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Gender and culture –  
together

*by*

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As women from subjugated cultures we have tried to point out that it is not helpful to us when gender and culture are talked about in ways that imply they exist separately and independently of one another. It is also misleading. 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. This is especially true when people speak about ‘true culture’ – as if the only true culture is that elusive entity that existed pre-colonisation. These 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’.

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.

We have tried to create an alternative way of approaching issues of gender and culture. This is a framework which focuses on the liberative traditions within all cultures. 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 peoples within our own cultures.

What this has meant in terms of issues of gender and culture is that 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. 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 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. It has gone on to inform a range of projects within the Samoan community on issues of gender and culture that do not bring the two into opposition (Tamasese 1998). And it has meant that as Samoan women we have been able to work on issues of gender without having our cultural identity questioned.

Elsewhere we have written 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. These are partnerships that are based on values of humility, respect, sacredness, reciprocity and love. They are also based on structures of accountability through caucusing, and leadership within these caucuses, that seek to protect against gender and culture bias in our day-to-day work. The Maori and Pacific island sections are self-determining, while the Pakeha (white section) runs its own affairs but is accountable to the other two sections. Similarly the women and the men caucus separately at times

to address their own issues. As with the cultural work, we have found it helpful to agree to creative forms of accountability that address our gendered histories and consequent biases. The women's work is self-determining. The men manage their own responsibilities but are accountable to the women.

What I will mention here is what these partnerships, these relationships, mean to me. Our partnerships and the structures of these partnerships have meant that we are not constantly locked into an oppositional frame. The partnerships provide space for separate men's and women's discussions, and for separate cultural caucuses. In these separate spaces groups are actively involved in the deconstruction and the reconstruction of gender and cultural traditions. The caucuses are also places where sustenance and support can be found in ways that further the partnerships.

For me to be able to spend my life working on issues of gender and culture requires these long-term relationships. I need the ongoing relationships with men and with people of other cultures at The Family Centre 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.