

*Na Marama iTaukei Kei Na Vanua:*  
Culturally Embedded Agency of Indigenous Fijian Women -  
Opportunities and Constraints

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**Abstract**

The concept of ‘culturally embedded agency’ presented in this article argues that an agency-oriented approach to women’s agenda is needed. This article focuses on some cultural systems, practices and processes associated with women’s wellbeing. These were identified in a doctoral study exploring the cultural constructs of health and wellbeing of Indigenous Fijian women in a village in Fiji and a transnational community in Aotearoa. These are referred to as forms of culturally embedded agency as they are processes within the culture that contribute to overall wellbeing.

Culturally embedded agency calls for social policy that incorporates full participation of women in society, which is inclusive of indigeneity goals, cultural wellbeing and fairness. The article identifies forms of culturally embedded agency that empower women and contributes to their overall wellbeing. The article discusses the limitations, tensions and opportunities within this agency in relation to gender and impacts on health and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Culture, Fijian women, Indigenous wellbeing, culturally embedded agency, social policy.

**Introduction**

“ The limited role of women’s active agency seriously afflicts the lives of all people - men as well as women, children as well as adults. While there is every reason to not to slacken the concern about women’s wellbeing and ill-being, and to continue to pay attention to the sufferings and deprivations of women, there is also an urgent and basic necessity, particularly at this time, to take an agent-oriented approach to women’s agenda.” (Sen, 2001: 191)

This article includes findings from a doctoral thesis on the cultural constructs of health and wellbeing of Indigenous Fijian women or *Marama iTaukei*. This qualitative study of 23 participants was conducted in two geographical locations, one in Fiji and one in Aotearoa. It was not, however, a comparative study; the study in Fiji enabled an exploration of how perceptions and experiences of health and wellbeing have evolved as Fijian women have migrated to Aotearoa (Meo-Sewabu, 2015). Ethnography was the overarching methodology was combined with the *Vanua*<sup>1</sup> methodology<sup>2</sup> (Meo-Sewabu, 2014a, 2014b; Nabobo-Baba, 2006, 2008). Methods used included *talanoa*<sup>3</sup> (Farely & Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Vaioleti, 2006), participant observation and photovoice.

The concept of ‘culturally embedded agency’ presented in this article argues that there needs to be an agency-oriented approach to women’s agenda. Culturally embedded agency calls for social policy that incorporates full participation of women in society, inclusive of indigeneity goals, cultural wellbeing and fairness. The study identified forms of culturally embedded agency that empower women in tasks contributing to overall wellbeing. Dolan, Johnstone-Louis, and Scott (2012: 38) state that at the core of empowerment is agency, citing (Malhotra, 2012: 9) and defining agency as the ability to “formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes specifically in areas that have marginalized women” (Dolan et al., 2012: 38). For Dolan et al., agency means:

“...a shift from instrumental notions of empowerment as something a woman does or does not have and instead focuses on the processes by which women come to perceive themselves as able to act, and the condition under which they do so within the contexts of particular social and cultural systems.” (2012: 38)

This article focuses on some of the cultural systems, practices and processes associated with women’s wellbeing. These are referred to as forms

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<sup>1</sup> The way of knowing, refers to ‘a people, their chief, their defined territory, their waterways or fishing grounds, their environment, their spirituality, their history, their epistemology and culture (Nabobo-Baba, 2006: 155).

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Fijian methodology that ensures the research is conducted in a culturally relevant way that respects the values of the Vanua or land and its people.

<sup>3</sup> Sharing of conversation and knowledge.

of culturally embedded agency as they are processes within the culture that contribute to overall wellbeing. The article also discusses the limitations, tensions and opportunities within this agency in relation to gender and impacts on health and wellbeing. This article explores culturally embedded agency using Rowlands' four concepts of power as "*power over, power to, power with and power within*" (1997: 13). Here power relations, how power is being exerted and how empowerment is realised, are discussed. Power over and power being exerted has been interpreted as power that women gain at the expense of men.

Gaining this power can be seen as inherently threatening for men; therefore men's fear of losing control then becomes an obstacle for women's empowerment. "*Power to*", according to Rowlands (1997: 13), "creates new possibilities and actions without domination" (p. 13). "*Power with*", requires working as a collective to deal with the issues, and "*power from within*" is about spirituality, the power and strength that participants referred to which allowed them to cope with their daily realities. Forms of power within were referred to as commitment to a spiritual being and or their God through daily prayer or reliance on a spiritual being.

The 'triple burden' of women articulated by Moser (1989), expresses the need to see women as active agents of change rather than as passive victims or beneficiaries of development. This article explores the layers of complexity that are also referred to as women's triple burden as associated with, the reproductive, and productive and community links. Complexities exist in that women's reproductive work (procreation, nurturing, social reproduction, domestic sphere work) is often not seen as 'productive work' (work for money, e.g., work in which goods are produced even though they may not be sold). Development projects that enter the village, often expect input from women at the cost to their reproductive work. The disadvantage to these forms of work is that very little attention is given to meeting strategic needs leading to the empowerment of women. Moser (1989: 1803) explains that strategic needs are:

"...those needs formulated from the analysis of women's subordination to men and deriving out of this the strategic gender interest for alternative, more equal and satisfactory organisation of society than that which exists at present, in terms of both the structure and nature of relationships between men and women..."

