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# The Pacific Community Filmmaking Consortium: producing pacific community-based films by Pacific filmmakers

Kirsten MacLeod 

School of Arts & Creative Industries, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

## ABSTRACT

This case study will discuss the impact pathways associated with a practice-led impact and engagement project based in the Pacific through the establishment of *The Pacific Community Filmmaking Consortium*. The project aims to support community-based and participatory media production as a creative and credible approach to influencing policy and communities in relation to gender inequality and gender-based violence in the region. The project commissioned and produced a slate of eight films, *Film4Gender*, by Pacific filmmakers on the theme of gender-based violence, gender inequality and Pacific responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The project aims to give visibility to and build capacity amongst a network of Pacific community-based filmmakers and organisations whose work with communities addresses gender inequality in vernacular terms, with local participation and frames of reference. Supporting their work opens up alternative routes to understanding and influencing gender inequality in the Pacific. The Consortium's approach to practice aims to foreground the potential impact of processes of production and distribution of Pacific-made films on individuals, institutions and communities. Drawing on interviews with the filmmakers, this paper demonstrates how some of the project's first-year impact pathways reflect broader concerns of sustainability of practice and development in the region.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Pacific; community filmmaking; development; impact

## Introduction

This case study will discuss the impact pathways generated by 'Pacific Community Filmmaking and Gender, Impact and Public Engagement'<sup>1</sup> an AHRC/GCRF Development, Impact and Engagement project. The project established the PaCiFiC (the Pacific Community Filmmaking Consortium<sup>2</sup>), commissioning and producing eight films from filmmakers across the Pacific region on gender-based violence, gender inequality and local responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The collected works are known as *Film4Gender*.<sup>3</sup> With the aim of influencing gender inequality in the Pacific, the project sought to create impact through a range of pathways, including capacity building, training and networked visibility amongst Pacific community-based filmmakers and organisations.

This case study presents the theoretical and contextual background to consideration of PaCiFiC and *Film4Gender* through an impact lens. Based on interviews with the project

filmmakers, the study demonstrates outcomes and impact pathways identified after the first year of distribution, critiquing notions of impact and its measurement.

## Background

PaCiFiC and *Film4Gender* built on the work of an AHRC/GCRF networking project, entitled '*Exploring Participatory Filmmaking as a Development Method to address Gender Inequality in the Pacific*', led by Dr Tony Crook from the University of St Andrews. Between 2018 and 2019, Crook led a series of collaborative networking projects to address community-based and participatory media production as a development methodology in tackling gender inequality and specifically gender-based violence in the Pacific. The aim was to interrogate how participatory and community-based filmmaking can be effective in contributing to positive social change where traditional development and policy methods have failed.

## Contexts for impact

*Film4Gender* adopted participatory processes that situate social impacts as long term and embedded across the relational creative process. The notion of impact for the PaCiFiC project sits within a development communication context, which has seen a shift towards participatory approaches (Mefalopoulos 2008). This relates to both the design and implementation of projects as well as the conceptual framework for measuring and creating impact – for this project, not just a specific, quantifiable outcome, such as audience numbers or documenting what has changed, counts as impact, but also 'contributions to that change' (Notley, Gregory, and Lowenthal 2017, 238) or impact pathways.

An impact pathway approach informed the long-term, iterative nature of *Film4Gender*. This values the process of production in its entirety, from development to filming, outreach and distribution, and advocates building audiences and capacity for filmmakers as much as measuring the success of a particular film in terms of audience numbers. The approach also stresses impact as a process rather than as a single event, echoing Thomas, Kauli, and Borrey (2018), who have extended significant influence in their roles as practitioners and researchers in previous PaCiFiC networking projects. Thomas, Kauli, and Borrey (2018) stress the importance of recognising impact in participatory media production processes and harnessing these processes to strengthen links between community groups and policymakers. Similarly, Crook, Farran, and Röell (2016) draw on anthropological understandings of Melanesian epistemology and ontology, advocating an indigenous research philosophy where action research combines with participatory co-production and community dialogue in what Thomas (2011) has described as a 'community responsive way of filmmaking.'

PaCiFiC and *Film4Gender* can also be situated within the context of what Nash and Corner (2016) describe as the rise of the 'strategic impact' documentary and the growing link between documentary filmmaking and social change. Academic critiques in this area (Whiteman 2004; Clark and Abrash 2011; Karlin and Johnson 2011; Chattoo and Das 2014; Aufderheide 2016 and Chattoo 2020) have developed alongside institutional, funding, think tank and practitioner initiatives led by, for example, the Lear Centre (Napoli 2014), the Harmony Institute (2013), MIT Open Doc Lab and Britdoc (2015).

