



Women's collective creativity: playful and transgressive processes for building peace in Fiji.

A story from Women's Action for Change

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Abstract

This paper explores the arts as a means of re-claiming, sharing and strengthening women's storytelling, peace building and gender equality work in Fiji, through a case study of the work of the community organisation Women's Action for Change. It will describe various aspects of the provocatively named 'F word' theatre production, an innovative and participatory process of collective creativity and community empowerment. WAC's feminist peace building praxis places creative and process-centred work firmly at its centre, and honours the ongoing activism of women and girls in Fiji who are working creatively on social transformation, towards gender equality and social justice. This is a story of women purposefully and creatively making transgressions across social and cultural boundaries, claiming new spaces and possibilities for themselves and for Fiji, and playfully encouraging others to do the same.

Keywords:

arts, community theatre, creative process, education, feminism, Fiji, peace building, storytelling, transgression, WAC.



It is the artist's job, and it is the job of the arts in any society, to 'stir things up'—to express and to cause a healthy degree of dissatisfaction—to search in risky places for beauty and truth—and to be stubborn about insisting upon their revelation and relevance once they have been found. (Murrell 2003:80)

The process of coming together to create art provides a stimulating, non-threatening and equalising forum for friendship and dialogue, for hope and celebration. When participants experience the power of imagination, are given a safe space to voice their visions, and work collectively to bring these to fruition, there is a palpable change in their level of self respect and respect for others. They begin to understand their ability and responsibility to affect positive change in the world. These are the building blocks for peace. (Johnson & O'Connell 2008:301–02)

Re-imagining the constituents of peace

Peace is fundamentally relational, and dialogue involves 'knowing' oneself and others. To have a deep understanding of the shared suffering of a colonial past and unite over issues wider and deeper than 'race' has been something that many in power have actively worked against.

Discourses about the causes of conflict in Fiji since the first coup in 1987 have been dominated by ideas about causes of conflict being located in the incommensurable 'racial divide' between indigenous Fijian and Fiji-Indian communities. The preoccupation with race obscures the impacts of gender relationships. This dialogue also forgets, excludes and renders almost invisible generations of Rotumans, Solomon Islanders, Fiji-born Chinese, relocated Banabans and other I-Kiribati (living in Rabi and elsewhere) and Tuvaluans (living in Kioa and elsewhere) effectively removing them from national peace and conflict talk and peace-building strategies. This racial smokescreen also obscures the complex and intersecting issues of intra-ethnic conflict, economic inequalities and politicised power relationships in Fiji.

The idea that differences in 'race' are synonymous with conflict has been an easily accepted one, as this discourse plays on the fear of the 'other'. In a society where indigenous Fijians and Fiji-Indians often continue to live lives that are parallel rather than intertwined, and where the historical, sociopolitical and structural heritage of colonially prescribed separatism still persists, it is vital to acknowledge the interdependence of *all* Fiji's people.

The artist's job is to stay awake in the space between convictions and certainties. The truth in art exists in the tension between contrasting realities. You try to find shapes that embody current ambiguities and uncertainties. While resisting certainty, you try to be as lucid and exact as possible from the state of imbalance and uncertainty. You act from a direct experience of the environment. (Bogart 2007:3)

The use of the arts to communicate messages about peace and conflict is a culturally embedded practice deeply rooted within the performance of Pacific oral cultures (Sheehan 1998:4). Pacific performances are rarely compartmentalised; instead, they weave together aspects of dance, song, poetry and drama. Art forms tell stories creatively, involving both performers and audiences in a rich process of learning, utilising cognitive and emotional experiences and discoveries:

Indigenous Knowledge Systems in many societies in all continents establish how the arts have always been at the centre of humans' attempts to encounter, and possibly transform, relationships with other humans, their social structures, nature and the 'world beyond'. (Ayindo 2008:186)

Fijian *meke* is a combination of poetry, dance, music and song. Within indigenous Fijian culture *meke* is used to share stories and to commemorate important people and events. The *daunivucu* 'composes' *meke*; acting as a channel between the human and the spirit worlds, he receives *meke* from the ancestors and teaches them to the community (Kubuabola, Seniloli & Vatuwaqa 1978:16). Thus gods communicate with the people; educating, commenting on power and leadership, on social life and structures, speaking about times of war, offering guidance and recommending courses of action to maintain peace in communities (Kaisau 1978:29). In contemporary Fiji there are strong tensions between pre-Christian and evangelical Christian traditions and beliefs, which increasingly function to silence, relegate and demonise many forms of indigenous performance.