[and]

“...practical gender needs are those formulated from the concrete conditions of women’s experience, in their engendered position within the sexual division of labour, and deriving out of this their practical gender interests for human survival.” (p. 1803)

Within both research settings women were clearly embedded in gendered roles that remained unchallenged and led to women addressing their practical needs rather than their strategic needs such as the division of labour within the culture that kept them in subordination. Within the culture itself ‘subtle strategies’ exercised by women allowed them to ‘talk back’ and to challenge systems that oppressed them. The article argues that in order to achieve wellbeing, forms of culturally embedded agency identified by the participants must be examined as tools for encouraging forms of active agency that empower women. To explore how culturally embedded agency can produce active agency and how empowerment of women and wellbeing maybe achieved, I begin by exploring the key theoretical concepts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Women in both of the research settings considered that their identities are engendered through a sense of service to the Vanua, people and institutions within their environment. When this sense of identity was secure, wellbeing was achieved. A study by Yabaki (2006) on Fijian women in the Sigatoka highlands highlighted the same sense of identity resulting in what she refers to as the ‘good life’ or a life that is complete. Good life, wellbeing, a good society are all terms used arising from constructs that contribute to a sense of wellbeing. Moghadam (1992: 8) states that gender:

“refers to the structural relationship between the sexes which is linked to the state, the economy, and to other macro and micro-processes and institutions. This relationship is asymmetrical; it is inscribed in law and finds expression in political processes and in economic structures.” (p. 8)

Gendered structural processes are ingrained within the Fijian culture and perpetuated by complex intersections between discourses and practices associated with colonisation, religion, modernity, cultural imperialism and social policies. Such discourses shape how women have been defined in

Fijian society and are strongly connected to the achievement of wellbeing. More importantly, agency and the empowerment of women, some of which existed in traditional settings and some of which have emerged as a result of modernisation, have rarely been acknowledged and embraced as vehicles for transformation.

Within the Indigenous Fijian context, the essence of a woman can be captured in a metaphor of the kitchen. Within Indigenous Fijian circles when a young man is around, a question asked by women and aunties is “*E sa dua na nona valeni kuro?*” The literal translation is ‘Does he have a kitchen?’ but, metaphorically, the questioner is asking if the young man is married. The kitchen metaphor means responsibility, rather than the physical space itself, and defines a woman’s domestic role. It teaches a young man how to become a responsible adult; he can no longer be taken care of by his mother and sisters but rather by his wife. No matter how old a man is, mother, sisters and female relatives will still look after an unmarried male. When a man marries, he has to look after his new family’s livelihood. Maintaining a livelihood means having a sense of purpose, requiring discipline, time management and a level of economic wellbeing, all that is associated with providing for a family. Therefore, having a kitchen is associated with becoming a responsible man and having sense of completion.

Clearly, in this example, the value of women is used as a standard of measurement for men’s identity, role and sense of responsibility. Not having a kitchen implies irresponsibility, lacking purpose, or discipline, being disorganised and unable to contribute the sense of communal wellbeing necessary for a ‘good society’. The kitchen metaphor illustrates how sets of understandings about male and female, masculinity and femininity are dependent upon each other for meaning. However, the voice and place of women in positioning men within the *Vanua* is often silenced when defined by others. The kitchen metaphor clearly shows that Fijian women are powerful actors in relation to how Fijian men are defined and valued.

Spivak (1988, 1992, 1999) has argued that colonial and historical discourses perpetuated the cycle of marginalisation with little hope of transformation. The kitchen metaphor suggests that such universalising theories about marginalisation, which fail to take into account the subtleties of local context, have had a significant impact on the development of social

policies and in turn a considerable impact on the cultural wellbeing of Indigenous Fijians especially women.

The metaphor of the kitchen is an allegory for the way that participants who may not have a voice politically are still able to affect transformation at the grassroots level through being active agents of change. Within culturally embedded forms of agency there are also constraints associated with women's wellbeing. Using Moser's concept of triple burden (Moser, 1989) and Molyneux's arguments about strategic and practical gender interests (Molyneux, 1985) to understand gender needs rather than interests<sup>4</sup>, I explore examples of culturally embedded agency in both research settings and explain how this agency can both constrain and empower Fijian women and influence their wellbeing. Findings show that when participants lack agency and feel burdened their wellbeing is impacted negatively. Conversely when they feel in control and have pride in their achievements this positively impacts on wellbeing. These forms of culturally embedded agency are represented in Figure 1 to illustrate how gender needs can be addressed to empower women.

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<sup>4</sup> Gender needs explore structures that keep women in subordination, rather than what their interests are relating to wants that can contribute to overall wellbeing.

