

## Susan Setae and the Papua Hahine Social Action Forum

ANNEMARIE LAUMAEA<sup>1</sup>

Viral Fusion Laboratory, Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia

### SUMMARY

**This article explores the childhood, educational experiences and professional life of Susan Setae. As the founder and current president of Papua Hahine Social Action Forum – an organization involved in caring and providing support for victims of violence – Susan makes an important contribution to the lives of her fellow citizens in Papua New Guinea. The article documents Susan's early influences and her passion to see women in Papua New Guinea live lives free of violence.**

#### Founder and president

Susan Setae is the founder and current president of Papua Hahine Social Action Forum, an organization involved in caring and providing support for victims of violence, notably women and children. Papua Hahine focuses on providing gender-based training programs, care and counselling and, to some extent, protection for victims of violence.

In a country like Papua New Guinea (PNG), not only are such services necessary, the need for them is almost as vital as health care. It is important to note that the need for these services is typically related to stigma associated with illnesses such as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and other debilitating conditions that are otherwise misunderstood by the perpetrators.

The role of Papua Hahine and other noteworthy non-government organizations (NGOs) and collaborators such as the Friends Foundation in alleviating the health burden in PNG cannot be underestimated, nor should it be overlooked. Social organizations are imperative in a functional health model where complex political and social issues are intertwined with serious health concerns.

The fundamental aim of Papua Hahine is to empower and educate marginalized women through gender-based training programs which focus on promoting positive conflict resolutions in the event of violent

altercations. Papua Hahine therefore works toward strengthening families, rather than the dissolution of ties, with the hope that educating women results in minimizing some of the misconceptions and struggles with the associated stigma of illnesses such as AIDS.

#### Personal life

Susan Setae was born to parents Laeka Hiovake and Marase Kavaro in Five Bay, Milne Bay Province, a long way from her home province in the Gulf of Papua. Susan was the youngest of four children, with two older brothers and a sister. Susan's parents were trainee pastors at the London Missionary Society (LMS) training college in Five Bay. When she was four months of age, her parents were posted to Goilala District in the Central Province and subsequently on to Sepoe in the Gulf Province, where the family remained while her parents took on the role of village pastors, and where her younger brother Sepoe was born. It was here in Iloka that Susan attended grades one and two at the LMS primary school, where classes were taught in Toaripi – her native tongue – and the only learning tools were an outdoor classroom with sand for books and one's index finger for writing.

At age 12 Susan progressed on to the LMS boarding school. It was this time at boarding school that Susan recalls as the most influential in her life. Susan and her fellow boarders learnt the skills of providing

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1 Viral Fusion Laboratory, Burnet Institute, 85 Commercial Road, Melbourne, Victoria 3004, Australia  
alaumaea@burnet.edu.au

for their own living. Parents paid a mere four shillings for an entire year's school fee, while all living expenses were paid for by the students through extracurricular employment programs, which involved cutting copra and selling to large businesses. Susan recalls this as forming the foundation to being a young, independent Papua New Guinean woman. This greatly influenced how Susan progressed into adulthood.

Susan recalls that the education system pre-Independence was very different to how it is in modern PNG. The system followed the Australian curriculum and teachers at Susan's school were mainly missionaries from England and often there were Samoan teachers as well. The young Susan was not only fascinated by a fellow islander speaking and teaching English but, most importantly, she was intrigued with how the pronunciation of words was 'exactly like the white teachers'. Susan was adamant that 'if they can do it, so can I'. This adage remained close to Susan's heart and it was from these early experiences that the young Susan decided to pursue a career in missionary education, the same vocation as her parents.

However, this was not to be. PNG was still in its infancy and gender bias dictated the roles of males and females. Susan's application to be a pastor consequently was rejected. This was Susan's first of a multitude of gender challenges. This, however, did not dampen her passion for the ministry; in fact it simply fuelled her interest to work in the ministry, with a focus on women and children, people whom she believed, through her own personal experiences, were often overlooked.

Susan's desire to be a teacher materialized, and so she began teaching primary school in Kikori District. In 1968, she moved to Rabaul to teach high school, merging her two passions, teaching and working with women and children in the ministry. It was following this, in 1969, that Susan was provided the opportunity to pursue a postgraduate diploma in community development at the South Pacific Community Education Training Centre in Fiji. This course enabled her to gain practical experience and training in sanitation and healthy living as the studies were centred largely around working in rural villages.

PNG was taking its initial steps toward independence with an impending development

boom, and Susan felt she could apply this knowledge and skill to her community. Seeing a fellow Melanesian country such as Fiji move ahead, Susan had faith that PNG could move just as swiftly, provided people like herself brought back skills and knowledge acquired through international education. Susan moved back to Rabaul upon completion of her studies, to the Raluana Leadership Training Centre of the United Church. She was given the role of training officer – one of the first PNG women to have been given this privilege. Here, Susan taught women in the mission until 1973.

Susan then began a life of travelling around PNG fostering partnerships with churches and communities to train women in community skills. She did this in Balimo in Western Province, Maprik in East Sepik, Bai River in Western Highlands, in Manus Province and in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Susan's working life, as an educator and trainer in church-funded programs, did not come without its challenges. Funding was, and continues to be, a common setback for development programs. Interestingly, Susan noted that the main challenge to maintain these programs was learning how to apply these new skills in everyday life. Susan says:

"To teach a person, in this case a woman, is relatively straightforward. To get her to practise this in her daily life and maintain this practice is the major obstacle."

Indeed, consistency continues to be one of the biggest challenges in PNG.

Susan's passion to work with families is reflected in her daily life. Her spare time is spent visiting and enjoying family time with her five children and nine grandchildren, which Susan states is a reflection of how she was raised. Her fondest recollection of her parents is their ability to relate to every person they encountered regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, culture or ethnicity. Her parents' genuine faith in God, she believes, was the foundation for their generosity and kindness – traits she concedes to aspire toward in her daily life and in her role as mother, grandmother, educator and friend.

While Papua Hahine at present does not have the capacity to provide shelter as part of its services, as Susan works purely on a voluntary basis, its collaboration with other

NGOs enables it to provide referrals. When asked what three changes she would like to see to improve the lives of women in PNG, Susan responded bluntly, saying her main desire was to see women enjoy life without violence. In addition, Susan would like to

see independent, well-educated women who are not reliant on their husbands. And, most importantly, Susan stresses she would like to see Papua New Guinean women educated overseas come back and be role models to the younger generation.