

Coming up in 2009 editions

Feature articles

Storytelling

Community and crisis arts informa- tion

Resource sharing

In 2009, issues in
May (this issue),
July, September, &
November

Marco Nogueira,
quoted in Marcia
Rivera. 'About
Women's Power and
Wisdom',
DAWN.2000:

***"(W)omen's role
is of vital
importance;
they are the ones
who can channel
political
processes and
determine social-
economic
projects with
totally different
parameters from
the already
exhausted ones."***



In 2003, with staff feeling the effects of 10 years of work on gender-equality, human rights, post-coup trauma-healing and peacebuilding in rural and urban areas of Fiji, WAC created our practical, achievable mission, which we called our Dream:

"To create safe spaces where individuals and groups, particularly marginalised people, can gain strength and confidence to build a just society".

In the midst of often divisive and elitist formal and informal political systems, fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity, another militarized coup and abrogation of the 1997 Fiji Constitution, a

dreaming is planning...

global financial crisis showing yet again the lack of merit in (un)free-trade economies, and continuing gender inequality and violence, it is more important than ever to affirm any human rights and social justice gains, actively support community-lead networks and movements, and more than that, to deliberately envision a gender equal and peaceful future.

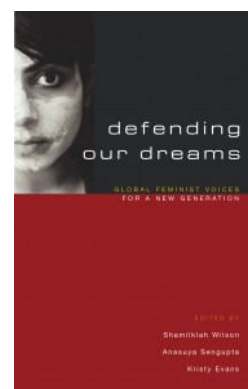
So in 2009 WAC ask ourselves and others just what a gender equal society in Fiji will be like, feel like, act like, give up, and take up...

Many others are also weaving dreams ...

Chapter 8 of the book, 'Defending Our Dreams' is written by Anasuya Sengupta.

In short-story form, Anasuya weaves toward a gender equal society, into possible futures, and affirms feminist contributions toward this goal.

And to those who say this is a pipe dream, we say with feminist Gloria Steinem that, ***'after all, dreaming is planning too!'***



Resource: 2006, Wilson, Sengupta and Evans (Eds.). 'Defending our Dreams: Global Feminist Voices for a New Generation' UK & USA:



Play: 'Take Over, Take Cover': Gender equality and nonviolence

WAC play 'Take Over, Take Cover' is a black comedy that offers spaces for community discussion and dialogue on gender equality, demilitarisation, non-violence and peacebuilding.

Since mid 2008, the 40 minute play has toured prisons, been shown before Military and Police, in rural and urban community spaces, and at secondary schools and tertiary institutions.

Women laugh at the outrageousness of Viola's women's army, men shift in their seats when

portrayed as victims of a woman-lead militarised takeover, and everyone gets uncomfortable at personal attitudes to gender roles, systemic violence and peacebuilding held up to the light.

Judging by positive audience reactions, the play has hit a timely note in both rural and urban Fiji.

Overall, wider community feedback has been extremely positive, with rural and urban performances generating long post-performance discussions. Performances continue in 2009.

WAC plays are researched, developed, and rehearsed internally and take 1-2 months to prepare.

Other current plays are on restorative justice and active nonviolence, and one on preventing solvent abuse by children. Upcoming plays focus on SRHR and relationships between older and younger women...and more...

Action...

Local

EPIC PEER MEDIATOR: GIVING AND GAINING RESPECT



"My name is Sitiveni Kinikini... When I was a young boy, I wanted to be a Doctor because I thought that it would be a good thing to heal peoples wounds. This thought slowly faded away when I met WAC in 2006. I was trained with a special skill that is also about healing people just as touching blood and seeing sick patients. It was mediation.

SITIVENI

Charlotte Bunch, USA in 'Listening To Each Other: An Intergenerational Dialogue', CREA, CWGL, Youth Coalition, 2007:

Its not about waiting for someone to give you leadership, but how you exercise leadership in whatever position you're in."

I joined up in this program because from the day that I learnt about Restorative Justice mediation, I wanted to explore more. I fell in love with mediation, when you assist someone to work through their problems and find a new path, and witness a sad face turn into a happy and joyful mood. I realize that this was a God given talent that WAC assisted me in exploring. I have learnt to deal with relationships, class disputes, conflicts in the community. Even at home, I am able to deal with difficult issues, in church and with friends.

