *Na ledru tobu ni ika na lewa.* (The Women's Own Fish Pond.)

When the women gathered again where we discussed and agreed on the details of the project proposal. The village nurse assisted by volunteering to get in touch with the local fisheries officer regarding the proposed project. However, first there were others to consult.

### **The women show their wisdom**

This research experience show me that the women exercise a lot of wisdom in introducing new ventures such as this Fish Pond Project, given their village norms and traditions. This included consulting the village men.

*O au qi numia me vasakei vuaru na chuqwaqwa qei ni ru na seigwane na leju i chuvachuva na lewa me balesia na tobu ni ika. Kai varau ga.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(I think that we ought to inform our village elders and men about our plans for the Fish Pond Project as this is customary and just the proper thing to do.)

The women knew what was customary and out of respect they agreed to share their intentions about the Fish Pond with the village men and elders at a special village meeting. This involved a traditional presentation of grog to the men and the rest of the village community. At the meeting, they also requested permission from the *mataqali* (land owning unit) concerned, to use their land by the water

lily pond for the project. This involved a presentation of kava to the elders of the clan by the women. The men were happy and very supportive of the women's proposal. Then, the women had three meetings with the local fisheries officer who helped them with the details of preparing the actual fishpond, fish breed and fish feed. Finally, with all this information included in the proposal, the documents were handed on to the provincial council for approval and endorsement before being sent to the aid section of the New Zealand High Commission.

A month after the submission of the project proposal, the village nurse received a letter from the funding body that the women's project proposal was approved. A meeting was subsequently convened to share this good news and to plan for the Fish Pond. The women felt elated that their project was the only one approved in the Nadroga/Navosa Province under the New Zealand Tekakano Fund. Although small in measure, it was a great boost for the women as it proved to them that their ideas, concerns and challenges were worthwhile. Moreover, it proved to them that their own ideas can be incubators for new knowledge and improved practices in their village community.

This was also a reminder to the women that there were people and agencies out there that had the resources and finance to support their needs.

## **Stepping into the world of commercial banking**

Granting of the money for the project brought with it a new challenge as a separate bank account was required. Three women trustees, Elena, Henimoli, Nasitodari were selected by the village women to travel to town to open a new account. When they arrived at the bank, they discovered that they needed something they did not have - official birth certificates to verify their age. The women were faced with no choice but to leave the bank and go to the central registry to apply for their birth certificates. This was an important learning as they now realised that one's birth certificate is an important document in the market economy. This stood in contrast to village life where birth certificates are important documents only for children's school enrolment.

*Machu tasi kilasia ni na lei vikasi ma na lemachu i vola ni sucu. A ru kwaya ma na baqe kodaki e hukai na i vola ni sucu kwe tasi rewa na i vola ni lavo.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(We did not realise that the bank required our birth certificates to verify our age. The bank officer also indicated that without our birth certificates we could not open a bank account.)

It took two weeks for the women to obtain their certificates from the central registry before they could return to the bank to open an account. Then, there was

another hitch. The women needed to deposit \$100 cash to open this new account – money they did not have at their disposal. They chatted outside the bank about how to solve the problem. Finally, they decided to approach a young man from the village who worked in town to ask him to lend them the money. The young man did not hesitate to help and so with the cash in hand the women returned to the bank and opened their bank account. Again, they reflected on their learning:

*E ri kwaya tale ma okwe me hila na drau na dola me dola ke na i  
vola ni lavo. E tasi hila na kwa okwe kwa levu ga ni holi ho ma e  
hila na uma i lavo levu me sekivu ke na tobu ni ika ni lewa I rara.*

(Village woman, 2001)

(The bank wants us to pay \$100 to open our new account, but this sum is not a problem. What is important is that we have this huge sum of money that is accessible to us.)

### **Repaying borrowed money the village women's way.**

The women owed \$100 to the man they had borrowed money from to open their new bank account so they planned how to repay the cash. One of the women suggested they volunteer in pairs where one woman prepares an evening dish for her partner and the other paying at least \$5 for the meal. If twenty pairs agreed the \$100 would be raised. The women agreed to this suggestion and a date was set for this special evening meal and *solu*. It was another exciting venture for the

women because they were working and achieving things based on their own ideas which were very empowering for them. The evening was a great success. They enjoyed dining together and they collected \$123 as repayment for borrowed money.

### **Communal effort in creating the fishpond.**

The project funding was used to hire a digger machine to excavate a fifty by fifty meter pond beside the existing lily pond. The sides as well as the base of the pond were then lined with cement to keep the soil out and the water in. Finally, water was pumped from the nearby water lily pond as well as water from the village tap. About 1,400 fresh water baby fish were introduced for the first harvest which would be in three months time. The village men worked hard to erect fences around the Fish Pond to keep stray animals away. The young men in the village contributed by each fetching a wooden post from the forest for the fence and they also erected barbed wire around the pond. The young women and girls helped by preparing food to feed everyone who spent the three to four days it took to build and fence the pond. Later on these young girls planted fruit trees and shrubs around the pond to make it a really special place in the whole village. The fact that the women allowed the men, especially the young men, to help them set up the Fish Pond meant it was an exciting new venture for the whole village.

### **Feeding the fish and lessons in accountability**

The women convened a meeting under the combined leadership of the three women trustees to chart out how they would manage the first phase of the project. They also worked under the directive of the local fisheries officer who visited the village frequently to provide technical guidance for which they were appreciative.

*Machi kilasia ni vivuke valevu na lemachu cakacaka qea na vailehilehi ni matanichu e qwaravia na kwa balesia na huhu ika.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(We know that the local fisheries officer provided much support and guidance for the project.)

