1. A Feel for Context: Contingency and Women’s Collective Agency

What is a contingent approach to women’s collective political agency and why is it valuable? This chapter offers answers to these questions by surveying existing approaches to the study of women’s organising and considering where and how these approaches might be usefully expanded. The conceptual framework I develop here foregrounds the importance of contextual factors when seeking to understand women’s political agency. This framework is then deployed in the following chapters to investigate the ways in which circumstance has shaped the political ambitions articulated by women’s organisation in Fiji over the past four decades.

As I have established, feminist analysis of women’s organising has generally been oriented in ways which avoid these considerations. In the main, emphasis has been placed upon the distance separating the sphere of formal institutional politics from the sphere of women’s organising, and the outcomes which result when the two spheres engage. These accounts have provided important insights into the ways that women’s collective political agency is manifest in domestic and international politics. Yet as I have shown, this approach allows limited emphasis to be placed upon the broader contingencies which shape this type of political activity.

Feminist research into women’s organising is vast and demonstrates a diverse range of opinions and perspectives that are not always in harmony. Yet, at the risk of reductionism, I contend that two predominant orientations can be found in this literature. The first emphasises reform and the extent to which women’s organisations are responsible for promoting gender-sensitive change within formal political institutions (Stephenson 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Joachim 1999, 2003; True and Mintrom 2001; Brown-Thompson 2002; Reilly 2009). The second emphasises a feminist counter-politics of resistance and gives closer attention to the challenges which have been unmet by the women’s movement. This type of research examines the increasingly ‘professionalised’ processes of political negotiation occurring amongst women’s organisations and asks if women’s capacities to challenge conservative and gender-discriminatory institutional agendas are diminished in the process (Yuval-Davis 2006: 288; Antrobus 1984; Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Kahn 2002; Tobar 2003).

Each of these perspectives offers compelling, if opposing, illustrations of women’s capacities for political agency. But could they also be criticised for making their assessments from an analytical ‘cliff-top’? Are these contending evaluations of women’s organisations underpinned by ““ideal-typical” understandings of
how women’s movements should operate in the broader political terrain’ (Marx-Ferree 2006: 10)? Both approaches privilege easily identifiable forms of reform- or resistance-oriented organisational activity but they also seem to assess how this behaviour aligns with pre-established ideals dictating the ‘right’ type of behaviour for women’s groups.

Such ideal-type understandings of organisational integrity help to reinforce the conceptual distance which many see as separating the domains of women’s organising and institutional politics. This is done by highlighting particular organisational features and approaches to the exercise of power which are said to be distinctive to women’s organisations and which facilitate their reform- or resistance-oriented political activity. This type of analysis heavily emphasises collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism within the realm of women’s organising and routine contrasts are drawn with formal models of institutional politics which are alternatively construed as hierarchical, conservative and ultimately governed by state interest (Walker 1984; Ferguson 1984; Stephenson 1995; Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Joachim 1999, 2003; True and Mintrom 2001). What seems to be missing from these accounts is a consideration of the way that contingent factors in the shape of historical legacies, socio-cultural influences, faith-based allegiances, class affinity, local political identification and broader trends in global governance and development all influence women activists’ negotiations of these privileged aspects of organisational activity in specific settings.

This study of the women’s movement in Fiji addresses the same aspects of organisational activity—collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism—which feature as key themes in the research described above. My objective here, however, is to describe these features in a way which is sensitive to the types of interplaying contingent factors previously noted as they have emerged locally in Fiji and shaped the regional and international political terrain.

In this way, I avoid privileging assumptions about organisational structures, ambitions or transnational engagements in ways which reinforce the idea of an obligatory distance between women’s organising and a monolithic institutional politics operating locally or globally. Rather, the aim is to develop a ‘situated’ appraisal of these aspects of organisational behaviour, showing how they are shaped by prevailing local and global factors and forecasting what this might mean for assessments of women’s political agency more generally. In the following discussion, therefore, I describe the conventional ways in which collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism are described in literature on women’s organising and then draw on a smaller body of research conducted in this area which eschews ideal-typical assessments of organisational agency in favour of greater attention to ‘agency in context’ (Howell 2003; Al-Ali 2003; Tripp 2003; see also Howell and Mulligan 2005). I conclude each section of this
discussion with a consideration of how and why this focus on contingency is vital to understanding the history of women’s organising in Fiji and the broader Pacific Island region.

Collectivity

Within both reform- and resistance-oriented studies of women’s political activity, a strong emphasis is placed upon collectivity as a defining feature of women’s organising. This is routinely contrasted with the individually competitive realm of formal institutional politics. Women’s capacity to work together to achieve political goals is seen as a strength of the women’s movement and something distinctive within the broader realm of political behaviour (Ferguson 1984: 217; Stephenson 1995; Marques-Pereira and Siim 2002; Jaquette 2003: 340). Much is made of the absence of hierarchy both within and between women’s organisations and invidious contrasts are drawn with the rigid and competitive realm of formal political institutions which is deemed to be more ‘hostile to women’ (Ferguson cited in Jaquette 2003: 339; see also Walker 1984; Goetz 1997; Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Friedman 1999). Therefore, across both reform- and resistance-oriented literatures, a strong degree of emphasis is placed upon the horizontal and fluid nature of relationships amongst and within women’s organisations and the extent to which this enables collective political agency to be maintained (Stienstra 1994: 146; Jaquette 2003: 340).