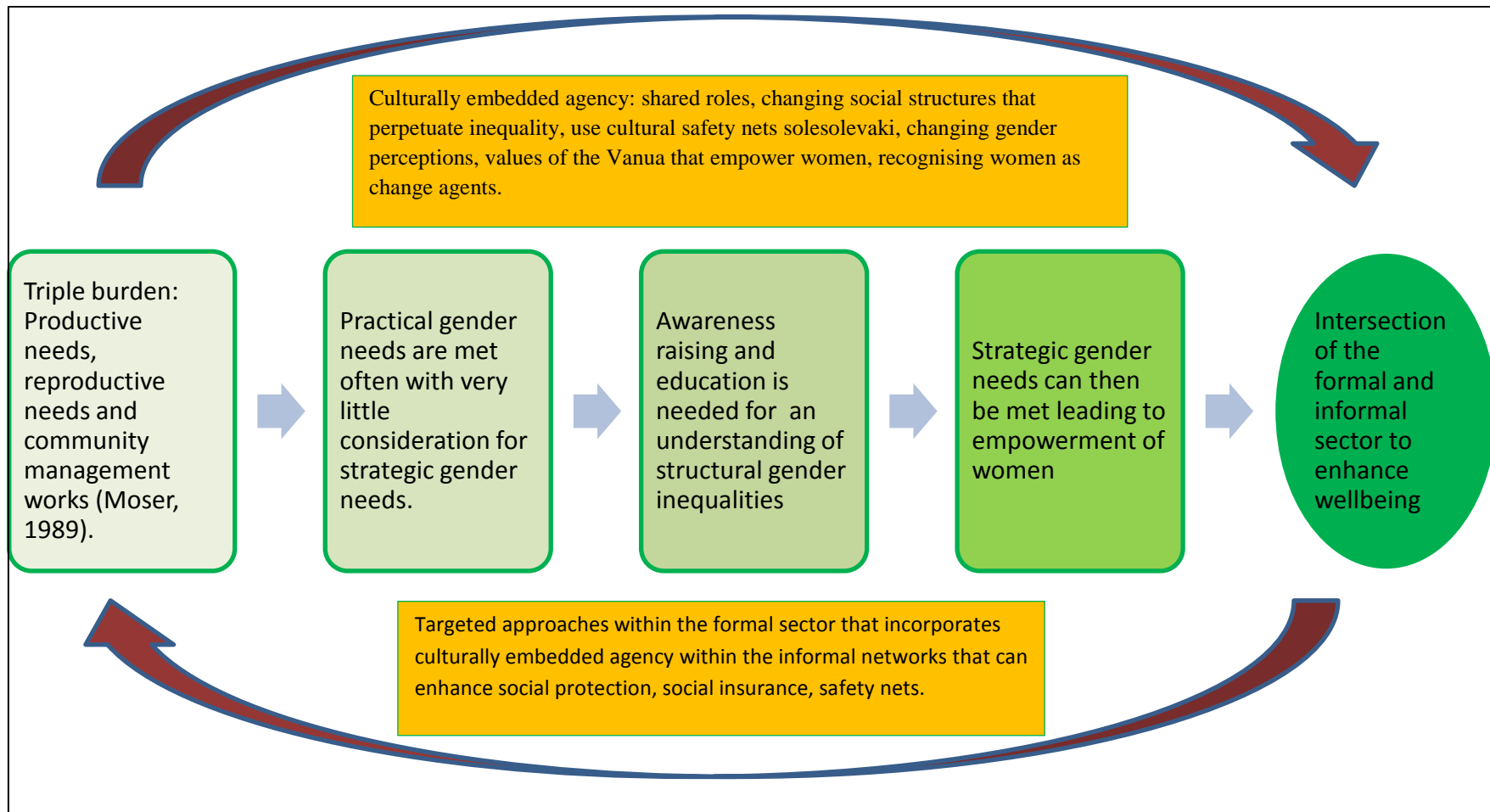


Figure 1 - Culturally embedded agency and gender needs

The triple burden of women, reproductive, productive and community management work was recognised as part of the participants' daily realities. Women dealt with these external needs daily leaving very little time for personal needs or to address strategic gender needs or examine structures that oppressed them. To address the oppressive structures, there is a need for education, advocacy and gender-based programmes that allow both men and women to examine these oppressive structures critically and therefore develop strategies for change. The illustration in Figure 1 shows that positive transformation occurs best through a cyclical process. These processes must take into account global and national strategies. In addition, these strategies need to be relevant and aimed at creating change that has a trickle-down effect on the village and the community settings. These can occur by implementing consciousness-raising programmes that promote such awareness.

The form of culturally embedded agency identified by participants included the importance of changing perceptions on reproductive roles and the need for shared gender roles; the importance of transmission of cultural knowledge; the value of the *Vanua* and cultural safety nets such as the *solesolevaki* in enhancing economic and general wellbeing; and the importance of recognising that women are change agents within society. However, within this culturally embedded agency, there are also constraints that must be addressed. These include the effects of *yaqona* abuse on family wellbeing; gendered roles within the culture which contribute to the triple burden of women and the economic and social pressures arising from the influence of the modern world in village life. The cyclical process illustrated in Figure 1 indicates an ongoing need to monitor and evaluate strategies to ensure that both practical and strategic gender needs of women are addressed. Constant monitoring is needed to also inform policy and by-laws that empower women. Culturally embedded forms of agency can be used as vehicles that can intersect with formal and informal sectors to improve women's wellbeing. First, reproductive gender roles and the importance of changing perceptions towards shared roles will be discussed.

### **Reproductive Gender Roles and 'Power Over'**

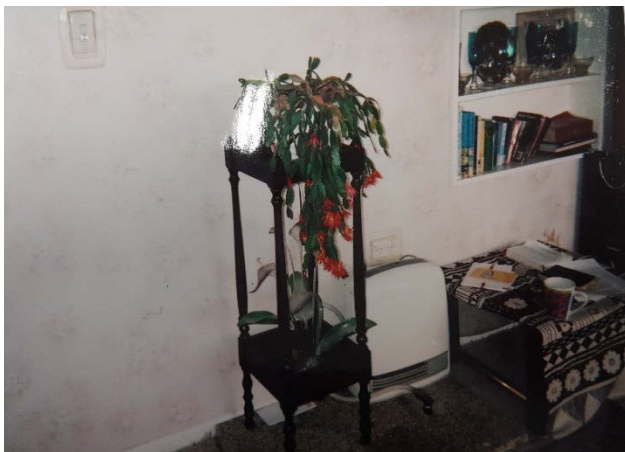
Moser (1989) defines reproductive gender roles as those that include procreation and nurturing or the mothering role, and the care and maintenance of one's family associated with the domestic sphere. The following section provides examples of some of the reproductive roles that women in both settings identified. In these contexts women are seen as recipients of change rather than active agents of



change. However, culturally embedded perceptions may be shifted to focus upon active agency through consciousness raising activities that identify how women are being oppressed and creating strategies to change these structures and transforming perceptions and ways of being within the community.

Within village settings, gendered roles within the family were identified by participants as tasks associated with running a household. These included gardening, collecting firewood, preparing food, looking after the children, cleaning, doing laundry, and chores that are generally referred to as ‘housework’. Participants who felt that fulfilling obligations associated with the gendered role were essential also identified cultural practices and processes that enhanced and hindered the achievement of wellbeing. The transformation of action into agency, however, can only occur once the women themselves realise how the practice oppresses them. Only when the shift occurs is active agency operationalised and the empowerment of women can occur. Participants identified some of the constraints to agency.