Successful strategic or social impact documentary films, such as *Blackfish* (2013), have been successful in creating policy or institutional change within a 'networked digital age' (Chattoo 2020, 144), making use of a range of platforms and opportunities for audiences to view films and take action. Given that digital contexts and connectivity vary across the Pacific region (Tacchi et al. 2013), the digital online sphere has been relevant for PaCiFiC and *Film4Gender*, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### PaCiFiC and *Film4Gender*: pathways to impact

The author of this article occupies the role of project Principal Investigator and is also executive producer of the films collected to form *Film4Gender*. The project design gave creative control to the filmmakers and their teams within a brief stipulating that the films should relate to gender-based violence or gender inequality. As the period for funding spend covered 2020 and the global Covid-19 pandemic, this brief was extended to include responses to and the impacts of Covid restrictions.

The *Film4Gender* collection launched in November 2020, timed to coincide with the annual global campaign, *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence*.<sup>4</sup> The premiere was held in Suva, Fiji, at the University of the South Pacific, followed by local screenings hosted by the filmmakers. *Film4Gender* screened as a collection of six new films and one pre-made film, with two films still in production in Samoa and Tonga. Links to the films and information about the filmmakers and the project are available on the PaCiFiC website and YouTube page, which are intended to be ongoing resources and pathways to impact. The *Film4Gender* collection currently includes *Strongpela Meri* (Strong Women), a documentary about the impact of Covid restrictions on women street vendors in Goroka, Papua New Guinea; *From the Market to the Parliament*, a documentary exploring the effects of Covid on women in Bougainville and one woman's journey to be elected for parliament; *Hero-ine*, a drama about police responses to gender-based violence in the Solomon Islands; *Te Ala kite Mae* (A Path to Violence), a drama set on Tuvalu about a husband's violence towards his wife; *Resilience*, a documentary about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Samoa; *Weaving the Streets*, a documentary about a trans woman in Fiji; and *Wanem ia Fos*, a pre-commissioned drama set in Vanuatu on the subject of consensual sexual relations.

Although the launch of *Film4Gender* was scheduled to coincide with the global *16 Days of Activism* campaign, the filmmakers created their own publicity for local launches, screening to local and regional audiences. The screenings for *Hero-ine* and *Te Ala kite Mae* focused on the individual films, while other screenings showed the full *Film4Gender* collection. The filmmakers invited a range of viewers to the screenings, including members of the public, participants and representatives of relevant NGOs and local organisations. Some screenings – for example, in Samoa – were also streamed on Facebook Live.

Live screenings have an impact at several levels, acting as events that bring people together, where audiences watch films and a message or story can be told. They also serve as spaces to open up dialogue, often in question and answer sessions or discussions with audience and participants that follow the screenings themselves, as with the *Film4Gender* films, where conversations have opened out into the public realm, enabling insights and opinions to be shared and new relationships formed. The longevity of

community-based films is an important aspect of the project's impact pathways, with audiences and stakeholders part of an ongoing dialogic relationship with the films (MacLeod 2015). For example, in the Solomon Islands, producer Anouk Ride hosted a public screening event in Honiara, bringing together members of the public with the public solicitor's office and family support centre on the island. The event acted as a springboard for a discussion of domestic violence and how victims are treated. *Hero-ine* was inspired by a report Anouk co-authored (Ride and Soaki 2019) about family violence services in the islands. The film and its public screening created an opportunity for dialogue with the police force about how officers respond to gender-based violence.

The networks of contributors, organisations and communities connected to or actively involved in productions were fundamentally important to the screenings as events and also to the processes of production. For example, for the premiere of *Weaving the Streets* in Suva, Fiji, filmmaker Larry Thomas and producer Dr Jacqueline Ryle assembled a diverse audience, including representatives from the University of the South Pacific, members of the clergy, students, the film's main contributor, Rani, members of gay rights advocacy group Rainbow Pride and representatives from NGOs such as the Pacific Center for Peace Building, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement and Haus of Khameleon. Thomas worked with Rainbow Pride and Haus of Khameleon in his research for the film, and the police in Fiji have since approached Haus of Khameleon for advice on training in trans issues and safety. Other organisations have also asked to use the film in a range of future community initiatives, and networks of organisations involved in the production process can use the films in their own work, distributing them and spreading impact by continuing to open up dialogue about issues relating to gender inequality and violence.

Since screening *From the Market to Parliament*, Bougainville filmmaker Llane Munau has been approached by PLAN International and the International Foundation for Electoral Services to make films to enhance the organisations' objectives in relation to gender equality and electoral participation and representation. The project's impact is evident in the development of Munau's career and participatory practice, advocating for and giving visibility to women in politics.