For scholars who take a reform-oriented view of women’s organising, the collective and non-hierarchical aspects of women’s political activity are viewed as unconventional and yet influential. These ideas are particularly evident in work which focuses upon political engagement between women’s organisations and the United Nations (UN), and most significantly, in studies which describe the participation of women’s organisations in the UN World Conferences for Women in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). These events are understood to have set the stage for the emergence of a ‘new feminist movement’ which was flamboyant, participatory, spontaneous, even chaotic, but also influential (Stephenson 1995: 136; also Stienstra 1995; West 1999; UNIWY Secretariat 1975: 38). Lois West (1999: 178) argues, for example, that as the profile of women’s organisations rose through participation at these types of events, increased recognition was given to ‘non-institutionalized efforts … to change national and international processes.’

When these questions are examined from a resistance-oriented perspective, assessments of organisational capacities to sustain horizontal models of collectivity are less optimistic. From this vantage point, there is a strong suggestion that engagement with formal institutions both at state and
international levels tends to stifle organisational capacities for fluidity and makes the maintenance of horizontal relationships within and between organisations more difficult. Even when organisations have an ideological commitment towards collective horizontality, evidenced by efforts to foster voluntarism and collaboration, interaction with the institutional realm is seen to mitigate against this lasting. The idea here is that institutional influence encourages women's groups to become more professionalised, adapt their operations to the more vertical structures of formal politics, and act less cooperatively as they compete for institutional largesse (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Tobar 2003).

This privileging of fluid and horizontal collectivity is an important feature of research into women's organising, yet it has also been challenged by a smaller body of research conducted in settings as diverse as China, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East which offers a more contextualised perspective of how women's organisations operate (Howell 2003; Al-Ali 2003; Tripp 2003; see also Howell and Mulligan 2005). In these studies, the broader protocols that regulate social and political life also appear within organisational structures, influencing how models of collectivity are negotiated. This research shows how state-authority structures, religious-belief systems and socio-political influences have an impact on conduct within women's organisations.

For example, where the state is a dominant presence in economic, social and political life, mass women's organisations have been a common feature of the political landscape. These organisations may define themselves as NGOs but they often retain close links with the state and operate along similarly hierarchical lines. Jude Howell's description of the structures which regulate Chinese mass organisations, in particular, the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) is one powerful example of this tendency (Howell 2003: 205–08). Although the dominance of the ACWF in China has made it more difficult for newer women's organisations to establish their own credentials, the ACWF's close and often 'porous' relationships with the Chinese state has also provided some of these groups with an 'institutional structure with inroads into the system already in place' (Howell 2003: 205, 206).

Howell's account suggests that in state-dominant contexts, women's organisations can position themselves to draw political advantage by adopting similarly vertical structures. Aili Mari Tripp's descriptions of the position of mass women's organisations in post-independence Africa are more pessimistic about the scope for political agency that results from such tactics. In the immediate post-independence context, where many African countries were ruled by single-party regimes, mass organisations for women were also common and, as in China, mirrored the hierarchical structures of ruling parties (2003: 235–38). But as funding for these organisations often came from ruling political
parties, women’s organisations were, for the most part, following ‘party-dictated agendas’ which offered limited avenues for challenging the ‘status quo when it came to pushing for women’s advancement’ (Tripp 2003: 237).

Discussing the Middle Eastern context, Nadje Al-Ali has also argued that women’s organisations reflect the broader ‘hierarchical and authoritarian’ nature of political life (2003: 226). While some organisations have attempted to create more participatory organisational structures, they have encountered opposition from the state, from Islamists and also from ‘other activists within civil society who follow more traditional patterns of political and social engagement’ (Al-Ali 2003: 228). Moreover, even in organisations that take a strong stance against such pressures there is a tendency for ‘charismatic activists to frequently take over leadership’ and direct operations according to their own vision (Al-Ali 2003: 226). Al-Ali’s account of women’s organising in the Middle East suggests that with the increasing politicisation of Islam, and a ‘lack of existing democratic models and experiences in democratic political structures,’ the scope for organisations to manifest the type of informal, non-hierarchical structure conventionally understood to enhance women’s political agency is extremely limited (2003: 228). Nevertheless, she also contends that although collective horizontality may be less evident amongst women’s organisations in the Middle East than elsewhere, these groups continue to bring difficult and confronting aspects of gender disadvantage into the public domain (2003).

Similar considerations need to be taken into account when examining the nature of collectivity within women’s movements in the Pacific. In this context, personal understandings of social location are shaped by prevailing cultural and political imperatives and these have a profound influence upon the ways that individual members within women’s organisations, and indeed entire organisations, tend to conduct themselves.

The impact of Christianity is significant in this regard. Christianity may be an imported institution, but it is also important to appreciate how Christianity has been ‘indigenised’ in the Pacific (Jolly and MacIntyre 1989; Jolly 1996, 1997, 2003; Tuwere 1997; Douglas 2000b; Ryle 2005; Tomlinson 2009), how it influences the conduct of women’s groups generally in this setting (Douglas 2003: 7; see also Jolly 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003; Douglas 1998, 2002; Boseto 2000) and how it can ‘normalise’ hierarchical structures of authority even within entities which adopt a more secular identity.¹ For example, Anna Paini’s (2003: 88–90) study of the Drueulu Women’s Group in Lifou, New Caledonia, shows how broader social hierarchies were reflected within this organisation and

¹ The Church’s strong community-level presence in the Pacific is such that it is often only faith-based women’s organisations which have the network capacity to ‘reach down and to make links between village women’ (Scheyvens 2003: 29).
linked to women’s participation in faith-based communities. She argues that the membership of a local high chief’s wife, other elderly women married into high-ranking families, and the wives of two local catechists, provided leadership for a local women’s group with the added benefit of enhancing its credibility within the community when it tackled difficult social questions.