In the following example, Seini expresses how she felt overwhelmed at times with what was expected of her as a Fijian woman in Aotearoa. Seini felt that her sense of wellbeing was negatively impacted because she was preoccupied with housework and therefore, she was unable to do other things that she loved such as gardening:



*Figure 2: Housework as a gendered role (Courtesy of Seini)*

“ I take that picture [Figure 2] to show how the women [pause] does the work in the house, that’s why I took this picture ... it looks like it’s a sad picture to me that I think that most of the work at home in the house the women are....or may be is it a guilty conscious or [pause] but to me I just do it, sometimes I do it quietly and sometimes I do it loudly too with my mouth complaining” [laughing]. (Seini)

Seini saw the task of cleaning the house as part of her role as a mother which required her to take care of her family. Seini felt that, within Fijian culture, housework was clearly defined as a women’s role and therefore accepted that it was her job to clean. Even though she saw this task as a gendered role, her

complaining was part of a subtle strategy that she was exercising to get her family members to realise that if the workload was shared, she would not be so overwhelmed. Seini's view, that the performance of daily chores was often not seen as real work and was often taken for granted, was reflected by most women in this study.

To draw on Rowlands (1997) analysis, Seini's example relates to '*power over*' where domination and control is associated with culturally embedded practices and beliefs that have become an ingrained part of women's reality regardless of geographical location. Seini realises that in order to gain 'power within' she has to "challenge the existing power relation, and... [gain] control over the sources of power" (Batliwala, 1994: 130). This form of power according to Batliwala (1994) and Rowlands (1997) is defined as empowerment when women gain control the over power structures that have been oppressing them which, in this instance, is Seini's family.

Power over also relates to women in the village who lived within a contained space in which gendered roles were more visible, defined and felt they had to actively participate in household and community chores. Many of the participants commented on how little help they received from their husbands. Kalisi in the following example discusses how they seek the power within to get them through the work:

"Our husbands never help [referring to household chores]. We just have to have a good heart because Christ Jesus is in us. Even if they do not help us, we have God, even if we are sinners, we will keep moving."  
(Kalisi)

In both settings, women expressed concern about with tasks required of them in addition to their roles at home. Most felt their role was to keep their husbands happy by doing everything to the best of their ability and many asked for spiritual help to remain humble and accept that they were there to serve<sup>1</sup>. Kalisi's belief, that she was not alone and that her burdens could be lifted by asking for spiritual help, was shared by participants in both locations. Rowland (1997) refers to this as '*power from within*', the ability to draw on their inner strength to achieve the task at hand. This form of power allows them to stay motivated to achieve tasks and meet their daily practical needs. Still in Kalisi's example, serving willingly and wholeheartedly within the roles is part of the cultural practice yet the inability

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<sup>1</sup> The ability to serve or to be of service was one of the components of what contributes to wellbeing as identified by women in this study.

to see beyond this for strategic needs has an oppressive potential. In both locations, gender roles associated with domestic work were felt to consume too much of the participants' time and left them little time to address strategic needs associated with planning beyond their daily needs. Women will have to think critically about the structures within their culture that oppress them and to strategise how changes in them can be achieved.

Koto provides an example of a shift from culturally engendered practices to culturally embedded agency. In this instance a change occurs from '*power over*' to '*power to*' where roles are shared and actions occur without domination. Koto shared a story of a subtle strategy to transform a burdensome cultural practice into a positive outcome. Koto suggested that within a marriage couples must help each other and this positively impacts on the wellbeing of the family as a whole. She talked about a couple in the village who shared household responsibilities, going against the traditional engendered roles and creating new possibilities for both the couple and the community:

“It does not mean that women are to do chores all the time, it is also the men's role. I often admire Aunty Lesu's son, Sikeli [name changed for anonymity]. He is always raking their yard. It will be a challenge to have some of our men to even touch a rake...it seems that they are embarrassed to do what is considered a women's job.” (Koto)

Gendered barriers prevented men from helping with tasks that were traditionally constructed as women's work. Sikeli's challenge to the cultural system opens up new possibilities for women in the village who come to perceive themselves as able to act and ask questions within the culture such as the gendered barriers. In challenging the men in the village to follow Sikeli's example the women are questioning the cultural norm. Cultural norms change slowly but women are making incremental changes to the status quo, leading to the empowerment of women or '*power with*' (Rowlands, 1997). '*Power with*' includes women's enhanced ability to negotiate decisions in the family and marriage as well as collective empowerment. In Koto's example, the structures that have kept women marginalised within their culture are transformed and the strategic gender needs of women are being addressed. In the example, subtle forms of negotiation make a stand against oppressive structures. Changing the perception of gendered roles associated with housework is a clear illustration of a culturally embedded practice that is shifting to become culturally embedded active agency which could empower women, address their strategic needs and impact positively on wellbeing. Moser (1989: 1800) argues that the:

“...sexual division of labour is seen to reflect the “natural” order, and is ideologically reinforced through such means as the legal and education system, the media, and family planning programs, without recognition that within it the women’s position is subordinate to that of man’s.” (p. 1800)

Other roles for women often directly impact on their wellbeing. In both research settings, women identified further tasks which routinely prioritised family wellbeing over their own needs. Their examples of the sexual division of labour, in both settings, indicate how segregated roles within the household have become burdensome for these women. Their examples focus on cultural discourses about the collective good and about what contributes to a good society in order to effect change. The collective good is secured when burdens are shared rather than carried by one person. In this context, requesting that stereotypical views about role delineation are broken becomes a means of achieving wellbeing of the family and society.

In the following extracts Koto suggests that the family’s wellbeing is ensured through serving them well every day. Koto’s identity is invested in her ability to serve as she feels it contributes to the overall wellbeing of the family. In this example male roles are conferred and defined through the actions of women and in relation to female identity, as illustrated in the kitchen metaphor used earlier in this article. In spite of what she identifies as her husband’s negative behaviour, refusing to serve would create disharmony and disrupt the wellness of the family as a whole. Koto feels that she is accountable to a higher power. Koto chooses to respond in an acceptable way that reflects her faith, and chooses to ignore negativity because it is more important for her to be a ‘good mother’ and ensure the wellbeing of the family even at the cost of her own health and wellbeing:

“For women, the way we are, how we carry ourselves will help our husbands become fully aware of their role. My view is what can we do so that our families achieve wellbeing? We should serve them well every day, their food, as for me, these ladies all know that I have never ever missed preparing a meal or serving his [her husband’s] food. Even though he does those kind of things [referring to her husband’s negative behaviour] I just have to humble myself, and not have that attitude [not to be arrogant or self-serving] ...when we do that [serve them well], there will be no animosity towards us as women. We will always be happy and we will be able to sit together and talk or converse as a family, because Jesus is part of our lives.” (Koto)

Koto feels that the happiness of her husband and her family is dependent on her. This sense of responsibility urges her to draw upon her spiritual strength to persevere with the marriage. Koto also states that if women serve to the best of their ability, their husbands will not be upset, harmony will be maintained and wellbeing attained which can also be seen as a source of status within the community. Women who take good care of their husbands exemplify the concept of '*vakamarama*' (Ravuvu, 1983), through willingly carrying out culturally accepted roles within the family and obligations within the community as a part of their responsibility within the *Vanua*.