As a young person I would testify that these skills have totally changed my life. Even though I am dealing with other people's problems, I have to make sure that I look at myself first before making a move. I found that I am able to gain respect when I give respect. Everything I do, I take precaution not to hurt anybody.

The interesting part is when it comes to gender issues. I find that this issue is still something that is scarce in Fiji. With mediation processes girls who seem to be quiet, learnt to speak freely of their opinions and views ,and young men like me are able to give a lot of respect to young women. Restorative Mediation has reflected so well on the other young EPIC MEDIATORS* life as well as mine.

As the 2009 program started rolling with training in Nausori, Lautoka and the Youth Alternative Sentencing project coming up. I am looking forward to this years program as I will continue to do what I've started.

I know that Fiji would be a better place with restorative mediation and I also hope that one day I'd achieve my personal goal and that is to be-

come a professional mediator. I believe that the world would be at peace with Restorative Justice."

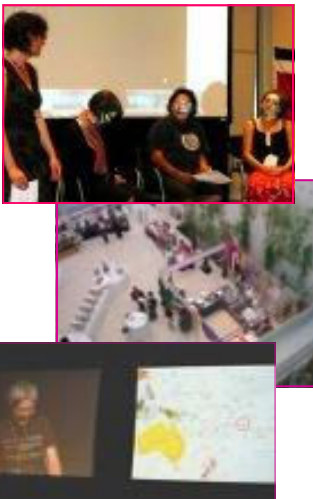
**EPIC MEDIATORS is a growing network of mediators under the age of 25 years old who are slowly forming a Fiji-wide network. They are already working in over 11 schools including Vunimono High, Nausori High, Rishikul Sanatan, Suva Sangam, Suva Grammar, Marist Brothers High school, St Josephs, Central College, Natabua High, Drasa Secondary and Holy Family... They have created a list of those willing to work as peer mediators with any other young people who request their services. They have also produced a Mediator manual for young people, and various conflict analysis, restorative justice and mediation information sheets designed by and for young people.*

Please contact Sitiveni at WAC, on 3314 363 (Mornings Mon-Fri) for more details on services and available areas of work.

To

Global...

Feminist Movement-Building -48 Pacific women at 2008 AWID Forum, Cape Town, South Africa



Pacific regional participation at the AWID Forum in Cape Town Nov 2008 included 48 women from PNG, Cook Islands, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Aotearoa (NZ), Fiji, and Australia. The theme of the Forum was 'Movement Building'.

WAC was part of the AWID International Planning Committee from 2007-2009, along with Pacific working group of Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) and DAWN Pacific with practical support from UNIFEM

Pacific, SPC, NZAID, Ausaid, Global Fund for Women, IWDA and many others ...

In 2009, 3 post-forum AWID Seed Grants have been awarded to Pacific projects:

Congratulations to 'From a Ripple to a Pacific WAVE: Pacific Women in Media Project'; 'Digital Stories for Mine affected Women in PNG', by the Centre for Environmental Research and Dev Inc, (PNG); and 'Digital Storytelling--Sounds of

Silence' by Rainbow Women's Network (Fiji)...

Other possible upcoming Pacific activities include a regional feminist e-group with FWRM, Pacific FTX with fem-LINKPACIFIC, 'Development' Journal article by PNG participants on Gender Based Violence, HIV and AIDS and Movement-Building (Upcoming)

See www.awid.org to find out about the HOT PINK SCARVES!

Masculinities

‘Engaging Men and Boys on Gender Equality Work’ ...and Beyond...

WAC Creative Director Peni Moore was unable to attend a global conference on ‘Engaging Men and Boys on Gender Equality Work’ in Brazil in March 2009, as part of a Pacific delegation building partnerships to further this critical aspect of gender equality work.

So we wanted to affirm the importance of this work!

Over 16 years WAC has been learning, discussing and affirming diverse gender and sexuality and embedding sexuality rights into our organization and work.

WAC work in a wide range of rural and urban communities

and institutions –with women, girls, children, men and boys, with young mediators; sex workers; religious groups; school students; with lesbians and also in wider civil society work.

We also work with Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding, FRIEND and others in Prisons, with prisoners and their families, with Police and Military, other Institutions, and with some male traditional and faith-based leaders. This is not easy work, and we learn as we go...

Note: Half of WAC fulltime staff are males.

