

Human Rights Education: A Tool for Social Change in the Pacific

Kathryn Choules*

USING THE EXPERIENCE of the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT)¹ in human rights education, this paper explores some of the challenges facing those championing human rights and social change in the Pacific. What this paper does not do is show the enormous breadth and depth of the work that RRRT has undertaken since its inception in 1995. It is not a detailed exploration of RRRT's human rights education program – an altogether more ambitious task than this paper can undertake. RRRT is the pre-eminent regional human rights organization in the Pacific. It was established to enhance the legal and social status of women in the Pacific. Since then it has broadened the scope of its work and it now works in all areas of human rights relevant to the region. This paper focuses on one of the programs undertaken by RRRT, the community paralegal training.

There are myriad challenges to establishing a human rights culture in the Pacific. For example, the Australian Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has highlighted as major human rights concerns gender discrimination and violence, human trafficking, restrictions on freedom of expression and association and profound poverty.² All of these issues and others are the focus of RRRT human rights education.

RRRT's Community Paralegal Training

The community paralegal training is located in the lower level of RRRT's three-tiered approach to human rights education. A three-tiered approach is seen to be most effective in generating change. At the lower level (micro), RRRT works with community and individuals "to strengthen the capacity of civil society and marginalised groups to advocate, assert, monitor and defend human rights and good governance – with special focus on the poor, women and children" (RRRT Strategic Plan, Objective 3). At the mid-level (meso) RRRT works with institutions such as the civil service "to strengthen the capacity of implementation-level agencies to promote and apply hu-

*Kathryn Choules, PhD, worked at the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT) from September 2009 to July 2010 on a placement through Australian Volunteers International.

man rights principles and good governance practices” (RRRT Strategic Plan, Objective 2). At the top level (macro) RRRT works with law and policy makers “to strengthen the capacity of policymakers to adopt and apply human rights principles and good governance practices” (RRRT Strategic Plan, Objective 1).³ Through this multi-layered approach RRRT seeks to develop capacity and engagement in human rights at all levels of society, thus developing demand for social change from below and response from above.

Participants in the community paralegal training come from a wide range of backgrounds. Although all their expenses related to the training are covered, they are expected to put the learning into practice without further remuneration as part of their existing work; from which they would have been selected to participate. This requires their commitment to human rights.⁴

For the first decade of its life, RRRT undertook the majority of its human rights education at the micro level. In the last five years, and especially since becoming part of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community in 2008, RRRT has strengthened its role at the meso and macro levels. A multi-level strategy is seen as important to embedding human rights change in the structures of Pacific societies.

The community paralegal training program has been delivered in eight Pacific island nations – Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga, Kiribati, Nauru and Samoa. Although there are distinct cultures in each of the countries there are also some similarities. The Melanesian countries of Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu, the Polynesian countries of Tonga, Samoa and Tuvalu and the Micronesian countries of Kiribati and Nauru all have strong cultural links with the land and seas that make up their territories. They are communal cultures in which the individual is seen in the function of the group rather than in terms of her or his own personal development. The vast majority of Pacific Islanders are practising Christians. An exception to this rule is Fiji which is multi-ethnic with significant numbers of Hindu and Muslim citizens.

Pacific Culture and Human Rights

There is strong identification by the people of the Pacific with their traditions and customs. Apart from the Polynesian countries, there is great cultural and linguistic diversity within the region. In most countries customary

law is preserved in the constitutions of many of these countries (e.g. Tuvalu and Samoa) and traditional authorities continue to exert significant power at least at the local level.

All countries in the Pacific have patriarchal cultures although this is manifested in different ways in different countries. This is an important factor given the approach to human rights education taken by RRRT. Some countries have matrilineal land inheritance and others patrilineal. Although certain women are accorded particular respect and rank in some Pacific countries (e.g. *Fahu* or oldest sister in Tonga), there is a generalized belief among Pacific Islanders that women are subordinate to men and that they have no role in public life. This is exemplified in comments from a church leader participating in a recent human rights training by RRRT to the effect that assertions as to the equality of women did not fit with his religious beliefs that woman was man's inferior and that it was the responsibility of a husband, as well as the privilege, to make decisions as the head of the family and to correct his wife where necessary. Such beliefs are part of the dominant norms.