Online distribution, especially during the pandemic, has been important for the project, with *Hero-ine* and *Weaving the Streets* attracting significant audience numbers via YouTube. While online views alone do not guarantee impact, they can suggest reach, particularly to a younger, more digital-friendly demographic. Director Anouk Ride's perspective on the success of *Hero-ine* on YouTube, where it has had more than 18,000 views, is that the film has benefitted from its listing on the platform next to Solomon Islands-produced reggae videos, popular with young people in the islands. *Weaving the Streets* has performed well on the PaCiFiC and X'isle Productions YouTube pages, with over 1,000 views, and comments indicate that sharing has taken place amongst the gay and trans communities in Fiji. Both these examples indicate that audiences are watching locally produced content online and that local filmmakers can take advantage of this where there is established online use (in this case via YouTube).

In Tuvalu, access to projection facilities was a challenge for filmmaker Tala Simeti. However, as well as being screened at a small premiere with invited guests, *Te Ale kite Mae* has been shown on the local TV station. Taking the film to smaller outlying islands without reliable TV reception and sharing it with an important audience addressed in the film, is Simeti's next goal. In Samoa, *Resilience* has screened on the University of

Samoa's internal TV channel and, like *Weaving the Streets* in Fiji, is being used as part of university teaching.

*Film4Gender* showcases a range of work and approaches to production with the aim of contributing to a recognised broader need for investment and support for practitioners (Stupples and Teaiwa 2016). Given the precarious nature of being an independent Bougainville filmmaker, Llane Munau commented, 'I'm trying to develop a space where ... I'm just going to tell their stories in their own ways.' Munau has said that she frequently turns down commissioned films from development agencies because of the conditions attached. The *Film4Gender* filmmakers had creative control of production budgets (£3,000–£5,000 per project) and expressed satisfaction that they were not constrained in their work beyond the time-scale and the broad brief.

Capacity building within the media industries in the Pacific (Tacchi et al. 2013; Menzies 2016) also relates to another aim of the project to provide opportunities for mentoring of new and younger filmmakers. In Samoa, producer Ramona Boodoosingh worked with filmmaker Khosrow Siisiialafia, who mentored two young trainees during the production process, enabling them to learn new skills in filming, interviewing and post-production activities. Siisiialafia is committed to developing a grassroots community of filmmakers in Samoa. Similarly, Llane Munau trained a filmmaker to work with her. This trainee is now using these skills on other productions, contributing to social change in Bougainville.

The importance of training was embedded into the project via the delivery of community media workshops. Covid, and consequent travel restrictions in 2020, however, hampered this process. The filmmakers are therefore currently working to produce a second film about how they share community media on the project website in 2022. This media content offers further impact pathways, sharing the filmmakers' processes, how they work with communities and why their approach to production is important, creative and applicable (although not exclusively) in development contexts, to local and global audiences.

For participants, their involvement in the process represents a catalyst in their lives and an important impact pathway. As this project has focused on producing, screening and distributing films on sensitive and potentially traumatic subjects such as gender-based violence, the impact of the filmmaking process has been carefully considered. Their experiences, and ethical and respectful approaches to their participation in the films during and after the filmmaking process, are central to this project. For some participants, taking part in the films has opened doors in their personal lives. For example, Larry Thomas noted that Rani has been able to extend her advocacy work for trans rights in Fiji. In addition, in Bougainville, Llane Munau observed that, for some of her contributors seeking election in government, 'the film has also made them powerful because in Tok Pisin we say, "Luk Save" like, "People Notice You".'

## Conclusion

The PaCiFiC *Film4Gender* project is committed to indigenous and local responses to global development challenges using community-based media. It was designed to develop pathways to impact across the processes of production and distribution. Impact in this context is complex and its measurement should acknowledge the multiple and varied beneficiaries of process-based projects such as this one. Framing impact as pathways to impact, rather than single and project-specific outcomes, allows us to consider

methods and practices themselves as significant. For the PaCiFiC *Film4Gender* project, the ripples of impact continue in the form of ongoing sharing and dialogue on the part of the productions, participants and filmmakers.

## Notes

1. Principal Investigator: Dr Kirsten MacLeod; Grant Reference: AH/T007990/1.
2. <https://pacificfilm.net>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCay9m0ScfbKBOViR4GplbvA/featured>
4. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/take-action/16-days-of-activism>

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## Notes on contributor

*Kirsten MacLeod* is Associate Professor in Creative Media Practice and Programme Leader for BA (Hons) Television at Edinburgh Napier University.

## ORCID

*Kirsten MacLeod*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8057-2599>

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