The women divided themselves into groups of three and each group was then rostered weekly to feed the fish and keep a general watch over the pond. A total of about thirty-six women volunteered to oversee the breeding of the first lot of fish. The task of breeding the fish appeared fine at first, however, they soon found out that managing a fishpond requires a consistent routine of work and commitment. There were other learnings, for example, they had to purchase the fish feed according to the budgeted amount and to make sure that the feed was enough to last for the week. At first, some of the women over fed the fish which meant that additional fish feed had to be purchased.

This meant an imbalance in their weekly spending on fish feed. The three women trustees realised that they needed to have regular informal chats with the women to discuss their budget for the fish feed.

Another challenge was that at times the water level fell very low and it was difficult and time consuming to manually refill the pond again by fetching water from the river and the nearby water lily pond.

The women learnt that time management was an important factor in the success of the project basically because the fish were required to be fed at a certain time. As a result, one of the women commented that she had to schedule her household chores so that she would be available at the time when the fish had to be fed.

*Na vakananiru na ika e vavolicike au mequ cakacaka qea na gauna balesia o kuru na ika e ra kana ka.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003 )

(Because the fish had to be fed at a certain time, I learnt that time was important.)

*Qu vulicia muni me qu chuvania vina lequ cakacaka ni were, balesia ni qei cava ma na gauna me ru lei vakana ke na ika, qi na tasi calasia.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(I learnt to plan out my household chores, so that the fish would be fed at the scheduled time.)

One of the women commented that, if the fish had to be fed at a certain time, then how much more important it was for her family and children to be fed on time too!

Perhaps most important lesson was that of accountability. The seed money for the project was a large sum for these village women and they soon realised the enormous responsibility that came with it. The trustees had also advised them at one of the initial meetings, that the money (FJ\$3 600) was someone else's money, so they were accountable for every dollar they used including the money earned from the sale of fish.

### **The first fish harvest: a cause for celebration and hope.**

A month before the first fish harvest, the village women got together to plan for this big day of celebration. The women agreed that on the day, each woman would team up with another village man and they would be the woman's guest for the day. The women agreed that each would contribute four meters of cloth each to be ceremonially presented to the men as an acknowledgement for their support.

At about 10 am the whole village gathered around the pond to witness the first harvest. The women were dressed in their specially sewn *chamba* and *sulu* (a short dress of island print material worn over a matching ankle length skirt), while the men put on their best *bula* shirts (a short sleeved shirt of island print material). Everyone wore a garland of flowers around their neck and it was a dignified and joyous occasion for the whole village community. Amongst the crowd were the local fisheries officer, the government women's officer and the district pastor. After a short prayer of thanksgiving, the first lot of fish was harvested which was then traditionally presented by the village women to the village men. The men acknowledged this gesture with a donation of \$700 cash towards the Women's Fish Pond Project. On that day, a total of sixty three kilograms of fish was harvested and sold at \$4 per kilogram. The first fish harvest was a pivotal event in which the women tasted the fruits of their initiative, commitment and labour in a real and tangible way.

### **Working under good leadership**

One of the important reflections shared by the women after the first fish harvest was the importance of good leadership in the success of the first harvest. Most of the women stated that the success of the project was due to the combined and united directive that came from the three women trustees of the project.

*E a mai rawa vinaka na kena tagavi na ika ena vinaka ni veiliutaki  
mai vei Elenoa, Ivamere kei Ridome.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(The first fish harvest was a success because of the good leadership  
we had under Elena.)

*E vakavatukana na susu ika oqo baleta na kena vinaka ni da  
rogoca ga e dua na vosa.* (Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(Our first harvest was a success because we had directive from one voice.)

There was one common and simple goal that all the women were working  
towards and that was to look after the fish so that there would be a good harvest.  
One woman commented about the importance of women working together at this  
point in the history of their village.

*Na draki ni cola i na rara okwe, ji gadrevia valevu meju loma vata na  
lewa, meju cakacaka vata.* (Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(Because of the lifestyle changes that we now experience in this village, it  
is vital for women to work together).

There were two more fish harvests and the women made a profit of \$1,420.  
However, keeping the money under tight reign was indeed challenging for the

three women trustees especially as it was common knowledge in the village that the women had this pool of money that could be accessed.

### **The women's encounter with money.**

One of the most challenging aspects of the women's Fish Pond Project was the issue of money and how this was managed by the women over the two year life span of the project. The three women trustees did their best to keep a tight reign over the women's pool of cash especially when women had individual views how it should be spent.

*E hila na kwa dredre, me ju vivohakitakinia na kwa balesia nai  
lavo. A ma ji kilasia ni juku no chu na vakahama me balesia na i  
lavo.* (Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(It is a challenge to discuss issues about money, in the village.  
Moreover, women have individual views on finance.)

They soon realised that it was crucial to meet on a regular basis to discuss views on various issues including financial matters especially when the men, as they had in previous projects, realised the money might be accessed. Indeed, the men requested \$400 to pay off their hire purchase for the village lawn mower. The women responded by calling a meeting to discuss the request.

This was a challenging decision for the women for many reasons. One reason is that the men have always had the upper hand in village affairs and were always making decisions for the women. The women realised that if this pool of money remained under their control then their views and decision had counted- an empowering realisation. They had accumulated this pool of money that gave them a sense of independence and power.

*Na kwa ga jina vadonuya vabohe na lewa me balesia na ledru  
kerekere na seigwane ena vabau ga ho.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(Whatever collective decision we make as a group in this meeting  
will be passed on to the men.)

Most of the women were resistant to the men's request so it was a consensus that the request be turned down. The women had several reasons for refusing this request all of which included their positioning as women

*Balesia ni tasi no i na i chuvachuva ni qwaravi ni tobu ni ika, na  
kea vayagatakikolo na i lavo ji rewasia.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(We could not give this money to the men because it was not part  
of the project guideline and it was not wise to use money  
prematurely.)

