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*Working for gender justice
across cultures*

An interview with Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese

By Cheryl White

For many years, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese has been speaking about and encouraging workers to think differently about issues of gender, culture and violence. In this interview, she identifies four key principles that can assist in working with women across culture on issues of violence. These include: not separating issues of culture and gender; making it possible for women to trace the liberative gender elements within their own culture; workers attending to their own privilege and cultural assumptions; and the development of meaningful cross-cultural partnerships.

Please note that some extracts from Taimalieutu's earlier writings have also been included in this text as the editors believe these will be of significant value to readers.

Cheryl: *The ways in which you have described how issues of gender and culture cannot be separated have been very helpful to many of us. Let me quote from one of your earlier writings:*

As women from subjugated cultures we have tried to point out that gender and culture cannot be separated. Our ways of living as women and as men are always influenced by the symbols, rituals, language and relationship structures of culture. Recognising that gender cannot be separated from culture does not mean that we are privileging culture over gender. It means that whenever we are talking about gender, cultural considerations are relevant, as are other considerations of class and sexuality, etc. Similarly, wherever we are talking about culture, relations of gender are relevant (Tamasese 2003, p.204).

Can you say more about why this is important?

Taimalieutu: The ways in which 'gender' and 'culture' are sometimes talked about seems to lift both these concepts out of relationship. In some conversations it seems as if gender is in some way separate from the general ways in which people live their lives, as if gender resides within individuals. Similarly, the ways in which 'culture' is sometimes spoken about makes it sound as if it is a fixed entity. To some degree this is to do with the English language. Gender and culture can be constructed in the English language as if they exist separately and independently of one another, which they cannot.

These separated constructions of gender and of culture are problematic, particularly for women from subjugated cultures who wish to address issues of gender. If our gender and our culture are constructed as somehow separate from each other, as soon as we attempt to take any action in relation to either issues of gender or culture, we find our identities called into question. For instance, when I return to Samoa with other Samoan women we must take great care to ensure that we are not perceived as white feminists. However, back in New Zealand, in trying to ensure that issues of culture are considered in all projects, white feminist women may believe that we are 'privileging culture over gender'.

When working with women from subjugated cultures, refraining from talking about issues of culture and issues of gender in ways that seem to place them in opposition to one another is a key consideration.

Cheryl: *I find it very helpful to consider the importance of not placing women in this bind where they have to choose between their culture or their gender. I know that you have also described the significance of taking a 'non-oppositional' view to culture. Can you say more about this?*

Taimalieutu: If we understand that gender and culture are not separate from one another then, in order to address issues of gender justice, we do not need to take an oppositional view of culture. Instead we are interested in tracing the liberative gender arrangements within a particular culture and finding ways that these traditional arrangements can inform our work.

Within all our people's histories there are non-liberative as well as liberative stories, traditions and practices. As we have written about elsewhere, the principles of belonging, liberation and sacredness, and their inter-relationship, inform every aspect of our work. We're interested in playing our part to contribute to the traditions of belonging that are liberative, and that we could call sacred. Many sacred traditions are not liberative – so we do not make these our focus. And some liberative traditions don't emphasise belonging, so similarly we do not concentrate on these. We believe in creating contexts to further those traditions and practices in which belonging, liberation and sacredness meet. And we believe that this is a challenge for all people's within our own cultures.

Cheryl: *Am I right in thinking that when working with a woman or women from a particular culture, it therefore becomes possible to trace the history of liberative gender stories in their own lives (for instance, times in their history when they have been supported to take actions that may be contrary to dominant patriarchal gender relations) and then also to link these individual stories to broader liberative gender traditions within their culture?*

Taimalieutu: Yes. Of course, the women may not initially be aware of the broader gender liberative traditions of their own culture and so some research may need to be carried out. The women themselves might be able to be involved in this, or the workers might need to approach cultural consultants to assist in this process. The research may turn up examples of women from the particular culture who are currently taking action on behalf of women's lives; it may also turn up examples

of women of that culture from the past who have been influential in relation to these issues; and it may also turn up cultural traditions that are supportive of equitable gender relations that have been obscured over time.