Many of the indentured labourers brought to Fiji from India to work on sugar cane plantations during British colonial rule were illiterate. Even for those able to read, access to books and religious texts was limited. The oral performance of culture has therefore been crucial to the maintenance and transmission of Fiji-Indian culture through the brutal and disassociating period of indenture (R. Prasad 2004:47). The oral transmission of scriptures and stories formed the basis for religious and cultural life amongst Indians in Fiji. Songs were an important way of recording histories and communicating messages, they were used as lamentations and as forms of protest (R. Prasad 2004; U. Prasad 2005). The Fiji-Indian community nurtured a vibrant culture of theatrical performance used to unite and to educate the community (R. Prasad 2004).

Within drama-based arts approaches, people actively experience other perspectives and points of view. Walking in someone else's shoes, participants are simultaneously self and other, real and imaginary, serious and playful. In the performance space, hierarchies and boundaries are temporarily blurred, thus transforming space and time (Māhina 2004).

Drama and performance-based tools for community development and peace building are increasingly popular amongst civil society organisations in Fiji.¹ The arts are recognised as powerful tools for resistance, engagement, participation, empathy, resilience, transgression and transformation. People use drama to try out different possibilities and ways of being in the world, at a safe and playful distance from 'reality', but with a frame of reference that speaks to their everyday lives (Liebmann 1996:2). Issues are voiced, enacted and *played* with in a space that reduces risks for individuals whose voices may often be silenced due to their gender, status, ability, seniority or genealogical relationships.

Women's storytelling forms a counter-discourse (Tyson 2003:20). You can tell a lot about a person's power in society by considering how many people usually listen to them tell their stories. We can empower people by providing spaces where they take up the power to tell their own stories. This power is really given through our respectful listening (Dinnen, Jowitt & Newton-Cain 2003:36).

WAC's Dream – safe spaces for community expression and development

The civil society organisation Women's Action for Change (WAC) was founded in Suva in 1993 with the aim of using drama for community education and the empowerment and mobilisation of women. WAC is a feminist organisation that uses drama for research, education and dialogue.² Over the past 17 years of working with communities across Fiji, WAC has developed and adapted processes for working creatively and holistically with diverse people, with a special focus on enabling marginalised women to share their stories safely. WAC supports women to explore the commonalities in their gendered social and cultural experiences, and to create spaces in which the experiences of women and girls are valued, privileged and respected. Theatre as a pedagogy links the often divided worlds of theory and practice (Gallagher & Booth 2003:4). It is a means of establishing community engagement, dialogue *and* action (Paulin 2006:1).

WAC's 'dream' is to work across communities in Fiji to 'create safe spaces where individuals and groups, particularly marginalised people, can gain strength and confidence to build a just society' (Nabulivou & Moore 2008:3). WAC works to re-claim the importance of women's experiences and perspectives. WAC uses theatre to acknowledge, remember, record and share the stories of women and girls and stories about gender-based violence. Implicit in WAC's work is the act of change and transformation, working consistently towards gender equality.

Feminist approaches to working with communities

WAC's work to increase equality, peace and justice for women and girls is continuous. Peace work in communities is not a reactionary response to conflict; rather, it is activism that is both consistent and ongoing:

Relocating peacebuilding within a context of a framework of nonviolent change shifts the current emphasis away from post-conflict practice to a vision of peacebuilding as the latest phase in an ongoing struggle to transform the structural dimension of oppression and exploitation. (Spence & McLeod 2002:63)

As a feminist collective, WAC increases awareness of the links between the personal experiences of women and the wider sociopolitical context in Fiji, looking to find plausible and meaningful pathways for engagement with women's movements regionally and globally. The personal is always political. Through safe, creative and playful spaces in which women and girls can network and share stories, they begin to explore for themselves the links between their individual experiences and a shared experience of oppression, transgression and transformation. 'What each of us does might not seem like much, because in important ways it isn't, but when many people do this work together, they can form a critical mass that is anything but insignificant' (Johnson 2008:550).

WAC's work is a pragmatic call for the importance of the local; for supporting meaningful, long-term connections and relationships between people. Peace begins in small places—close to home, in families, villages, churches, temples and workplaces.

WAC supports peace through the slow and careful building of women's networks over time, including the inevitable challenges and conflicts inherent in such spaces of change. 'Peace building requires a vision of relationship' (Lederach 2005:35). Rakuita argues that Fiji needs to adopt an

enlarged concept of kinship relationships—*mataveivakani*—extending our notions of belongingness to be inclusive of all of Fiji people (2007:80).

Peace work is also about *doing*. Action for change has always been a significant part of the philosophy and praxis of WAC. Peace is about creating new conversations, exchanges and understandings between people. These require intimate, face-to-face participation (Teaiwa 2001:343). Building a wider culture of peace means strengthening peaceful actions and nonviolence locally (Azar, Goslin & Okado 2009:319). In an ever shifting and fluid political and legal landscape, building peace locally is a practical strategy, steady in a sea of change, yet flexible and ready for the next wave.