Transformative gender and sexuality work...

‘Work with men and boys’ often does not question the binary of male/female, women/men... But there is liberating work on intersex and transgender sexual rights, and on located/local/global gender and sexuality rights being done by groups such as Aids Taskforce of Fiji, CREA (India, NY) and others...

Note: For copy of the Brazil conference outcome statement or to contact CREA and other potential resources, email wac@connect.com.fj.



Partnership and Skill-sharing



WAC Creative Director Peni Moore (Centre), with two Management Collective members, Pat and Shirley...

Every theatre group is unique to the organisation within which it grows. Peni Moore, WAC Creative Director

New Theatre Group in Lautoka

Since mid 2008, WAC has been working with NGO partner ‘Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprise and Development’ (FRIEND) in Lautoka, to co-develop a new community theatre group serving the Western side of Viti Levu.

Community theatre development requires strong and long-term organizational commitment and ongoing resources. “You cannot just set up groups and expect them to thrive”,

says Peni Moore, WAC Creative Director. “They need regular support. This includes theatre planning, setup, ongoing actor training and development, theatre skills including community-based research, playwriting, singing, prop and costume design, tour planning and logistics, and more...”

For the theatre to work, the host organisation needs to integrate artistic work into their overall organizational

aims, objectives, outputs and activities. Every level!

“Every theatre group is unique to the organisation within which it grows. This is not a mini-WAC -It is a new FRIEND theatre group, unique in content, style and processes. “

Throughout 2009, Peni continues to regularly travel to Western Viti Levu to support FRIEND Theatre Group.

'Fundamentalisms of Progressive Movements: Reflections on Gujarat and Karomo' – By Anasuya Sengupta, India

The Fundamentalisms of the Progressive

This is a rough transcript of a presentation made at the DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era) panel on 'The Many Faces of Fundamentalisms', held at the World Social Forum, Mumbai (India), January 2004. Others on the panel included Gita Sen, Sonia Correa, Ros Petchesky, Marina Durano and Vanita Mukherjee. It was made in response to the work that many of us have been doing in India and elsewhere, around combating right wing fundamentalist and fascist forces. It asks us to look within ourselves and our movements, in order to critically examine what might be termed our own fundamentalisms.

What happened in Gujarat two years ago,¹ just as what happened at Ayodhya twelve years ago,² changed my life. Both these moments in Indian history threatened my identities, my choices, my soul. Like it did to so many others across the country, like fundamentalism and fascism do to so many of us across the world. And yet I can't help wondering why so little changed for us, the so called 'progressive forces', in the effectiveness of our strategies, our mobilisations, between Ayodhya and Gujarat and beyond? Why does it feel as though we struggle without end, often without hope, rarely with clarity? Perhaps the time has come for us to look within ourselves, critically and honestly, and examine what might well be called our own 'fundamentalisms', our own entrenched and embedded notions of the way we are and the work we do, and the manner in which these play out in our attitudes and our in/ actions. I offer these thoughts in a spirit of hope and humility, wondering towards a different set of visions and strategies of advocacy that might help us in our quest for other worlds, more just and more humane. These thoughts are rooted in Indian experience, specifically in a few of my experiences across the last two years post-Gujarat, but may have echoes and resonate with some of you elsewhere in the world.

Purity

As we rail against fundamentalists and their constructions of 'purity', it seems somewhat ironic that we too have our own entrenched notions of purity – certainly not as consciously and carefully constructed as those we struggle against, but self-defeating nonetheless – purity of the body, of intellect/ ideology, of history, of movement, of difference itself. Gender, sexuality, ability – why has the WSF been so difficult for the disabled? – caste, language... All those GRACES³ we otherwise worship as 'multiplicity' or 'intersectionality' seem to be our stumbling blocks in coming together powerfully. Our most critical need today is the 'expanding of constituencies', of convincing people who might otherwise be confused about their political decisions that the world cannot be a better place if bias and bigotry are fostered and institutionalised. And yet we spend much of our time implying – and trying to convince – our colleagues in different social justice movements, that "my issue is more important than yours". We do the same with ideologies, with strategies, with methods of mobilising. Who am I, a 29 year old middle class woman, born into a Hindu family, with a father from the east of India and a mother from the south, in love with someone born into a Christian family, wearing jeans and learning Indian classical music, living in a cosmopolitan city, often working with women from villages, speaking languages that are not my 'mother tongue'...? Am I impure? Confused? Fused? ...We need to accept and celebrate our multiple identities, including of class and culture, and be creative and innovative in our advocacy. In Bangalore, where I live, we have tried different strategies to reach out to young people, where we weren't 'preaching to the converted'. One of our campaigns was to wear a white ribbon for peace ([the White Ribbon Campaign for Peace, India](#)) – we

