

## Improving the Livelihoods of Women in Rural Areas through Distance Education

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Women leaders in rural communities are often not equipped with the necessary leadership skills and as a consequence they have poor self esteem and high levels of anxiety which limit their roles in their communities. A new approach to distance education where women have direct tutor access has improved the leadership skills, self esteem and motivation of a group of women in rural Fiji. This project explores the extent to which distance education is used to raise awareness and improve the leadership capacities of women in rural areas. In particular, the research focuses on distance education delivery through enhanced tutor access and on the skills that are most relevant to the lives of rural women. As a developing country, Fiji is adapting to new ideas, technologies, innovation and change concentrated mainly in urban centers while rural areas remain isolated. Women's organisations in rural communities have only limited access to funds, facilities, training and development programmes and as a consequence, face-to-face education is difficult to deliver. Thus, training is carried out only occasionally through direct tutor access. This research establishes that enhanced tutor access focusing on specific leadership skills significantly improved self esteem and motivation. The relevance of these findings is discussed in the context of the research literature in this field.

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore ways to improve the lives of rural women leaders in Fiji through training in leadership. The participants are from the Central Eastern Division of Fiji. Fiji is divided administratively into four divisions (see Fig 1). Each division is headed by a Commissioner, appointed by the Fijian government.

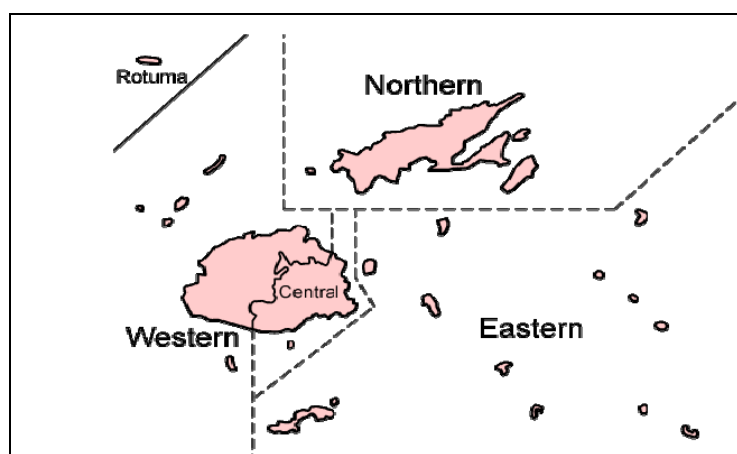


Figure 1. Geographical divisions of Fiji

About 60% of the population in Fiji live in rural areas and 40% live in urban areas. The term 'rural' in this study refers to the settled places outside of towns and cities, on the outskirts of towns, the countryside, isolated, or remote areas with limited access to roads and electricity. It also includes the islands and their villages. Such areas are distinct from more intensively settled urban and suburban areas. Fiji has 320 islands scattered across 150,000 square kilometers in the south

Pacific ocean. About 75% of the population live on the main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, with the remainder residing in about 106 small scattered outer islands. The latest 2007 population census recorded 827,900 residents where the indigenous population constituted 473,983, Indo-fijians 311,591, and other ethnic groups 42,326.

Women leaders in the rural areas are not exposed to the privileges of urban life where education is accessible and professional development is readily available. Therefore, these leaders would generally lack confidence and have lower self esteem because they are not trained with the appropriate leadership skills. If they are not the wife of the village headman or community leader they are disadvantaged because the recognition given to women is influenced by the husband's position in the community. Moreover, women leaders in the church are implicitly expected to be humble and submissive and if their husbands are pastors, society has high expectations of them. In rural areas these women would likely be housewives living very simple lives with a minimal education.

The women in this study are leaders of women's groups, committee members and some are wives of church ministers.

## BACKGROUND

The use of distance education for women in rural areas is an effective form of development and empowerment. There are many different organisations in Fiji providing training for women at the micro-enterprise level. However, very little training is provided for women to meet their personal development needs. Basic management skills and personal development topics are not covered mostly because trainers are not available. Therefore, it is the focus of this study that these women leaders are provided with the training that will contribute to their self development in a flexible and personally suitable framework. Thus, "Rural women can learn at their own pace on the basis of availability of time" (Krishnaian, 2003, p.180).

The approach to distance learning used in this project is one of 'direct tutor access' where participants have face-to-face contact with the facilitators on an occasional basis. Since the participants here are women living in rural areas with minimal education, this approach is suitable and it also supports the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nation's vision for distance education, that it should be based on sound pedagogical and administrative model (FAO Secretariat Paper, 2001). The direct tutor model was used here as it enhances participation and gives the opportunity to openly ask questions and raise concerns with the facilitator. Nasseh (1997) confirms that open communication between teacher and student is a vital element of successful distance education.

