Optimistic about the possibilities for further political change, Fiji’s YWCA members envisaged continuing their forthright and often provocative advocacy campaigns for women during the UN-declared Decade for Women. But changing political circumstances, both within Fiji and outside the country, made this difficult. Women activists who had formerly made a strong political stance on issues related to Pacific Island nations’ political and economic sovereignty, now found themselves working within a more constrained political environment. As Pacific Island statesmen began to bow to increased international pressure to modify their stance on nuclear testing in the region and Pacific decolonisation, civil society groups saw government support for their activity on these questions begin to wane. This changed political environment caused a number of women’s groups to critically assess the utility and appropriateness of provocative political approaches to questions of women’s disadvantage.

This did not, however, equate to a terminal loss of momentum within Fiji’s women’s movement. Other developments, such as the international attention placed upon the ‘women in development’ agenda, and further conferences held to mark the UN’s Decade for Women, provided added political impetus and an international legitimacy to the calls by local activists for Fiji’s government to focus more attention and resources on the needs and interests of women. In response, Fiji’s political leaders made some rhetorical commitments to the promotion of women’s interests, but they rarely followed through with concrete practical initiatives that might boost women’s social, political or economic standing.

This meant that Fiji’s women’s organisations were extremely active during this period as they sought to highlight the disjuncture between state rhetoric and practice. At the local level, they advocated for new approaches to national development which recognised women. They also campaigned heavily for women to gain increased institutional participation within government. Certain activists also began to think about the need for a more concentrated focus upon specific aspects of women’s disadvantage.

This thinking gave rise to a new organisation, the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, formed in the latter part of this Decade for Women to confront violence against women. Through its campaigns designed to raise public awareness of this issue, change social behaviour, and elicit government support for policy reforms that might reduce the incidence of violence against women, the FWCC broke new ground for women’s organisations in Fiji. This work introduced a sensitive topic
into the public domain and challenged robust cultural protocols which had previously ensured that the subject of violence against women remained firmly located within the private sphere.

Additionally, representatives from Fiji’s women’s organisations continued to be energetic participants in regional institutional deliberations and at the two UN conferences for women staged in Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985. To begin with, their contributions to global debate on the status of women were marked by a continued focus upon questions of economic and political power distribution across the Pacific region. However, towards the end of the Decade this position tended to be complemented by an increasingly strong focus upon specific phenomena that were also felt to be contributing to women’s subordination in a more localised manner. This included a more direct focus upon gender inequalities in the areas of health, education, law and order, and the media. This more concentrated emphasis on particular aspects of women’s disadvantage is indicative of an emerging trend evident locally (with the formation of the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC)) and internationally. This was a period when women activists became increasingly interested in developing transnational networks to confront specific issues deemed detrimental to women.

While these developments certainly indicate the vibrancy of women’s domestic, regional and transnational political engagement, this chapter also shows that not all gender activists in Fiji were content that such activities equated to evidence of women’s political agency. Some felt that gender activists’ abilities to be heard regionally and internationally were hampered by institutional constraints and a broader international disregard for the Pacific Island region. Others began to question what they felt was an inappropriate expatriate influence within the sphere of women’s organising. This contrasted dramatically with the earlier independence era where the contributions made by expatriate women were viewed in a more positive light. As the latter sections of this chapter demonstrate, activists’ assessments of collectivity, progressive potential and transnationalism at this time indicate that there was no firm consensus of opinion regarding the appropriate makeup of the women’s movement and the goals to which it should aspire.

Local developments

Both the Fiji YWCA and the National Council of Women (NCW) suffered serious internal disputes in the late 1970s which distracted attention away from their advocacy programs. Within the YWCA, internal tensions relating to the organisation’s political profile became increasingly apparent and began to spill over into the public arena. Records of the organisation’s management committee
meetings suggest that the more radical voices prominent within the YWCA in the previous decade were now losing some of their influence. For example, policy submissions devised by the YWCA's Public Affairs Committee (PAC) on matters of economic governance faced strong opposition from YWCA members of a more conservative political persuasion. These members argued that the PAC should remember the YWCA's 'Christian mandate' and interpret its core commitments to 'justice in society' in a less incendiary fashion (Fiji YWCA 19 August 1975, PAC Record Book).

In mid-1976, conflict within the YWCA came to a head when the organisation's board terminated the employment of four executive officers, including Amelia Rokotuivuna, who had continued her outspoken public role. While this decision was partly justified as a money-saving measure in response to the organisation's difficulty in meeting overdraft and mortgage repayments, board-members also argued that the controversial activity of the YWCA had cost the organisation support and needed to be curbed. In particular, they were critical of the 'rudeness' and 'excessively forceful views' articulated by certain executive members of the YWCA which were often deemed to be representative of the YWCA as a whole (Keith-Reid 1976: 16–17). For some, the tone of YWCA advocacy was deemed too aggressive and out of step with local cultural mores which emphasised the importance of 'quiet diplomacy' in political conduct (Robertson and Sutherland 2001: 56). While the sacked executive members were supported by members of the YWCA general staff, who engaged in a series of strike actions, the board remained resolute. This situation badly affected the internal operations of the organisation as well as its public credibility. The YWCA had always sought to use the local media to its advantage. Now it found there was intense media interest in the internal battles for organisational control.¹ A general meeting was held some months later which saw the dissolution of the YWCA board after a no-confidence vote, and a new board elected which immediately reinstated the sacked employees. Nevertheless, this very public split within the YWCA, and clear evidence of serious internal division emerging on questions of public advocacy, was damaging to the organisation. Ultimately, Rokotuivuna chose to temporarily resign from the YWCA in 1977, convinced that she no longer had the capacity to 'pull the conservatives along' (2002b).

With Rokotuivuna's departure, the general tenor of the organisation's political engagement was perhaps less provocative than it had previously been. However, this more muted style of political engagement also reflected broader political

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¹ One notable account of these events was published in the Pacific Islands Monthly under the headline of 'Teeth and Talons bared at the Suva YWCA'. In this account, the writer repeatedly uses highly sexist language to describe the struggles for influence taking place within the organisation. In a subsequent edition of the Pacific Islands Monthly, letters from YWCA representatives were published protesting at the inappropriate language appearing in the article, its overall disparaging tone, and the damaging picture it presented of the organisation (Keith-Reid 1976; Pacific Islands Monthly November 1976).
developments taking place in the politics of the Pacific Islands. As the decade progressed, a more conservative policy focus was also emanating from Fiji’s government in many areas and particularly in its foreign policy.

A shift in government policy direction on the question of the Pacific nuclear presence significantly reshaped the local political space available to those women’s organisations that had previously taken up the anti-nuclear cause with great energy. Despite the fact that the same governing party and Prime Minister retained power, the Fiji government was under increasing pressure from the US to take a more moderate line on these questions and it began to move away from its earlier international advocacy of a nuclear free Pacific. The previously ‘close relationship’ that had existed between the Fiji government and the anti-nuclear movement was all but ‘lost’ by this later stage (Ogashiwa 1991: 50, 52). YWCA members continued to pursue the peace and disarmament cause in the ensuing years, but the changed mood within government equated to a crucial loss of institutional support on this issue.

Like the YWCA, the National Council of Women (NCW) had also experienced internal troubles related to the organisation’s political profile, and coordination of member organisations’ activities was becoming more difficult. In 1979, the indigenous women’s organisation Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSVM) withdrew its support for the NCW on the grounds that younger organisations were becoming too outspoken. This was a substantial blow for the NCW and threatened to damage its standing with the indigenous political elite. However, in her newly appointed role as NCW leader, Esiteri Kamikamica (1982: 42–43) voiced a determination to move beyond these difficulties and refocus organisational efforts upon women.

More generally, local debate about the role that women should play in development was beginning to gather momentum. While this discussion reflected broader themes under examination in development policy-making circles globally (Papanek 1975a), Pacific activists’ deliberations in this area tended to begin with a critical examination of the foreign influences at work in the region and how they had diminished the perceived importance of women’s economic roles. Such concerns echoed themes that had been prevalent in other aspects of women’s advocacy undertaken by the YWCA in the early 1970s.

For example, in 1978 Ruth Lechte authored a study which argued that the influence of European missionaries and colonisers had encouraged Pacific women to internalise the view that they were economically unproductive and

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2 In 1982, the local government had chosen to ban US nuclear-powered ships from using Fiji’s port facilities. This decision was reversed twelve months later, in the wake of strong US pressure and justified by Fiji’s Prime Minister on the basis that such actions compromised Fiji’s international law obligations as well as the country’s strategic, economic and security interests (Ogashiwa 1991: 50).
that the daily tasks they performed in the areas of horticulture or handicraft production required no skill (1978: 161–64; see also Schoeffel and Kikau 1980). Lechte also argued that the position taken by Third World delegates to the UN’s Mexico City women’s conference in 1975, and their clear articulation of a desire for ‘liberation and justice’, issued a new challenge to development planners in the current context. When applied to the Pacific situation, Lechte argued that this underscored the need for a new approach to development and economic policy-making which would create greater opportunities for Pacific women’s participation (1978: 170).