used it both as a symbol and as a talking point, to begin conversations about violence of all kinds, including what we call 'communalism' in India (the rousing of hatred against particular communities). Initially, some of our friends scoffed at us, and wondered what an insignificant white ribbon could do, to change attitudes and animosities. But the interesting thing was that there were so many people – both young and not so young – who were unable to be political in the same way as they saw 'activists'; they felt this meant standing at street corners with banners, or going on rallies, or shouting slogans against the government. They found this too 'political' (in their understanding of the term), and yet they were deeply disturbed at the kinds of violence being perpetrated in the name of religion. So for these people, wearing a ribbon was the beginning of a series of conversations they had with others, which began other processes of change, at least in terms of breaking the silence around violence. And because it was something everyone could do – and have conversations at whatever level of politics and ideology each was comfortable with – it wasn't intimidating in any way, and yet gave a sense of belonging to a community against violence, and speaking up for peace.

Another interesting initiative has been of a group of us called 'Culture Move', who decided to go into spaces that hadn't been explored before, like pubs (frequented by most young people who can afford them), and put together a cultural experience, particularly using music, that would discuss different issues, beginning with the occupation of Iraq. Initially, we had support from many senior activists in Bangalore, but we also faced a lot of resistance from those who felt this was not the way to be political, to be going into a pub, a symbol of globalisation and class inequalities (and possibly Western decadence?) and discussing politics. And yet, while we need the sense of solidarity and community we feel protesting together on street corners and at rallies, we do not, at all, reach out to those with power and influence, and we certainly do not change the way most young people in schools and colleges think. Music and television, for instance, can reach out in such dramatic, powerful ways to people – and if we have to do whatever it takes to reach out, we should be prepared to make music videos, we should be prepared to go on pub crawls!

Dissent vs. Consensus

Dissent is one of the most important organising principles of progressive groups, and it is often the real difference between 'us and them'. When I talk to young people, in schools and colleges, I often use this to ask them to question everything and anything – including what I tell them - because they need to examine the grotesque versions of history in their textbooks, the notions of unqualified 'truths', of stories they are told; they need to ask themselves who the storyteller is and why such a story is told? And ultimately, with the freedom of informed choice, they can dissent, debate, dialogue. But what is the fine balance between dissent and consensus? This is both conceptual and strategically critical – we cannot move forward without this. What are the ways in which we can accept and embrace dissent while acting powerfully (which always requires some degree of consensus, some degree of joint action)?

(Continued next page)

“What are the ways in which we can accept and embrace dissent while acting powerfully?”

Fundamentalisms of Progressive Movements: Reflections on Gujarat and Karomo— (Cont'd 2)

Faith/religion/spirituality

What is the feminist understanding of faith and spirituality? We need to create, in particular, the feminist understanding of religion and its implications for the ways in which we live and work.

However we might reject organised religion ourselves, often coming from our leftist socialist upbringing, we have to be honest about the ways in which many of us are creating a personal sense of spirituality for ourselves. And even if not, we have to be even more honest and accountable to the women we work with – do we have the right to reject organised religion without thought, when so many of the women we claim to represent or whose voices we amplify, have strong faith bases, and cannot reject them in the same way we can, and do? For instance, in a rally of women against communalism in Bangalore, a few young men were extremely strident and getting violent in their reactions to a particular banner, which rejected 'Hindutva'; at that moment, in order to ease the situation, I spoke up to explain to these young men that although 'I was Hindu, I did not believe in Hindutva as a political agenda based upon fear and violence'. Now this was also a moment of uncomfortable truth for me: I would never before have claimed to be 'Hindu' in a public space. Yet it also brought home to me the fact that for so many Indians, it is difficult to understand or analyse the difference between Hinduism and Hindutva, and right-wing forces of course cash in on this confusion, while we do little to dispel it.