Other considerations about social location are pertinent to understanding the way relationships are formed and how they structure women’s groups. This is particularly evident if we consider the influence of communalism and its impact on women’s organisation in Fiji. Communalism is a contemporary legacy of the roughly one-hundred-year period of British colonial rule on this island territory which ended officially in 1970 (Sutherland 1992; Denoon 1997; Firth 1997; Robertson and Sutherland 2001; Kelly and Kaplan 2001). While it has been common to examine the potency of ethnic politics, or the ‘race’ question as it is defined in the local idiom, in ways which concentrate upon formalised sites of political contestation between the country’s indigenous and Indian population (primarily descended from a colonially imported, indentured labour-force) less attention has been focused upon the communalism prevalent within Fiji’s civil society. Today the make-up of many sporting associations, youth groups, cultural organisations and even some trade unions is defined on the basis of ethnicity. In addition religious affiliations within both the Indo-Fijian (Moslem and Hindu) and Fijian (Christian, primarily Methodist) communities also reinforce this communal aspect within Fiji’s civil society. The profile of many associations pursuing interests in policy, welfare, advocacy or education tends to emphasise an overarching, faith-based orientation. The make-up of many women’s organisations has reflected this broader communalist trend and in important instances has seen groups coalesce around sites of religious, cultural or ethnic identity.

Of course, neither of Fiji’s two principal ethnic communities is homogeneous. Within the indigenous population particularly, intra-communal rivalries over control of the country’s political and economic resources, have also contributed to political instability in Fiji as a narrow chiefly elite, endowed with political privilege during the colonial period, has sought to protect its status since decolonisation (Durutalo 1985; Sutherland 1992; Robertson and Sutherland 2001; Fraenkel 2000). This group has sought to legitimise a hierarchical, clan-based vision of political leadership in Fiji through appeals to the cultural authenticity of such a model and its effectiveness in safeguarding broader aspects of indigenous paramountcy, such as the preservation of land tenure.2

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2 Indigenous protocols generally promote hierarchical and patriarchal social structures as the norm, although, as Christian Toren (1999: 163–81) suggests, these structures may also be balanced by ideas about reciprocity and competitive equality.
This emphasis upon the appropriateness of hierarchy again spills over into civil society. The leadership structures of some important civil society groups tend to invest authority in those members who have a high social rank or age seniority. Other organisations may have begun with flatter structures but over time produced personalities with a firmly established organisational authority. These figures neither voluntarily relinquish their positions nor are they likely to face challenges from their ‘subordinates.’ Again, this has ramifications for how questions of collectivity are negotiated amongst women’s organisations. For example, Annelise Riles (2001: 51) described the importance of ‘institutionalized expressions of Fijian norms of hierarchy’ within women’s organisations stating that older women and women with a higher chiefly rank assumed the right to speak first while younger women were given the opportunity to speak only when explicitly asked.

The strong cultural importance placed upon norms of quiet diplomacy, frequently described as the ‘appropriate’ means by which to articulate and mediate between political demands in the Pacific, also explains the presence of hierarchy within civil society. Within particular associations, interactions between ‘superiors’ and ‘subordinates’ are expected to take place in accordance with protocols which emphasise ‘modesty,’ ‘self-effacement’ and the good of the community (or organisation) rather than the promotion of individual will (Robertson and Sutherland 2001: 56).

Within the women’s movement in Fiji, there have been activists who have sought to challenge the prevalence of social hierarchy and communalism both within individual organisations and as they shape community interaction and political engagement more generally. Since the 1960s, women’s groups have formed which have challenged the racially segregated terrain of women’s organising by promoting a multicultural identity and models of collectivity which are not defined by ethnic identity. However, as the following chapters will demonstrate, these organisations have not been immune to the communal tensions that have simmered more generally in Fiji across the previous decades. Their efforts to maintain a harmonious collective structure have often been imperilled when national political crises have threatened to fracture the country along its ethnic fault lines.

Likewise, there have been groups that have worked to promote ideas that are antithetical to notions of hierarchy but still culturally relevant—reciprocity, accountability and competitive equality (Toren 1999). Yet the repeated emergence of anti-democratic and authoritarian political forces has made this task increasingly difficult in Fiji.

These preliminary considerations demonstrate the importance of developing a contingent understanding of organisational collectivity and how this might
be shaped by prevailing socio-cultural, political and religious values. As the following chapters of this book will make clear, this perspective challenges the more conventional idea of women's organising as a sphere in which hierarchy or division should be ideally absent, and produced only as a result of engagement with formal political institutions.

**Progressive ideas**

Women's organisations contribute to the ‘conscience of the body politic,’ argues Arvonne Fraser, for they have a political autonomy which allows them the ‘freedom to test out and promote the adoption of new ideas, policies and programs’ (cited in Karl 1995: 5). Such claims about the relative autonomy of these groups, and how this enhances their progressive political potential, feature heavily in research on women's organising. The idea here is that proximity to grassroots communities, rather than the more rigid realm of institutional politics, enables women's organisations to operate in a creative manner, enhancing their capacity to formulate innovative and progressive responses to the needs of women. As such, progress and innovation are seen to be the domain of women's organisations and to contrast with institutional political activity, viewed more negatively as 'out of touch' with community expectations and inclined to reinforce rather than challenge the (gender discriminatory and conservative) status quo.