*E dredre muni na dania nai lavo levu kodaki okwe balesia ni  
hewahewa na i vurevure ni lavo i rara.*

(Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(It is rare to get such a large sum of money specifically for women and in the village there are not many sources of income for people, let alone women.)

Having such a large sum of money in the bank was a great encouragement for this group of village women and most of the women indicated that this is the first time that they have amassed such a sum. The women had a new sense of independence and felt empowered knowing that there was a pool of money they owned and controlled. For the women the money was a tangible platform of power that boosted their socio-economic energy as women.

### **An illustration that things can change**

The Fish Pond was a clear illustration to the women that they have the potential and capability to change and improve the standard of living for their families and village community. The fish from the Fish Pond provided an important and fresh source of protein for their meals which they would otherwise have obtained from canned fish and canned beef which would have been more expensive and not as healthy (the women paid for the fish they took). The women also proved that with

hard work and commitment, much can be achieved in the village to meet their needs and challenges.

*Tolavia re na kwa ji rewasia na lewa kodaki ji cakacaka va kaikai  
qei nia na leju yalo vata.* (Fish Pond Questionnaire, 2003)

(We certainly can achieve much with some hard work,  
commitment and unity.)

The women were also involved in something different from their normal routine. For example, they had something new to talk about including all the interesting and challenging encounters that accompanied such projects.

*Hila na kwa na lemachu talanoataki nia na lewa na lemachu tobu  
ni ika balesia ni machu bau tara chu na lewa e hila na kwa yaga a  
vou muni vainikematou.*

(Personal letter, 2003)

(Our Fish Pond has been our common topic of conversation  
because as women we are doing something new, something  
different and useful for ourselves.)

Even more importantly, they were change agents as they began to see things from a different perspective which in turn triggered a new way of doing things.

One of the exciting things that emerged from our action research was that women began to share their dreams and hopes on things that they can collectively do together as a spin off from their fish harvest. Although we had teething problems along the way, the women hoped they could extend their next project breeding prawns and perhaps start up a little commercial flower cultivation that can be sold to nearby hotels along the coral coast. This can be a source of a much-needed income for the women's pool of funds and also their families.

## **Conclusion**

An aim of this research was to explore approaches to development that engages women in ways that are collaborative. Crucial dimensions to my involvement in the process may be linked to four assumptions suggested by Stringer (1999) in regards to community action research: it is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people, it is *equitable*, acknowledging people's equality of worth, it is *liberating*, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions, it is *life enhancing*, enabling the expression of people's full human potential (Stringer, 1999: 9-10).

My role in the initial phase of the project was one of mentor as I encouraged the women to voice their opinions and wishes as we discussed the proposed project. My position was that this was our own project and we had total ownership of it

(equitable). The project was implemented in a way that involved acknowledgment of and respect for each other's contribution. In other words acknowledging each other's equality of worth and dismissing any social or political hierarchy amongst us as women (democratic). For example, I consistently encouraged the women to see themselves collectively (and not the researcher) as the experts in local village knowledge, values, skills and practices. Their contributions were vital to the success of the project. Without doubt, this kind of action research is most empowering for these women because of its collaborative nature and approach (Henry & Kemmis, cited in Connole, Smith & Weiseman, 1985: 262-263).

As a researcher, I played many roles but I focused my energy on being a catalytic leader coaxing the women to believe in themselves and building their confidence through our relationships and in our various engagements (liberating). Given these characteristics the women were guided through three basic cyclic phases of action research, which involved planning, acting and reflecting on the project. These phases were more than procedures because underpinning these phases was a form of self reflective enquiry on the women's part to identify and critically confront their socio-economic situations and if sufficiently energized and enthused take some (collective) action to improve their situation in a way that suits them.

The patriarchal system of the Fijian village social system means that women are seldom involved in the decision-making process and this in turn has impeded the

socio-economic progress and empowerment of women at this level. Furthermore, most training and social progress initiatives are not gender sensitive and do not provide space and opportunities for women to make decisions on these initiatives. However, the Fish Pond was initiated by the women themselves with the researcher as a mentor and facilitator to this initiative. The Fish Pond provided the space for women to practice making decisions on their own and to work through the decisions they have made. This is an important aspect in the collaborative process and is seen as a bottom-up initiation of change. The 'top-down' approach that is typical of most rural development programmes do not often meet rural and indigenous women's needs (Korten, 1980). The project provided much needed opportunity for all the women to fully participate in the decision-making process. Their full participation was encouraged in such a way that is similar to what Arnstein (1971) defines as 'citizen control' which refers to 'true' participation involving some real transfer of power. However, before this can happen it was necessary for the researcher to continually coax and encourage women to share their views and to feel good about sharing their views.

It was difficult to leave the women behind when my six months of field work ended because I was now part of their lives but more importantly that I had left behind this small project to manage and be anxiously looking forward to the first harvest of fresh water fish. The women had truly reaped a great harvest from their efforts on this project but more importantly a startling proof that as women they can be agents of change for the progress and development of their families and community. It also proved to the women that they already possess the necessary

knowledge and skills to do new things for their community. All they needed was technical support and some expertise from their local government officers. This provided a great empowering process for the women and consequently became a vital platform of power for the women collectively. The intention was, given this power base; the women would co-construct ways in which they could begin to interrogate the power relations and dynamics that has disadvantaged them as women in their village. This of course was a long-term vision of empowering women in their village community. Finally, the women found the process enjoyable giving them something new to talk about even though there were challenges in it and it benefited their families (life enhancing).