Being reactive vs. a positive vision

We are often branded, within India, as 'pseudo-secularists' – as many of you know, 'secularism' in India is taken to mean a profusion and celebration of multiple religions, rather than a rejection of all religions. While this term is meant to be a crude insult by the right-wingers, there must be some truth in it for the name to stick, for it to resonate with many of those who might not otherwise consider themselves to be politically right wing. Is it that we are too often reactive, that we are constantly fighting against positions, vocabularies, actions created by the right, rather than creating a positive vision ourselves? It is important to react in certain contexts, we cannot afford not to, but it is equally important that we are able to reach out with messages of hope, of joy, of celebration.

So how are we going wrong in the how, where, what and whom of advocacy? We know that the majority of Hindus are not necessarily right-wing: then what is our vision of pluralism for them? How can we explain this cogently, honestly, powerfully?

While making the distinction between Hindu fascism in India and fundamentalism,⁴ we cannot ignore Islamic or Christian fundamentalism in the country. For instance, while we were protesting the Iraq war, there was the killing of innocent people in Kashmir that not many of us protested against: was this responsible of us? Is there some truth in the accusation that we are ourselves somehow biased in the issues we raise and the people we raise them for? And most important, why are we not making the global to local connections that are intuitively so clear, but that we do not express publicly enough? It is true that our issues are many, our locations multiple, and our energies fragmented. Yet these too are critical reasons to be more powerful in our ways of strategising together, and building support for what we do.

Perhaps our new understanding of 'belonging' can begin with the notion of 'citizenship'. Yet we must analyse this in the context of fractured nation states (particularly

within the global context of fundamentalisms and fascisms,⁵ as well as the resistance to these that is equally and inspiringly global). Perhaps we need to move from the notion of 'citizenship' as being bounded by geography (even if imagined as such) to being about the integrity of personhood in all possible ways. How do we do this? How can we combine using international mechanisms like the International Criminal Court with struggling against local assaults upon citizenship?

In our country, we desperately need a new vision of 'being Indian' – a Muslim woman in Gujarat for instance, is unlikely to feel a sense of belonging, of truly being 'Indian' – through legal systems, perhaps we can gain her some justice of citizenship – but how do we recreate a sense of emotional belonging that she may never really have had, and has even less of, now?

Political participation is equally important – we know that in Gujarat, some panchayats who did not allow the mobs to enter their villages, were able to save the Muslim inhabitants from destruction and possible death. And yet others allowed them in, and we all know what happened next. What is the real meaning of political participation then? And what does it imply for those women who are part of these panchayats, who are filling positions of local government, being in public, political spaces, in numbers that have never before been contemplated?

Finally, we know that histories and stories are being rewritten, reconstructed, reinvented... Can we use myth and metaphor in even more powerful ways to state our case, to make our stories heard?

The Politics of Intimacy

Fundamentalism ultimately tries to govern/manipulate our most intimate relationships... whether it is lover, mother, maid, gardener, friend, neighbour, chai walla, isthri walla... finally creating a sense of community, which is both inclusive and naturally excluding. I would like to call these processes the 'politics of intimacy', a politics that we all play out but rarely reflect upon; we now need to look at these processes from the perspective of both honesty and strategy. Our most radical understanding needs to come from these intimate relationships and how they can be manipulated. Why is it that the most concrete base of the RSS *shakha*⁶ is the games that young boys play together, the creating of a sense of belonging and togetherness that can later be channelised into a sense of bigotry and xenophobia? How do we create a sense of community that is positive and powerful? From this we also need to understand how the personal is made into propoganda. For instance, in conversations among housewives, "Shiva is a bad tailor, find another tailor; Mohammed is a bad tailor, all Muslims are bad tailors" – this grotesque leap of imagination is often the way in which rumours are created, stereotypes are constructed and images are cast, sometimes permanently. It is these leaps of imagination that masquerade as truths that we are constantly battling against. So if these personal conversations telescope out, our strategies must also telescope back in to the people and communities we work with – both in terms of the issues we discuss as well as the ways in which we discuss them.

From personal to collective action, our only way to change attitudes is to understand levels of intimacy and to create those levels of trust and intimacy in our mission and our messages. As a friend recently told me, there were people associated with filming the public hearings on the (Cont'd)

"Fundamentalism ultimately tries to govern/manipulate our most intimate relationships."

