

Inter-generational perspectives on the importance of Pacific women leading

By Sharon Bhagwan Rolls, Regional Manager, Shifting the Power Coalition

Young feminist Carolyn Kitione and I had an opportunity to represent the Shifting the Power Coalition at the opening of Research for Development Impact Network, 2021 Conference, focusing on "Pathways Through Disruption." We outlined inter-generational perspectives on the importance of Pacific women leading and development actors listening. It was a collective call for a more representative, intersectional and inclusive political space.

The Shifting the Power Coalition (StPC) was formed in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam (2015) in Vanuatu and Cyclone Winston (2016) in Fiji. It is the only regional alliance focused on strengthening the collective power, influence and leadership of diverse Pacific women in responding to disasters and climate change.

As I often say "As Pacific feminists we are weaving our own mats, creating our spaces - It is time for the development sector to redesign the table" while Carolyn called for a system change:

"When we talk about supporting diverse young women and young people in leadership and decision-making, we're not asking you to throw money at us or invite us to apply for funding whose criteria is too narrow that it immediately disqualifies us from the pool. We're asking you to listen and understand what we're saying. We're telling you to work with us and respect that our lived realities have provided us too with the wisdom to create and innovate solutions that work for us. We're asking you to recognize the existing power dynamics - not only within the socio-cultural environment we must work and live in - but also within structures that donor-development-grantee relationships are modeled after."

"As young women leaders within the Shifting the Power coalition we have come to understand that our issues are similar no matter what country we're in: We lack access to proper healthcare services & CT services and protection; We face high rates of violence in a region with the lowest level of women's representation in leadership across all levels from community to national; Financial independence is often not afforded to those of us in rural and coastal communities because the burden of unpaid domestic work has fallen to us and it's been exacerbated by the pandemic; LGBT communities and women with disabilities are not present in conversations or decision-making that must reflect and benefit their needs. But just because we face similar issues does not mean we are the same. It is dangerous to assume the solutions that work for one will work for another.

That a development model that is fine tuned for one can be tuned for another. To lump us all into one big homogenous group is to disregard our individual experience as movement organizers, as diverse women with diverse needs and as leaders actively challenging the structures that do not welcome us. We're redesigning the table but we are also intentional with our invitation. We are creating a space that welcomes the diversity that is missing from existing spaces. As young Pacific women, we are telling you that when a system is not working for us, work with us to change it. Be an equal partner that recognizes the diversity and wealth of experience we bring to the table. Work with us to shift the power at all

levels: from the mat to the policy table."