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSION**

The major research question for this research focused on the perceptions of a group of rural Indigenous Fijian women regarding their daily needs and challenges at a point in time when their traditionally subsistence way of life intersects with a market economy. I signalled at the beginning of the thesis that my reading of their responses would be viewed through the lenses of training and development responses, in particular, ways in which those responsible for development could work in an empowering manner. My way of addressing this issue was to live amongst the group in question, to immerse myself in their daily lives, to listen carefully to their perceptions and to offer them my skills in achieving a development outcome. I also wanted to produce a thesis which narrated the story of their lives, allowing their daily lived experience and voices to enter into the public arena. Finally, I was interested in reflecting on what I had learnt as an indigenous researcher who returns to her mother's village in the position of outside/insider. The work of this chapter is to pull together some of the insights I have gained about the agendas I set myself at the beginning of this project.

## **Women's daily needs and challenges**

When I returned to my mother's village I discovered that there were many aspects of their way of life that had not changed. Their families, *vanua*, church and school continue to be central institutions in their lives. Each of these institutions, especially the family (including the extended family), *vanua* and the church continue to make enormous demands of the women's time and money. The women continue to value these institutions but they want the demands on them reduced. The reason they want them reduced is because they have entered into a market economy in which they use, in the main, their traditional skills of farming to produce surplus produce they can sell for profit. The daily work involved in producing this surplus is physically demanding and, as other researchers have found in similar contexts, it leaves them no personal time and exhausted as they do it in addition to traditional demands. While the women value their traditional institutions they resent that they have little say in communal decisions because these are dominated by the men. If a goal of organisations such as the United Nations is to have women involved in decision making at the national level then women need support in making this happen at the local level.

The women want the money that comes from the market economy because they want more efficient homes that can withstand cyclones, are easy to clean and have better sanitation, light and water supply. They want money so they can send their children to school because they know that education leads to better jobs and

more money for their families. They recognise that leadership, both male and female, is important in achieving this change.

Many indigenous Fijians begin their education in local village schools but move on to urban centres for better educational opportunities. There is a sense of awakening amongst Fijian communities of the importance of education for a better and secure future. A prominent trend is for families who can afford it to relocate to urban centres for better education opportunities. Many indigenous rural villages today, including some in Marama Village, benefit from remittances from their urban based relatives.

### **Negotiating the old and the new**

This study has shown that in recent years the impact of modernisation, particularly the influence of the market economy, has been significant and has both challenged and complicated much of the women's daily-lived experiences. In this contemporary Fijian village, there are old perspectives and assumptions and values that retain their vibrancy, their credibility and influence but because of the impact of the outside world, there are new ways. For these village women, this has meant contradictions between the new ways and the old ways and they are confronted with negotiating these new challenges and at the same time finding meaningful ways to sustain their families and livelihood and community connections. The women find it challenging to negotiate between the individualistic and materialistic stance of a market economy and their communal

way of life. These village women are further disadvantaged by traditional institutions and infrastructures that are patriarchal where men hold power and have access to land and other natural resources. Although the women are the economic backbone of the community, they have little space and opportunity to be active decision makers in the socio-economic and political affairs of the village.

### **Creating spaces for women**

This study has provided the space and opportunity for the women to exercise their decision-making skills and power through the women's workshop and the Women's Own Fish Pond Project. It has illustrated that it is vital to commit time, energy and resources to fully understand and validate local women's knowledge, values and practices. This may provide a more meaningful and authentic platform on which to develop women's empowerment and development initiatives. Listening to village women's stories can assist outsiders, including myself; understand the things that really matter to them: their actual needs and priorities. Providing the space and opportunity for these women to tell their stories is an acknowledgement and respect for their being and existence. One mark of a liberating process is to help these women tell and share their stories in a critical manner. According to Freire (1970:4) when people are not free to speak, silence is oppression and in indigenous rural villages women live under a culture of silence because Fijian traditional norms and social infrastructures do not place women on an equal footing with the menfolk. Yet the women in Marama Village

showed that when facilitation is made available for them to meet together, to listen to each other and to share common concerns and visions, they can act together in ways that are empowering for them. The safe and secure nature of the relationship that had evolved allowed the women to be very open and honest with one another as they shared about their daily lives in the village. This culminated in a very emotional but powerful situation during the village women's workshop where the women confessed to each other about their shortcomings and weaknesses; and forgiving each other in the process. This to me was the psychological and emotional clean slate and foundation that, for this group, was necessary for change to occur. I found that the new spaces and opportunities that were created as part of the research empowered the women to have a sense of ownership, comradeship and control over much of the needs, challenges and opportunities they had shared amongst themselves and the researcher. Through the process of critical reflection, the women were able to interrogate and understand their daily-lived experiences so as to take ownership and control over these experiences. This empowered them for collective action, the first was a village clean up day where all the women under the leadership of the village nurse spent the whole day to clear, burn and bury rubbish in the whole village. This triggered off a chain reaction where the women were more conscious in keeping their home surroundings neat and tidy. Home gardens were made and animals were kept out of the village green. This collaborative effort provided a social glue for the women's empowerment and unity and also became a tool for further collective action. For most of the women these provided a boost to their

self-esteem and dignity and provided the necessary space and platform to play out their potential and capability.

The other major project, the Women's own Fish Pond, which emerged as a result of the collaborative action approach of the study, provided a space and opportunity for the women to engage in the practical and challenging aspects of empowering themselves. The mere fact that they were able to talk about their plans and ideas for the fishpond gave them a sense of engagement and influence. Consequently, the women experienced some form of control as they sat together and collaboratively discussed issues pertaining to the fishpond. The initial funds I successfully applied for on behalf of the women were powerful evidence to prove to them that their idea of a fishpond had counted. In the project the researcher played a catalytic and supportive role and cheered the women on as they engaged themselves in their own Fish Pond Project. Finally, the women took control of their resources when they decided to join together to keep control of the money they made from the Women's Own Fish Pond rather than handing it over to the men.

