

Women's Roles in Fijian Society

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While living in the Fijian village of Naivuvuni in the fall of 1999, I had the opportunity to observe the nature and structure of the Fijian social system. For Fijians, life revolves around family and an individual's need to contribute to the family and the larger kin group. As an American, coming from a society where personal independence is so highly valued, I was amazed to see how interdependent Fijians are, and how people are defined not by their individual accomplishments and achievements, but by the way they sacrifice their individuality and personal desires in order to contribute to the larger group. However, it also became apparent to me that not all groups of people were willingly sacrificing their autonomy, and that some people were not happy with the social system they were a part of. While people in some positions, people like middle-aged married men can willingly give to support the kin system, other people, like young, married women do not feel the benefits of their sacrifices. Because of their low social standing, they are giving to others but do not feel that there is anyone contributing to fulfilling their needs. As a result, these women are often unhappy in their social roles and also in their marriages.

I was first interested in the lives of young Fijian women because they are so strikingly different than my own. While I was a young college student traveling to Fiji to study anthropology, these women, who are my age or younger, are married and have children and responsibilities I could not dream of. I decided to base my research on these women. My research explored the social structure of Fijian society and the share and

care mentality that dictates the actions of Fijians, the nature and structure of marriage within the ideology of share and care, and the actions and feelings of both married and unmarried women toward the share and care ideology and their places within the social structure. Here, however, I will focus mainly on the lives and experiences of young, married women, and also on those women who have chosen to remain unmarried.

An individual's place and role within Fijian society is dictated through a highly structured social order. Each individual is essentially assigned a role within the group based on three broad and basic principles: age, gender, and rank. As one ages, he or she assumes different roles and has responsibilities to different groups of people. For example, when she is young, a girl has the status of child and has few social obligations. However, as she grows older, she will marry, moving her into a new role of wife and eventually, mother. As a wife she has a new set of responsibilities to a different group of people, her husband's mataqali, or patriline. Although she is still responsible to her own mataqali and family, she is now also a member of her husband's group. When the couple has children, she retains her affiliations with her previous relations but also creates a new group to whom she is responsible, her own family. As she ages, and by the time her children are grown, her function within her role changes again. She still occupies the role of wife and mother but she also has some autonomy within these roles. By running her own household and participating in community and church groups, and simply by being older, she benefits from the share and care ideology and communal aspects of the society much more.

Communalism becomes a satisfying experience when individuals have some amount of control over their lives and can willingly contribute to the group, as older

married women can. They feel they are freely choosing to express themselves by contributing to the community and are therefore satisfied with the share and care ideology. When they are younger, however, and newly married, they often do not feel the benefits of this structure. Instead of feeling that they are willingly contributing to the group, they often feel constrained by the demands placed on them and the lack of options available to them. They do not have the opportunity to meaningfully and willingly contribute to the society because their actions are dictated to them by their husbands and his family. The authority and power that men have over their wives often creates serious tension and problems for the couple and a feeling of unhappiness for the woman who feels confined and constrained by her marriage. As a result, these young women often seek ways to exert some autonomy over their own lives. However, because their ability to do so is restricted by their relationship with their husband and his family, and their place within his family is dictated by the traditional values of the society, finding even a small amount of satisfying independence is difficult. However, by spending time with women in similar situations and participating in community events and groups, they are sometimes able to find a degree of autonomy and relief.

Women feel constrained in their roles for several reasons. The most obvious is that they are no longer considered children. Their new role of wife has demanding new responsibilities associated with it. While children have few, if any, social obligations, the role of wife requires that everything a woman do be done for the good of the larger kin group.

The way in which women marry also contributes to the difficulty they have in adjusting to their roles. Although arranged marriages are rarely performed today, if the

man appeals to the woman's father and asks to marry her, there is often little either the father or daughter can do to reject the marriage offer. In accordance with the structure of the society, any offer made to or by a group is difficult to reject, and doing so would likely bring shame to the father's group. There is still a strong sense of tradition surrounding marriages of choice, and as a result, women may still have little choice in whether or not to marry.

Because the society is so male dominated, women automatically occupy a lower social standing than men. Additionally, because these women are young, their position does not demand much respect from others in the community. They also do not have status because they have recently moved into a new social role. Instead of commanding respect from others, they are required by their low rank to be respectful and obedient to others.

The relationship between a woman and her in-laws is traditionally a strained and tense one. A young wife and her father-in-law often have a particularly awkward relationship. It is not uncommon for a wife to have to respect her father-in-law to the point of avoidance. As many newly married couples live with the husband's parents, this understandably makes the daughter-in-law feel uncomfortable living with her in-laws. The women I spoke with, all of whom live with their in-laws, said they felt their marriages would be better if they could live in a home of their own. One woman described the difficulty and frustrations of her relationship with her father-in-law by saying, "I have to obey him. When he's home, I have to go crawling if he is sitting, if he is standing, I have to sit [signs of respect]. He tells me what to do...Sometimes when I am angry I think, 'Man, if I had a shotgun, I would shoot him, right in the head!'"