Within reform-oriented accounts of women's organising there is a strong appreciation of the limitations that are placed upon organisational autonomy. Nonetheless, strong emphasis is placed upon the idea that organisations' normative legitimacy depends upon the maintenance of a certain degree of distance from institutional authority. This, it is assumed, will allow groups to at least function as creative issue framers or ‘autonomous makers of meaning’ (Khagram, Riker and Sikkink 2002: 11) and allow them to bring something innovative, and potentially progressive, to the negotiating table when attempts are made to reform the institutional realm.

The success of global campaigns waged in the early 1990s to make the issue of violence against women an international human rights concern have been widely analysed and celebrated from this perspective. This effort was led by an important coalition of women's organisations associated with the Center for Women's Global Leadership, headed by Charlotte Bunch, and is said to have been instrumental in bringing the issue of violence against women into international focus (Connors 1996; Otto 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Joachim 1999, 2003; Brown Thompson 2002). This strategy saw women's organisations argue that gendered forms of violence should no longer be considered 'domestic' or
‘private’ phenomena. Rather, these acts of violence were presented as violations of international human rights law; a shift which threw both the perpetrators of the violence and the states condoning such violence into the international spotlight. Favourable UN responses to this argument at the end of 1993, and the incorporation of this position into a number of UN policy documents promoting human rights and gender equality in the ensuing years, are repeatedly cited as evidence of women’s organisations’ progressive and innovative potential as promoters of institutional reform at the international level (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Joachim 1999; Brown Thompson 2002).

In the field of international development, the progressive potential of women’s organisations has been similarly acclaimed. Women’s organisations are understood to be the drivers of innovation in development policy, assisting in the creation of ‘new structures and organisational cultures’ that are participatory and respond directly to ‘women’s needs, interests and behavioral preferences’ (Goetz 1997: 7; see also Clark 1997; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Van Rooy 1998; Howell and Pearce 2001). The idea that women’s organisations have the capacity to transform the development perspectives of institutional actors in ways which are appropriate to local settings has seen governments and aid agencies increasingly seek active partnership with local women’s groups in many settings (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999).

Resistance-oriented perspectives of women’s organising tender alternative explanations for why institutions may be interested in developing closer relations with women’s organisations. It is argued that increased emphasis upon the participation of non-state actors in development is consistent with neoliberal approaches to development economics which posit the importance of state streamlining and local entrepreneurship above state welfare support and other more literal forms of social provisioning (Hulme and Edwards 1997; Van Rooy 1998; Howell and Pearce 2001; Schild 2002). The outsourcing of government services to the private and non-government sector has become an important aspect of this policy platform and further opened the way for women’s organisations to play a role in institutional efforts to promote women in development. Yet, although development institutions tend to describe their working relationships with women’s organisations as ‘partnerships,’ the degree to which organisations can maintain their autonomy while accessing institutional funding and other forms of benevolence comes into question. Observers in a number of settings have noted that as organisations are pressured to assume aspects of service provision that have previously been undertaken by the state, they begin to emulate the normative vocabulary of formal institutions, and in so doing, tend to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Rankin 2002; Schild 2002; Bergeron 2003). Such assessments suggest a stifling of organisations’ progressive capacities through institutional engagement.
This privileging of autonomy as the key to innovative potential within women’s organisations is challenged, however, by accounts that examine how these groups operate in authoritarian political contexts, or developing states (Friedman 1999; Howell 2003; Al-Ali 2003). Here, they are seen to interact with formal or more informal sites of political authority in complex and fluid ways. Less emphasis is placed upon the supposed links between organisational autonomy and progressive potential, and greater attention is paid to the ways in which women’s organisations negotiate the space to articulate agendas of reform while operating in close proximity to institutionalised sites of political power.

For example, in authoritarian contexts the relationship between organisational autonomy and progressive capacity is less clear than in more conventionally framed accounts of women’s political agency. Jude Howell suggests that while a degree of autonomy may be conventionally understood, ‘axiomatically,’ as a ‘measure of the strength and validity of civil society,’ the dynamics of relationships between women’s organisations and the state in China are far more complex (2003: 205). She observes that in China: ‘[n]ot only are the boundaries porous and blurred,… but civil society organizations often, but not always, positively seek a relationship with the state so as to seek access to resources, legitimacy and authority’ (2003: 205).

Many women’s organisations have close links with the communist state, through the organisational involvement of state officials, and the corresponding determination shown by many groups to access the ‘funds, contracts and protection’ that the state can provide (Howell 2003: 205). Since the state remains a dominant presence in economic and social life, many women’s organisations choose to ‘work with or keep a quiet distance from the party-state rather than directly oppose it’ (Howell 2003: 206). The important point Howell makes in this analysis, however, is that progressive potential and a capacity for innovation does not necessarily rely upon organisational autonomy from the state.

Al-Ali makes some similar observations in relation to the Middle Eastern context (2003: 222). In many cases, women’s non-government organisations were actually the result of initiatives begun by women located within state bureaucracies. In Iran the relationship between the two spheres is such that women’s groups are often labelled as governmental non-government organisations. Such seeming contradictions are indicative of how state-civil-society relations operate within the Middle Eastern political environment, where repressive measures have often been put in place to curb critical political activity. Yet as Al-Ali maintains, within the realm of institutional politics, individual government officials often voice support for participatory models of governance and a stronger ‘commitment to democratic principles’ than is evident in official institutional rhetoric (2003: 231). Al-Ali’s reflections suggest that while the state may maintain a strong degree of control over civil-society activity in certain settings, at the level of
individual agency there can still be some convergence of political agendas, and recognition of the need for reform of the status quo. Such views challenge the idea of a monolithic institutional politic, necessarily hostile to those promoting gender-sensitive reform.