Fundamentalisms of Progressive Movements: Reflections on Gujarat and Karomo— (Cont'd)

in Gujarat who were initially not just hostile to the process, but who turned out to consider themselves right-wing Hindus. Yet with hearing the terrible and unbelievable experiences that so many Muslims went through, day after day, these same people were moved enough to reject their right-wing politics. Were 'we' responsible for such a change? Not at all, it was a spontaneous expression of emotion created by an atmosphere of honest and powerful intimacy and pain, of each family, each individual telling his/her/their stories of what happened.

How can we create such an atmosphere in the work we do, for the people we reach out to, without losing an inherent honesty and integrity? And how can we combine our understanding of the pain involved in these struggles, with a vision that is healing and celebratory of pluralism?

I have grown up with the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political', but in strategising and mobilising against fundamentalisms, I increasingly feel that the political needs to be personal.

1. For some descriptions and analyses of the violence in Gujarat (2002), refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Gujarat_violence; <http://conconflicts.ssrc.org/gujarat/varshnev/>; <http://www.pucl.org/gujarat-index.htm>.

2. For some descriptions and writings around the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (1992), refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babri_Mosque; <http://www.pucl.org/reports/National/2001/buddhist.htm>.

3. G(ender), R(ace, religion, region), A(bility, age), C(aste, class, community), E(thnicity, expression), S(exuality) – a nomenclature given by Kumi Naidoo and expanded by others at the *Gender at Work* founding meeting in mid-2001.

4. Since some of us recognise that much of the rise of Hindu right-wing ideology and activity in this country is either state-engineered or supported; specifically in Gujarat, for instance, and clearly in other institutional ways across the country.

5. Within which I would include the 'market fundamentalisms' of international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as many international corporations, and the activities of the present government of the United States of America.



The logo for GEAR UP! features the word "GEAR" in a large, blue, stylized font with gear teeth on the letters. Below it, "UP!" is written in a smaller, blue, stylized font with a gear on the letter "P".

SIGN A GLOBAL PETITION TO REFORM THE UN FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

GEAR UP! Is a global campaign of over 300 organisations aimed at ensuring that the United Nations (UN) puts into place new gender equality architecture reforms (GEAR).

Its way past time, and urgently needed so that existing commitments to women and girls by all governments are fully and meaningfully implemented. Go to the GEAR website for more info and to sign the petition:

www.gear.collectivex.com

WAC Knowledge and Skill sharing, Regional

Restorative Justice and Conflict Transformation Skillbuilding Workshops in Pango Settlement, Port Vila and Pentecost Island, Vanuatu in 2007-8 . Partner: Oxfam Vanuatu

This work started in 2007 following a community request, supported by Oxfam Vanuatu. After the initial 2 week workshop in Pentecost and multiple success stories with young people and elders working together to bring more equitable resolutions to community conflicts, a follow-up/refresher course was requested by the Pentecost community by 2008.

WAC was again in Vanuatu twice in 2008 , in May/June with a follow-up workshop in Pentecost and 2 week programme in Pango settlement, Vila, to train new community mediators. The work uses participant stories to process conflict using restorative justice models. Many of the stories shared and processed were about gender-related issues including domestic violence, victims left out of traditional processes, forced marriage, age-related exclusions, etc. 25 participants at each workshop included young people and elders.

In October 2008 WAC also participated in an Antares Conference on Stress Management to use Playback Theatre with a regional audience and working in partnership with several actors from Wansmolbag, a long-established community arts NGO in Vanuatu. WAC continues to be available for further regional skills sharing subject to time and resources, and enter regional relationships after long consultation with local partners and communities, toward sustainable, community-lead projects. **(For more information or to arrange similar work, contact WAC directly)**

WAC Staff page

Seruwaia Saumatua, WAC actor and facilitator: Women can do anything!

What do you find hardest about working for WAC?

"When one of the actors does not turn up on a performance day...then someone else from the group has to try and replace the absent person, especially when he or she is not familiar with the lines."

What do you find easiest about working at WAC?

"Going to perform at places or to an audience where they already recognise the previous work we have done with them."

How does your life experience help you in your work?

"Family problems – men's attitudes. Also children's needs and inequality."

A woman's story from workshops that personally moved you?