In coming together to share stories, women make linkages interpersonally, conceptually and practically. A collective consciousness begins to develop and grow. The use of theatre and storytelling is a conscious choice. The form and process is integral to the outcomes for communities and allows the entire creative process to be 'powerfully portrayed' (Ife & Tesoriero 2006:177) and shared in an engaging and non-threatening form. Drama provides a 'unique interactive space for creative brainstorming and dialogue in which parties can consider transformation around the scenario of someone else's conflict' (Arai 2009:204). In this 'safe' drama space we can play with ideas and possibilities, question norms, situations and conflicts, and imagine new possibilities for a more peaceful future.



Women from informal settlement communities using drama to explore women's roles and relationships in Fiji.

Peace building, gender and patriarchy in Fiji

We often presume a common understanding of what peace means. Perhaps that peace is justice or equality for all; but in a highly patriarchal and homophobic culture, who is it that defines eligibility for membership in an imagined community of peace? And who does not access their full rights

as members of the community? How can we enlarge our 'boundaries of compassion' (Clements 2009) to recognise and fully include as members in our cultures of peace those whose stories are not usually valued or heard? As activists and community members we need to be conscious of whether we are working towards a more compassionate version of what we have now, or whether we are 'boundary dwellers' (Daly 1973) working on the edges in a way that is politically transgressive and transformative.

Fiji remains strongly hierarchical and patriarchal despite decades of feminist activists working to push, extend and step over the boundaries. Stereotypical gender roles significantly restrict the freedoms of both men *and* women. These are supported by interpretations of cultural and religious norms and values perpetuating rigid, polarised attitudes towards gender roles. In hegemonic views of society, elders and senior men continue to make the majority of decisions in both formal and informal spheres. Women's role is to accept and to implement these directives (CEDAW Report 2008:35). WAC believes working towards full equality for women and girls must necessarily involve men and boys. Operating within a highly gender segregated societal context, WAC nurtures strong men who are committed to feminist principles, and who openly share their own learning journey towards gender equality with others.

One in three women in the world suffers violence simply because of being female. Globally, women have also been significant main agents of change in their communities (Jacobs 2003:6) and instrumental in the creation of new understandings and more equal conditions for themselves and their families. In Fiji, organisations such as the Soqosoqo Vakamarama i-Taukei, the Pan Pacific South East Asian Women's Association (PPSEAWA), National Council of Women, Catholic Women's League, Stri Sewa Sabha, Young Women's Christian Association, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, FemLink Pacific and WAC have been the public, vocal voices of such change (George 2006).

WAC recognises that many stories and perspectives of women and girls in Fiji are still marginalised. Although Fiji ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995, women and girls continue to have limited access to decision-making and participation in the society. 'Gender equality and justice for all . . . is far from being achieved' (Nabulivou & Moore 2008). This recognition is at the heart of the 'F word' process, in which women gather together to share, record and publicly perform true stories of gender-based violence. The 'F word' process and performance recognises the need to engage women continually in creative processes of dreaming and becoming.

Transgressive practices seek to challenge and to transform rigid, stereotypical gender roles, acknowledging and imagining possibilities beyond the system that we currently have and the possibility of a life outside of those boundaries. Transgressive acts involve imagining other realities (Bernal et al. 2006:24). The act of *re-image-ing* society is one that involves great risk, creativity and vulnerability. Transgression involves both looking directly into everyday conflicts that are a known part of our realities in the world, and then taking tentative courageous steps into the unknown, time and again, with the conviction that other more peaceful realities are possible (Lederach 2005:169).

Women in Fiji experience, mediate and assert their identities, bodies and places, within, through and around many male dominated spaces and relationships. Gendered relationships are often so highly codified that the inherent fluidity of relationships and the changing, creative nature of



individual and group identity construction, social processes and structures is downplayed or near-forgotten. Transgressive philosophies and practices instead affirm the idea that there is always a space for diversity and fluidity; contrasting with still-present colonial and neocolonial patriarchal dialogues, which prioritise conservation, preservation and protection of so called traditional beliefs and practices.

British colonial structures patronised and thought to 'protect' indigenous Fijian culture through processes of writing, codifying and institutionalising economic, social and political practices that they regarded as being both at risk and in a state of rapid decline. Preserving cultural practices would prevent the otherwise inevitable demise of 'Fijian culture' (Lal 1992). The idea, which is embedded within these colonial and neocolonial discourses, is that the system that we currently have is inherently cohesive and stable. Such perspectives struggle to accommodate inherent fluidities and flexibilities of sociocultural practices, and find it difficult to embrace uncovered and emergent sociocultural, gender and other identities. Transgressive practitioners, in contrast, work hopefully and imaginatively in the midst of social diversity and change; taking strength from the thought that current sociocultural worlds are constructed and contingent, never inevitable.