Elisabeth Friedman’s (1999) research on women’s organisation in Venezuela also reflects this idea as she describes how innovative reforms for women have at times also been negotiated through close cooperation with state authorities. Through the creation of a women’s non-government coordinating body named CONG, women’s groups in cooperation with state authorities, were able to push for wider public recognition of gender issues and to lead important campaigns for legal reform and the creation of institutional machineries for women. Although she is critical of the ways in which the engagement between CONG and the Venezuelan government has played out in more recent times, Friedman claims that in the early years CONG maintained a strong cooperative relationship with the state. She argues that this productive engagement was made possible due to the fact that both within CONG and within the state, a diversity of political interests were represented and no one voice was in a position to dominate (1999: 366–68). Together, these discussions indicate that in settings where women’s political autonomy is limited, the capacity to promote progressive agendas of reform may remain.

Likewise, existing research on women’s organising in the Pacific Islands suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between autonomy and progress and, in particular, an understanding of how the region’s women activists negotiate the social importance of prevailing systems of cultural and religious belief. From a western secular standpoint, cultural and religious influences are often viewed as an obstacle to women’s advancement (Merry 2003a, 2006b). Yet in the context of the Pacific Islands, these influences are evident within civil society and have important impacts upon the ways women’s organisations promote feminist goals. While it might be assumed that this scenario indicates the reduced autonomy of women’s organisations operating in the Pacific, provocative challenges to the prevailing status quo remain possible in these circumstances.

For example, gender activists frequently make reference to local systems of religious and customary belief in their efforts to promote women’s advancement. In so doing, they attempt to navigate local resistance which dismisses ideas associated with ‘women’s liberation or feminism’ as ‘European, colonial

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3 While this scenario helped CONG to preserve its autonomy in the short term, Friedman argues that in the longer term, the organisation became increasingly dependent upon state funding and that this climate encouraged women to think of their own projects first rather than broader goals that might require greater collaboration between organisations. Friedman argues that as a result of ‘near-clientelism’, projects were tailored to the priorities of government and ‘radicality’ was lost in the process (Friedman 1999: 370–71).
or alien’ to local patterns of social life (Douglas 2003: 8). This sees women activists make reference to the customary significance of women’s roles as they promote challenging messages of social or political reform. Affirmation of women’s customary authority—within the family, within the realm of cultural production, and within some systems of social hierarchy—are all seen as important strategies which imbue Pacific women activists’ political demands with a cultural legitimation and local authenticity (Jolly 2000: 132; Tariseisei 2000; Paini 2003).

References to Christianity function in the same way. Commentaries upon campaigns led by Pacific women to challenge the pervasiveness of gender-based violence, for example, have described how activists combine references to Christian teachings on the respectful and just treatment of women with appeals to more secularised rights-based agendas prevailing within transnational advocacy communities (Jolly 1997, Douglas 2003). Again, such strategies are seen to lend a local authenticity to activity which is often viewed in a contentious frame by those who brand feminism as harmful to traditions and local value systems.

While these challenges to gender discrimination are promoted in ways which have correspondence with the cultural and religious institutions of the Pacific Islands, they also indicate how prevailing values and belief systems shape the public space in which women’s organisations operate. Certainly these strategies can be viewed as ‘creative’ (Jolly 2005a: 154) forms of advocacy which draw upon local cultural and religious values as ‘resources’. Yet it also needs to be recognised that this type of activity references social norms and values which have not always been empowering for women (see Stivens 2000: 22).

For example, invocation of women’s maternal roles may well provide campaigns led by women’s groups with a politically powerful communal reference point and lend local legitimacy to advocacy efforts. Nonetheless, this positive emphasis also tends to gloss over the fact that rates of maternal mortality in some Pacific countries are amongst the highest in the world and that for many women of the region, motherhood has a ‘considerable physical and mental cost’ (Douglas 2003: 10).4

In a similar vein, the articulation of women’s human rights messages with Christianity also tends to downplay patriarchy in the Church. Women have minimal representation within the authority structures of Pacific mainline churches and biblical texts are frequently used selectively by religious leaders to legitimate women’s subordinate status in society more generally. Women may be recognised as the ‘backbone of the church’ in many Pacific contexts

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4 In her examination of women’s roles in Simbo, Western Solomon Islands, Christine Dureau (1993: 18, 20–22) argued that despite women’s maternal roles being viewed as central to their gender identity, Simbo women also equated motherhood with ‘exhaustion, illness and decrepitude.’
(Varani-Norton 2005: 223), however the expectation that their Church duties will involve participation in fundraising activities and practical support for Church meetings and social occasions generally results in increased demands made upon ‘women’s time, material wealth and energy’ and little else (Varani-Norton 2005: 240). Emphasising the emancipatory aspects of Christian faith in the Pacific also downplays the historical influence of the Christian missions which, in combination with colonial influences, frequently deprived Pacific Island women of their customary and traditional status (Jolly and MacIntyre 1989; Ralston 1989; Meggitt 1989).

Promoting women’s rights in ways which reference customary values may also entail some risk. In many post-independence contexts, local political elites within the Pacific region have frequently made reference to customary values in ways that aim to restrict women or sabotage the political ambitions of those committed to gender equality (Jolly 1997: 155). Such tendencies are particularly pertinent to analysis of gender politics in Fiji where selective discourses of ‘indigeneity’ have been used by successive nationalist-dominated political regimes to justify women’s minimal representation in formal politics (Cretton 2004: 4). In recent decades, Fijian nationalists have also issued increasingly vocal demands that Fiji declare itself a Christian state, thus reinforcing the close links between state authority and the Church in this context, and further legitimising patriarchal systems of social and political regulation.