Let me describe this process in relation to Samoan culture. In order to find ways of grounding our current work on issues of gender in history, we thoroughly researched the traditions of gender arrangement within Samoan culture, and by doing so unearthed various liberative traditions. Specifically, our analysis of pre-colonised Samoa revealed a covenant relationships (*feagaiga*) between brother and sister that had the capacity to equalise the relationships between women and men. We learnt of traditional gender arrangements of partnership, and of the positions of respect that women had been held within Samoan culture. This research was an involved process that we took very seriously. The fact that we can identify traditions within the culture that promote the sorts of gender relations to which we aspire has made our work in the present considerably easier. And it has meant that as Samoan women we have been able to work on issues of gender without having our cultural identity questioned.

Cheryl: I can see how significant this process can be. Rather than women struggling against their own culture in order to achieve a sense of equity, they can call upon the liberative aspects of their own culture and traditions to assist them in this work. I know how being connected to a sense of women's history within my own culture is significant to me. My guess is that these explorations can also lead to ways of working that are based on specific cultural ways. Are there ways of working with issues of violence that you have developed that have evolved from Samoan cultural understandings?

Taimalieutu: The most relevant project to mention is probably the 'Stop Abuse Project' that we developed some years ago. For us, as Samoan people, where there is a matter of importance, an issue that touches the whole life of our people, it is important that we discuss it not only as a collective – at the village level – but also that we discuss it in gendered collectives – as a group of women and a group of men. There is a feeling that there are boundaries of discussion between the genders particularly around matters of sexuality. The only way that matters related to sexuality can be talked about in depth is to have separate gender

groups. Within the separate groups there is some degree of common experience, there will be differences too, but there will be common ground. The group of women need to come to a consensus on their views of the issue, as do the men. The only way this can be done equitably is through single gender groups. Having separate age groups means that the voices of young women and young men can also be heard and honoured.

Within the 'Stop Abuse' Project, all of the groups began by building a sense of belonging and strength to deal with the issue of violence. We then looked at the definition of violence and how it is lived out. We set about establishing a community consensus on what is violent and what is not. By doing this it meant that we had to rely very little on workers' judgements. The community came up with their own definitions of what is violent and what is not. Great care was taken in the ways in which we did this. We called the exercise 'Drawing the Line'.

We asked the members of the community to identify behaviours that they considered to be examples of physical, economic, spiritual, psychological and sexual violence. We asked for five examples of each type of violence. The examples ranged from overt assault to less dramatic examples of harassment.

We then asked the participants to 'draw the line' as to what violence they wanted stopped in the community. A lot of negotiations would then take place as we tried to facilitate a consensus. Importantly within these discussions the final judgement of what behaviour is okay and what is not okay is always decided by those who have suffered from it. We ask people throughout the discussions to put themselves in the places of those who have experienced the particular example of violence. We ask questions like, 'Would the people who experience this think it is okay? If not, why not? Do you still think it is okay?'

This principle of the right for those people who have been subject to violence to determine where the line should be drawn is also structured into the program. At the end of the separate training day sessions, the different groups (older men, older women, younger women, younger men) all come together. As a community, we then come up with a consensus of where we wish to 'draw the line'. As facilitators, we are clear that at the end of the day the 'drawing of the line' needs to satisfy the group that are most hurt by the violence, that are most affected. As sexual abuse is mostly experienced by women and young women, we are clear that where the line is drawn must satisfy the women. What is also

important is that, by the end of the exercise, the men must be able to see the importance of this and the reasons behind it.

Having established a community consensus on what is violent behaviour and what is not, we then explore different ways of stopping violence. As most violence is perpetrated by men, we look at ways of ensuring a restitution of the place of respect for women within the family, within organisations, within the churches, and within the culture itself.

One of the direct outcomes of this work was that the community named a Sunday of each year as 'Stop Abuse Sunday'. The community wanted to see a particular Sunday to focus on these issues, and to remember those who have suffered. It is also a day of recommitment to non-violent behaviour. Many of the men who attended the training days continue to work to live lives free of violence, and also to run groups to help other men do likewise.