Public spaces for women's voices

Material deemed to be 'private' or 'tabu' is always connected to the historical, political and social conditions that women face. Certain voices and stories are relegated to the realm of the private as part of marginalisation, stigmatisation and the actual or perceived threat of psychological and physical violence. The 'F word' theatre production process began in 2009. It uses the simple, radical and subversive idea of placing Fiji women's stories at the centre of public performances, where it is possible to speak loudly, proudly and strategically about issues of gender inequality, violence, survival, resilience and transgression in their lives.

The diversity of stories depicted in the 'F word' play demonstrates a refusal to be silent or silenced around issues such as domestic violence, rape and women's diverse gender identities. It is a conscious break with communal and individual silences about the impacts of gender-based violence on women, silences that are often self-imposed as much as coercive.

Risks and possibilities are inherent within transgressive performances. They have the potential to challenge and reveal stereotypes and boundaries that are placed around women. Such performances remind us of our own social constructions, thus affirming the possibility of choosing and creating other pathways (Johnson 2008:551). Risks are inherent, many women face further marginalisation and isolation in their communities as a consequence of their involvement and activism (Lengel 2005:9); telling your story in public is thus a radical and courageous act.

This is especially so in small Island community spaces, where the consequences of stepping outside normative gender roles often include physical, sexual and psychological violence, segregation, and ostracisation from family and peer groups.



Collective Creation—the 'F word' process



Creating mimes to show solidarity with other women at an 'F word' storytelling workshop.

Within communal theatre the process is *at least* as important as the final outcome or product (Mika 2002:237). The conceptualisation of the 'F word' really began in 2005, as a consequence of WAC's work with young women and their mothers around suicide prevention. Women talked about their disempowerment and lack of agency in their homes, and WAC identified the need to work on the structural causes of gender-based violence, a symptom of which is suicide. This involves examining notions of family, identity, belonging and self-worth (*Talanoa* with Noeline Nabulivou, 16 July 2010).

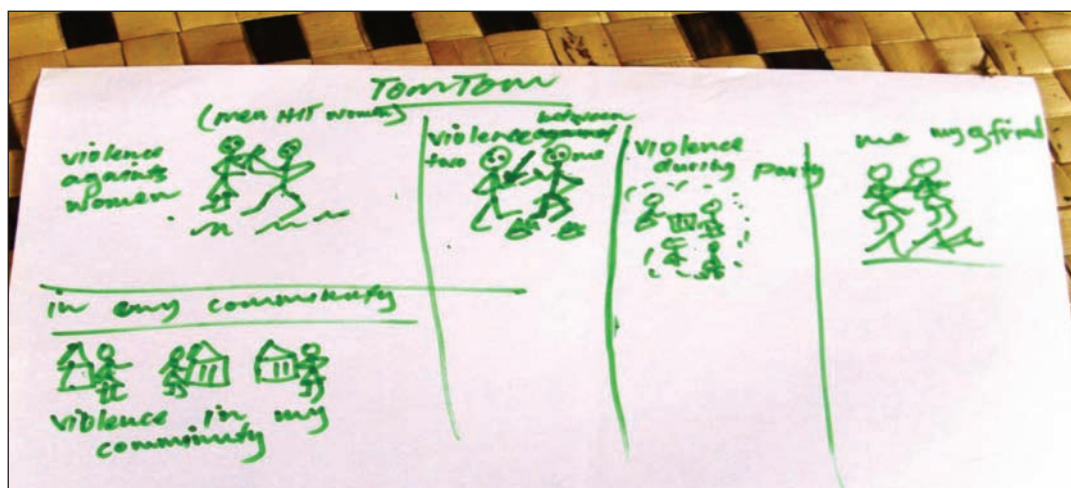
The 'F word' has many meanings, amongst them female, feminist, family and free. The family, which we imagine to be a loving and safe place of kinship, can actually be an 'F word' of oppression and violence for many women and girls, transgender people, lesbian women and gay men. It also deliberately plays with the idea that feminism is seen as a subversive word, akin to the word *F****, that being female in Fiji can be considered enough of a reason for others to harm and oppress, and that feminism and transgressive feminist discourses are often derogated as 'dirty' words or outright silenced.

Diversity is at the heart of the 'F word' production. Rather than placing women's experience into 'monolithic categories of *women*' and forgetting the specificities of place, culture (Hollidge & Tompkins 2000:6) and the complexities of intersectional identities, it weaves together a diverse performance of true stories shared by women in Fiji. Women shared stories and strategies on violence, change and peace building as workshop participants using a range of theatrical forms. They took on multiple roles as storytellers, songwriters, musicians, actors and editors.