When appraised in this light, it is clear that gender advocates’ references to systems of religious belief or customary value can be politically enabling and constraining. These strategies may open the way for women activists to broach difficult questions in Pacific societies. Yet they may also reflect underlying currents that restrict the ways local actors understand their place in Fiji’s broader politics. Contending scenarios of this type demonstrate why a contingent appraisal of women’s organisations’ progressive potential is warranted. In this study, I avoid overemphasising the supposed benefits of organisational autonomy, and instead provide a more situated account of the varying ways Fiji’s women activists have themselves understood their capacity to negotiate progressive solutions for women in shifting political circumstances. Such an approach provides insight into the benefits and risks that have accrued from activists’ efforts to work within and respect prevailing socio-cultural systems.

**Transnationalism**

References to transnationalism constitute a third important theme in feminist research on women’s organising, with attention frequently drawn to the local and international ‘frequency’ of gender advocacy efforts (Al-Ali 2003:
In these discussions, transnationalism is defined loosely, signifying ‘any actor, organization, or issue that could be either international or global in orientation’ (Booth 1998: 120). This allows researchers to consider how women’s organisations use transnational networks to make local questions of gender subordination resonate at the international level (Joachim 1999, 2003; Brown Thompson 2002; True and Mintrom 2001). Reversing this lens, they also focus upon the ‘significance of transnational advocacy and activist networks’ at the local level, describing how international discourses are employed by women’s organisations in the community context (Naples and Desai 2002: 34–41; Bickham Mendez 2002; Wells 2002; Karides 2002; Wing 2002; Friedman 1999).

The term transnationalism is used to examine the corresponding political agendas taken up by women’s organisations from different locations. It is viewed as enabling a more flexible approach to comparative appraisals of feminist politics at the global level. This terminology is often invoked to avoid questions of gender subordination being articulated in ways which reference hegemonic, universalising ideals (Reilly 2009; Ackerly 2001) or romantic, yet essentialising images of ‘global sisterhood’ (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Transnationalism, therefore, enables consideration to be given to common feminist perspectives which link the efforts of women advocates around the globe, while simultaneously acknowledging the specific circumstances which contribute to gender subordination in particular settings. This type of ‘principled’ transnationalism is contrasted with the more self-interested, international engagement which takes place within the institutional political realm (True and Mintrom 2001; c.f. Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Reform-oriented perspectives of women’s organising generally describe a flourishing of feminist transnationalism which challenges ‘business-as-usual,’ state-centric international politics (True and Mintrom 2001: 27). From this perspective, the United Nations Declaration of the Decade for Women and the subsequent four conferences and non-governmental forums that were held in the period from 1975 to 1995 are viewed as events which have strengthened the transnational dimensions of women’s political agency.

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5 While there has been great interest in documenting the recent history of transnational connection between women’s organisations and the implications for global governance, scholars such as Nina Berkovitch, Margaret Galey and Deborah Stienstra have suggested that the procedural authority of these transnational networks has a long, if largely unrecognised, pedigree outside feminist circles that stretches back to the late 1800s. They discuss the emergence of early international women’s organisations such as the International Congress of Women, the Socialist Women’s International, the World Young Women’s Christian Movement, the World Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (Berkovitch 1999; Stienstra 1994; Galey 1995b). They also note early attempts to stage international congresses for women, listing events such as an International Women’s Rights Conference held in Paris in the 1870s (Galey 1995b: 22), and the 1915 International Congress for Women held in The Hague which brought together 2,800 women from fifteen, mainly European countries (Stienstra 1994: 51).
Writing in 2003, Jane Jaquette cites statistics which show a significant increase in NGO participation at the parallel forums from Mexico City in 1975 to Beijing in 1995. These developments, she argues, are indicators that transnational women's organising ‘over the past three decades has been a feminist success story’ (Jaquette 2003: 336). Moreover, the significant increase in the numbers of women's organisations and their participation in policy debates taking place at the international level is viewed by Riles as an exercise in legitimation, not only of transnational women's organising, but also of the international institutions responsible for these events: ‘NGOs contribute to the “success” of the conferences, but the conferences … are claimed in retrospect by the NGO community as a validation of the significance of NGOs and their causes domestically and internationally’ (Riles 2001: 10).

Women's organisations are also seen to gain from their participation in transnational networks that facilitate the flow of information and knowledge, allowing them to ‘break their isolation’ and ‘exchange … ideas and experience’ (Karl 1995: 38). In this way they are seen to benefit from the transfer of information and knowledge ‘concerning alternative political strategies and how they may be applied to further promote policy change’ (True and Mintrom 2001: 29). Hence transnational connection is seen as an important asset for women's organisations and something that can contribute to their capacity to promote institutional reform, particularly in the area of gender-mainstreaming (True and Mintrom 2001).

Transnationalism is also viewed as enabling the emergence of consensual norms (Jaquette 2003) within the realm of women's organising. This is particularly evident in research that emphasises how women's organisations have taken up human rights advocacy frameworks in their efforts to promote gender equality. Although human rights concepts are ‘contested’ for their presumed incompatibility with ‘non-Western traditions of thought’ (Nussbaum 2002: 48), reform-oriented accounts of women's organising have frequently celebrated gender advocates’ efforts to ‘forcibly’ reshape these concepts so that they resonate in ways which are appropriate to local contexts (Stivens 2000: 18–24) and are taken up as issues of concern with policy-making elites (Reilly 2009; Bunch 1990; Brown Thompson 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Joachim 1999, 2003). This may see advocates align their human rights frameworks with broader nation-building goals (Wing 2002), or with locally prevailing social or cultural practices that reflect principles of equality and inclusiveness (Ackerly 2001). In this way, contemporary feminist transnationalism is seen to accommodate local diversity and demonstrate a multilayered, multicentric potential (Reilly 2009; Ackerly 2001; Pettman 1996; Antrobus 2004; Ruppert 2002).