A key factor in the success of the women's undertaking was that they started with a project where all the required input was available locally in the village. The fishpond was small enough to be managed by the women themselves and carried no complicated issues and it was a project that met their basic food needs. A crucial aspect of the project was that the women had informed the men in the traditional manner that they had plans to start a fish-breeding project. So the men

gave their blessings for the women's own fishpond. This gesture was significant because although the fishpond was focused on women's empowerment, the women acknowledged local traditional protocols and the important role that their men had to play in this project. Because this was a Fijian village community, the women realised that they needed the cooperation of the whole village community to make the venture a success. In fact for the first fish harvest, the men in the village gave their blessings again by giving a donation of F\$943 as they were invited to be chief guests at the first harvest. This is a major tenet of the Fijian way of life, respect and reciprocity. As a researcher I found that the women still had much respect for operating within traditional protocols and this was crucial for such communities. This suggests that any collaborative action research needs to be sensitive to local contexts and social networks and to support the women in managing the process for themselves.

There is a moral responsibility for local indigenous women scholars and leaders to reconnect and talk with rural women on a whole range of issues that are crucial to their lives as women. Local women's knowledge is grounded in their experience, values and practices and when women leaders understand this knowledge, they actually bring to the core and privilege the local women as knower. This is profoundly a political act which should be advocated by women leaders at the grass root level.

Traditions and customs are important components of the Fijian village way of life hence it is important to engender development and training within the context of

this traditional way of life as a starting point. Like most of their Pacific counterparts, village women in Fiji have lived their lives within the traditional context of their village community and it is only wise to engender development and progress into how women do things in their village. In the early stages of the fieldwork, it was observed that women were very cautious to follow traditional norms but were equally skilful in manoeuvring their way through this male dominated culture. This research has illustrated that the village women know how to manoeuvre and weave progress and development challenges given the nature of their village landscape.

This study also demonstrates that the local culture of our people is not necessarily a stumbling block to development and progress as suggested by dominant models of development. On the contrary, local traditions and culture are vital starting blocks or springboards to progressive socio-economic activities and development. The existing village institutions ought to be used as platforms or learning arena where the village's patriarchal system will be 'metamorphised' in such a way where men are engaged in communal activities that are conducive to the process of conscientisation and power sharing.

We need to make sure that the development and research processes that we engage the women in will rebuild women's lives spiritually, emotionally, socially, economically and politically. If we work with no hidden agendas or professional aloofness and a genuine heart to really make a difference in the lives of women, then there is no need for these village women to live a life of

hopelessness. With the same token we must be accountable for the corrective measures that will be required should these development programmes fail to bring about the intended social economic and political outcomes. It is also important to allow the research process to evolve naturally rather than forcing it through because this created space for much reflect-action (praxis) on the part of the researcher and the women also.

However, in a predominantly patriarchal society such as this Fijian village, feminist approach to power and access to resources needs to be treated with much caution and sensitivity. This group of village women had much wisdom in dealing with this issue when they started off their fishpond project. Even though the fishpond would bring them a new sense of social and economic status, the women realised that they were still part of the social and economic fabric of their village community. The women live in a village landscape that has a communal infrastructure. In dealing with issues of power and the politics of Fijian village life, good sense must prevail and it is wise for outsiders including indigenous scholars like me to be very sensitive to this. In fact I have much admiration and respect for the women for respecting this aspect of their way of life. As women gain further mileage in their empowerment experiences, the village men needs to undergo a parallel process of conscientisation where they are equally empowered to interrogate their own privileged and powerful positions in the village community. This is vital because engendering training and development is not about women only but has much to do with the men also. Focusing on the men as part of the solution to women's oppression is a necessary prerequisite to

modifying current social and traditional institutions and infrastructures into meaningful and workable ones that are sensitive to women's socio-economic experiences and realities. And as indigenous research scholars we are equally in need of this conscientisation in order to make our works authentic, useful and meaningful for our own communities.

### **Lessons for village women's empowerment**

The collective experiences of the women have revealed basic and challenging insights into women's empowerment at the village level. As the research progressed, issues of empowerment became a vital part of our collaborative efforts and these ranged from efforts to facilitate women's empowerment to efforts focusing on sensitizing men to gender issues.

First, these village women are not passive victims of development programmes, rather they are aware and active about their lives. They do think about and reflect on the challenges they face in the new global economy. The women are actively engaged in providing sustenance for their families, to gain control over economic, social and political resources. Through their increasing knowledge, skills and communal effort as part of this research project, the women have been able to improve aspects of their livelihood.

Second, greater economic independence and security would enable women to achieve even more power. This is vital as they need an economic power base and

a secure platform from which to work from. Women in Marama Village put in long hours of hard work on a daily basis, yet they remain in the socio-economic and political shadows of their husbands. Therefore, there needs to be more emphasis on how women can be empowered to enhance their economic enterprise for greater independence. This was evident amongst the village women after they accumulated F\$1,420 from their Fish Pond Project and their ownership of this amount provided a quiet confidence amongst the women. The women in turn realized that the amount also provided them some effective bargaining and negotiating tool with the men. The Fijian village has a strong patriarchal communal system that has made women invisible and inaudible in the village community. During the field work, the village women displayed much skill in negotiating their economic independence amongst the village men. More research needs to be done to help women interrogate village cultural norms when these violate women's sense of individuality and fairness. Women also need to interrogate cultural norms that disempower and disadvantage them in their own village community.

Third, education would provide women with some of the skills and tools required to live independently in society (e.g., capacity to gain employment). For example, the village women boosted their independence through the knowledge and skills that the village women gained from managing their own fish pond. Thus, research must be conducted on appropriate education or training that specifically caters for women's needs. It is also vital to understand that women may begin with different starting points: economic strategies, political strategies, social strategies or a

combination of these strategies (Murthy, 2001). Ideally, the choice of the starting should be defined by the women themselves.