The 'F word' process began with a total of 72 women coming together and sharing space, time and stories in three different workshops. Consent was gained from women for their stories to be developed creatively and woven together. Women then worked with WAC Theatre Unlimited to

transform their stories into scripts, songs, poems, mimes and choruses in order to communicate them creatively to audiences. Using these stories, forms and ideas, Peni Moore, the Creative Director of WAC, went on to write the final script for the 'F word'.

In all three workshops women began by exploring, through the arts, conceptions of what constitutes family, how their own families fit or differ from that stereotype, and the forms of discrimination that this can generate within communities. Women went on to explore different forms of violence and how trauma is held within the mind and body.



F word workshop participants used the arts to explore and analyse different forms of violence.

Intersectional identities of women and girls invited in these workshops included: women and girls living in situations of poverty, single female heads of households, women community leaders, volunteers, survivors of gender-based violence of many kinds, lesbian and bisexual women, mental health survivors, carers, ethnic minority women, indigenous Fijian and Rotuman women, *kei loma* (Fijians of mixed ethnic descent), market stall and microenterprise owners, partners and wives of prisoners and ex-prisoners, single mothers, divorcees, elders, young women and girls.

In the first workshop, women from 15 informal settlement communities in the Suva–Nausori corridor spoke about the impacts that poverty and vulnerable relationships visit upon them and their families, reminding WAC of the Gandhian truism that poverty is the worst kind of violence.

In the second workshop, young women talked about the harm inherent in the overprotective attitudes of their families and communities. This has widespread implications for their ability to choose and to explore, and for their freedom of movement and association. During the workshop they shared practical strategies and explored possibilities for transforming restrictive and violent family relationships.

The third workshop invited women sex workers and also women with non-heteronormative sexual orientation. They told stories about the multiple levels of stigma and risk experienced in Fiji's society, as well as the freeing qualities of living a life outside of recognised gender roles. They shared stories about family members, partners, interactions with police and other actors of the state.

Playing with possibilities

Through play the WAC theatre company enacts an embodied respect and care for the needs of the whole person; caring for their physical, spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Play, stretching, breathing and massage are a part of all WAC workshops, rehearsals, performances and debriefing. This work on and with the body has a healing and relaxing function for women. When the storytelling is on themes that are very emotional, personal and intense—such as gender-based violence and engendering change—play and bodywork are essential parts of the *process* and help to keep participants safe.



Women looking after one another. A massage chain at WAC's 'F word' workshop with women from informal settlement communities.

WAC teaches and enables different forms of playfulness. Through play people recognise and develop their ability to improvise, to act spontaneously and imaginatively in response to the challenges of everyday life (Guiffre 2009:xii). Trust games build relationships, communication skills and confidence, in the process, breaking down the barriers formed by fear, nervousness, mistrust and unfamiliarity.

Each WAC workshop and theatre company rehearsal begins with simple Yoga exercises. During this opening of breath, stretches and smiles, women come together in shared action and activity. Interacting and co-operating non-verbally, they form a collective from the start. For many women these practices are a marker of safety, indicating that this is now a women's space to laugh, cry, rage and strategise together. Community actors spoke about how, in times of darkness or difficulty, fun and laughter is a big part of how the company offers emotional support to one another. 'There must be a time for cavorting. Laughter works its own kind of miracles and brings the spirit to a new place. It may even open a new door into the future' (Boulding 2002:303).

Playful spaces mark in and on the individual body a temporary stoppage to the multiple, layered roles held outside the workshop space. WAC notices that the energy in the room shifts in most of their workshops. In the beginning groups often have a frenetic quality as women let loose their



emotions and begin to untie knots in tired, hardworking minds and bodies. The deepened connection between body and mind can also bring forth hidden fear and anger as the workshop progresses. The process is expressly designed to maximise fun and release stress, whilst also honouring, affirming and challenging the rich knowledge of the participants.

Discursive circle processes are part of workshops and everyday theatre praxis at WAC. In the circles people remember, reflect and evaluate their own practice and participation. Circle processes have a ritual quality. WAC uses a talking stick, which is passed around to each person in the circle, whether or not they choose to speak. This happens with staff, volunteers and in community workshops. The talking stick symbolises each participant's value and voice, symbolically protecting their space to speak and to be listened to.

One of the 'F word' participants, TomTom, said that through being with the theatre company she felt that she had 'learnt how to talk' and that she was also using this newly found sense of voice to express herself and to manage conflict peacefully in her wider relationships. TomTom's feeling of finding her voice was linked to being fully accepted *as she is* within the collective, and being given the time, space and opportunity to be heard (*Talanoa* with TomTom Tuisawau, 13 April 2010).