The establishment of the post of Women’s Programme Officer within the Centre for Applied Studies in Development at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva in 1979 increased the possibilities for academic research to be conducted into women’s economic productivity. Headed by Claire Slatter, this unit produced studies on the role of women in fisheries, women’s access to health infrastructure, and women’s uses of traditional medicines and healing practices (Goodwillie and Lechte 1985: 60). Other studies were conducted by local scholars who were closely connected to women’s organisations. These focused upon the role played by development aid agencies and found that although increased aid was flowing into the region, consultation with local communities remained limited. A process of ‘passive’ aid distribution was identified (Siwatibau 1985), whereby development programs were poorly matched to the needs of local communities and became unsustainable as funds were exhausted or foreign expertise was withdrawn (Pulea 1982; Schoeffel 1983; Randell 1983; Siwatibau 1985).

In 1980, women’s organisations won the right to take up these questions at the first National Development Summit held in Fiji. While the participation of women’s groups at this event was significant in its own right, Rokotuivuna (2002b) also argued that the women’s submission was generally well-received. Nevertheless, this did not signal a new era of engagement between government and women’s organisations on the women in development (WID) question. Indeed, Rokotuivuna argued that the ability of women to penetrate this meeting was facilitated through personal contacts that YWCA members had made with a member of the national planning office who was friendly to their cause and simply included them on the conference agenda (2002b). While the national development strategy that was formulated during this summit duly reflected the concerns raised by the women present (NCW 1981: 2), concrete policy, which might increase women’s economic visibility, was generally not forthcoming.

3 Many development initiatives proposed for Pacific Island women were found to be inappropriate to local contexts—for example, encouraging women to use imported products such as flour and rice in food preparation and discouraging the preparation of more nutritious local food staples on the basis that these took longer to cook and consumed more fuel (NCW 1982; Schoeffel 1986).
In 1982, Fiji’s NCW incorporated the WID theme into its own programs and held a national workshop on this subject which brought together over two hundred participants from the broad range of organisations affiliated with the council. One of the principal ideas emerging from this three-day event was the need for increased representation of women’s interests within government. However the debate was principally focused upon women’s bureaucratic representation with the NCW arguing for the establishment of a women’s ministry within Fiji’s government (NCW 1981: 1). The creation of a women’s machinery was felt to be important at this time for, as Dianne Goodwillie notes, Fiji’s post-independence government had offered only meagre support for a Women’s Office, and this tended to be shunted from ministry to ministry but was most frequently housed within the Ministry of Fijian Affairs. As a result, the office was politically weak and failed to represent the interests of Indo-Fijian women or women in urban settings (Goodwillie and Kaloumaira 2000: 9). Many of the organisations affiliated with the national council of women, argued for the creation of a women’s ministry as an independent office or associated directly with the prime-minister’s office. The NCW claimed that this location would ensure greater and more consistent attention given by government to the interests of women. Despite intense amounts of lobbying by the NCW on this issue, the government paid little heed to these calls and showed almost no interest in developing a new institutional machinery for women in these years.

Women’s Crisis Centre

Towards the end of the Decade for Women, an important new women’s organisation was established in Fiji which adopted a more issue-specific approach to advocacy for women than the women’s groups that had formed previously. The Women’s Crisis Centre (later the FWCC) was founded amid rising community concern over rape and other forms of sexual violence in Fiji. In 1983, a newly formed local research body, the Action Centre for Women in Need (ACWIN), published a significant report entitled Rape in Fiji (1983) in which the frequency of crimes of sexual violence, community attitudes towards these acts, and the treatment of rape victims within Fiji’s legal system were examined.

This was a bold move in a social and political context where public discussion of such incidents was rare, the stigma attached to these crimes substantial and policing responses to these events generally poor (Adinkrah 1995; Jolly 1996; Ali 1987; McKenzie Aucoin 1990; Lateef 1990; also see Introduction). Up
until this point, the institutional and civil society responses to gender violence were almost non-existent and the country’s political classes and cultural and religious leaders generally showed little willingness to raise this issue in the public domain. ACWIN’s 1983 report, therefore, attempted to generate greater public awareness of the prevalence of rape and sexual violence. Additionally, it examined the measures needed to improve state welfare and police responses to rape crimes and considered how judicial processes might be amended to better support rape victims. The report’s findings pointed to the urgent need for a government counselling service for rape victims and the establishment of a women’s crisis centre (pp. 20, 22).

In 1983, a group of expatriate women in Fiji began to think about how a local women’s group could respond to some of the challenges outlined in the ACWIN report. These women saw the importance of developing a multiracial response to the issue of rape in Fiji. To this end, they sought to engage local women as participants within an organisation that would tackle this issue in an ongoing manner (S. Ali 2002). In 1984, the Women’s Crisis Centre began operations. At first, the group envisaged using voluntary staff to provide victims of rape with emotional support and information about government support services (Sutherland et al. 1986). But Crisis Centre staff soon came to realise that the phenomenon of gender violence was not simply limited to rape and sexual violence. It became evident that the Centre needed to expand its focus to also support the victims of violence in the home, and women and children suffering other types of abuse (Ali 1987).

Therefore, in addition to counselling, the Crisis Centre also established programs of public education and community awareness about violence against women. It distributed posters and pamphlets, undertook media engagements and ran training sessions in schools and with women’s groups on the issue of violence against women. It also sought to build links with health professionals, the police and legal practitioners (Ali 1987).

The highly sensitive nature of this work meant that, at the outset, the Crisis Centre faced strong opposition from conservative elements within the broader realm of civil society, including from other women’s organisations. These groups often argued that the organisation’s discussion of domestic violence threatened the integrity of the family—highly valued within Pacific cultures—and promoted an agenda that was essentially, ‘anti-men’ (S. Ali 2002; see also Leckie 2002: 169). The Crisis Centre also faced some opposition from government representatives who argued that the use of the word ‘crisis’ in the centre’s title was damaging to Fiji’s reputation as a tourist haven and the image of the country as a tropical ‘paradise’ (Ali 1987: 40). These critiques meant that the Centre faced some pressure to modify its rhetoric and even change its title.
The critiques also made funding difficult, with potential local benefactors often wary of close public association with a group deemed troublesome in national political circles.5 Nevertheless, the establishment of the Women’s Crisis Centre in 1984 was a significant development, heralding a new trend towards more issue-specific approaches to advocacy and service provision for women. Unlike the NCW or the YWCA, which developed broadly focused engagements with both community and the state on women’s issues, the Crisis Centre’s approach to the advancement of women was clearly aimed at promoting women’s physical security and supporting women who had become victims of violence. Contrasting the Centre’s efforts with existing women’s groups, Shamima Ali argued:

Though the Centre might not be contributing to ‘development’ in the sense of economic growth or being involved in any redistribution of wealth, the Centre is providing a valuable support service for women and the Collective is making decisions and running the Centre on a shoe-string budget. The project is working well in the face of opposition from men and women also (1987: 40)

In later years, the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre would develop an important local and international profile as one of the leading women’s organisations in the Pacific Island region.

Regional developments

During this period, regional institutional deliberation on the question of women’s advancement began to increase, with a number of significant conferences taking place. Yet, there was a marked variance in the types of access women had to these forums, and the spaces they provided for critical debate on the status of women.

The first of these events took place at the annual South Pacific Commission (SPC) conference held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG), in October 1980.6

5 In many cases, funding allocations at this time were granted to local organisations from external agencies, but distributed via the state. This meant that local government authorities were able to scrutinise local programs and block funding initiatives where it was felt that the activities of local organisations were inappropriate. From time to time the Fiji government had given small amounts of funding to the Crisis Centre, but it had also used its powers of scrutiny to block access to larger amounts of grant money directed to the organisation from international agencies (Ali 1987: 40).