"From a previous workshop with women from squatter settlements, a woman shared her story that she and her family had to move to Suva to look for better life opportunities because the landowners had taken back their land. She does domestic duties, her husband is a casual labourer and one of her daughters is so sickly. It means a lot to me. I know how she feels, this woman trying her best to give the best of things to her children...Mothers always try to fulfil everybody's needs in a family, even if they have to walk to the hospital...They do it for the sake of the family...Women can do anything."

How do you feel about conflict transformation and peace building work in Fiji?

"I really admire this work in our society and community especially trying to build the bridge between difference of races, age, and gender equality -through conflict transformation and peace building...I do still think that we haven't reached grassroots people (rural areas) enough with information about conflict transformation and peace building."



Seruwaia Rosi Saumatua is a WAC actor and facilitator. She started work at WAC in 1994, left in 1996 and returned in 2006. In this photo are Seruwaia and Jeet, performing on a school tour in Levuka.

SHAJENDRA JEET, WAC actor and facilitator: Glue sniffing ignored by too many adults...

"I'm Jeet, still young but have learnt quite a lot by joining this organisation. I am quite a shy person but you wouldn't think of that once you get to know me."

I started as a participant at one of the workshops organised by WAC in my community back in Ba, on the western side of Fiji. I was not schooling and was unemployed, so I was like a low self-esteem person. But the workshop was quite different and I learned to stand up for myself and also learned that everybody is special. What also stood out for me was the atmosphere created by the WAC team (safe). So when I heard about WAC looking for actors I did not hesitate but applied and here I am a much changed Jeet.

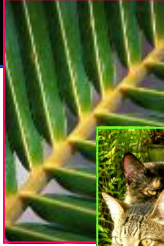
Let me tell you something, working at WAC is never boring. Just last week I was in Levuka, as usual we went on one of our many tours. The aims of this tour was to create awareness of the negative effects of solvent abuse, especially glue-sniffing.

Personally for me this is an eye-opener because glue sniffing has become a common threat not only to teenagers but to young children as young as 7 years old. Some of our community findings indicate that adults are still in denial that it is happening but children are very much aware of it. I was very sad to hear this but at the same time was feeling good, because through our drama and processes we managed to highlight some major effects of glue-sniffing and at the same time work with children on how and what to say and do when challenged or pressured into these situations. So at the end of the week I felt quite content with our work.

WAC is constantly trying to empower women and girls in every aspect. A good example is our work in the informal settlements. With the funds we have so far managed to practically help at least 70 women from at least 5 different informal settlements. (Editor note: This has already increased to 12 settlements, IWDA (Aust) are our funding partner in this work). So many women are making their dreams a reality, doing different courses of their preferred choice, so as they could earn a living. Meanwhile the courses are ongoing, and the number of women has increased.

WAC is a feminist organisation and we include men and boys so that we would also learn to look at the women from a different perspective i.e. equally. This was quite evident when we were doing one of our plays known as 'Take Over, Take Cover' (Editor: See front page). In this play women are in power and the men are treated like women are right now. For me, I was taught that women are less....but I have learned how to respect and value women and consider their opinions."





Peni Moore,

WAC Creative Director...

"Maybe it is something to do with 'Change' being part of our name, but it seems that WAC keep changing and evolving as an organisation, and as individuals.

We began in 1993 as an organisation working for women's rights in Fiji using theatre for education and awareness raising on key issues. Our work was in so many different communities that we began to get requests for community empowerment, poverty alleviation and development work. Also, as we trained ourselves in a variety of theatre processes we discovered more ways to assist people to develop their power, voice and action in non-threatening ways. This put us in places like prisons and juvenile centres. Then with the 2000 coup we saw the need for healing ourselves and others. Playback theatre was a wonderful tool that helped people in communities to tell stories and get honoured and respected for their lives.

However it traumatized us actors, and then the road of healing began. The Goddess has always been close to WAC and we seemed to get training from wonderful people just when we needed it. Before 2000 we received training in restorative mediation that was further enhanced thanks to ECREA's Peace program, then lead by Koila Costello-Olsson, providing us with trauma healing that had impacted greatly on us.

We then put everything we had learnt so far, into a process that enabled us to share knowledge and skills with young people and women in urban and rural areas to learn how to mediate restoratively and to practise conflict transformation and peacebuilding. There now is a growing network of young people who are EPIC mediators.