The 'F word'—the process of knowledge creation, consent, reciprocity and relationality

WAC works on a principle of continuous informed consent and partnership with communities. Consent is fundamentally relational. 'Consent is not so much given for a project or a specific set of questions, but for a person, for their credibility' (Smith 1999:136). Interrelatedness, ongoing relationships and everyday interactions necessitate continual accountability in the Pacific context. Albert Wendt describes the *Va* as '*the space between the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates*' (Wendt, cited in Anae 2007:18). Such relational space can restrict and exclude as well as include; it is constantly changing and in flux.

Women and girls from the 'F word' workshops gathered to watch the first 'draft production' in Suva. They were asked to talk about how they felt after watching the play, and whether their experiences and stories were adequately represented. Women offered changes, suggestions and feedback, which were integrated before the production was finalised and began to tour.

The original version did not include any specific portrayal of family violence and this scene was written into the final version. It is interesting that this scene was not part of the initial choice of storylines. Almost all participants, after seeing the draft play, felt this addition was essential. This is one example of the ongoing reflective, critical analysis that is a necessary part of grounded and creative process. It demonstrates the need for gender and peace building groups to be consultative, responsive, flexible and open to change.

One WAC community actor watched the portrayal of domestic violence with tears in her eyes. She described the importance of showing real life experiences through drama, even the hardest parts, so that people who watch the performance might then feel less alone and more able to talk about their own experiences of domestic violence (*Talanoa* with TomTom Tuisawau, 13 April 2010).



Community Actors – Sharing Herstories



Community Actors TomTom Tuisawan (left) and Kini Tinai (with Litiana Verenika Suluka, WAC) portraying a woman's story of life on the streets and stealing to survive after being rejected by her family for not conforming to gender stereotypes.

Involving women in developing and portraying their own stories and experiences assumes that they are the experts, and have skills and resources that can authentically reach out to other women, girls and communities. The 'F word' is social practice that is 'deeply embedded in the experiences of people who live the stories it dramatises and whose community has created the conditions through which the stories have emerged' (Green 2006:475).

Participants across the 'F word' workshops were asked how they wanted to become part of the wider performance process. Four women who had been part of the initial storytelling workshops chose to join the WAC theatre company for the 'F word' performances. These women had little or no acting background. They were supported by WAC Theatre Unlimited throughout the process of rehearsing and touring. They learnt about communication, theatre games processes and techniques, and about themselves.

Pasepa is a single mother of three children living in a settlement in Suva and a participant in one of the 'F word' workshops. Pasepa remembered that the stories of violence and abuse shared by women living in her community were 'heavy' and difficult to listen to. At the beginning of the workshop Pasepa's understanding of violence was that it was about physical abuse. As the workshop went on and discussions developed, Pasepa's conception of violence deepened and expanded. She began to realise that verbal and emotional abuse were also forms of violence and to link this to her own experience (Talanoa with Pasepa Toga, 15 April 2010).



Since performing the 'F word', one woman has participated in research focusing on remembering the impacts of performances with audiences around Viti Levu. Other 'F word' actors and participants have become part of the WAC management collective, and have either taken on or enhanced their leadership roles in women's groups in their communities.

As performers, actors do not just communicate messages through their bodies; they also discover and re-discover the messages inherent in the stories through acting (Schirch 2005:3). The community actors had personal experience of many aspects of the violence within the stories they helped to portray in the 'F word' production. The discursive and creative process that WAC Theatre Unlimited has developed is very important in keeping the women emotionally and psychologically safe.

Peni Moore, the Creative Director of WAC, spoke about being acutely aware of the potential for re-traumatisation for women who were embodying characters experiencing violence. Techniques include de-role-ing; de-briefing as a group and for individuals as needed; eating together and getting plenty of sleep whilst on tour; noticing and caring for people's physical health and wellbeing and responding to feelings of pain or *dis-ease*; and reflective *Talanoa* on completion of the project were used to minimise this risk (*Talanoa* with Peni Moore, 9th July 2010).

Breaking the silences—a catalyst for dialogue and action

The critical importance of addressing gender-based violence in Fiji's families was echoed in WAC evaluations with teachers who had watched the 'F word'. Mrs Ram and Ms Singh teach at Nadi College. They shared the information that family violence is a significant and ongoing issue for many of their students, and talked about the importance of showing all the different forms of violence that are really being experienced by women and girls in Fiji today.

Mrs Ram described the impacts of the play for one of her students. After watching the 'F word', a student who was often missing from school and whose absences were 'persistent and unexplained' told Mrs Ram about similar situations of violence and conflict at home. Mrs Ram said that the play had allowed her student to see that she was not the only person going through these kinds of struggles. She felt that the performance was a direct catalyst for her student to begin to feel less isolated and seek support.