6 These conferences are held as annual ‘general assemblies’ of the SPC, a regional intergovernmental institution formed in 1947 and whose membership at this time included the metropolitan countries responsible for the administration of Pacific Island territories as well as independent Pacific Island states. Tensions between delegates from within and outside the region have frequently been apparent and often resulted in efforts made to steer SPC conference deliberations towards areas where all parties have common
The conference agenda required participants to respond to the theme of Women in Development in the Pacific Island region, however, the meeting began as a decidedly male-centred dialogue. Of the two hundred conference delegates, only two were female (Goodwillie and Lechte 1985: 59). It is for this reason perhaps, that the prepared statements read by government representatives gave little or no consideration to the work that women researchers and activists had previously conducted on WID issues, nor to the concerns that they had begun to raise in the public domain.7

This state of affairs was not allowed to persist however. During a morning recess in the male-dominated conference deliberations, more than twenty women from a variety of local organisations, including the PNG YWCA, streamed into the conference venue carrying placards and a petition which demanded that the SPC give women greater rights of participation. The placards asked delegates ‘Where are the Pacific women?’, or stated ‘Only women can understand women.’ Another claimed, ‘the time will come when you will be sorry that you have left behind half the population—the women—in your clever development programmes’ (Pacific Islands Monthly December 1980).

The protestors were eventually allowed to address the meeting and called upon the SPC to recognise women’s rights to participate in regional intergovernmental deliberations. They also called for the SPC to re-establish the Pacific Women’s Resource Centre (PWRC), a short-lived regional organisation for women which was founded in the wake of the 1975 regional women’s conference but ultimately disbanded as it struggled to fund its operations (Pacific Islands Monthly December 1980; Waqovonovono 1980; Griffen 1984).

This highly visual and confrontational protest was widely reported in the local press across the region. In response, conference delegates agreed that the SPC should hold a special meeting of Pacific women in Tahiti, French Polynesia, the following year, and that this meeting would make recommendations to the 21st South Pacific Conference. Moreover, governments were also requested to ‘take action’ to ensure effective implementation of the resolutions from the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) sub-regional interests such as the environment, technology and welfare. The aim of this policy has been to overcome the traditional, cultural and political differences that have often marked relations between the Pacific Island states and the metropolitan powers of the region (Smales 1980).

7 The lack of consultation that characterised the content of the papers presented at this meeting is nowhere more evident than in the presentation made by the delegate from French Polynesia whose paper began with the confident affirmation that women and development issues were ‘non-political’ (SPC 1980a). In a further section of this paper, the same delegate characterised feminism as innately ‘competitive’ and argued that this was certainly not something that Pacific Island women were interested in. He claimed, instead, that Pacific Island women were more interested in ‘reciprocity, exchange, sharing, cooperation and respect’ (SPC 1980a).
Women’s Conference that was to be held in Suva only a few days later, and to ensure that they were ‘adequately represented by women’ at this meeting (SPC 1980b).

The ESCAP regional follow-up meeting duly took place and was attended by government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives from the twelve-member and associate-member states of the Pacific sub-region, and observers from specialised UN agencies, the SPC, a variety of local and internationally based NGOs, and outside states with a strategic interest in the region such as the US and Great Britain (Kahn 1980). The United Nations accorded the meeting a high status, sending both Lucille Mair, Secretary-General of the UN World Conference for Women held in Copenhagen, and the Australian-born Elizabeth Reid, who also represented the UN as Principal Officer of the Secretariat responsible for the UN’s mid-Decade conference. Both women had forged close ties with the community of women activists operating in the Pacific during the first half of the UN’s Decade for Women, and were understood by Pacific Island women to be sympathetic institutional representatives to the event (Rokotuivuna 2002b).

The principal objective of the conference was to develop a sub-regional Plan of Action that would guide local and regional institutions in the implementation of policy addressing the themes of the final five years of the United Nations Decade for Women. The final document that the delegates produced is noteworthy for the fact that it did not simply provide a Pacific response to issues and problems identified at the international level. Neither did it describe issues of concern in abstract terms. Instead, it offered a regionally specific perspective on the challenges facing Pacific women, identifying issues of concern in concrete language and suggesting pragmatic courses of action as a response to these concerns. For example, the document called for scrutiny of legislation to identify possibilities for gender-based discrimination, the collection of data and research relating to women at the national level, more public awareness campaigns to confront women’s health and mental health issues and greater efforts made to combat violence against women, and the impact of alcohol abuse in the community (Danielsson and Danielsson 1981a). In proposals for action at the regional level, delegates called for the re-establishment of a Pacific Women’s Resource Centre as an ‘autonomous intergovernmental institution’ staffed by Pacific women with the aim of facilitating communication on gender issues across the region (Danielsson and Danielsson 1981a: 19).

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8 Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

9 The French Ambassador in Suva, reportedly displeased by the ruling that his country’s representatives would only have observer status, chose not to send representation (Danielsson and Danielsson 1981b).
In addition to these proposals, the Plan of Action’s conceptual framework section was particularly striking for its highly critical interpretation of international regional engagement within the Pacific Island region, and the fact that it was constructed in a way that paid little heed to the sensibilities of those outside observers participating at the meeting. This particular section of the Plan made reference to Pacific Islanders’ rights to self-determination, the negative impact of nuclear weapons testing and nuclear waste dumping in the region, inappropriate trajectories of aid and development in the Pacific, and the inability of local communities to exert control over these processes. It also noted the local health, social and cultural costs that followed the regional importation of goods such as potentially harmful contraceptive drugs, manufactured foodstuffs, agricultural methods and alcohol (UNESCAP 1980).

While debate about the wording of this part of the document was at times heated, and saw some delegations, most notably Australia and New Zealand, take reservations upon the whole section, the majority of delegates in the final instance put their weight behind the sentiments expressed (Rasmussen 1980; Danielsson and Danielsson 1981a; Reid 1984). Described by some as a ‘poetic’ plea for Pacific Islanders’ political, cultural and economic self-determination (Goodwillie and Lechte 1985: 59), the sentiments expressed in the document represented the culmination of local and regional advocacy efforts that occurred during the preceding years. It exemplified an activist voice which was regionally focused, conscious of the international, and informed by a redistributive ethos. Here, a strong degree of emphasis was focused upon the subordination of Pacific Island communities in world politics and the global restructuring that was required to ensure that these communities might have greater powers of self-determination.

Within later regional meetings for women, this voice became much harder to detect. These events were convened within a more structured institutional environment, restricted by the agendas of foreign powers in the region, and this slowed the momentum that had previously carried forward critical deliberation upon the status of Pacific Island women. This trend became quickly apparent at the first regional women’s meeting convened by the SPC and held in Tahiti in July 1981. At this point, the SPC had finally acceded to the demands made in PNG twelve months earlier and agreed to convene a conference focused solely on the situation of Pacific women. Yet, the conference outcomes were far less significant than many of the attendees had envisioned. Delegates may have hoped that the meeting would provide an opportunity to build upon the Plan of Action developed at the ESCAP forum, but the highly structured environment of the Tahiti event meant that the space for substantive discussion of the issues raised in Suva was not only limited, but actively controlled.
In particular, discussion was thwarted by the actions of the SPC’s Director of Programmes. A figure highly sympathetic to the French administration, he frequently acted to inhibit debate and appeared particularly keen to police the issue of French nuclear testing in the region. In this role, he was described in the media as a ‘hawk’ swooping down from his ‘secretarial nest on the conference doves whenever they dared to squeak a little’ (Danielsson and Danielsson 1981b: 21).

On a positive note, delegates to the SPC women’s seminar agreed to support the reconstitution of the PWRC, and the staging of regional triennial conferences which would bring together government delegations to debate women’s issues. Yet, in more general terms, the meeting passed a set of resolutions which had only a faint resemblance to those agreed upon at the previous ESCAP conference in 1981. Many anticipated that the ESCAP resolutions would form the blueprint for a further set of resolutions in Tahiti. They had even had them translated into French. Yet their attempts to distribute this material amongst conference delegates was thwarted by the Director of Programmes. He defended this action on the grounds that objections from ‘certain countries’ made this impossible (Danielsson and Danielsson 1981b: 20).

While impetus for institutional reform had been building at the regional level, the events of this conference palpably demonstrate the hurdles that remained for women activists working within the SPC. This was an institution committed to working principally with the governments of the region rather than its NGOs and generally disinclined to offend the French government who provided it with substantial funding. The only way that the activist community would be able to influence SPC discussion was through their representation on state delegations. Without this, women activists could attend regional meetings as observers but were unable to actively participate in the meeting’s formal deliberations. Hence, they had few opportunities to voice their dissatisfaction over the activities of the region’s metropolitan powers.