Fourth, women experience power relationship in multiple ways and in various levels and contexts. In this village the dominant power relationship is between the village men and women at both family and communal level and this is perpetuated in the institution of the *vanua*, the church and the family. Women in Marama village need empowerment strategies that highlight the exploitative character of these power relations as well as strategies that provide women with the impetus to interrogate these power relationships. However, like other Fijian villagers, it was not uncommon for the women in this village to focus on the positive aspects of this power relationship. Most of the women would do this out of respect for the men.

For these village women, a necessary prerequisite to this interrogation was cooperative security and a power base from which women can work. During the field work, the women found strength in each other as a group as they managed their Fish Pond over a period of two years.

Finally, the empowerment of women cannot be planned for in a top-down manner. This research suggests that the process of empowerment ought to be context specific and grounded in the women's socio-economic experiences, practices and beliefs. This guarantees an empowerment approach that is genuine and meaningful for the women themselves.

It is also important to work with the men on gender issues, so that spaces for women's empowerment are expanded (Murthy, 2001). Women's empowerment is enhanced by support rather than opposition from men. It was evident through the field work that these village women were excellent strategists because they maneuvered aspects of their Fish Pond project through the cultural nuances of their village community. For example throughout the field exercise the women informed the men what they were doing which gave a sense of ownership and respect for the men folk. Women also set aside an evening where they formally informed their village elders of their plans to start up a Fish Pond Project. The village women also invited the village men to be their special guest at the first harvest of the fish pond. Experience has also shown that men react favourably when women's empowerment initiatives benefit the family or the particular community in which they live. On the other hand, men react negatively when women cut into men's source of power. It is therefore crucial and wise that women involve men because these women will remain with these men.

### **Implications for professional practice**

The study has illustrated that it is critical for those who live and relate to these village women, particularly professionals in positions of power and privilege to engage in critical self reflection to find out what will work in the field.

Building partnerships with the women through dialogue is an important principle for success. This dialogue provides an initial platform of cordial relationship and negotiation between the women and the development worker. Such dialogue needs to occur at policy level as well as during program/project design and implementation. A major challenge here is for development workers to articulate in a very concrete manner, the ways in which how women's needs, benefits and rights at the village level are relevant to national development. It is vital to involve all stakeholders in dialogue on development objectives while local women's organizations and advocacy groups can play a key advocacy role in setting the directions for country strategies and in the design of development activities, if they have a place at the table. Civil society organisations can play an important role in holding partner institutions accountable to close gaps between policy commitments and practice (Hunt, 2004 : 53-57). In order to make sustainable progress towards women's development and empowerment, there is a need to make long term commitments to development activities and projects for these Fijian village women. These commitments are also important for continuing the trust and the collaborative relationship that was forged between the researcher and the village women during the fieldwork.

This research project clearly showed that the use of participatory approaches is important in building indigenous women's self confidence as well as strengthening women's leadership capacity. The provision of leadership training for women is also a key feature in successful development programmes for women. In others, providing women with skills training has an empowering

impact on women's decision making capacity (AusAID, 2002b). Women's decision making capacity is enhanced when combined with participatory planning and monitoring processes and this was clearly illustrated in the village women's monitoring of their Fish Pond Project. The women's active involvement in the project demonstrated increased participation in decision making at both personal and group level. It is unfortunate that the project was only run on a small scale.

Supporting these village women as agents of social progress and development in their community enhances progress towards gender empowerment and gender equality. This support will then be provided by the women themselves when their organizational capacity is strengthened. Additionally, institutions such as the *vanua* and the church will need to provide an enabling socio-economic and cultural environment that will enhance development and empowerment initiatives for the local village women. These listed practices are not 'magic bullets'. However, they provide the basis for effective and sustainable development and empowerment for women.

### **Addressing women's way of knowing**

An important revelation of women's development and empowerment that developed out of this research is the issue of women's ways of knowing. This has brought to the fore a vital gap that needs to be addressed to effectively enhance women's development and empowerment. Belenky et al (1997) formulated a theory consisting of five stages of knowing from which women perceive

themselves and approach the world. This theory has provided me with crucial insights into the ways in which these village women construct and use knowledge. The first stage of knowing is silence, where one blindly follows external authority, thinks stereotypically and finds it difficult to define oneself. This condition was common amongst the village women when they did not speak out, unless they were coaxed or encouraged by the researcher. Next is 'received knowledge', where one listens to the authority of the voices of others. Many of the women listened to the voice of the researcher and received external knowledge during the field work providing little input themselves. The next stage is subjective knowledge, where one listens to oneself and severs one's sense of obligation to follow others' views. This is the next challenging stage that the women and researchers will need to work through as an important extension to this research. The next category is 'procedural knowledge', consisting of 'connected knowing and separate knowing'. The connected knower believes that truth is 'personal, particular, and grounded in firsthand experience'. They attempt to find truth through listening, empathizing, and taking impersonal stances to information, whereas the separate knower completely excludes their feelings from making meaning and strictly relies on reason. The last way of knowing that Belenky et al. define is 'constructed knowledge', where one integrates their own opinions and sense of self with reason and the outside world around them (Belenky et al. 1997).

This theory on women's way of knowing has assisted me in understanding the reasons why most of the women at grass roots level remain silent and passive.

The women are silent because they totally depend on external authority and knowledge. Although, women have a wealth of local knowledge and skills, these are not acknowledged by these external authorities. With the aid of a mediator (myself as researcher), these women were exposed to external and additional knowledge and given the space to produce knowledge. With this added knowledge base, the women could then step out of their silence. I see this as a basic yet vital step to women's empowerment. The women also constructed their own knowledge in relation to their Fish Pond Project. In the past, the knowledge and skills gained through the research process and the Fish Pond Project would have been perceived by the women as personal and private. Now, they no longer remain silent, but provide an active voice in women's development and empowerment in the village. Apart from our development initiatives to empower women economically, socially and politically, it is equally crucial to provide the space for women to enhance their capacity to move through these stages of knowing and be mentally empowered for women's social progress and development.

