

## **Professor Shameem- only female PhD in Juridical Science in Fiji**

Professor Shaista Shameem, the Dean of the Justice Devendra Pathik School of Law, is the only female PhD holder in law in Fiji. She has just attained her Doctorate in Juridical Science (SJD) from the University of Waikato, New Zealand and will be graduating at a ceremony in December.

Professor Shameem already had a PhD in Sociology from the University of Waikato which she had attained in 1991. She taught Sociology, Social Anthropology and Women's Studies at the School of Social Sciences at Waikato University from 1985 until 1997 when she returned to Fiji to practise law, initially at Gates and Associates and then as Director of the Fiji Human Rights Commission from 1999 until 2009 when she joined the School of Law, the University of Fiji as Associate Professor.

Professor Shameem credits her parents and teachers for fostering her intellectual curiosity from an early age. She is the eldest in a family of four sisters. Her mother was a school teacher, a first generation Fijian of Indian heritage, and her father was a poet and playwright who was born and raised in what is now Pakistan and was a student writing Urdu poetry in support of independence during anti-colonial protests by Gandhi. He was training to be a doctor when family circumstances interrupted his studies. Professor Shameem said that her parents raised their children to be independent and to achieve highest possible qualifications.

“I am the eldest so the pressure was on me to show by example. My family was not wealthy and my parents had to work hard for everything. Independence in all aspects of life and self-reliance was an important value that my parents instilled in me at an early age. I have worked from the age of 22 as I have valued the independence that my careers have given me both as a woman and as a professional,” she said.

Professor Shameem's various careers range from journalism (including as a film-maker), to academia in New Zealand and Fiji, to law. During her years with the Fiji Human Rights Commission she was the Commission's chief litigator, appearing in court on behalf of clients of the Commission with various human rights complaints.

Professor Shameem's SJD thesis is about constitutions and why they have to be legitimate. She said that she had been working on the subject for 10 years.

“I had been involved in a number of constitutional and human rights cases as Director of the Fiji Human Rights Commission and during my work I realised the importance of the contractual relation between a government and its people; we called it the 'social contract'. Since this contractual relationship is expressed in a constitution it is important to ensure that any constitution is legitimate. There are guidelines for constitutional legitimacy. I chose the topic

because of Fiji's turbulent constitutional history and my involvement in national and international human rights issues," she stated.

When asked about the breaking the glass ceiling, Professor Shameem said that she was not convinced that women had become truly liberated and free just because they were educated.

"The prejudices against women are still there in society; for example promotions are still hard to come by for women. People still think that women should be responsible in the kitchen, be the primary caregivers in the family as well as have a career. Women's days are always longer. Playing a double or triple role is so normal for women that no one questions it," she noted.

She said that she was fortunate to have had her family's support along the way to be able to study to her heart's content.

Professor Shameem encouraged women to decide what they want and then go ahead and do it- that was what independence meant, she said.

She also noted that more could be done to empower women in Fiji including reforming the education system. The education system would need to provide a kind of autonomy required for our young women to be able to think freely without fear of breaking society's prejudiced rules for women.

She advises young women who wish to be successful in the legal fraternity to be definitive of their choices.

"To have a successful legal career a person has to work long hours, be dedicated to the profession, have integrity and common sense and be a good communicator with empathy for the disadvantaged. The rest will follow," she concluded.