Leckie (2009) and the World Bank (2011) note that not enough is being done to address gender inequalities. Linkages between cultural gender values and gender inequalities are often not addressed in depth. Moser (1989) argues that the consequences are serious for women as the majority of their work is not valued or is made invisible, and that development programmes often add to their triple burden and put their health and wellbeing at risk. Conversely, the majority of men's work is recognised through status and payments made in exchange for labour.

### **Triple Burden and Obligations**

The findings in this study are similar to those of Varani-Norton (2009), who discusses the difficulties Fijian women in rural areas experience as they try to fulfil their obligations to the state, the *Vanua* and the church. The next example is of a woman who felt powerless because of forces that kept her marginalised. This participant had five children under the age of six years and was three months pregnant with her sixth child during this research. Despite her reproductive role and childcare responsibilities, she was also expected to do all the chores within the home as well as meet village and community obligations:

“I went over to Tupou's house to give her children some books. She said she had just returned from *Salia* which is about a 45 minute walk on the beach, because they had to go to clean the school which her 3 older children attend. She took her two little ones, with packed lunches. She felt it would be inappropriate for her not to attend. She also mentioned that the next day, she would be cooking yams for the Village Council meeting as her clan has been appointed to serve the food for the gathering. This meant that she would have to go to gather the yams and cook these early in the morning before getting her children ready for school.” (Field notes)

Moser (1989) refers to this case, exemplified by Tupou who participated in reproductive, productive and community management roles, as the triple burden of women. As a child-bearing mother Tupou ensured that the children had food to eat and were prepared for the 45 minute walk to the school. She carried the youngest, who was barely a year old, for the walk. Her community management roles required her to cook yams as a contribution to the Village Council meeting and to help clean the school. As Tupou had to leave early to go to the school, she also had to consider all the daily chores she would have to do beforehand and because she would return late in the afternoon, she also had to think about the meal she would have to prepare for dinner.

Tupou's reproductive obligations become almost invisible and are not seen as work as they are an expected gendered role. The 'triple burden', according to Moser (1989) means that Tupou's work within the community, (cleaning the school and cooking for the village council meeting) was seen as productive work while little consideration was given to all her reproductive roles, including looking after her five children, preparing their meals and the family dinner, helping with homework and doing household chores. Tupou managed these layers of obligation on her own, despite being in her first trimester of pregnancy. These culturally embedded practices keep women like Tupou marginalised as she is occupied with addressing everyday needs with very little time to focus on strategic needs that could empower her.

Tupou's agency is constrained as she is expected to fulfil these roles and little if anything is done by her husband or her community to assist Tupou in her reproductive role. Schuler (1986) suggests that consciousness-raising is important for both men and women to produce social change. Consciousness-raising allows the community as a whole to examine the structures that oppress women and address their strategic gender needs critically. The aim of consciousness-raising for men is to make men aware of the injustices women face in society and to encourage them to support women.

### **Sharing Engendered Roles**

One of the ways burdens are being shared is through the implementation of policies at the village level. Recently, in some provinces in Fiji, villagers have been advised by government officials to use their discretion on goods given to officials as part of official welcomes and *sevusevu*. These goods, which often

include, mats, *masi*<sup>2</sup> and *salusalu*<sup>3</sup>, as well as the refreshments and preparatory work for official visits are usually provided by women. Traditional welcome ceremonies have been a real burden for villagers and the government of Fiji has informed all villages that there is no expectation on them to conduct *sevusevu* ceremonies and exchange gifts during official visits. Government officials have also been urged not to take traditional goods prepared for them as was previously done.

The new practice means that women can store the same non-perishable goods for official visits and lessens the burdens for villages. The government's advice was welcomed by village women who agreed that as it relieved them from the burden of preparing for official visits. (M. Radilevukana, personal communication, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013). This example shows that the triple burden effect, often associated with the additional requirements of modern society, do not take into account how busy women are. This change to production of goods for *sevusevu* ceremonies is an example of how the triple burden has been taken into consideration to reduce women's burdens. Consciousness raising amongst the villagers, and acknowledgement by government, led to reduction of some injustices associated with the gendered roles of women within Fijian culture. The next section explores how women exert power within their productive roles.

### **Gender Inequality and Education**

'Power to' as defined by Rowland (1997), refers to "generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination" (p. 13). This form of resistance was referred to earlier as a 'subtle strategy'. In a study of women in Fiji, Chatter (2013) stated that the restrictive gendered cultural norms perpetuate gender inequality despite the gains in education and access to work. How cultural gender norms perpetuate gender inequalities is explained in the following extract:

" I came to the village as a retired school teacher. There are a lot of things that I could not do, the laundry, I would just do a little and it's like...you know [expression of exhaustion]." (Kalisi)

Kalisi explained that her academic qualification and work as a teacher remained invisible in the village. Instead she was required to learn most of the

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<sup>2</sup> Also known as *tapa*, traditional Fijian textile used in clothing.

<sup>3</sup> Garland prepared using fresh fragrant flowers.

roles expected of women within the village. Her educational qualifications had limited value in the village and were not realised as a form of agency. As a new arrival in the village setting Kalisi has wisdom acquired through Western education but lacks social status arising from the wisdom that is attributed to '*na kila vakavanua*' or knowledge of the things in the *Vanua*.