The approach of RRRT has been to look at human rights with a strong gender analysis. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, RRRT started life as a women's rights program. Secondly, the most widespread injustice in the Pacific (or area of human rights abuse) is gender injustice.

Community Paralegal and Human Rights Education

Human rights education has been developing as a pedagogical approach in its own right in recent times, although it necessarily draws on other pedagogical areas such as social justice education, development education, global education, multicultural education, anti-racism education, critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. There are five areas of practice and research which have been identified in the field of human rights education.⁵ These are:

- teaching about and for human rights;
- education as a human right in itself;
- human rights in education;
- education and training of professionals confronted with human rights issues; and
- educational and social work aspects of the rights of the child.

RRRT works in areas of practice (a) and (d) above.

Claudia Lohrenscheit describes the overall goals of human rights education as raising consciousness and promoting an active respect for human rights as formulated in the UDHR.⁶ These goals are implicit goals in every training undertaken by RRRT. The two aspects of human rights education, namely learning about and learning for human rights,⁷ are an integral part of all training. Under the first dimension—learning about human rights—RRRT training covers a range of content depending on the particular participant group. Commonly covered are:

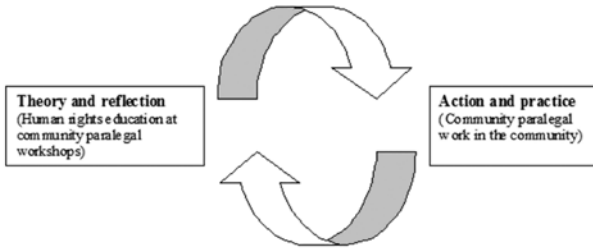
- what human rights are
- history and relevance of human rights
- basic human rights principles (such as equality, discrimination and affirmative action)
- core human rights instruments
- gender
- culture and human rights
- the United Nations
- domestic and international human rights law
- governance and democracy.

In all RRRT training, this content is integrated, to different degrees, with the second dimension of human rights education. Under the second dimension—learning for human rights—RRRT training explores how to turn the knowledge into action. Commonly covered are:

- strategies for change
- action planning
- monitoring and evaluation.

The community paralegal training program took this aspect of human rights education a step further by including as a final training module a two-week workshop entitled DART or Developing Advocates for Rights Training. DART sought to provide the community paralegal participants with skills to assess, plan and implement training. It also covered skills on advocacy and how to mobilize groups to seek structural change.

This content shows an emphasis on empowerment, participation in community life, social change in society, solidarity and multiplying the ef-



fect of the training. Thus RRRT deliberately develops a pedagogy which balances action (practice) with reflection (theory). See graph.

In selecting participants for the community paralegal training program, RRRT has targeted people already actively involved in community, civil service, church or other roles. The human rights education is thus designed to provide them with additional and targeted human rights knowledge and skills to strengthen their existing work.

Some Features of the Community Paralegal Training

An important aspect of the community paralegal training program has been its ongoing nature. The initial training of six, one-week modules is paced over 18–24 months. Thus the participants are able to develop strong relationships with each other. These informal networks are important to sustain people working in human rights, an area which receives little social or political support.

One of the requirements of the community paralegal program is that the participants provide on an ongoing basis documented narratives of the human rights work that they have undertaken and the change that has resulted. These narratives are known as “impacts”— statements of the impact of their work. The requirement to provide “impacts,” is one way of emphasizing to the community paralegals⁸ the need for action. The sharing of impact stories at successive workshops motivates other community paralegals and provides them positive examples of the ways that people like them can make a difference.

The community paralegal training strengthens participants’ analytical ability. Teaching the participants to analyze their “impacts” is part of this. The program includes sessions on strategies for change and the need for social change to occur at three levels – micro, meso and macro. Participants

are helped to analyze their “impacts” in these terms. They also analyze their action in terms of human rights instruments, the vulnerable groups involved and the allies involved.

The success of a program such as the community paralegal training can be seen in part from the social change results that flow from the actions of the participants in the human rights education processes. Some examples are provided further below.