### **Reflections of an indigenous researcher**

As I moved between Australia and Fiji in the period of the research (2001-2003), I began to see my own role in the project quite differently. Reading back over my diary entries in the earlier phases I noticed that I was both anxious regarding how to be of help and also a little too aware of the additional knowledge and skill that I had and which I considered to be lacking in the village. There was a temptation

to 'save' my mother's village from falling into bad times. Additionally, my view of leadership implicit in some of my early reflections was based on the idea of the leader as expert or educated person who was recognised as a 'man' by the village men and elders. As I grew to really be able to listen to and respect the knowledge and capacity for strategic thinking in the women, and in further reflection on the energy and capacity to understand emerged, it was also tempting to romanticise the women as not in need of leadership at all, but as embodying all the required virtues and skills for change in the globalised world. However, the women themselves and my further reflection suggested there was a need for a leader – one who can act as catalyst.

I found the metaphor of catalyst useful because it allowed for agency on the part of all concerned. There is a need for knowledge of the outside practices – those that sustain the state - seen most clearly here in the fishpond project. However, the insider position provides access and understanding that may be difficult for someone with little knowledge of the culture. As both an insider and outsider, I realised the enormous responsibility and accountability I had to respect but at the same time to create the space and opportunity to dialogue with the women regarding their socio-economic experiences. Part of this process was to encourage women to perceive their knowledge, beliefs, values and practices as important, and an indigenous researcher to validate these experiences. Therefore, much of the interaction and discussion with the women were based on this process. It is healthy for the insider-outsider herself to balance not privileging either the outside knowledge or the inner relationships. The other thing the catalyst

position does is to allow for interplay between the women's knowledge of practices that have stood the test of time and her knowledge as an educated Indigenous woman with experience of the wider world. Consequently, the people can respect the position of catalyst because it acknowledges their own lifestyle as not inferior or to be superseded. The life of the village has intrinsic worth and it is worth sustaining.

Finally, although this academic undertaking concludes here in words, the thesis has created a unique and authentic relationship between me, the researcher and the women who call me *vahu*, my mother's relatives. As I reflect on this research exercise, I am grateful for the opportunity to interact and to learn from the lives of these village women. The thesis has been the scholastic seed out of which has emerged an obligation to continue to help these women meet their needs and challenges and be part of the fulfillment of their dreams. This is the human face of academic research.

I return to the women in Marama Village to continue to build on what the women and I have been able to achieve from this research journey. I also return home contented and humbled in my heart that the thesis has brought not only hope and alternative perspectives about the world and themselves but also bring an enjoyable change to an often, limited daily life that these village women live.

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[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=23023&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
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## APPENDIX A : THE HOUSEHOLD SURVEY

### A. HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTIC

Respondent \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Time

Fijian household name \_\_\_\_\_

#### 1. Household Roster

Person number	Names of usual residents	Relationship to head of household	Sex Married/ Single	Age at last birthday	Place of birth
Indicate head of household in terms of position and activity. (1)	Please give the names of persons who usually live in your home. (2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)

### B. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS

1. Yaca ni were \_\_\_\_\_

Significance/meaning \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the traditional role of the family \_\_\_\_\_

3. What social/cultural activity were you involved in last month ?

Type of activity	Date/length of activity	Household persons involved	Nature of your involvement and contribution

4. What special contribution did you make as compared to your husband or males in your household

	Women	Men
Perform a cultural activity		
Cash donation		
Provide other resources (food/kind/material)		
Other contributions Specify		
Activities involved e.g. cooking, fetching food/firewood etc.		

5. As a woman how did you obtain your contributions for these social/cultural activities

6. In your view these activities

- .. are okay and should continue
- .. should be modified
- .. are burdensome
- .. should be abolished
- .. no comment

Please explain your answer.

7. In your view who often faces the burden of these obligations ?

.. men .. women .. both men and women .. the whole family

Please explain your answer.

8. In your social/cultural obligations, list three of your most urgent needs as a woman (to meet these obligations).

i.

ii.

iii.

9. List three of your major challenges

i.

ii.

iii.

10. How do you manage these challenges ?

### C. AGRICULTURE AND ECONOMIC STATUS

1. Briefly outline your farming activities for the year

May - August

Sept - December

Jan - April

2. What is the family's main agricultural activity ?

i. \_\_\_\_\_ ii. \_\_\_\_\_

2. What farm activities was your household involved in last month ?

Type of activity	Person involved	Nature and degree of involvement
Siviyara/Yara		
Lovolovo		
Huihui		
Boroboro		
Harvest crops		
Marketing		

3. What proportion of farm work is done by you as compared to your husband/men ?

.. 75/25%      .. 50/50%      .. 25/75%

4. What are the necessary inputs into your agricultural activities ?  
(labour, capital, physical).

5. How are these obtained and by whom ?

6. List some technology and farm tools you think would improve farming in your community ?

7. **Marketing produce**

Market days	Produce/Quantity	Person involved	Income	Items bought on return

8. What other sources of income do you have ?

9. If you required extra cash, where do you get it ?

.. Bank    .. Borrow money    .. Go without    .. Others – specify

10. List three most pressing needs of your farming activities .

i.

ii.

iii.

11. List three challenges you face in your agricultural activities

i.

ii.

iii.

**D. HOME AND AMENITIES**

1. What type of house do you have ?

Concrete `` Wooden `` Aluminium `` Thatched `` Others/specify ``

2. Your reason for having built this type of house

3. Number of rooms in the house

	Part of the house	Separate and outside [enclosed]	Outside and open [not enclosed]	Non existent
Kitchen				
Bathroom				
Toilet				
Eating place				

4.