Kalisi explained that her status in the western society as a teacher, a knowledge holder, is not valued as much as her role as a mother in the village. Clearly, Kalisi has been part of an environment where both her reproductive and productive roles have been visible. Kalisi's western education, a potential form of active agency, has not been recognised because she is a woman and is perceived as someone that lacks the cultural capital that comes from exposure to '*kila vakavanua*'. While this was true in this context, it may not be true for other villages in Fiji.

Similarly, participants in Aotearoa, some of whom were highly educated, noted that their roles within Fijian society were based not on their educational attainment but rather on their status within the social structure. In a study of Pacific migrants in Aotearoa, Macpherson (2001) made the observation that many migrants eventually realise that the opposite is true in Aotearoa that merits mattered more than their social status from the Pacific<sup>4</sup>.

This study found that traditional (re)productive roles and tertiary qualifications need to be acknowledged as forms of active agency that can lead to personal and social transformation. A lack of acknowledgement of the ways in which traditional culture and modern society shape women's daily realities, may be experienced as disempowering. Clearly, Kalisi has a lot to contribute but her qualification is not valued as a knowledge source that can positively impact upon wellbeing in the village. Kalisi, for example 'talks back' to the societal structures in the village by asking that her status as a teacher is also valued as contributing to the wellbeing of the village. Similar strategies are adopted by organisations working with women who are considered marginalised. Cultural norms perpetuated the acceptance of rights and obligations as part of their gendered roles. In both research settings women voiced their concerns about their limited influence within the Fijian societal structures. Formal education was not always adopted as a form of active agency because within the cultural structures women remained subordinates.

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<sup>4</sup> Social status in the Pacific often comes with the authority to speak on matters; to lead and to hold mana and power.



A statement by Priti Darooka, the Executive Director of the Programme on Women's Economic Social and Cultural Rights (PWESCR) in India (Womens Coalition, 2015), suggested that:

“All women work. Recognize women as workers, producers and as individual right holders. Recognize, reduce and redistribute women's unpaid work, including domestic work, direct care work, and subsistence forms of livelihoods.”

Her statement reflects the feelings of participants in this study that reproductive work should be recognised as work and that they should have the right to have their education and work acknowledged as pertinent contributions to the wellbeing of the community. Findings from this study also noted that some initiatives to improve women's economic wellbeing often increased their burden on women, as their reproductive and gender roles are often not taken into consideration.

### **Economic Wellbeing of Women**

This section explores women's relationship to the market<sup>5</sup> and why culturally embedded agency was not considered in developing some projects highlighted by the women in the village. Dolan et al. (2012) state that “examining women's agency is thus key to identifying which aspects of market engagement maybe empowering and why.” (p. 38).

Economic advancement is often seen as the key to improving women's wellbeing. Cornwall and Edwards (2014: 5) argue that providing loans and business opportunities for women does bring about some positive changes in their livelihood:

“...but to really see substantial changes, the kind that can transform the root causes of poverty and begin to address the deep structural basis of gender inequality, conditions need to be fostered for shifts in consciousness so that women begin to understand their situation and come together to act to bring about change that can benefit not only them but also other women.” (p. 5)

Similarly, Kabeer (2005), states that microfinance projects are often seen as the *'magic bullet'* that will improve women's economic situation. But often opportunities do not eventuate but become more of a burden as practical gender

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<sup>5</sup> A place or a community where commodity exchange and trade can occur.

needs and cultural needs are not considered before beginning the project. The project becomes an additional task women have to take on.

An example of a failed micro-finance project that was shared by village women at their weekly meeting involved a representative from the village who was chosen for training in the city to learn how to make virgin coconut oil. It was envisaged that upon her return she would teach other women how to make the oil and then together they would create a business where women could gain an income. However, no system was put in place to ensure that skills learnt led to economic wellbeing therefore the programme never gained any momentum or economic gain for the village.

Economic approaches often fail according to Batliwala (1993, 1994); Cornwall and Edwards (2014) and Rowlands (1995, 1997) because they do not comprehend the cultural environment in which the programmes are being implemented. Participants discussed how it was hard to make a profit as relatives would buy oil on credit and they often would be reluctant to collect money after months of waiting to be paid. Within the culture things are shared and exchanged without any real need for money, but within modern society there is a need to discuss these cultural realities and design solutions with the community on how to make good economic decisions.

Economic decisions and wellbeing for participants are often focused on meeting familial obligations and contributing to their extended family. Similarly within transnational communities meeting familial needs were considered a priority within Pacific communities. A study in Aotearoa found that Pacific women defined “economic wellbeing as having enough resources to meet the needs of their families” (Koloto & Sharma, 2005: 79). Failure of these programmes occurs because programme designers often do not comprehend local conceptions of what constitutes economic ‘economic wellbeing’, because programmes are often focused on individuals and the benefits of increased incomes rather than the communal concepts of achieving economic wellbeing.

Entrepreneurial skills to improve economic wellbeing already exist in the Fijian village but working collectively and exercising communal agency organised through the ‘*solesolevaki*’ structure ensures shared workloads. Along with using this culturally embedded form of agency, there needs to be a shift in thinking and organising within their environment through awareness-raising by agencies that work within these communities. The shift in agency occurs when using a familiar existing structure to contribute to wellbeing through creating an environment in which women can make decisions themselves and have control

over the factors that once marginalised them. Central to this aspiration is making entrepreneurial ventures sustainable. They can be sustainable, for example, by finding a viable non-local market where these products can be sold either to hotels or abroad. In doing so, the endeavour becomes part of an agentic process that contributes to economic benefits and sustainability for the women and the community as a whole. Shifting the focus from culturally embedded agency to active agency addresses both the practical and strategic gender needs of women<sup>6</sup>.