Resistance-oriented critiques of women's organising tend to view such evaluations of women's transnational activity with a greater level of scepticism, however.
On the one hand, they are cautious about the extent to which transnationalism is empowering for women’s groups, finding instead that transnational influences can be a distraction, which ‘skews’ organisations’ efforts away from the needs of local communities in times of crisis (Friedman 1999: 375). On the other hand, it has been argued that the procedures of information exchange and the ‘drafting and redrafting’ of documentation to be shared amongst transnational organisational networks tend to become the priority of many organisations such that they become bogged down in the procedural aspects of their work and lose sight of the broader normative political goals that provided the original motivation (Riles 2001: xvi, 174).

Some Third World feminists have also been highly critical of the extent to which transnationalism contributes to a ‘multilayered’ and ‘dialogic’ feminist politics (Pettman 1996: 212). Rather than focusing upon the benefits of transnational processes of information and knowledge exchange, consideration is given to the relative power of contending discourses within the realm of women’s transnational organising and the mechanics of representation. Questions are duly asked about which views are given the greatest exposure within transnational feminist networks and which tend to be obscured (Tripp 2006). The contention here is that southern women find themselves continually co-opted into a transnational realm of political engagement where western, learned and elite women are dominant (Spivak 1996; Mohanty 1984). This strand of argument calls attention, in particular, to the limitations of contemporary trends in gender advocacy which are framed in human rights terms and their incapacity to address the ‘multiple dimensions of gender oppression …. set in motion by global forces’ (Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995: 702; see also Mackie 2001). Such frameworks have been decried for their heavy reliance upon activists’ technical and professionalised socio-legal expertise, a development which is said to undermine the mass-movement orientation of women’s activism (Yuval-Davis 2006: 288). Kahn perhaps best summarises this thinking when she condemns activism oriented towards human rights as ‘abstracted, unlocated and apolitical’ in manner (Khan 2002: 41).

Yet such assessments tend not to consider how interplaying global and local political influences shape the transnational advocacy agendas promoted by women’s organisational networks. These processes are made more clearly apparent when a situated appraisal of women’s transnational engagement is undertaken.

Sally Engle Merry adopts such a perspective when she offers her unconventional critique of the gains for women supposedly made through the utilisation of human rights advocacy frameworks. Merry (2003a: 62) argues that these frameworks are frequently deployed in ways which reinforce the idea that it is ‘culture that is subordinating women’ and universal concepts of ‘modernity’
which will ‘free them’. Such strategies are seen to encourage activists to take a localised view of gender disadvantage while diverting their attention away from global phenomena such as ‘expansive capitalism’ or violent conflict and how these might also impact seriously on women’s well-being. The ‘culturing’ of the debate surrounding women’s human rights is seen to allegedly absolve ‘rich countries of responsibility for the suffering caused by these processes’ (Merry 2003a: 64). According to Merry developed countries have political and economic ‘vested interests’ in seeing human rights perspectives of gender disadvantage legitimised globally. In this process, local culture rather than western models of development becomes ‘demonised’ as the cause of women’s subordination (2003a: 64).

Others argue that the utilisation of human rights advocacy frameworks places a heavy emphasis upon the juridical rights of the subordinated and can over-emphasise the role of the state, as the ‘critical agent for improving women’s lives’ (Brown Thompson 2002: 114). This liberal view again diverts attention away from the socio-economic disadvantage endured by women all over the world, and particularly in the global South, by emphasising the ‘law and order’ dimension of women’s subordination. Moreover, such views suppose that victims of subordination enjoy a level of ‘capability’ which gives them access to the legal instruments and infrastructure allowing them to redeem ‘state-protected’ rights (Nussbaum 2002). Karen Brown Thompson argues that while rights frameworks are commonly articulated at the local level via ‘legalistic discourse,’ this is ‘at the least, not empowering, and at the worst, disempowering for … some, depending on their social context’ (Brown Thompson 2002: 116; see also Merry 2003b).

Research into the prevalence and reporting of gender violence in Fiji supports such findings. It has been shown that socio-cultural factors help to make all forms of violence against women hidden phenomena in Fiji, with a strong stigma attached in particular to crimes such as rape, and rape victims are frequently blamed for inciting their attackers (Adinkrah 1995: 79). Within the Indian community, the high value placed on notions of izzat (honour) and sharm (shame) mean that victims of sexual violence face pressure from clan members or relatives not to report attacks to state authorities to avoid bringing disrepute upon the family (Lateef 1990: 45). Within Fijian communities, women victims of violence face similar pressures. Rather than reporting such incidents to state authorities, they are encouraged to see ceremonies of ritual apology (i soro) as the more appropriate avenue for redress.6 These tendencies help to explain why

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6 Ceremonies of ritual apology (i soro) are an important part of indigenous custom in Fiji and used within communities to reconcile a range of grievances (Kelly and Kaplan 2001: 144). The practice of bulabula is a ceremony of pardon used in cases of injury, particularly in cases of rape or domestic violence. However, in recent times, gender activists have also argued that this practice has been subject to abuse, used within
only between 5–10 ten per cent of women victims of rape report these incidents to the police (Adinkrah 1995: 75–79), a statistic which indicates the limited effectiveness of ‘law and order’ approaches to combating gender violence.

