Fijiana’s Olympic dream opens the door for the next generation

Fiji Rugby Union wants to build new partnerships that address a range of priorities for women. Read about how that has already started.

When Ana Roqica leads her team onto the field in Rio she will be making history. It will be the first time a Pacific Island team has competed in an Olympic event. If they can win a medal, it will be only the second time a Pacific Island country has done so and the first time the Fijian flag has been raised at the Olympics.

“The nation will stop when they play. Girls everywhere will look at them and think 'If she can do that then I can do anything'.” said Mr Seremaia Bai, a retired Fiji national player and ambassador for women’s rugby in Fiji.

With the support of Oceania Rugby and Australian Rugby Union, Fiji Rugby Union is launching a campaign to welcome more girls into rugby.

Ms Vela Naucukidi, Fiji Rugby Union development officer says “In the end, we want more girls and women to invite their friends and sisters and cousins to come along and try the World Rugby programme, Get Into Rugby. We want parents to know that when girls tell them they are doing Get Into Rugby at school they are safe, they are with their friends and they are having fun. Then we want to make sure is it easy for them to be involved at the club level too.”

The opportunities don’t stop there. In the long term Fiji Rugby Union wants to build new partnerships that address a range of priorities for women.

“Rugby is already breaking down gender equity barriers just by giving girls and women a chance to experience the solidarity of being in a team and the challenge of trying something new. We want rugby to open doors to more new opportunities for girls and women. We want rugby to also give them the chance to lead, run their own business or contribute more to the community. We believe rugby develops the complete women.” said Ms Naucukidi.

Fiji Rugby Union and Oceania Rugby are partnering with the University of the South Pacific to research the barriers and motivations to playing rugby by surveying and interviewing women who play rugby, cusp players (adolescent girls who are physically active but don’t play rugby) and their gatekeepers (parents, teachers, pastors).

"The research that has been done so far has given us some really specific ideas about the type of activities to prioritise, said Kylie Bates, Director of GameChangers and a consultant for Oceania Rugby. “We are learning that rugby players have the potential to be strong influencers. They are seen as being smart, confident and brave. At the same time, we know people are concerned about the girls’ safety and well-being so we need to do things like make sure the coaches and officials are well trained and partner with organisations like Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre to help rugby address things like safeguarding children and member protection.” The research will be launched at University of the South Pacific’s Rugby Symposium on the 8th of September 2016.
Fiji Rugby Union will train women and men who are influential in the rugby community to work in schools and villages to not only run Get Into Rugby programmes but also conduct talanoa (a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations) sessions about gender roles and the opportunities for girls and women in all areas of life.

“This Fijiana are trail blazers. They started playing rugby when not many other women did and they made their way to compete in the Olympics. We honour their effort and we want to make it much easier for the next group of women who are coming through. Most of all, we want more girls and women to enjoy the solidarity, challenge and excitement in this game.” said Mr Sale Solovaki, Fiji Rugby Union Development Manager. “We want to make rugby welcoming to everyone while improving things for the players that have forged the way.”

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