The freedom to be an active decision maker enables women to plan their future looking after both practical gender needs and strategic gender needs. This means that targeted approaches need to ensure that the women will not only have access to and control of the money that they make from economic ventures. The economic benefits for the women will allow them to meet their practical needs and improve the wellbeing of their families. The report on 'Gender Equality and Development', World Bank (2011) concluded that when women have control over their resources and have the freedom to make their own economic decisions, wellbeing improved for women and for their whole family. Leckie (2009) and Chatterier (2012) contend that women experience economic freedom when they have access to paid work. However, because of policies and gender bias in most workplaces, women in Fiji still experience inequalities in these areas Chatterier (2012, 2013); Longwe (1995). The structures and the environments that women are in have not fully addressed the shift that needs to occur to liberate women from economic marginalisation.

The market engagement is an example of '*power to*' as well as '*power with*' and '*power within*' as material wellbeing allows women to take control of their situation collectively working together to maximise the benefits for the village in improving wellbeing.

### **Culturally Embedded Agency of Solesolevaki**

The concept of *solesolevaki* is a form of social capital and communal cohesiveness that leads to collective wellbeing. The following discussion will show how the concept of *solesolevaki* has been disrupted by modern society which values striving for independence rather than working collectively. In this section, I highlight the need to encourage the use *solesolevaki* as a form of active agency for transforming communities. Not enough is being done by policy

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<sup>6</sup> Strategic gender needs are addressed because there is an assured demand for the product within the markets. The economic venture allows them to have a sustainable source of income and contributes to their economic wellbeing.

makers, agencies and decision makers to use culturally embedded agency to bring about social change, as noted by Meo-Sewabu and Walsh-Tapiata (2012):

“Women interviewed expressed that there have been shifts in gender roles that were clear cut in the last decade and are not as clear now that children have moved away for education, and school fees have meant that both parents are now actively seeking sources of money. In this particular village, generating income involved gathering beche-de-mers<sup>7</sup> and dried copra to sell to outside traders from the urban areas. The women felt that they were now working individually towards educational access for their children and have lost the collectivity of working together as a clan to achieve a purpose, often referred to as *solesolevaki*.” (p. 314) (excerpts from field notes)

Prices of *bêche-de-mer* depended on their size. The number of hours spent diving or cutting copra depended on how much money was needed for the school fees and other expenses of modern life. Participants noted that instead of working communally, or as a clan, as they would traditionally have done through the culturally embedded agency of the *solesolevaki*, families choices were now driven by their individual needs. During the research, some of the women commented that it had been a while since they had come together as clan members to work. One participant commented that ‘*it is like a thief in the night*’; referring to modern obligations such as getting money to pay children’s school fees, participate in council meetings and functions organised by government agencies was robbing them of opportunities to work communally as traditionally practised. At the end of the first week of research one of the women in the village told me:

“I am grateful to you all for coming; women have come to know once again the importance of interacting with one another. As well as working together, that has allowed us to share the hardships and burdens we experience in our families. We have been able to share this in a day, or in a week and we have also learned from it. I am therefore thankful that you all have come, as it is a good time for us, as we are also awakened spiritually.” (Selai)

Selai’s response reflects the agency women were referring to as *solesolevaki*; the ability to work together for the common good, to share burdens and responsibilities and disrupt the introduced discourses and individualised practices

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<sup>7</sup> Beche-der-mer are sea cucumbers which are sold to traders within the village and are a good source of income for villagers, but unsafe diving practices makes it a dangerous trade.

that have negatively impacted their wellbeing. Because villagers were so caught up with meeting practical needs and securing income to provide for their family, and the need to survive in a cash economy, they had failed to consider how the practice of *solesolevaki* could be used as a collective approach to improving wellbeing.

*Solesolevaki* ensured that burdens were shared amongst the women and there was a lot of laughter which made tasks enjoyable and easier to accomplish faster. This study found that as Fiji moves towards a cash economy, women in this village are unconsciously shifting away from using the traditional *solesolevaki* to meet obligations; tasks are still shared but not to the extent where everyone looked out for each other as a collective.

The social organisation in the village is moving towards western individualism, leaving women with more responsibilities. Findings show that the inability to complete tasks has become a major cause of stress and negatively impacts on participants' wellbeing because failing to meet obligations can lead to alienation from the extended family and marginalisation within their communities. *Solesolevaki* can also be seen as a culturally embedded form of social protection within the Fijian culture but "is often overlooked in mainstream development discourses" (Ratuva, 2010: 40). In the following extract, Ratuva refers to two forms of social protection - formal and informal:

"Formal social protection [is]... often linked to policies (relating to insurance, compensation, poverty alleviation and so on) and emanates from the state, aid agencies or even civil society organisations and often deals with protecting people in the formal sector. Informal social protection systems are usually community and family based and can be based on cultural systems of exchange, social networking, and social safety nets." (2010: 43)

His analysis (Ratuva, 2010) permits an examination of how cultural processes can become forms of culturally embedded agency. Ratuva states that allowing the formal and informal systems to intersect can ensure that the development of projects within communities has a better chance of success and sustainability. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2006 as cited by Ratuva, 2010) explores how an informal system was used to create a savings club contributing to income for families in Vanuatu. The concept worked because it:

"...recognized that within rural communities a culture of savings already existed. People would save traditional wealth such as mat[s]

and pigs for special occasions and there was always continuous supply as a result of this.” (p. 50)

Fiji has similar practices within the informal systems: women save material goods to prepare for cultural activities in the village social structures. The practice of saving was common for the women in the village, and some women in Aotearoa had accumulated and built reserves of cultural capital or cultural goods in preparation for weddings, funerals, birthdays and cultural events. When traditional events occurred the women were well prepared to work alongside the men and mobilise resources making the occasion successful. The goods that women prepared were not limited to mats and tapa; it also included storing oil, and associated goods for cultural protocols that assisted the men in cultural events that occurred within both the village and the transnational extended family. Men and women came together to make the events a success and to enhance cultural capital and wellbeing and to contribute to the attainment of the good society.