In line with the recommendations made at this conference, and after a sustained campaign effort on the part of women’s organisations in many parts of the Pacific, the SPC finally established a new regional body in 1982, the Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau (PWRB), and appointed Hilda Lini as the body’s Anglophone representative (Marie-Claire Beccalossie was later appointed to this office as the representative for the Pacific’s French speaking territories). Lini already had a strong background as a ni-Vanuatu independence activist and was, therefore, hardly someone who could be relied upon to pursue the type of quietly conservative line that the SPC seemed to expect. And, in the early period of the PWRB’s operations, Lini seemed to have some success in widening

10 A commitment which the SPC has upheld to this day.
the parameters of debate within subsequent SPC-facilitated conferences on women’s issues. On the whole, however, the efforts of the PWRB officeholders to independently define an agenda of women’s concerns were hamstrung by the SPC stipulation that this body should deal with member governments only. In the longer term, this meant that the PWRB’s operations generally reflected the conservative political course steered by the region’s governments rather than the more radical agendas that had been promoted by the region’s activist community.

This was made clearly evident during a later women’s conference convened by the SPC in Rarotonga in 1985 to formulate regional strategies for the UN’s End of Decade Women’s conference, upcoming in Nairobi. The report from this conference indicates the increasingly systematic approach taken to women’s issues by regionally based women’s groups at the end of the Decade for Women (SPC 1985). Rather than the free-ranging debates that were recorded by conference observers at the first Pacific regional conference for women in 1975, the report of this meeting, staged ten years later, indicates a more structured and detailed approach to the issues deemed to be negatively impacting upon women. Delegates participated in workshops on issues related to health, education, employment and women’s role in decision-making, with detailed consideration given to the causes of the disadvantage experienced by women in these areas and the types of policy solutions that might address some of these difficulties. In addition, a detailed discussion of issues relating to young women in the region, and the detrimental impacts upon women of alcoholism, drugs and gender violence also took place at this meeting. This was the first time that these subjects had received a special emphasis within a regional forum.

Consideration of the broader international dimensions of women’s disadvantage that had been a major feature of discussions taking place in earlier regional conferences of NGO women were not given the same emphasis in this particular forum. Discussions were locally framed and, once again, actively regulated by members of the SPC institutional hierarchy. Nevertheless, there was brief mention made of the Pacific nuclear disarmament issue, something that had not been allowed to occur in Tahiti in 1981. On this question, it was stated that governments should be ‘strongly urged to make rapid progress on peace issues such as the Nuclear Free Pacific Zone Treaty’ (SPC 1985: 23). The brief references to this issue within the 1985 conference report suggest that the PWRB office bearers were having measured success in creating an institutional environment more tolerant of criticism towards the region’s remaining colonial powers.

However, developments in other quarters suggest that the momentum driving this broader structural critique was beginning to wane of its own accord within women’s advocacy circles. Some indication of this is evidenced in reports of a final NGO conference for women staged in Sydney in June 1985, in the lead up
to the UN’s End of Decade Conference for Women. A strictly NGO-only affair, the Sydney meeting brought together two hundred women from across the Pacific Island region, including indigenous activists from Australia and New Zealand, and was organised by the Australian offices of the international women’s organisation, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). We might expect that because it took place outside an institutional framework, this forum, with its particular focus on peace, would be a likely venue for the articulation of strongly worded critiques of prevailing international structures and the continued inability of the peoples of the Pacific Islands to gain full rights of self-determination from foreign powers in the region.

While these issues were clearly audible in many of the presentations made by representatives of local organisations, they were not dominant. What is striking about this particular meeting is the extent to which many of the issues raised mirrored the concerns that had been raised by Pacific women at the SPC’s Rarotonga meeting a few months earlier. Women’s organisations discussed in great detail the break-down of law and order in many parts of the Pacific and the accompanying rise in violence against women. This discussion was also framed as a peace issue, with one speaker from PNG arguing that the high incidence of rape and sexual abuse was a diminution of women’s peace and freedom. Other women spoke on issues relating to alcohol abuse, the role and function of women’s organisations, funding levels for women’s groups and women’s access to media (Pacific Islands Monthly September 1985).

This shift towards a more issue-specific form of advocacy which emphasised the causes of women’s oppression that came from within the region, rather than attributing oppression to the impact of colonialism or global inequality, can be understood in part as a reflection of broader international advocacy trends. During the preparatory meetings for the UN’s Nairobi Women’s Conference, deliberations upon the shape of the intergovernmental conference document, Forward Looking Strategies (FLS), had identified specific areas of concern that contributed to women’s disadvantage. These were established as areas that international institutions and local governments should address in their policy-making processes. While this development certainly encouraged activists working in Pacific Island contexts to frame their advocacy in similar ways, the shift towards a more issue-specific deliberation of gender inequality was home grown too, reflecting activists’ increasing expertise as gender analysts and their more systematic attention to the local social, political and economic structures that contributed to women’s subordination. As a result, this new style of advocacy retained its strong emphasis upon Pacific experience and the struggles to overcome disadvantage waged by women from around the region.
Pacific women on the international stage

Two further UN-convened conferences for women provided a platform for Pacific women to participate on the international stage in these years. The first was held in Copenhagen in 1980 to mark the UN Decade for Women’s ‘Midpoint’. The second was held in Nairobi in 1985 to close the Decade. Government and NGO delegations from the Pacific attended these conferences, but on each occasion complained that they found it difficult to make their particular regional concerns heard and understood, both within the intergovernmental conferences and the parallel NGO Forums.

Copenhagen 1980

The 1980 World Conference on the United Nations Decade for Women was seen by many at the time to have been a highly politicised and internationally divisive event. Indeed, the signing ceremony for the newly established United Nations Convention For the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which saw sixty-four states recognise the instrument, was generally noted as one of the few highpoints. In general, many accounts of this event focussed upon the militancy allegedly demonstrated by Third World delegates on issues of political and economic dependency, and the extent to which this caused divisions that were harmful to the broader conference objectives (Syrkin 1980; Fraser 1987; Tinker and Jaquette 1987; Hill 1980).

On this occasion, Third World political actors appeared determined to make international policy-makers recognise the need for international political and economic negotiations to be guided by a pronounced redistributive ethos. Universal consensus on these issues remained a long way distant, however, as talks gave way to battles over political ideology. Observers of this event argued that official delegations to Copenhagen had a tendency to bloc together into three groups with competing perspectives on the status of women offered by participants from western countries, participants from developing states and those from the Eastern Bloc countries (Fraser 1987; Hill 1980). Intergovernmental debates continued to make reference to contentious international questions such as the establishment of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), the continuing policy of apartheid in South Africa and the status of Palestine in the Middle East (Ashwin 1981). All of this meant that consensus on the final conference document was ultimately unattainable. Opposition to the inclusion

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11 The intrusion of the Palestinian question into conference debate was interpreted by many as a serious deviation from the official business of the conference and a lost opportunity for a consensus to emerge. When the issue was forced by India, official conference delegates were drawn into lengthy and highly politicised discussions of Middle East politics and the implications of Zionist doctrine (Syrkin 1980; Fraser 1987; Tinker and Jaquette 1987; Hill 1980; Ashwin 1981).
of the term Zionism in the final draft of the Programme for Action meant that twenty-two states abstained from voting while four states (Australia, the United States, Canada and Israel) voted against.\textsuperscript{12}

Many interpreted this outcome as a significant defeat for the broader cause of women’s advancement, and questioned how such politically divisive issues could be considered legitimate subject matter for an international conference on the status of women. However, as in Mexico City five years earlier, Third World delegates to the Copenhagen conference found structural perspectives of disadvantage to be highly relevant to the experiences of women in their own countries and something that could not be ignored when strategies for improvement were devised. For these participants, arguments for the advancement of women could not be disassociated from broader themes related to the ‘common struggle for justice and liberty’ (Danielsson 1980: 21).

As they had in Mexico City, Pacific delegates again articulated perspectives of gender disadvantage that supported this idea and blurred the lines between local and international obstacles impeding women’s advancement. In so doing, they recalled the idea that the struggles waged by women in the region could not be considered in isolation from the international struggles waged by the peoples of the Pacific to have their economic interests, environment, culture and rights to self-determination better protected (Griffen 1987).

The region as a whole was represented within the Copenhagen parallel NGO Forum by delegates from Fiji, Tonga, Western Samoa, New Hebrides (Vanuatu from 1980), French Polynesia and New Caledonia, as well as indigenous representation from Australia and New Zealand. However, the same misgivings experienced in Mexico City were again apparent amongst the Pacific Island participants at Forum ‘80 who argued that the organisers had made them ‘practically invisible’ at this event (Villabos 1980). Lini from the New Hebrides argued that the Forum had been organised in a way that was more accommodating to delegates from ‘Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas’. Lini lamented this as a lost opportunity, for she saw attendance at Copenhagen as a way to draw international attention to the struggle for independence taking place in her country. She argued, ‘no one knows about our struggle…. My whole country knows I’m attending this conference and they expect me to publicise our problems and get help’ (Lini cited in Villabos 1980).