Another direct result of the Project is that participants have identified that they have come to know more about the gender arrangements that were a part of Samoan culture before the Christian missionaries arrived. This knowledge had dispersed. Participants said they came to learn of the gender arrangements of partnerships, and the positions of respect that women had within Samoan culture. And they reconnected with the culture's deep commitment to its own futures – the children.

Cheryl: That seems a significant example and I can imagine how people working with different cultural groups could start to imagine developing programs and approaches that fit with the traditions of these cultures. Can I now ask you about the particular responsibilities of women from dominant cultures when working with women from subjugated cultures?

Taimalieutu: This is a big topic and I have really appreciated the other chapters in this collection by white feminists. It seems that these white feminist women no longer see issues of culture as separate or peripheral to the feminist struggle. But instead they see issues of culture are critical to the work which they are doing. They have described clearly that their own cultural views and assumptions limit what they see and what they do, and how they are taking care not to impose their values and beliefs upon women of other cultures. It seems to me that they

have articulated clearly that they do not wish for their work to in any way contribute to the violence of cultural domination. They do not wish to assert their cultural values or cultural ways of being over those of women of subjugated cultures. They do not wish to put women of subjugated cultures through therapeutic processes that would be counter-productive to the women's own cultural values.

While I think people of dominant groups can reach a level of sensitivity in relation to these issues, we cannot afford not to be vigilant. We can never know when our blind spots that relate to our positions of privilege will come up. And so, we all need a group of people around us who can help us be vigilant. We need a group of people, cultural consultants, feminist friends, women friends, men friends who are very sensitive to issues of feminism and gender justice, to sit by us, to look at our work, advise us, support us, challenge us in areas in which we need extending.

To white feminists who are engaged in this work, I would congratulate them on their hard work and soul-searching to be sensitive to issues of cultural domination. I would also say that no-one can be self-vigilant all the time, that we all need to ensure that there are other people (from subjugated cultures and subjugated positions within the culture) to monitor our work, to point out the blind spots we have not noticed and to work together to address these.

Cheryl: *Are these the sorts of partnerships that you and the Just Therapy Team have written and spoken about?*

Taimalieutu: Yes. I don't think it is possible to work across cultures or to work on issues of gender and cultural justice without meaningful partnerships of accountability. We all require 'monitoring' and feedback – in a way that supports us to take the next steps. We have written elsewhere about the ways in which we have developed partnerships across issues of culture and gender within The Family Centre (see Tamasese & Waldegrave 1996; Tamasese, Waldegrave, Tuhaka & Campbell 1998) and so I won't go into this in any detail here. And people will form these partnerships in different ways in their own contexts.

For me to be able to spend my life working on issues of gender and culture requires long-term relationships. I need the ongoing relationships with men and

with people of other cultures in order to be able to move into the outside world and address issues of culture and of gender. These relationships sustain me. Sometimes there are difficulties, but we all know that these are long-term committed relationships to one another. We know that in time the difficulties will be sorted out.

We've had thirty years in the field now. In the beginning we had no vocabulary to use to speak about power differentials, practices of power and privilege and their effects on our work and our relationships. In the absence of language and vocabulary, sometimes the discussions were fierce and cutting words were the only ones that we could find to articulate the damage done by domination. Now we've developed vocabularies and languages through which we can talk across differences. It's now possible to speak with each other across differences in much kinder ways.

What remains critical if we are trying to work for gender justice across cultures, is that we build strong partnerships in which the perspectives and knowledge of all involved are respected and honoured.

Cheryl: *Thank you Taimalieutu. As always, it's been great to speak with you about these issues.*

References

- Tamasese, K. 2003: 'Gender and culture – together.' In Waldegrave, C., Tamasese, K., Tuhaka, F. & Campbell, W. (eds): *Just Therapy – a journey: A collection of papers from the Just Therapy Team, New Zealand*, pp.203-206 (chp 14). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
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For other writings by Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, see Waldegrave, C., Tamasese, K., Tuhaka, F. & Campbell, W. 2003: *Just Therapy – a journey: A collection of papers from the Just Therapy Team, New Zealand*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.