The subordinate economic circumstances of a large proportion of Fiji’s women also throw into doubt the extent to which the legalistic aspects of human rights advocacy can be considered to be universally empowering for women. Fiji’s women are disproportionately affected by poverty (Narsey 2007: 106–08). In part, this reflects the fact that women shoulder the chief responsibilities for domestic care-giving within Fiji’s households (Chattier 2005). In part, this situation is explained by women’s involvement in subsistence agriculture and fishing work and their over-representation in low-wage, low-skilled, non-unionised industries, many of which are sustained by foreign capital, such as Fiji’s garment manufacturing industry (United Nations Convention For the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (UN CEDAW) 2000). Women are also further disadvantaged by a state welfare system which is limited, inadequately publicised and difficult to access (Harrington 2004). This suggests that, like women in many other parts of the developing world, global and local factors have combined to compound the economic vulnerability of Fiji’s women (Slatter 1994, 2006; Elson 1995; Marchand and Runyan 2000; Firth 2000; Rai 2002; Steans 2003). And this can jeopardise their ability to achieve the type of financial autonomy needed to access the legal mechanisms enacted to protect their human rights should they become victims of gender-based violence (Chattier 2005: 267, 270–71).

Despite the fact that many of Fiji’s women live in precarious circumstances, activists in this setting have frequently sought to emulate the more general trend in transnational gender advocacy by increasingly seeking to frame their demands for women’s advancement in human rights terms. This development would seem to support the idea of a growing transnational consensus within the realm of women’s organising regarding the utility of such advocacy frameworks (Yuval-Davis 2006; Reilly 2009). Yet, as the considerations raised previously suggest, a ‘situated’ assessment of the political environment—local and global—exposes some difficulties with this advocacy pathway. On the one hand it seems to reflect activists’ underestimation of the depths of economic and social vulnerability borne by women in Fiji and the broader Pacific Islands. On the other hand it perhaps also reflects activists’ overestimation of how women can effectively mobilise human rights frameworks to resist disadvantage. In broader terms, such strategies might also be seen as ultimately serving the indigenous communities to absolve perpetrators of gender violence from responsibility for their actions, and to dissuade women from reporting acts of violence perpetrated against them to state authorities (Cretton 2004: 5; Emberson-Bain 1992).
interests of domestic and international policy-making elites whose activities are not adequately scrutinised for the extent to which they contribute in direct terms to the perpetuation of women’s disadvantage.\(^7\)

For these reasons, this study gives critical consideration to the varying ways in which Fiji-based activists have participated in transnational advocacy networks. I consider how these activists have sought to raise global awareness of women’s disadvantage in the Pacific context, and also how developments within transnational gender advocacy realms have been translated in the local context. Most significantly, however, I consider the ways that interplaying global and local political influences have shaped the transnational dimensions of this activity in particular instances. This enables a more nuanced and contextualised appreciation of the transnational ‘frequency’ of women’s political agency than has often been provided in accounts of women’s organising which take a reform- or resistance-oriented perspective of this terrain.

**Conclusion**

The previous discussion has demonstrated the importance of developing an analytical approach to women’s organising which departs from the more conventional reform- or resistance-oriented narratives. As I have shown, analysis of women’s political agency in Pacific Island contexts demands an in-depth consideration of prevailing historical legacies, socio-cultural factors and religious influences, broader international orthodoxies dictating policy on governance and development and how such influences shape women’s political ambitions and achievements. In the chapters which follow I will build upon the insights developed in this chapter and demonstrate how activists’ ‘situated’ understandings of these various currents influence advocacy decisions. I will show how they opened up some avenues of organisational activity and institutional engagement and closed down others.

While each of the subsequent chapters will conclude with a more analytically focused discussion of the ways in which collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism have featured as aspects of organisational behaviour, the emphasis will not be upon understanding how these characteristics define the sphere of women’s organising as distinct from formal institutional politics in Fiji, or how they work to enhance women’s political agency. Rather, by emphasising activists’ ‘situated’ discussions of how these features were negotiated at particular historical junctures, I will show how collectivity, progressive ideas

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\(^7\) There is some evidence to suggest, however, that this trend may be changing as some women’s groups in Fiji have begun to examine in greater detail the local implications of Pacific Island accession to a range of international free trade agreements. See Chapter 5.
and transnationalism were manifest within the realm of women’s organising in ways which reflect the broader trends shaping the prevailing political environment at that point in time.

The following chapters provide a detailed empirical defence of this argument. The next chapter begins with a discussion of women’s organising in colonial Fiji and then documents the growing politicisation of this field in the period during which Fiji negotiated its independence. Fiji’s women activists viewed this era as one of national and international transition. This inspired them to ‘pioneer’ an activist model that linked concerns about the advancement of women with a provocatively defined political agenda calling attention to inequities in the global distribution of political and economic power and how this compounded disadvantage in the Pacific Islands. Their efforts sought to make the concerns of Pacific women resonate in local and international political contexts and provided a critical momentum for gender-focussed advocacy, which is remembered with gratitude by local activists to this day. However, as later chapters of this book will demonstrate, the particular orientation of this type of activity was very much in keeping with the thinking of the times. As I will make clear, such challenging political agendas became much harder to sustain in later decades as local politics became more unsettled and authoritarian, and international institutional actors became less willing to indulge Third World efforts to promote global economic and political structural reform.