Out of a sense of frustration, the Pacific Forum participants organised a joint meeting to be held between local NGO representatives and all official delegations to the conference with economic or political stakes in the region. For women from areas of the Pacific still subject to colonial rule, this was considered an

\textsuperscript{12} Conference delegates managed to generate a consensus vote on the National sections of the Programme for Action, which were subject to a far less contentious level of international scrutiny and debate.
especially significant opportunity; one which enabled them to articulate their grievances in an international context and to demonstrate the plight of the ‘stateless’ who were powerless to resist imposed models of development (Lini cited in Villabos 1980).

Vanessa Griffen’s later writing on women’s regionalism emphasises the significance of this meeting. Despite the fact that the Forum organisers gave no recognition to the Pacific Island region, Pacific Island women took affairs into their own hands. As such, they appeared far better prepared to challenge their ‘imposed silence’ than they had been in Mexico City. Working as a ‘regional delegation’ (Griffen 1987: 520), these women argued that the Copenhagen Program of Action must address themes relevant to Pacific Island women, listing a number of internationally focused issues which should be given top priority by ‘all governments and peoples’ if disadvantage in the region was to be effectively addressed (Danielsson 1980: 22). These included calls for the creation of a Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone, the banning of nuclear tests, weapons and the dumping of nuclear waste, acceleration of the decolonisation process in those areas of the Pacific still governed as colonial dominions, an end to the continuing exploitation of the Pacific region’s natural resources by foreign and multinational corporations, a revaluing of indigenous cultures in the field of local education, an end to large-scale labour migration into Pacific Island countries, and greater efforts to combat racial discrimination (Hill 1980). This agenda was far more challenging, detailed and provocative than the substance of the Pacific Island official government reports to the conference agenda (Slatter 1980). At the same time, the participation of state representatives at this meeting suggests that while not in full agreement with the lines of argument presented, state officials were motivated to give some attention to the provocative perspectives of Pacific women’s disadvantage being advanced by the regions’ activists.

Pacific delegates anticipated a high level of support from the Australian and New Zealand state representatives attending this meeting, hoping that, as neighbours to the Island region, they would provide leadership within the intergovernmental conference on the issues raised. This leadership was not forthcoming, however, and Pacific women interpreted this as a lack of regional identification. Australian and New Zealand delegations were felt to be displaying a clear determination to protect their own strategic and economic interests in

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13 Only four Pacific Island states sent delegates to the official conference in Copenhagen—PNG, Western Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. Of these, only Fiji and PNG presented country reports to the conference plenary. Fiji’s paper was written in Copenhagen by the delegation’s male advisor who came across from New York to assist the three-women delegation. While the paper acknowledged that the government had not committed to a Plan of Action for women, it was also stated that collaborative government and NGO efforts had meant that Fiji had ‘come near to meeting all the 14 minimum objectives of Mexico City World Plan of Action recommendations’ (cited in Slatter 1980: 15). In a show of regional solidarity with the population of the New Hebrides, the Fiji country paper also expressed a highly critical opinion of foreign interests which were said to be frustrating the independence aspirations of this territory’s peoples.
the region and a loyalty towards ‘the rich men’s clubs of Europe’ rather than ‘the poor relations of the South Pacific’ (Hill 1980). The only point of convergence related to the nuclear presence in the Pacific with Australia and New Zealand co-sponsoring a resolution with the official Pacific Island delegates for a nuclear test ban treaty (Hill 1980: 28; Slatter 1980: 16).

The general lack of receptiveness to the viewpoints proposed by the region’s activists reflects the broader conflicts emerging in Copenhagen, particularly when participants from developing countries attempted to explain women’s subordination via reference to the international sphere and the uneven distribution of global economic and political power. While Pacific women clearly demonstrated a determination to be heard internationally on these questions, the broader political division evident at Copenhagen tended to overshadow their efforts.

Nairobi 1985

By contrast, the UN World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women, staged in Nairobi in 1985, was generally viewed as the ‘high-point’ of the Decade for Women (Tinker and Jaquette 1987: 419). This was partly due to the enormous number of women involved, but also because deliberations were said to have been driven by consensus-building approaches rather than the adversarial negotiation that had marked the previous two UN Conferences for Women. Many observers argued that this was made possible through the creation of a more cooperative conference environment and a determination to overcome the wide gulf separating Third World and First World women that had been evident in Mexico City and Copenhagen (Berkovitch 1999; O’Barr 1986; Tinker 1986; Hultman 1986; Basu 1986; Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986; Galey 1986; Mair 1986). Within both the intergovernmental conference and the parallel NGO Forum, a spirit of compromise was said to have prevailed, prompted by a growing awareness that the factors contributing to women’s subordination had become more serious across the decade. Indeed, staging the final women’s conference of the Decade in an African location brought home, in stark terms, the disparities between North and South and was undoubtedly influential in increasing the willingness of ‘Western women to see issues such as access to clean water as “feminist”’ (Hultman 1986).

Within the formal conference proceedings, emphasis upon consensus-style deliberation was encouraged by the Kenyan host-delegation that was eager to avoid a situation whereby Nairobi would be viewed as the ‘graveyard of the women’s movement’ (Galey 1986). Margaret Galey argues that, in this spirit,
Kenyan delegates acted to disrupt the G77 solidarity that had marked the previous intergovernmental conference deliberations and, in coalition with representatives from other African states, diffused tensions over issues related to the status of Palestine that had been a significant sticking point during the previous UN women’s conferences (Tinker and Jaquette 1987; Patton 1995). Consensus was also reached on sections of the Nairobi conference document entitled the *Forward Looking Strategies* which paid particular attention to needs of specific groups of women—women victims of violence, women living in drought, urban poor and elderly women, the abused and destitute, and young women—and encouraged a more issue-specific response by states and local women’s groups to these challenges.

Within the NGO Forum, this shift towards consensus building was also apparent. Delegates seemed more prepared to concede that feminism needed to accommodate consideration of ‘survival issues’ if it were to have a global legitimacy (Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986: 403). This perspective also required delegates to question how other determinants of social location such as class, ethnicity, religion or culture operate to further compound the already disadvantaged status of women in many locations. Divisions and some conflict were, as on previous occasions, also part of Forum deliberations. Nonetheless, observers generally found that participants showed a determination to ‘engage in productive and peaceful dialogue, even on issues that historically divided them by nationality, class or race’ (Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986: 409; O’Barr 1986: 585).

The experience of Pacific women at Nairobi, on the other hand, reveals some misgivings in this regard. Within both the intergovernmental conference, and the parallel NGO Forum, the region’s delegations again experienced significant difficulties in making their presence felt and in drawing international attention to the particular nature of their grievances.

Over sixty Pacific women attended the Nairobi Forum, more than three times the number of regional representatives attending Copenhagen 1980. Nonetheless, delegates generally felt ‘overwhelmed’ by the sheer scope of the event and the number of women attending (Goodwillie 1985). Fiji’s Susanna Evening, representing the Pacific Council of Churches, claimed ‘we are drowned in these workshops because we are only a small group. We need to voice ourselves loudly before we are identified’ (Chew 1985a). Once again, Pacific delegates were also unhappy that the Forum organisers had failed to provide sufficient space for Pacific women to set up exhibitions and had not included them in Forum workshop schedules (Chew 1985b). This situation was relieved to some degree by the fact that a Fiji-based journalist who regularly wrote on women’s issues in the local press, Seona Martin, was also part of the Pacific delegation to
Nairobi, and worked on the *Forum '85* daily newspaper. Martin’s efforts ensured that coverage was given to Pacific activities within this conference, and Pacific perspectives of the event in general (Goodwillie 1985).15

These reports show that many of Fiji’s representatives to the conference continued to identify international factors as contributing to women’s subordination in the region. Their advocacy at the Nairobi conference echoed the themes that had been apparent in their presentations to the 1975 and 1980 conferences and again focused upon issues such as the testing of nuclear weapons, calls for decolonisation and greater local control over Pacific Island economic and natural resources. For example, Vanessa Griffen’s forum presentation focused upon the negative impact of militarisation in the Pacific and the ways in which the world’s major powers had acted to enhance their strategic interests in the region but simultaneously endangered the interests of local communities (Chew 1985e). On another occasion, Fiji YWCA national general secretary, Tupou Vere, spoke of the continuing colonial presence in the region and urged delegates from the states implicated to pressure their governments to withdraw from the Pacific and recognise local communities’ rights to self-rule. Arguing that colonial states were imposing their own sense of superiority on Pacific Islanders, she stated ‘[w]e do not want your white gods’ (Chew 1985c). Another highly critical presentation on similar issues was made by Shaista Shameem, also a Fiji YWCA member. Shameem argued that some Pacific Island states may have gained political sovereignty but their ability to retain control over economic resources and production had been compromised by outside influences. In particular, Shameem argued that Fiji’s strategic alliances with the US and Australia were compromising the country’s independent status (*Fiji Sun* 20 July 1985).16

In an effort to promote Pacific concerns within the Forum, delegates from the region again formed a regional committee which aimed to influence Pacific delegations to the official intergovernmental conference. This committee issued a joint statement which drew attention once again to nuclear testing in the Pacific region, the continuing economic dependency of newly independent states, and indigenous populations’ rights to self-rule. It read, ‘[i]t is our responsibility as women of the world to combine to bring this exploitation to an immediate halt’ (Martin 1985b).