The frustration and discomfort this woman felt is understandable. I spent a lot of time with her in the village, and saw how she was required to act around her father-in-law, one of the highest ranking men in the village. She had to follow the traditional, expected behavior around him, while other family members could be more relaxed with him. One day she and I were taking the bus into town. It happened that her father-in-law was taking the same bus. At the bus stop, she did not look at or talk to him, and she stood as far away from him as possible. Even though we were the only three people waiting for the bus, she had to avoid interacting with him in any way. Avoidance is the ultimate sign of respect in Fijian society, and by avoiding any interaction with him, this woman was showing the respect that her role dictates. However, it's a lot easier to avoid someone when you are outside and in public. Living in a small house together makes avoidance a lot more difficult.

Adding to the distress in their roles, these young wives must often do most, if not all of the housework. They often spoke of the washing and cleaning they are required to do. It occupies most of their day, every day. Washing clothes for a family of four, five, or six by hand is a very time consuming and tiring task. It usually took me more than an hour several times a week just to do my own wash.

I saw one woman's work in the home on a daily basis and saw that she really did everything for her husband's family. Each morning she made breakfast for the family and afterwards did all of the dishes by herself. She then swept the entire house and did the washing, which took the rest of the morning. After she finished, she had to prepare the midday meal and clean up after it. In the middle of the day, she may have some time to spend with her baby, who at the time was not yet a year old. In the afternoon she had

to bring water to and pasture the cow and then prepare dinner for the family. Although there were two other women living in this house, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, she did all of the housework herself. The other women spent most of their days fishing or visiting with other women in the village. Although I felt bad for this woman and offered to help her with the housework, I too found it was easy to assume that she would do everything because it was “her job in the family.”

Doing all of the housework usually means being in the house all day. One woman explained her frustration with being stuck in the house all day by saying

It's very difficult here. I want to enjoy my life but I can't. I want to go to the different houses, share jokes, things like that, but I can't. I have to stay in this house. My mother-in-law said to me that I have to stay here. I can't go to the other houses. I have to stay here and do all the work.

Because of this, all of the women I spoke with stressed the importance of having a home of their own where they could live with only their husband and children. They feel that living in their own home would give them some control over their own actions, their marriages, and their lives. They also feel that without their in-laws constantly telling both them and their husbands what to do, their relationships with their husbands would be better. Instead of being responsible to all the other members of the family, they would only have to be obedient to their husband.

Although newly married women must deal with all these constraints, and some simply said they wished they were still unmarried, they do have some opportunities in which they are able to express some small degree of autonomy over their lives. Sharing similar experiences within their roles creates a sense of understanding and camaraderie among these women. On Sunday afternoons, when little work is done by anyone in the village, they can meet and spend time with their friends. I spent several Sunday

afternoons relaxing in the home of one of these women with her friend, who had also recently married. Although they only had a short time before both of them had to return to their responsibilities, they were obviously more relaxed and happy when they could sit and talk together.

Some women have the opportunity to participate in the larger community through church groups. For one woman, being active in the church's youth group, attending its meetings and working in the group-run village shop offered her the ability to remove herself from her role in the home and act as a member of the larger group. In these ways, young women can exert some amount of autonomy over their lives while remaining in their role, although for the most part, they continue to feel restricted within their roles and unhappy in their positions.

Because of this, some young women are now choosing to remain unmarried. By not marrying, they avoid moving directly from the role of child to the role of wife and are able to avoid much of the unpleasantness married women feel. Women traditionally moved directly from one role into the next- from child to wife. There really is no role for unmarried women in this society. Therefore, they are able to avoid many of the demands and responsibilities that other women their age are faced with as wives and mothers. Women who are old enough to marry (usually between the ages of 18 and 25) and have not, are in some ways "in limbo," not being in one role or the other. In some ways, because they never officially moved out of the role, they are still considered children and enjoy the minimal responsibilities associated with that role. They are responsible to their parents, mainly their fathers, as they have been all their lives. Unlike married women who wanted to change their positions to gain independence over their lives, women who

have remained unmarried are content with their lives. Many have the opportunity to further their schooling or get jobs and make money for themselves, some are allowed by their families to date, others do so without their knowledge. All of these women plan on marrying eventually, and I know that at least one of them has since I left the village, but they wanted to wait in order to enjoy the freedom that their unmarried position allows them.

Although young married women are often unsatisfied in their roles, the older women I spoke with were quite content as wives and mothers. As women grow older and have children, their status within the community, through their role as a married woman, changes. As they gain status in the larger community, they no longer feel constrained but instead view their life as autonomous and satisfying. This change happens as women grow older, gaining respect, and move out of their in-laws' home. Additionally, as they age, men and women spend less time together and spend most of their time in separate, gender-based social worlds. Without their husbands around a lot, women control the home. Therefore, they see the contributions they make to the larger society as freely given and they derive a greater sense of satisfaction from giving them.

Therefore, although young women find their roles as wives and mothers difficult and constraining, as they grow older they are able to exert some control over their lives and feel autonomous. Although they often feel constrained in their situations, the needs of these young women are ultimately being met through the larger kin based social structure.