The culture of saving is linked to the concept of *solesolevaki* and is part of the informal system within the existing social structures that already thrive through forms of networking and social capital within Fijian communities. However, these systems need to be encouraged and should intersect with the formal systems such as the state, civil organisations, and non-governmental organisations to contribute successfully to the overall wellbeing and ‘*sautu*’<sup>8</sup> of the village in modern Fiji and in transnational Fijian communities (Meo-Sewabu & Walsh-Tapiata, 2012).

Women activate agency through cultural events and through ‘*solesolevaki*’ which mobilises communities to work together to collect goods that they have saved and to assign tasks and roles to ensure that events are successful. *Solesolevaki* is an example of ‘*power with*’ that builds on collective activity for a greater impact. Despite some of the changes, major constraints on women’s agency, such as the abuses associated with cultural gatherings and for instance, the excessive consumption of *yaqona*, were highlighted by the women.

### **Constraints on Family Wellbeing**

Dolan et al. (2012) argued that agency focuses on the processes in which women can see themselves as able to act. When it came to their roles within the family, women in both locations were concerned about the influence of abuse of *yaqona*

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<sup>8</sup> Wellbeing or the good quality life of the *vanua* or people.

which took away from the quality time needed for the family. As a result, participants pointed out that helping with the children's homework and running the household in the evening required more of women's time than men's and added to their triple burden. When developing an understanding of agency, the structures that oppress and marginalise women need to be taken into account (Alexander, 2009; Chatter, 2012; Leckie, 2009; Longwe, 1995).

The practice of *yaqona* consumption, was a way of bringing families together, fostering dialogue and maintaining relationships. It is the over-consumption and the abuse of this practice that has negatively impacted family wellbeing. Transforming cultural beliefs and practices around *yaqona* consumption to bring about positive change, needs to come from the community.

Tupou shared how she treasures their family time, and especially evening prayers, in the village. *Yaqona* is consumed by men in the evening and her husband attends *yaqona* drinking sessions instead of helping with the evening meal and spending time with family:

“ Part of our family life is our family devotion [most families in the village conducted their devotion in the evening after dinner]. When this does not happen, it makes me very unwell.” (Tupou)

Tupou cherished this time which she felt was a time when the father, as the head of the family, could teach children moral principles and family values. She was very emotional when she discussed this, and said it really frustrated her because she had to be the one doing everything for the family. In this example, the addition to the triple burden is the expectation that Tupou will also be doing every other task associated with the children at risk to her own health.

In the Aotearoa context, Unaisi commented on her picture of the *tanoa* or *kava* bowl, which illustrated how agency is once again constrained by meeting cultural norms:

“ I do not like the drinking of *yaqona* because it is not part of my life. I do not like living with a person that drinks *yaqona* because I was raised in a Seventh Day Adventist family. My father is Catholic. That is why I do not drink. *Yaqona* takes...my husband...away from family time. He drinks a lot of *yaqona* and is unaware of the main family time, because I was not raised that way.” (Unaisi)

Both excerpts highlight the way in which men's role is critical and vital in achieving family holistic health and wellbeing. In both settings, women noted that *yaqona* drinking has taken away from quality time with the family and women

were keen to see changes put into place. In Fiji, some of these cultural practices of *yaqona* consumption have been acknowledged as disrupting family wellbeing (see for example, Lindstrom, 2004; Nadore, 2008; Singh, 2004) and measures to assist with the problem have been introduced by the church and health agencies to raise awareness.

The following are examples of active agency adopted at the village level that have dramatically changed the social structures that marginalise women. Traditionally, the church pastor and men in the village, immediately after the morning church service, would take part in a *yaqona* drinking sessions to relax after the morning church service. These sessions would start around midday and often last until the early hours of the morning. Women often have to wait up for the men to finish drinking *yaqona* so that they can prepare their food.

Since the research began in 2010, the Methodist church in Fiji has placed a ban on *yaqona* consumption (Bolatika, 2013). The *yaqona* ban has been overwhelmingly welcomed especially by women within the Methodist church and a relative stated that in villages and in urban centres men are now able to enjoy Sunday lunch with their families (S. Drasuna, personal communication, April 9th, 2013). Women in general have indicated they are happy that their husbands can enjoy a Sunday meal with the family which rarely occurred before the ban (Vakacautadra, E., personal communication, January 2014).

This is an example of how *'power over'* has been transformed to *'power with'*; here the church as an institution exerts its power over its adherents by changing the cultural norm and has changed a practice that has oppressed women within the villages for decades.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I used a quote by Sen to illustrate the importance of having an agent oriented approach to women's agendas. This article has argued that some institutionalised cultural practices that oppress Fijian women need to be re-examined to raise consciousness and to increase women's agency. Figure 1 illustrates how consciousness raising is required to define and to realise strategic gender needs. This awareness of gendered inequalities makes women aware of how they are being oppressed and marginalised and also enables men to recognise the injustices experienced by women. The illustration also emphasises the importance of incorporating culturally embedded agency in changing social structures that perpetuate inequality. These include sharing roles, the use of cultural safety nets such as *solesolevaki*, changing gender perceptions through



awareness raising, identifying values of the Vanua that empower women and, most importantly, recognising women as change agents. The article argues that culturally embedded agency cannot be addressed by women alone. Men's consciousness also needs to be addressed, so that they are aware of the injustices and offer support for what can be done for the collective good

These forms of agency can be used as vehicles that intersect in the formal and informal sector and enhance wellbeing. Approaches need to be targeted within the formal sector and culturally embedded agency used within the informal networks to enhance social protection, social insurance and safety nets. This means that approaches taken for each community may vary depending on location, education level, socio-economic background and other factors that are relevant within that particular culture. The process then must be constantly monitored and strategies for change reviewed to ensure that wellbeing goals are being met.

Examples of how power is exerted were provided to illustrate 'power over', which was about control and domination over women. 'Power to' and 'power with' allowed for transformation of cultural practices, structures, and processes to make them agent oriented, which in turn leads to women's empowerment. This often means that women need to have a sense of conscientisation in which they begin to realise how existing structures oppress them.

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