Challenges to Human Rights Workers in the Pacific

It is worth pausing in this discussion of the community paralegal training program to note the antipathy to human rights in the Pacific. There is little knowledge of human rights in the Pacific and the awareness that people have of human rights is often the result of misinformation. As a result, there is strong outright and unqualified rejection of human rights. Participants in human rights education start with varying degrees of knowledge, much of it incorrect. Recent examples of the strength of rejection of human rights, and in particular women’s rights, come from Tonga and Vanuatu. In 2007 the long struggle by women’s organizations in Tonga for the government to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) appeared to have been successful as the government and the people’s representatives in the legislature agreed to ratification.⁹ However, as a result of a campaign against ratification in which churches and other traditional voices played a strong part, the decision to ratify was revoked in 2009 and Tonga remains one of seven countries who are not a party to CEDAW. It is important to recognize here the positive role of the churches in Tonga in promoting greater civil and political rights; it is primarily in the area of women’s rights that churches often find it more difficult to support human rights.

Of the seven countries who are not a party to CEDAW, three are in the Pacific. A similar negative campaign to that described above in Tonga occurred in Vanuatu in relation to the long debated Family Protection Bill. The new legislation (finally passed in 2008) was designed to respond to high levels of violence against women and children and protect their human rights to safety and security. The campaign against the passing of the legislation was led in part by church leaders and even the President was involved in the Bill being challenged as unconstitutional. The campaigns in both coun-

tries argued that the protection of women's human rights via CEDAW or the Family Protection Bill was contrary to both Pacific culture and Christianity. Women are seen as subservient to men and any talk of equality of women is rejected by some men and traditional forms of power to be a challenge to culture and religion.

Support to Community Paralegals

Many of the men and women who participate in RRRRT training go on to become human rights workers, trainers and activists. It is common for women particularly, who are engaged in human rights work and education across the region, to be branded as 'family breakers' and 'culture breakers.' This can be very difficult for the women, who rather than breaking culture or family see their work as contributing to a strengthening of both. One aspect of RRRRT's approach that helps women deal with the pressure is that it deliberately works through ongoing processes and not 'one-off' human rights trainings. Through this, strong networks are built within the groups of community paralegals. This is coupled with the employment by RRRRT of Country Focal Officers (CFO) in several countries namely, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, Solomon Islands and Tonga.¹⁰ The CFO is responsible for providing support to the community paralegals.¹¹ In addition, because of the role that RRRRT plays as a key focal point for much of the human rights work that goes on in the South Pacific it is able to link community paralegals into other initiatives that occur in the region. Thus direct and indirect support is provided to community paralegals undertaking work that can cause backlash from powerful groups.

In such a context, RRRRT has the advantage of being a regional organization which employs Pacific Islanders to facilitate human rights education. This is very significant given the existing resistance to human rights. It has been an easy claim for those who advocate against human rights-based social change to argue that human rights is a foreign concept being imposed by foreign forces. RRRRT shows the face of human rights as a universal concept, advocated for by Pacific Islanders.

Due to the negative and quite emotional response that has been evoked by the use of the term "human rights" in the Pacific, it was a strategic decision by RRRRT when the community paralegal program commenced, not to call the program a human rights program. This facilitated participants to

work with their communities, organizations and beyond without having to carry the burden of the term. It is a positive sign of the changing situation in the Pacific that with the program being initiated now, it is likely that the title “community paralegal” would be replaced by “human rights advocate” or similar title.

Impact of Community Paralegal Work

Having noted the entrenched resistance to human rights, and women’s rights in particular, it is significant that many of the community paralegals who have been instrumental in achieving social change have been women. They do this at different levels and attending to different human rights.

An example from Tonga shows how some women community paralegals put into practice their human rights learning. The community paralegal in Tonga works within existing cultural processes with a long-term view to developing women’s capacity to be active in community decision-making. She initiated an income generating scheme where women worked in groups to produce *tapa* cloth made from the bark of paper-mulberry trees. This cloth is a key element of many celebrations and rituals. It is often sold to Tongans living abroad who are unable to make it themselves. Supporting the economic rights of these women was an important objective as many of these women are quite poor and have limited access to their own resources. Realizing economic rights is clearly linked to the satisfaction of many other rights of both the woman and her family, such as education, health and housing. It has been shown many times over that increasing the economic security of a mother results in a significantly greater improvement in the wellbeing of the family than increasing the economic security of a father.¹²

In addition to the economic rights goal of the project, the longer term objective of this project was to develop women’s capacity to participate more actively in their community and in the decision-making bodies (church, local meetings) of the village. As part of her strategy the community paralegal provided basic human rights training to the group and maintained ongoing discussions and encouragement to the women to participate more actively in community bodies. All this occurred in the informal atmosphere of the women’s group, entirely within the traditional cultural practices familiar in Tonga. In this example, the community paralegal is working at the micro level. Although economic rights are the primary focus, and the draw-card

for the women in the village, she ensures that women's civil and potentially political rights are promoted by supporting and encouraging women to be more active participants and decision-makers in the village.