Like Pacific women participating in the Nairobi Forum, the Pacific region’s official delegates to the intergovernmental conference also felt that they were

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15 The UN also sponsored a local journalist, Connie Chew, to cover the event for Fiji’s local press. This ensured that the Nairobi women’s conference and Pacific women’s participation received far greater coverage in the press than the previous events of the UN Decade for Women.

16 This observation partly reflects local dissatisfaction over the Fiji government’s reversal of its previously strong anti-nuclear stance as a result of US pressure.
given little opportunity to present their case.\textsuperscript{17} Despite the fact that official Pacific Island state delegations were generally more high-ranking and more numerous than those that had attended previous conferences, there was also some dissatisfaction that delegates were grouped with those from Asia and thus viewed as representing the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. Kuini Bavadra, head of Fiji’s official delegation, argued that this common practice within the UN was in need of review, given that Pacific Island countries ‘have no similarity’ with Asian countries and that their ‘tradition and customs are totally different’ (cited in Gokal 1985). The fact that significant tensions existed within the Asian group also exacerbated the situation and ensured that the Pacific Island delegates received little support from other state representatives when it came to raising particular issues of concern (Gokal 1985). As in Copenhagen, the region’s delegates were also disappointed that Australia and New Zealand seemed reluctant to support a Pacific Island agenda. Once again, they were viewed as displaying loyalties towards delegations from the western states, rather than their local neighbours (Chew 1985f).

Yet, even Fiji’s delegates were heartened by the apparent broadening of feminist debate that occurred in Nairobi. While the world may have become ‘more aware of disadvantaged women’ as Bavadra asserted on her return to Fiji (cited in Gokal 1985), the way had also become clearer for the global articulation of a ‘diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women’ (Sen and Grown 1987: 13). This development contrasted with the divisions that had been evident during earlier conferences.

The idea that feminist debate had expanded in this period was reiterated by local and international observers of women’s organising, and viewed as a progressive development for women in general terms (Tinker 1986; Fraser 1987; Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986; Bernstein 1986; Griffen 1987). Important changes were also taking place within the sphere of women’s organising domestically—in Fiji and across the region—during this period. Certainly the formation of an important new women’s organisation in Fiji and the creation of an agency specifically designed to address women’s needs at the regional level provided an energising impetus for women’s advocacy in these years. Yet, Pacific gender activists were also encountering influences which made their work difficult. This suggests that the developments described in the previous pages need to be understood in contingent terms. In the following section therefore, I consider how women’s political agency was shaped by the contingencies of the prevailing political environment during these years. I focus again on gender activists

\textsuperscript{17} Fiji was represented at this event by Kuini Bavadra, a senior official within the Department of Information, and Ross Ligari, second secretary of the Fiji Mission to the United Nations in New York. This formal delegation was assisted in the various conference committees by local NGO representatives: Esiteri Kamikamica from the NCW; Adi Mei Gauna from the SSVM; and Sabreen Kahn of the Fiji Moslem Youth League.
‘situated experience’, of the domestic and international political influences that shaped their negotiations of collectivity, their promotion of ‘progressive ideas’, and their approach to transnational engagement.

Collectivity

The previous chapter demonstrated the important commitments that the YWCA made towards multicultural organisational participation. This was something that contrasted with the communalism and hierarchical structures more generally prevalent within Fiji’s civil society, however it was a commitment that also became more difficult to maintain in this later period.

The internal disputes that emerged in the late 1970s within the YWCA are a strong indication of this shifting trend. These disputes often occurred as younger, more outspoken members of the organisation clashed with those who believed they should be accorded greater organisational authority due to their age, or their indigenous rank. For example, some board members of the YWCA who, in their lives outside the organisation, were closely connected with the ruling political elite and, in particular, Fiji’s politically dominant Alliance Party, were frequently uncomfortable with the controversial public political profile pursued by other members of the organisation. In 1975, disputes over planned policy submissions to government saw one prominent board member argue that her association with this type of activity conflicted with her political standing outside the organisation (Fiji YWCA 19 August 1975, PAC Record Book).

The later and more serious developments taking place within the YWCA, leading to the strike action in 1976, also reflected internal struggles for influence between younger, more radicalised and outspoken members, and older members who were uncomfortable with the provocative nature of this activity (Keith-Reid 1976). While some acted to protect the early idea of a participatory organisational culture, this position was increasingly challenged by those who could see no reason why the YWCA should challenge social and cultural values more generally respected within Fiji’s civil society. Rokotuivuna, in particular, was deeply disappointed that the YWCA leadership had begun to ignore the ‘higher goals’ it had aimed for in the past (Rokotuivuna 2002b).

The breakthrough of relationships within the NCW can also be understood as influenced by these broader socio-cultural protocols and helps explain the SSVM decision to end its affiliation with the NCW in 1979. The SSVM justified this decision in part because it was unable to reconcile its own organisational ethos, which emphasised the importance of respect for seniority and social rank, with that of the younger, more reform-oriented women within the NCW whose conduct challenged these values (Kamikamica 1982). In the short term, this
development damaged the NCW’s profile. Although the newly appointed NCW coordinator, Kamicamica, vowed to put division behind her, the departure of the SSVM compromised the NCW’s ability to speak for Fiji’s women in a way that was wholly representative.

Towards the end of this period the creation of the FWCC indicates an emergent shift towards a more issue-oriented approach to women’s advocacy; in this case an organisation specifically devoted to combating gendered forms of violence. This was a significant development which reflected trends emerging internationally, and which many viewed as enhancing women’s networking opportunities locally and internationally. It was anticipated that developing coalitions around single issues would provide the ‘necessary space for a cross-fertilisation of ideas and strategies’ and help to minimise the transnational tensions that had been apparent at global conferences in the past ( Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986: 410). Nevertheless, in Fiji, the personal recollections of those closely connected to the Women’s Crisis Centre also demonstrate how these supposed benefits often gave way to a sense of competition and rivalry within the sphere of women’s organising more broadly, and made the achievement of a sense of common purpose, even in the domestic setting, a considerable challenge.

The foundation of the Crisis Centre could be read as a development that signalled confidence in the capacity of existing organisations to meet the needs of women in general terms, and an attempt to build upon the earlier groundbreaking work performed by the YWCA. Yet, when outlining the early operations of the Centre, the organisation’s coordinator, Shamima Ali, did not articulate this sense of progression, and her references to broader cooperation or collaboration were largely absent. Rather, Ali argued that within the local sphere of women’s organising there was some reluctance to concede both political space and funding opportunities to a new organisation. In an environment where funding was tight and WID issues predominant, the task of convincing donors of the relevance of programs on gender violence was described as a challenge. Ali also suggested that the efforts of the Centre were sometimes discredited by other organisations that had pre-existing relations with funding agencies (S. Ali 2002).

Ali claimed that the issue of race was emphasised, in particular, by representatives from other women’s groups to discredit the political profile of the Crisis Centre, and to suggest that the early expatriate presence within the organisation compromised its local authenticity. In our discussions, Ali praised the early role of expatriate women within the Crisis Centre and their tendency to ‘push’ local members to ‘take ownership of the issues’ (in many ways echoing the sentiments expressed by early YWCA members as they discussed the role of founding expatriate members like Ruth Lechte and Anne Walker). Nevertheless, in this later period, Ali argued that expatriate involvement had harmed the Crisis Centre’s profile, with other women’s organisations dismissing its importance by arguing ‘oh they’re an expat organisation’ (S. Ali 2002).
Of course, in a political climate where the detractors of the women’s movement have frequently accused women’s organisations of introducing foreign ideas that are incompatible with Pacific Island cultures, the presence of expatriate women could be viewed as detrimental to the long-term ambition of these organisations to be accepted as locally authentic. Additionally, there continued to be some local resistance towards the ‘monolithic’ (Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986) prominence of western-oriented feminist frameworks which had seemed hostile to local perspectives of gender disadvantage. These tendencies help to explain why local women activists during this period were able to discredit those organisations that continued to incorporate expatriates as members. Yet, such views also tended to overlook the important role that locally admired expatriate figures such as Lechte had played in pioneering critical public debate on gender issues (Moore 2002b; Bhagwan Rolls 2002a).