But as discussed in Anasuya's article it is not always easy working in certain areas, using creative methods, emphasising personal as well as group empowerment, and working in informal community spaces more than with the state. We get such satisfaction from being part of community change, seeing young people grow in confidence, and women from informal settlements taking on life, and making more decisions.

However there is something about artistic work and creativity that it is still misunderstood and disrespected. We are often expected to do work for free or too quickly, and there is a great underestimation of how much energy, training, responsibility and professionalism we expect of ourselves, every day.

Where work is transformative, it is never simple, short or based on a standard model. It is the result of years building trust, experimenting, careful listening and checking of facts and assumptions, and a willingness to change ourselves as well.

If we did not work this way, we might not act on sensitive issues. Or we might speak about it from a distance, proposing 'safe' strategies.

We might not work in prisons, with sex workers, with children who sniff glue, with women in informal settlements, with people with diverse gender and sexuality, in rural areas, or with police and military, or conservative women's groups, or religious groups. We might not work among males experiencing poverty, and accompany them to police stations, assisting them to get legal aid, or trying to protect them from police brutality.

It is one thing to speak at a distance, it is quite another to work directly among those experiencing pain, discrimination and violence.

As peacebuilders we are learning that we must work with both people we like and respect and also those who most oppose and oppress us. Often communities we work amongst are the ones most unpopular such as working with military and in prisons with violent offenders.

There was a quote that I read from an American who works with some of the most violent murderers in America and he had this to say, "The attempt to achieve and maintain justice or to undo or prevent injustice is the one and only universal cause of violence".

This is actually the core understanding in WAC work – Without justice by and for EVERYBODY, there can be no peace. But what is hardest, of course, is that some people's perspective of an injustice may be very different from our own, so we must remain open to discuss and find solutions. And yes, its hard.

But as Wole Soyinka the Nigerian playwright said, "Those who make peaceful change impossible, make violent change inevitable.""

"Those who make peaceful change impossible, make violent change inevitable."

Wole Soyinka,
Nigeria.



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Women's Action for Change (WAC) was

founded in 1993 by a group of local feminist women who identified a need for more community-based, participatory work on gender equality issues for diverse women in Fiji.

The dream of this group was to create a sustainable community-based organisation using a wide variety of theatre and arts-based learning methods, working toward full gender equality and social justice for all.

We believe that work to envision and create a gender equal future necessarily includes conflict transformation, active nonviolence and peacebuilding, and always an engagement with the personal as political.

16 years on, WAC works in 12 provinces around Fiji (with limited regional and international work), using participative arts to connect with people in remote, rural and urban communities, and especially working among individuals and groups, including women and girls, experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination, marginalisation, violence and poverty.

"WAC is founded on the principle that, "All persons, hence women, should be treated equally regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or ability."

Our Mission, which we also call our dream, is "To create safe spaces where individuals and groups, particularly marginalised people, can gain strength and confidence to build a just society."

JOIN WAC FRIENDS

From mid 2009 WAC will have an active wider community network. 'WAC Friends' will be open to all who agree with the founding principle and mission (see above), whether you live in Fiji or abroad. Benefits will include regular e-newsletters, resource sharing, and invitations to special events and internal workshops if you're in Fiji. If you're interested, please email Sharon at wac@connect.com.fj. More information in the July edition of this newsletter!

WAC Consultancies—May to Aug 2009

If you would like to organise a participative information-sharing, training session or workshop for your organisation on a wide range of human rights, gender equality, community development, community arts, youth empowerment, children and safety, environmental and peacebuilding issues, please contact WAC (See above for contact details).

WAC work with diverse groups, institutions and communities, including facilitation in Hindi and Fijian as well as English (and can arrange for other translations).

WAC use a wide range of arts based and participative methodologies. These include various forms of community theatre, over 100 workshop processes and games (and others that can be developed with you for specific needs), and small group work.

Other processes include Playback and Forum theatre sessions, songwriting, playwriting, visual arts and mural creation, street theatre, lectures, presentations and more, and most projects include multiple methods. Levels of recording and M&E adjusted to need.

We have very limited core and untied funds, so we use a negotiable sliding scale of fees for organisational consultancies, in support of unfunded and new areas of work.

Note: WAC donor-funded projects are always provided free-of-charge to schools, communities and high-need groups.