Men too have been important allies in the struggle for women's rights in the Pacific. A recent example of the role men play as allies comes from a ni-Vanuatu community paralegal. He described the situation in his village cooperative where it was always men who were employed as the manager. Capable women had applied for the position but the Executive Committee had never appointed a woman. Some of the women discussed the situation with the community paralegal as they were keen for women to have the opportunity to take on the role. At the next Annual General Meeting of the cooperative the community paralegal asked the Executive Committee why no woman had ever been appointed. The chairperson explained that there was a written policy which stated that men and women can apply for the position but only if no man applied could a woman be appointed to the position (a discriminatory policy). The culture of that village (and many Melanesian communities) is that women do not ask questions of men in public meetings. It was therefore important for them to get the support of a man who was able to ask the question (a strategic alliance). By asking the question (strategic action) they were able to find out that there was a structural reason for the discrimination against women candidates. With that information they then knew what to do. They worked together and lobbied to get the policy changed. At a later meeting of the cooperative it was agreed to change the policy and remove the discriminatory clause. Men are no longer given automatic preference. This meso level change is important. By enacting institutional change the benefit continues into the future for all whose human rights would have been otherwise discriminated against.

Concluding Comments

The community paralegal program has been an effective way to develop human rights knowledge, skills and action at a community level. However, it has been an extremely expensive program to run. Holding workshops of twenty-five people from all parts of a Pacific island nation such as Vanuatu is difficult logistically and, because of high transport costs and infrequent flights, very expensive. As a result RRRT has reviewed the program and de-

cided not to initiate new community paralegal training. However, refresher programs for active community paralegals are still held.

In place of the community paralegal program RRRT has been working with existing Pacific Island institutions to investigate how and where it might embed human rights training and courses. By engaging in partnerships with existing education providers it is believed that human rights education can become a standard part of all education in the region. Whatever specific form is chosen, RRRT will continue to provide effective human rights education in the region.

Endnotes

1. RRRT is part of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
2. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, (2010). Human Rights in the Asia-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities. Retrieved 6 July 2010 from www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/asia_pacific_hr/report.htm.
3. P. Imrana Jalal. 2005. Using rights-based programming principles to clam rights: The Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT) project in the Pacific islands. Retrieved 7 July from www.rrrt.org/assets/OHCHR%20Best%20Practice%20Case%20Study.pdf
4. For example, Imrana Jalal. 2006. "Frontline human rights defenders at local level: Community paralegals in the Pacific," *FOCUS Asia-Pacific*, issue 45, retrieved 7 July 2010 from www.hurights.or.jp/asia-pacific/045/02.html Further information about the community paralegal training including anecdotes from the experiences of participants is available from several publications on the RRRT website at <http://www.rrrt.org/>.
5. Lenhart, V., & Savolainen, K. 2002. "Human rights education as a field of practice and theoretical reflection," *International Review of Education*, 48(3-4), pages 145-158.
6. Lohrenscheit, C. 2002. International Approaches in Human Rights Education, *International Review of Education*, 48(3-4), pages 173-185.
7. Ibid.
8. This is the term used by RRRT to describe the participants who undertake the community paralegal training.
9. "CEDAW ratification on the horizon for Tonga," PACNEWS, 21 February 2007, Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association. Retrieved 7 July 2010 from www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-159614430.html.
10. Solomon Islands has a RRRT staff person located in country who performs some of the functions of the Country Focal Officer.
11. With the exception of Tonga.
12. Women for Women International. 2010. *2010 DRC Report: Amplifying the Voices of Women in Eastern Congo, Stronger Women Stronger Nations*, Report Series, retrieved 24 October 2010 from www.womenforwomen.org/news-women-for-women/files/dr-congo-report-2010.pdf.