

Fiji Constitution Commission Seminar: The Challenge of Poverty to the Constitution. Remarks by Rachel Bhagwan, Pensioner

Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts on the challenge of poverty to the constitution.

My name is Rachel. I will be 74 years old in just over two weeks. I am a retired executive secretary, a widow, senior citizen and a pensioner. I am also an active grandmother, mother and someone who enjoys serving her community even if it is only a little contribution – you never retire from being an activist or community worker.

I come from Labasa and lived in Lautoka for more than 2 decades, but Suva is my home now. I have lived with my son and daughter in law, and now their children, since my husband passed away 8 years ago. Wherever they live, I live. However they live, I live; whether it is a three or four bedroom house or a one bedroom flat in which we all have to camp.

I consider myself an independent person, but as age catches up, we senior citizens find ourselves struggling to cope with many things which the younger generation take for granted. At the same time, while we may be independent-minded, but economic restrictions may influence decisions like where or how we live.

I was raised in Labasa and have been fortunate to have friends who live all around Fiji, in both urban and rural areas. My mother, who was in her mid-eighties when she passed on, is my role model for what an active senior citizen can be like. She is also an example of the struggles senior citizens must endure.

For senior citizens access and mobility are very important issues. During the floods earlier this year, a 68 year old woman who was a member of the Ba Seniors Centre died because she did not have access to the Ba Hospital. The death of Sushila Prahla was a reminder of how access for the elderly to health and evacuation centres should not be forgotten during natural disasters.

But it is not only in emergencies that we oldies are left in the margins. Access to important services is also big concern for us. Often the needs of senior citizens are overlooked when it comes to the location of government departments.

When the knees don't work as well as they used to and the lungs and heart are tired -walking up to the second floor can take a very long time. It can also be a very frustrating experience when the service we hope for is unavailable.

Consideration needs to be given to who will use what services when planning the location of an office. If the building doesn't have an elevator or escalator, is it too much to ask that the government departments which senior citizens visit be situated on the ground floor.

Do not assume that the only government department that deals with senior citizens is the social welfare department. Lands, iTaukei Affairs, LTA, Water Authority and FEA all need to understand their role in providing access for seniors and those with disabilities.

Access to health care does not just mean physical access to a hospital or health centre, although this is a key issue. It also means access to quality and affordable medical supplies that are needed specifically for senior citizens.

Medicines for reproductive health issue, problems like osteoporosis and such are very expensive. As a result those who are on pension struggle to be able to afford them if available, and those not on pensions miss out completely. When I say this is a painful reality, I am speaking literally.

I am very fortunate that my children, my daughter in-law and grandchildren care for me and do their best to look after me. But I am concerned about those elderly who live in low-income earning households.

Many senior citizens who lived in the rural communities, such as farmers and labourers, did not have the benefit of the voluntary FNPF membership. As such it is only if they have any savings and those savings are not used by the rest of the family that they are able to care for themselves or at least contribute to the household expenses. No one likes to be or be thought of as a burden.

In Article 25, paragraph 1, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights it is established that: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, **old age** or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

In the Declaration of Human Duties and Responsibilities, chapter nine deals with rights of the child and elderly. As a mother and grandmother, I am fully supportive of the rights of the child. I am proud that my youngest grandchildren, even at 6 and 8 years old know about children's rights.

However, I feel that there has not been equal balance given to the rights of the elderly. I hope that under the new constitution the Human Rights Commission will ensure that adequate attention is given to both ends of the age spectrum.

The DHDR Article 34 is dedicated to the formulation of the duty and responsibility to promote and enforce the rights and wellbeing of the elderly, trying to ensure the full and effective enjoyment by elderly people of all human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination on the basis of age, and to respect the well-being, dignity and physical and personal integrity of the elderly.

Additionally Fiji is also state party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, and it is through this human rights framework that legislation, policies and programmes of the state should be guided.

That said, the new constitution needs to ensure that every successive government of Fiji has a policy for the aged. For example, there could be a basic pension scheme for every senior citizen. This could include discounts on public transport, medical bills, VAT exemption on common items for senior citizens. It would also include a small allowance for those with no FNPF or government pension, who retired before the voluntary pension scheme began.

At the same time with all our physical and mental limitations, we senior citizens are not completely useless. Many civil servants who retire at 55 from government and do not find work in the private sector are still able in body and mind to work productively. Perhaps a pool of temporary workers can be established to fill gaps in both public and private sector. I'm sure the chairman and members of the Constitution Commission would agree with me that old is gold.

We still continue to play active roles in our homes and countries and we are still consumers to the economy and above all, at the core of all the issues, we as seniors, as older women, need to have our different needs acknowledged.

Our right to dignity and participation in society includes being able to contribute to our communities, our societies and our nation. Many of us still have a few more years in which we can be of use.

Vinaka, shukriya and thank you, for allowing me to share some thoughts with you today. God bless you all.