Ali’s suggestion that the racial origins of Crisis Centre members were used to discredit the organisation appears particularly poignant and paradoxical given the earlier efforts that national organisations such as the YWCA or the umbrella group, the NCW, had made to promote ideals of multiculturalism both within society and within their own organisations. The critique of expatriate influence also contrasts sharply with the legitimating role played by expatriates within Fiji’s civil society during earlier colonial periods. At this time, women’s organisations were practically obligated to appoint expatriate women to positions of leadership if they were to be seen to have any authority by the prevailing colonial elite (Lechte 2005; see also Chapter 2).

Attempts to understand these episodes of ruptured collectivity within and between women’s organisations are only possible if recognition is given to the broader socio-cultural influences that shaped civil society behaviour more generally in Fiji at this time. Prevailing hierarchies of age and social status clearly had an impact upon women’s groups, influencing the negotiation of organisational relationships and disrupting the idea of horizontal collectivity, so often identified as an ideal feature of women’s organisations. Similarly, the legacies of Fiji’s colonial history, which have ensured that race remains a powerfully charged local idiom, frequently exploited for local political gain within the realm of institutional politics, clearly also permeated the associational sphere at this time. The ability of some Fiji-based women’s organisations to use the issue of race as a means by which to discredit others can therefore also be appreciated as a tactic that reflected Fiji’s highly communal political terrain and the contestation that inevitably surrounds questions of racial identification in this setting.18

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18 In her study of gender activist networks in Fiji leading up to the Beijing Conference in 1995, Annelise Riles notes in passing that ‘generalized conceptions of “race” and “culture” were divisive elements…. In some
Progressive ideas

The increasing international prominence of the WID policy framework in this period expanded the political space available to Fiji’s women’s organisations as they campaigned for greater government attention to be focused upon ‘women and development’ issues. While locally focused efforts to improve women’s formal representation in Fiji’s state bureaucratic structure were generally not successful in these years, activities designed to strengthen the regional network of women’s organisations certainly appear to have accrued some significant political dividends, particularly with the establishment of the PWRB within the SPC. The increased focus upon regionalism was, therefore, seen by many activists as a progressive approach to gender advocacy during this period.

When asked about the developing regional consciousness of Pacific Island women at this time, former YWCA member Suliana Siwatibau highlighted the importance of understanding women’s regionalism not as a new development, but an aspect of Pacific Island life that was simply enhanced in these years. Siwatibau argued that the SPC’s Community Education and Training Centre had, since its foundation in Suva in 1963, played an important role in fostering regional contacts amongst women. Participants who had come together for education or training from across the region still managed to ‘keep the network alive’ upon their return home, she argued (Siwatibau 2002).

Moreover, in these years, Pacific regionalism was becoming more pronounced at the intergovernmental level. Greg Fry has shown that this was an era when newly independent Pacific Island states, as well as regional neighbours (Australia and New Zealand), were seeking to establish new regional institutions such as the South Pacific Forum (founded in 1971), which aimed to facilitate regional cooperation while also increasing the region’s international political influence (Fry 1979, 1994, 1997). Therefore, Pacific women were increasing their level of regional engagement at a time when these same trends were becoming prominent within Pacific Island politics at a more general level.

When asked how regionalism could be empowering for women, many of my interlocutors emphasised how this level of engagement contributed to both organisational learning and political influence. It was argued that the ‘regional focus’ evident during this period facilitated learning in the shape of ‘exchange

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19 In terms of local institutional outcomes that might be identified as instances of reform-oriented agency, it is clear that positive developments for women at this time were few. The Fiji government was particularly good at making commitments towards women’s advancement on the international stage, but generally disinclined to follow these up with concrete policy formulations.
of information and experience’ and helped ‘shape ... advocacy, and the type of plans to be put in place’ (Vere 2002a). Rokotuivuna provided an important example of this when she described the regional ramifications of the PNG government’s 1975 decision to establish a women’s machinery within the Office of the Prime Minister. Rokotuivuna argued that this development was celebrated by the region’s women in general terms, and viewed as strengthening similar demands for the establishment of women’s machineries in other Pacific countries (Rokotuivuna 2002b).

Regionalism was also understood to increase the international influence of local women’s organisations. Griffen has argued that participation at the 1975 World Conference for Women in Mexico City ‘revealed to Pacific women that their individual voices were inadequate if they wished to raise issues; they found that they must present their views as a region’ (Griffen 1984: 519). Taufa Vakatale also emphasised this point, stating that, in this period ‘Fiji couldn’t come and fight its own case. If we wanted to be heard … we had to organise regionally’ (Vakatale 2002). Forming regional coalitions was, therefore, viewed as increasing activists’ ability to leverage support for particular causes on the local and international stage.

However, as the previous discussion has demonstrated, fortunes were somewhat mixed in this regard. Certainly, the ability of Pacific NGO representatives to convene a high-level meeting of international delegates to the Copenhagen women’s conference in 1980 was significant. Yet the concerns articulated at this meeting were not taken up within the intergovernmental forum. Campaigns waged by Pacific Island women to refocus the policy emphasis of the SPC to accord greater recognition of gender issues resulted in new institutional initiatives such as the triennial intergovernmental women’s conferences and the establishment of a new SPC agency for women, the PWRB. However, evidence from the SPC’s Tahiti meeting convened in 1981 also demonstrates that Pacific women were not able to make the same types of critical contributions to regional debate that had been a hallmark of their advocacy in the previous decade (Goodwillie 2005).

In later conferences convened by the SPC, debate on questions of gender disadvantage proceeded smoothly when an issue-specific approach was taken. This seemed to allow the thornier questions of structural inequality and international political influence in the region to be avoided altogether. Deliberations on questions of health infrastructure and education, or gender violence were areas where a commonality of experience and concern could be identified without provoking institutional observers. These developments reflected an emerging trend which was locally interpreted by some as taking women’s advocacy to a ‘new level’. From this perspective, issue-specific forms of advocacy were seen as progressive for the fact that they enabled women’s groups to ‘move beyond’ the questions that had been of particular concern in the past (Vere 2002b).
Within the broader transnational sphere of women’s organising, the shift towards issue-specific forms of advocacy was similarly acclaimed as progressive. The fact that the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies focused greater attention upon the disadvantage experienced by women in specific circumstances was viewed as demonstrating how cutting-edge academic research on gender inequalities was beginning to inform gender activism. It was argued that rather than simply documenting instances of women’s oppression, this type of work enabled a global understanding of the varied contexts in which women are disadvantaged and the strategies needed to alleviate this disadvantage (Fraser 1987; Tinker 1986: 588).

Arvonne Fraser described these attempts to identify both issues of concern and potential solutions as ‘hopeful and forward looking’; an acknowledgement of the obstacles impeding women’s advancement, but also an attempt to create a sense of progress (Fraser 1987: 168). By its very title, Forward Looking Strategies encapsulated this idea of progress for women being made at all levels of policy-making.

This does not mean that women’s organisations taking a more issue-specific approach to combating women’s disadvantage were strangers to controversy. As Ali’s recollections of this period demonstrate, organisations like the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre challenged important socio-cultural protocols which regulated conduct within civil society generally and prevented the issue of gender violence from becoming a topic of public debate. Describing the political environment before the Crisis Centre was established, Ali stated, ‘People didn’t talk about this issue and rape was not mentioned in the press. You only read about it if it was rape and murder. So reports were quite rare. In terms of open debate—there was none at all…. Rape was seen as a private affair, it was something that was shameful’ (S. Ali 2002).

Similarly, Ali also illustrated how cultural and social protocols operated to strengthen patriarchal values in civil society and limit the space available to organisations such as the Crisis Centre. She stated, ‘There were cultural restrictions too; the acceptability of treating women like doormats, and the mentality that if these things happen then women deserve it. We were working in a very conservative society … there is the whole patriarchal system in operation here which sanctions the culture of men owning women’ (S. Ali 2002).

Ali viewed the activities of ACWIN and, later, the Crisis Centre, as challenging these protocols. Yet, if Ali privately articulated a relatively bald view of the impacts of patriarchy and gender discrimination, she was also careful to point out that in its public advocacy the Crisis Centre had geared its message delivery in ways that reflected cultural values and religious belief systems within the broader community. She stated, ‘We have examined culture and religion. We
have read the Koran, the Hindu holy books and the Bible. We have learnt all about these religions so we can counter arguments that might do damage to women. This has been an important part of our training’ (S. Ali 2002).