Mrs Ram then initiated meetings with the family of this student, helping to bridge the often disparate worlds of home and school. This courageous disclosure led to a renewed understanding of the family's circumstances and the needs of the child. Mrs Ram said that she has subsequently seen an increase in this student's attendance at school (*Talanoa* with Mrs Ram and Ms Singh, 21st April 2010). Evaluations across schools in Nadi and Lautoka showed that watching the play was a catalyst for further discussions between teachers and students, both informally and within the curriculum in subjects such as family life education and social science.

Affirming women's diverse gender identities and sexualities

'Sexuality baiting' is the practice of 'strategically using ideas or prejudices about women's sexuality to intimidate, humiliate and stifle the expression of women thus discouraging women's organizing, control and independence' (Rothschild 2005:42). Civil society organisations and community members working with people with diverse sexuality are often at risk of being subjected to sexuality baiting.



In the Fiji context women with non-conforming gender identities, including lesbian and bisexual women and women sex workers, experience multiple and intersecting levels of marginalisation, stigma and violence from both state and non-state actors. This is further compounded by a lack of appropriate policies and services.

The 'F word' performance proudly and openly shows lesbian relationships. This is very new to audiences in Fiji. People may have seen lesbian relationships represented in television and films from overseas, but to see an open representation by Fijian actors in the Fiji context is innovative and transgressive. Some audiences were so surprised that they found it hard to believe what they saw, explaining away lesbian relationships in the scenes by assuming that perhaps one of the female characters was 'playing' a man.

At one school in Nadi, Pasepa, one of the community actors, led a group of girls in a *Talanoa*³ reflecting on the 'F word'. Pasepa played a lesbian role in one scene in the performance. The young women began to talk about how they felt about the different relationships shown in the play, and around issues of sexuality and sexual identity. One young woman said that being a lesbian is totally unacceptable to her on religious grounds, and that her family has brought her up in this way. Another girl shared that her sister is a lesbian, and we should not be against people of different sexualities. This young woman explained that the family pressure on her sister after she came out was so intense that her sister had ended up leaving home.

Many peace practitioners in Fiji operate from within organisations that are either implicitly or explicitly faith-based. Fiji is facing a rapid rise in the presence of fundamentalist and evangelical forms of Christianity, many preaching openly homophobic interpretations of the bible in communities. This is a significant pressure, which makes issues of gender non-conformity and diverse sexuality seem 'untouchable'. Peace practitioners therefore steer clear of issues of violence against lesbians, gays and trans-people. For many peace builders, homophobic violence is not perceived to be a constituent part of wider peace building work, although the intersectionality of economic, political and social violence is referred to in many community national and regional spaces. 'Because the persecution of gays and lesbians is the linchpin of patriarchy, support the right of men and women to love whomever they choose' (Spade & Valentine 2008:555).

The women who are part of the 'F word' have demonstrated that they are willing, ready and capable of dealing with complex issues of gender, sexual identity and diversity. This refutes the often-repeated notion that the Pacific is not ready or willing to deal with such issues. The women and girls participating in the 'F word' expect their stories to be told fully and accurately, and they want to see a range of sisterhood stories portrayed on the stage.



Young women finding pathways for peace and justice: lessons from the chorus



The chorus—showing different forms of harassment and violence against young women, and exploring strategies and solutions

The *chorus* is a theatre form in which there is active dialogue between a conflict or problem, and a variety of possible strategies or solutions. These possibilities are tested out by the teller of the story, who is offered a range of choices, and encouraged to think through the consequences of these. The teller then decides what might work in their life and context. The chorus form emerged spontaneously within discussions between young women in the 'F word' workshop in Lautoka. After listening to each another's experiences, they began to present possibilities to one another, thinking about how to resolve conflict and how to stay safe.

'F word' audience evaluations have shown that within the diverse patchwork of stories woven together in the performance, young people did find stories that spoke to their lives and situations. For some children, seeing forms of violence and abuse that they were experiencing performed on the stage was a place from which to begin talking safely about their own experiences and seeking support.

Evaluations showed that the chorus was very significant for audiences. Adults and children alike remembered and valued the practical possibilities and strategies depicted for young women to keep themselves safe. 'Staying safe is a full-time occupation when you are a woman. You get it from family, you get it from friends, you even get it from fate, it's an F world all right!' (Moore 2009).

One of the characters in the chorus is a lecherous teacher who touches students inappropriately, abusing his position of power. At one school WAC re-visited, children talked about racial, verbal and physical abuse by their teachers. Watching the portrayals of different forms of violence onstage affirms that wider society also recognises these behaviours as wrong, and that perhaps they can be challenged.



Refocusing peace building—towards creative and process-centred praxis

Working towards full equality entails focused attention on gender. This is not a utopian fantasy, but a dedicated commitment to a clear, long-term vision, whether it is achieved in this lifetime or not.