Moreover, the participants are 'active learners' in this study. According to Savery and Duffy (1995) active learners are learners that have a sense of ownership of their learning goals because they affect the manner in which they deal with the material to be learned. Further, Sherry (1996) argues that successful distance education systems involve interactivity between teacher and students, between students and the learning environment, and among students. Therefore, the topics and style of presentation used for the participants in this study are tailored to suit them. For each topic, a range of activities was designed and this led to extensive interaction and dialogue during the sessions which contributed to a participatory and interactive learning experience.

In terms of the contents of the sessions, Salomons' study (in Saettler, 1990) establishes that the mental effort which a learner will invest in a learning task depends on his own perception of two factors: First, the relevance of both the medium and the message it contains, and secondly, the ability to make something meaningful out of the material presented. Since the emphasis of the training sessions is on the holistic development of an individual the topics are relevant and

meaningful. The facilitators use the same language as the participants and relate to identifiable learning objects.

Furthermore, the tutors in this study serve as facilitators of learning. There is substantial group participation and sharing where participants are encouraged to talk and contribute to the discussion. The learning process is activity-based, and for women with a minimal level of education this method is effective. This approach also develops their confidence when they can freely discuss issues that are of concern to them. The physical presence of the tutor guides the discussion and enhances learning which supports the participants' involvement in the learning process.

## METHODOLOGY

### Method

This study used an action research based method. The language used as the medium of instruction was Fijian. Information was collected through:

(i) *Talanoa* – this is a semi-structured discussion with participants which is carried out casually, and in a traditional meeting format. It addressed issues like what they liked best and improvements they would make after the workshops.

(ii) Participant-observer (PO) – the researcher is a participant and also an observer. [This provided in-depth information.](#)

(iii) Evaluation document – an evaluation form is completed at the end of the workshops. [The document which addressed issues focused on the content, organization of the workshop, the facilitators' and presentation style and participants' learning opportunities.](#)

While conducting training the researcher also monitored and evaluated the effects of the training with the aim of improving practice.

There was no financial assistance from government or any other organisation in the preparation of these workshops. It is the women themselves through their ministries who realised that it is time they took up the initiative to bring change for themselves so they requested and organised the professional development sessions at the different locations.

### Participants

The participants were women living in rural areas of the Central Eastern Division who were members of a church group. There were 100 participants who attended the training that was conducted in four different sessions over a period of eighteen months. These participants were women leaders and committee members aged 35–60, some of whom were wives of church ministers. The participants did not have to pay to attend any of the workshops except for the fourth workshop because it was held at a hotel in the city.

### Procedure

The *Talanoa* sessions with the participants and other stakeholders were conducted on a regular basis during the eighteen months, while visits to the participants provided information on their performance. At the end of the sessions the participants completed an evaluation survey.

The first workshop was a rotational station session where the women moved from station to station in groups of 25. Each session was allocated 30 minutes. The stations had facilitators who provided information on housekeeping, landscaping, food garnishing, baking, floral art, hospitality and care-giving.

The second workshop was a leadership seminar emphasising the concept of the role of the woman in the home, in the church and in society. The topics were: leadership qualities, women mentoring women, effective communication and roles and responsibilities.

The third workshop emphasised the concept of women's health and reproductive health, which also covered breast & cervical cancer.

The fourth workshop was a leadership seminar specifically as a follow-up to the second workshop. Topics included: woman at prayer, managing finance, basic leadership skills, time management, conducting meetings and women & nutrition.

Workshops one to three were conducted at a central venue in the rural area on a Saturday, whereas the final workshop was held on a public holiday, at a hotel in the capital city. One hundred and seventy-nine women attended.

## RESULTS

Results were obtained from the following manner: *Talanoa*, participant-observer and the evaluation survey. These are discussed in the tables. Conversations were also collected and discussed below.

Table 1. What did I like best about the workshop?	Response
Organised very well	15
All the presentations	12
The variation of topics	10
The way the facilitators presented the topics	15
Time management	9
Help me with my responsibility	12
Managing finance & budgeting	10
The handouts and notes	2
Helped me a lot and learnt so many things	18
Conducting meetings	6

Table 1 & 2 show a summary of a *Talanoa* session. Fifteen respondents said the session was organised well and the same number liked the way the facilitators presented the topics. Eighteen participants said the workshop helped them a lot and they learnt so many things while only two said they liked the handouts and notes. Ten participants liked the variety of topics, and ten liked managing finance and budget, while nine participants liked the time management.