These statements suggest that the ‘progressive’ step towards issue-specific forms of advocacy for women was also shaped in important ways by the contingencies of the local socio-cultural setting. Ali’s comments indicate that while the Crisis Centre sought to challenge cultural protocols which reinforced the hidden nature of gender violence, the organisation was also mindful of the need to shape the anti-violence message in ways that were consonant with these influences. This tactic contrasted with the more provocative, head-on approach to structurally inclined advocacy that had been a characteristic feature of YWCA activity in previous years.

Transnationalism

At first glance, the events described in this chapter would appear to support the idea that throughout the UN’s Decade for Women, the transnational women’s movement developed an enhanced cohesiveness. Many international observers judged the outcomes generated by the Nairobi Conference—both the level of consensus within the forum and the final unanimous intergovernmental vote for the Forward Looking Strategies—to be indicative of a broader and more mature level of global feminist debate (Tinker and Jaquette 1987; Berkovitch 1999; Galey 1986; Fraser 1987). Similarly, some Pacific Island gender activists were keen to promote the argument that the international feminist agenda had become wider and more inclusive in this period.

Not long after the end of the Decade for Women, observers such as Griffen, who had previously been highly critical of the efforts to promote a global feminism, made reference to this idea of expansion:

The idea of feminism has been broadened. A fundamental aspect of it is recognition of the inequalities and exploitative nature of male-female relationships in all societies in the world. That is the universal aspect of women’s condition. Women have found that they cannot ignore other issues related to women, such as how their country is organized, who controls the country and the economy, and the dependence of that economy on the world economic system. With a wider perspective, women are able to see feminist struggle as not just changing the little things that affect aspects of women’s lives, but as an effort to seek a broader transformation that would improve the position of women—of men and women equally—for a better world (Griffen 1987: 7).
Griffen’s views suggest that her earlier mistrust of the universalising aspects of feminism, strongly biased towards the interests of western women, were diminished in this later period. Indeed, she appears greatly encouraged by the idea of an expanding framework for global feminist debate that would be more inclusive and more easily able to accommodate Pacific Islander perspectives of gender disadvantage (Griffen 1987).

Yet, in many parts of the Pacific, a resistance to the term feminism continued. Participants to a 1987 regional conference entitled ‘Women, Development and Empowerment’, and organised by a number of former Fiji YWCA activists, made this clear. Delegates to this event stated that they felt feminism to be something only relevant to highly educated women. Some argued that it challenged the cultural emphasis Pacific Islanders placed upon the family and the raising of children, or that its ultimate aim was to see women segregated from the rest of society (Griffen 1987). In other contexts, Pacific women also articulated the view that blanket judgements of Pacific Island cultures as anti-women overlooked the many aspects of local culture that celebrated and honoured Pacific women (Kamikamica 1985: 71). This suggests that while increasing numbers of women were motivated to change discriminatory practices against women within Pacific Island contexts, they were, in many cases, as reluctant as they had been in previous years to identify with the term feminism or to articulate their goals in these terms (Griffen 1987).

The emphasis upon issue-defined approaches to gender advocacy which increased in this period provided a way to move on from the more difficult question about the appropriateness of feminism in the Pacific context. At this time, many international observers were celebrating the emergence of smaller and more issue-focused transnational networks, arguing that they contributed a greater international cohesiveness to women’s organising by ‘providing a necessary space for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and strategies’ (Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986: 410). The idea here seems to be that while specific phenomena contributed to women’s subordination in specific ways in particular settings, it was also possible to talk about issues such as gender violence, women and environmental resource management (Tinker 1986), or women’s role in the media, in ways that acknowledged a commonality of experience and avoided hegemonic universalising.

Colonial interventions also sought to modify these traditions. Colonial and missionary interventions across the Pacific Island region were frequently accompanied by efforts to promote European ideas about women’s maternal and domestic duties and the appropriateness of women’s work. In many contexts, these efforts helped to undermine the traditional sites of women’s authority (Douglas 1999; Jolly and MacIntyre 1989).

In an exhortation to move beyond the ‘interminable’ debate on the Melanesian appropriateness of the term feminism, Jolly has argued that, ultimately, ‘the word is not so crucial as the processes and practices of women’s collective action to improve their lives’ (Jolly 2003: 143).
Broader political factors also help explain this shift towards issue-specific advocacy and a movement away from activity that protested global structural inequality. To begin with, civil-society actors committed to combating global poverty were operating within a far more constrained transnational political space than had been apparent ten years earlier. With the international debt crisis gathering strength and the world economy falling into recession, the rhetoric of Third World leaders also began to change. The political leaders of aid-recipient states were, at this time, more inclined to acquiesce to the stringent structural adjustment conditionalities placed upon them by multilateral monetary institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, than to call international attention to the added local hardship such policy-prescriptions were causing (Randall and Theobold 1998). In global political terms, this situation stood in stark contrast to the earlier period of Third Worldism which characterised international politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s and which influenced a range of civil-society actors to also question the structural imbalances that compounded disadvantage in developing countries.

Domestic political developments in Fiji also contributed to this advocacy shift. For example, the previous ‘close relationship’ that had existed between Fiji’s political elite and those civil society actors promoting an anti-nuclear agenda was, in this period, less evident. Fiji’s local political elite had begun to develop a foreign policy agenda which more clearly reflected US interests in the Pacific, and this meant a less provocative state line was being articulated on questions of the Pacific’s nuclear status and issues of decolonisation. In turn, this created a more constrained political environment for civil-society actors to pursue the kinds of questions that had absorbed their attention in the past.

This is not to say that advocacy examining the structural determinants of women’s disadvantage was a thing of the past. Such views were clearly evident in the strongly worded statements made at the Nairobi women’s conference by figures such as Vere, who decried the local influence of ‘white Gods,’ or Shameem, who argued that Pacific Island countries’ state sovereignty was being undermined by foreign powers. Yet, the beginnings of a shift to more issue-specific discussions of women’s disadvantage was clearly in evidence during this period, and was seen to offer new and potentially less divisive avenues for women’s transnational dialogue into the future.

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22 This approach to development economics was to become ‘increasingly hegemonic’ during the 1980s and formed the basis of structural adjustment programs, imposed by the IMF and World Bank which required debt-carrying developing states to devalue their currencies, cut spending in areas such as welfare, remove price control mechanisms and establish wage ceilings as part of ‘debt rescheduling packages’ (Randall and Theobold 1998: 123, 160).
Conclusion

Beyond the ‘new frontier’, a combination of changing local and global influences was shaping the ways in which Fiji’s women’s organisations understood their capacity to act. At domestic, regional and international levels, the political space in which advocates might make the case for greater recognition of the gendered impacts of global inequality was much reduced. To some degree, these developments can be understood as having encouraged a shift towards a new, issue-driven advocacy focus. Yet the fact that this new advocacy trend was also viewed as a progressive and less contentious transnational approach to promoting the advancement of women was also significant and saw the structural emphases that had been notable features of women’s advocacy lose some of their currency.

Efforts to negotiate collectivity within particular women’s organisations, and within Fiji’s women’s movements overall, continued to be shaped by longstanding social and cultural mores regulating social and political life in this context. This was indicated by the tensions which emerged both within the YWCA and the NCW over the behaviour of younger women in these organisations who were accused of acting disrespectfully towards older organisational members or those of a higher social rank. At the same time, race also emerged as an issue of contention within the sphere of women’s advocacy as groups used references to ethnicity in ways designed to discredit each other. This inscription of race politics contrasts in stark ways with the organisational ethos promoted by bodies such as the YWCA or NCW in previous years. Earlier efforts to promote a participatory and multicultural ethos appear, in this period, to have given way to a more competitive communalism. Certainly the expatriate women implicated in these developments were disappointed that the politics of race had been used against them (Goodwillie 2005). Yet in this context too, such developments reveal important characteristics about the nature of associational life in Fiji and the relative ease with which the issue of race could be mobilised for political gain.

The next chapter will examine the local, regional and international developments in women’s organising taking place from 1986 until the Beijing Conference for Women in 1995. This decade closed in a haze of international euphoria, as women’s organisations around the globe celebrated the success of the Beijing conference, the sheer numbers of women represented, and the fact that state delegates once again had showed a strong willingness to unanimously endorse the World Plan of Action. Nonetheless, at the local level in Fiji, this was a period in which local women’s organisations had to contend with a series of political developments that threatened the unity of the country as a whole and created a high level of internal tension within many nationally focused women’s groups.
Existence was precarious for these groups in this period, as new currents of religious and social conservatism yoked with ethno-nationalism shaped the terrain of local politics and civil society activity.