	Own	Comment
Radio		
Television		
Beds		
Table/chairs		
Others/specify		

5. What source of energy do you use at home and how often do you use these

	For what purpose	Frequency of use			
		Daily	2/3X/week	1X/fortnight	monthly
Electricity					
Firewood					
Benzene					
Kerosene					
Gas					
Others					

6. Your household has piped water Yes .. No ..

Individual use .. Communal use ..

7. Type of latrine used Flush .. pour flush .. Pit ..

Individual use .. communal use ..

**E. EDUCATION**

1. What is your level of education ?

No formal education .. Below class 6 .. Below class 8 ..  
 Fiji Junior level .. FSLC level .. Tertiary level ..

2. Household – level of education

Household member	Level of education	Can read R Can write W	Language in which one can R or W	Comments

3. What prevented you from gaining a higher education ?

- parents did not see worth of education for me ..
- was required to help at home/farm ..
- lack of financial support ..
- girls education was not important ..
- got pregnant ..
- got married ..

4. In your opinion girls in the village MUST be educated

Agree .. Disagree .. not sure ..

Give a reason for your answer

5. What level of education should girls strive to get

No formal education .. Below class 6 .. Below class 8 ..  
 Fiji Junior level .. FSLC level .. Tertiary level ..

Give a reason for your answer

6. Did you do any cash employment last week ? Yes .. No ..

Please describe this and your rate of pay ?

7. As a woman in the village, list in priority the problems you face

- Lack of income                    ..
- Social and cultural obligation ..
- Lack of resources                ..
- Low level of education        ..
- Isolation                            ..
- Male dominated society        ..

8. Are you happy in the village    Yes    ..    No    ..    Not sure    ..

Give reasons for your answer.

**F.    BASIC SANITATION AND HEALTH**

1. What is your view on the level of sanitation and health in the village

poor    ..    satisfactory    ..    excellent    ..

Give a reason for your answer

2. What are the contributing factors in this level of sanitation and health in the village

3 List three needs to improve sanitation and health in the village

5. Suggest three solutions to the level of sanitation and health in the village

	Poor	Satisfactory	Excellent
Water supply			
Sanitation			
Waste disposal			
Cooking pracs			
Diet			
Infant care			
Marijuana			
Kava			
Sexual behaviour			

**G. RELIGION**

1. What is your religious denomination

- Methodist ..
- Catholic ..
- Seventh Day ..
- Jehovahs Witness ..
- Pentecostal ..
- Others ..

2. What church activities did you take part in last month ?

Type of Act	Persons involved and contribution	Nature of involvement

3. Where and how did you obtain contributions for these activities

4. In your view these church activities are

Okay .. burdensome .. should be lessened .. abolished ..

5. Give a reason for your answer

6. List three needs you have as a member of this church

7. List three challenges you face as a member of the church

8. Suggested solutions

**H. IF YOU BECAME THE VILLAGE HEADMAN**

If you became the ‘Turaga ni Koro’, what would you do with a donation of \$5 million to the village. Please list and explain in list of priority.

PRIORITY ONE

PRIORITY TWO

PRIORITY THREE

PRIORITY FOUR

PRIORITY FIVE

**Are there any questions, concerns or issues you would like to share as a women in this village ?**

## APPENDIX B    FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1.    What is your perception of a good life in the village
2.    In your opinion is this good life attainable
3.    Please give reasons for your answer
4.    Please identify things in your current lifestyle in the village that can be modified/changed to improve your current standard of living
  - a.    your personal life as a woman
  - b.    your family life
  - c.    your life in the village – *vanua*
  - d.    your life as a member of your church – *lochu*
  - e.    your life in relation to the education of your children.
5.    Please suggest ways in which we as women can achieve this good life.

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### WOMEN'S SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. In your view, what do you consider as a good life in the village
2. What are the things that prevent you from attaining this good life

Please discuss your answers in light of the following areas in your life

- a. *Cola valewa I rara*
- b. *Cola vamatavuwere*
- c. *Cola vavanua*
- d. *Cola valochu*
- e. *Cola varara*
- f. *Cola ni waravi vuli vuaru na vero*

3. To attain this good life, what needs to be changed/modified in the following areas.  
Please discuss your answers in light of the following areas in your life

- g. *Cola valewa I rara*
- h. *Cola vamatavuwere*
- i. *Cola vavanua*
- j. *Cola valochu*
- k. *Cola varara*
- l. *Cola ni waravi vuli vuaru na vero*

3. Indicate which aspects are tough to change and why
4. For those aspects we can change, how can we begin to change these aspects. Please discuss your answers in light of the following areas in your life
  - a. *Cola valewa I rara*
  - b. *Cola vamatavuwere*
  - c. *Cola vavanua*
  - d. *Cola valochu*
  - e. *Cola varara*
  - f. *Cola ni qwaravi vuli vuaru na vero*

**Are there any other questions, concerns or issues you would like to share or raise regarding anything that we have discussed ?**

## **APPENDIX D    FISHPOND QUESTIONS**

### **MARAMA VILLAGE FISH POND HARVEST**

#### Women's Questionnaire

1.    What was the total number of fish that was bred in the pond
2.    How many fish were harvested
3.    What was the total weight of the fish harvested
4.    What was the total weight of fish sold
5.    What was the cost per kilogram
6.    What was the total amount collected from the fish that was sold
7.    Mention some of the people that came to buy fish
8.    What were you happy about your first fish harvest
9.    What in your view contributed to the success of the Fish Pond Project
10.    What did you learn as part of this project
11.    What were the challenges/ problems you faced
12.    Did the rest of the village community contribute to the project
13.    What opinions or views or comments did the men have of this project
14.    What plans do the women have after this project