Table 2. How is the session going to change how you do things?	Response
It will change me first as a leader	15
I will have monthly meetings and change the way I conduct meetings	7
At a personal level the seminar strengthens me on issues about prayer, finance management and nutrition	5
Applying what I have learnt and share it	9
Well for me it really changed the way I look at the women's ministry by the way we encourage the women to work together	2
I understand my role as a leader now and how I can help the people I lead.	17
It is going to change a lot of things especially our meeting and the eating part	3
I will be changed and my women will change	8

To be a strong leader	15
Overall teaching was very vital to the women ministry	3

Table 2 addressed the question of how the session was going to change the way they do things. Seventeen participants said they now understand their role as a leader and fifteen said it will change them first as leaders, whereas just two said it has changed the way they look at the women's ministry. Eight participants said they will change as leaders and the women in their group will also change while seven said they will change the way they conduct meetings.

<b>Table 3. Summary of Evaluation: Workshop 4</b>	<b>Very (+2)</b>	<b>Generally good (+1)</b>	<b>Neutral (0)</b>	<b>Little (-1)</b>	<b>Not at all (-2)</b>
1. How interesting was the seminar?	102				←
2. How useful was the content for your ministry?	69	20	20		←
3. How well organised were the presenters?	83	31	12		←
4. How good were they at explaining the topic?	75	42	9		←
5. Were you given enough opportunity to ask questions?	17	7	18	18	20
6. Were questions answered adequately?	31	12	20	13	9
7. Were you given enough opportunity for discussion?	22	33	24	18	4
8. How well did the presenter facilitate discussion?	64	39	14	6	4
9. Was there sufficient time spent on different topic areas?	30	27	26	24	6
10. Was the topic covered in enough depth?	42	41	18	5	←

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6. Were questions answered adequately?	31	12	20	13	9
7. Were you given enough opportunity for discussion?	22	33	21	18	4
8. How well did the presenter facilitate discussion?	64	39	14	6	1
9. Was there sufficient time spent on different topic areas?	30	27	26	21	6
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Table 3 is a summary of the evaluation survey.

### DISCUSSION

The opportunities and accessibility created by these workshops generated a lot of enthusiasm amongst the participants. Generally, the results show that participants appreciated the workshops because of the way it was organised; the facilitators' presentation style; the content and the flexibility in time.

A common comment that came out strongly during the *Talanoa* was : "Can we have more seminars like this".

The availability of the tutor gives confidence to the participants to ask questions and share their concerns on the topic. These women are rarely involved in decision-making within their community because of the traditional belief that men are the decision-makers of the household. They feel their role is confined to the kitchen and child care, thus, they have a low self esteem.

After the session on roles and responsibilities, one of the participants admitted that she was not satisfied about her performance as a leader being a church minister's wife for 20 years. She would delegate responsibilities to other women whom she considered were more capable than her just because she was insecure. The session enlightened her to identify her roles and responsibilities and in doing so, to be confident in herself and have greater self esteem.

The hands-on experience of the practical sessions influenced the women's self-confidence. This is perceived as an important development; being treated with respect as individuals in a learning situation. During the housekeeping session they had to make a bed, and set up a bedroom.

Participant AB: "I did not realise that housekeeping is what we do at home everyday as housewives, we can convert our bedroom into a hotel room now".

Participants felt challenged to go back to their groups and practise what they have learnt.

Participant DE: "I have learnt a lot on matters I am aware of but not really considered as important".



Figure 2. Workshop participants in one of the sessions.

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### Identifying beneficial outcomes

The leadership skills workshop covered areas on personal management skills, interpersonal relationship, motivational, personal equipping and administrative skills. Because of a low self esteem and lack of knowledge many women were reluctant to take up leadership positions. This workshop has equipped them to become better leaders.

For instance, workshop participants now know how to conduct meetings. The role of the chair person, the secretary, the treasurer and the importance of having regular meetings now makes sense. In the past, meetings were conducted when the need arose and there may have been no set date and time. They can now prepare a budget for their group and plan a yearly program.

The participants have a better self image and have become more confident in their leadership roles.

A comment from one of the church ministers was: "I appreciate the sessions these women are taking as I have noticed a difference in performance of our women's ministry leader"

Women living in rural areas are generally conscious of what they give to their families in terms of nutrition compared to women in the urban areas. However, after the session on women & nutrition, the participants realised that the fruits and vegetables they have in abundance contain nutrients which are needed by the body. The participants were informed of the quantity of food that should be consumed on a daily basis. In rural areas, carbohydrates are consumed more than other food types because they are in abundant supply. Participants are now aware of the risks involved in consuming too much of a particular kind of food.

### CONCLUSION

This study has shown that distance education when delivered appropriately to suit the lives of its target group can be effective. The women in this study improved their livelihoods in many respects because they chose their topics and they influenced the way their learning was conducted.

One of the limitations of this study was the lack of funds to support the program and meet demand from other rural areas. Visits to remote areas were limited and it was not possible to compile training materials in a fully professional way, so the number of participants was minimised to women in leadership positions. The islands were only visited once because air fares were expensive.

This study, however, establishes that learner support is a significant aspect of distance education. It has successfully shown that the lives of women leaders living in rural areas can be improved through direct tutor access.

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