Patriarchy is not a permanent state; it is a temporary state on the way to other temporary states. Systems are all in a continuing state of realignment and never go back to where they were . . . oppressive systems only appear stable because they control and limit our lives so much that our imaginations can't see beyond them. (Spade & Valentine 2008:549)

Peace building strategies need to be ongoing, flexible and creative, rather than conflict driven and reactive. WAC is committed to the idea that gender equality cannot occur without an active and long-term peace building approach. Strategies are grounded in work towards wider, wiser movements for change requiring intersectional, flexible, creative and gendered peace-building approaches. This includes methods that also address people's real needs in the short and medium term. These needs include boundary stretching and envisaging new possibilities; recognising, owning and celebrating moments of peace, achievement and innovation whenever they occur. 'It is up to us to keep noticing peacemaking whenever it happens, no matter how trivial the incident. One smile will do it. One hug. What exists is possible' (Boulding 2002:303).

There is a need to explore commonalities and convergences (Rakuita 2007) as well as honouring women's diversity. Rather than emphasising simplistic, polarising differences, we can consciously resist dichotomies, and gain a better understanding of our experiences as women across cultures, gender roles, poverty and life within a patriarchal society.

WAC has a strong history of working with women from informal settlement communities. This ever increasing multicultural and multiethnic population,⁴ who face high levels of poverty, crime, overcrowding, unemployment and insecure land tenure, can ill afford to be further marginalised and divided by simplistic notions of age, race, gender or heteronormativity. Women living in informal settlement communities are well aware of this (Women's Action for Change, 2008).

WAC builds creative relationships and allows women to play freely. Community actors, participants and WAC staff speak about the care, integrity and kindness extended to them within this fluid, interconnected collective. Strong senses of belonging and high levels of confidence are the result of being part of a strong and inclusive set of relationships.

WAC creates transgressive, risky spaces that are also safe enough to allow people to consider and question the boundaries and possibilities. Cloaked in play and metaphor, as well as taking conscious choices to reveal themselves as actors, Fiji women are 'storying' with purpose, playfully shaking the ground.

Creativity is not the periphery, a mere add on, or a tool. Creativity is at the centre of change and of how peace is built. Without a commitment to a flexible and creative process, products may be shiny on the outside, but will ultimately be hollow and unsustainable. Work that polarises product and process, relegating the processes of change to the periphery to be forgotten, misses a fundamental learning that WAC has glimpsed and embraced through practice-based learning. *The process is the product.*



In the process, learning is gentle and not coercive; people choose to take on and to live learnings about themselves and others in their own way. This piece of writing is to remember, to bring the fragments together (Hooks 1995:64) and to continue the journey. It hopes that WAC's glimpses might inform and inspire others. Arts-based approaches are not about end products: although many different points in time may be marked by products, processes and the relationships are not bounded. *Relationships with each other are creative processes* and these are enabled by arts-based approaches to building peace.

Notes

¹ Such organisations in Fiji include Ecumenical Centre for Research Education and Advocacy (ECREA), Transparency International Fiji, Foundation of the South Pacific International, Youth Champs for Mental Health (YC4MH), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding, and Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development (FRIEND).

² WAC's community theatre work weaves together a variety of participatory theatre forms, styles and influences to meet the diverse needs of communities within the Fiji context. These include the work of Augusto Boal – particularly *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* and *Forum Theatre* processes, and *Playback Theatre*—a healing form of improvised theatre first developed by Jonathan Fox in 1975. Other significant collaborations and influences upon WAC's current practice include: training in Playback Theatre by Won Smolbag Theatre Company from Vanuatu and by Bev Hosking, founder of the Wellington Playback Theatre Company from Aotearoa; training in Forum Theatre with the Irondale Theatre Company from Canada; training in Choice Theory delivered by the Australia Fiji Community Justice Programme and based on the work of Dr William Glasser; as well as training in Trauma Healing and Restorative Justice processes, provided by the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA) and the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding (PCP) in Fiji.

³ *Talanoa* is a word found in many Pacific languages. Its literal meaning appears to be something like 'talking about nothing' (*noa* equals nothing) along the lines of idle chit-chat or talking about nothing in particular. *Talanoa*, however, is purposeful talk although in *Talanoa* the pathway of the dialogue and the end of the conversation are not predetermined. *Talanoa* is context specific. It functions to strengthen relationships between people (Violeti 2003).

⁴ The Squatter Settlement Unit of the Ministry of Local Government, Housing, Squatter Settlement and Environment estimated that in 2004 10%—82,350 people—of Fiji's total population were living in informal settlement communities. This estimate is likely to be conservative (Barr 2007:5–6).



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