
The period from 1985 to 1995 was one of mixed fortune for Fiji’s women’s organisations. Overall, it was marked by an episode occurring in 1987 which had a critical political impact on the country and far-reaching social and economic consequences. In that year, the newly elected coalition government, made up of Labour Party and National Federation Party (NFP) representatives, was overthrown in the wake of a military coup. This event marked the culmination of an indigenous nationalist ‘insurgency’ which had brewed since the country’s first Non-Alliance Party government had assumed political office only a few weeks earlier (Kelly and Kaplan 2001: 174). These events had significant ramifications for the political agency of women’s organisations as they came to terms with a much-transformed political context and increased levels of need in the local community.

On the one hand, responses to these events were divided, demonstrating that the terrain of women’s organising was not immune to the cleavages emerging within the broader local political sphere. On the other hand, these groups were equally confronted with a higher level of practical need in the community, as women of all nationalities struggled to deal with the immediate and serious social and economic impacts that accrued from Fiji’s political upheavals. Drawing attention to these circumstances was difficult, however, within a post-coup political climate exhibiting a powerful current of ethno-nationalism. Accordingly, both supporters and detractors of the prevailing military-led regime promptly came to terms with the need to assume a more guarded political profile than had been apparent in previous years.

Women’s organisations active at the regional level during this period enjoyed a more enabling political environment. Indeed, the regional presence of Fiji-based women’s organisations increased significantly as local groups looked to create regional networks around specific issues such as gender violence, legal literacy and women’s electoral representation. These regional initiatives were motivated by local knowledge of the areas in which women faced common challenges and resulted in the formulation of highly distinctive perspectives on gender disadvantage, with each activist network formulating a specific methodology for advocacy.
Regional preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be staged in Beijing in 1995, were more extensive than in the previous decade and, again, provided an important platform for organisational activity. However, the sectionalised and issue-specific focus of activity predominated, with regional intergovernmental bodies also limiting the extent to which non-government perspectives on these questions could be heard. In the long run, this meant that official documents prepared for Beijing by regional institutions tended to present a relatively moderate picture of gender disadvantage in the Pacific Island context.

Acting in their own right on the international stage, local women’s organisations went to Beijing with a determination to be seen and heard, although the underlying issues that had to some extent been unifying factors and emblematic of participation at previous international events seem to be more difficult to detect on this occasion. The tone of advocacy undertaken by women’s organisations was, for the most part, of a far more subtle complexion than had been evident at the preceding world conferences. This reflected general trends emerging in gender politics towards the end of the period and the tendency for statesmen and women, together with members of the activist community, to focus more squarely upon the human rights dimensions of gender disadvantage rather than broader redistributive goals.

To make sense of the waxing and waning fortunes of Fiji’s women’s organisations during this period, the following pages provide a close examination of the intersecting local and global factors that shaped women’s advocacy in this decade. This discussion demonstrates how the terrain of women’s advocacy was affected by Fiji’s 1987 coups and an emergent authoritarian and, at times, chauvinistic political culture. It also discusses the influence of regional and international policy trends which had newly begun to emphasise ‘women’s rights as human rights’. The latter sections of the chapter focus on the ‘situated’ experience of women’s organising during this period and draw from gender activists’ first hand testimonies to examine how these prevailing circumstances shaped organisational abilities to negotiate collectivity, progressive ideas and transnational engagement.

Local developments

In contrast to the latter years of this decade, the period from 1985 to mid-1987 can be considered a generally positive time for women’s organising in Fiji. The Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC) was beginning to increase its credentials as a nationally focused organisation with the establishment of provincial offices within Fiji and a mobile counselling clinic which aimed to extend the centre’s
reach to outlying areas. It had also begun to develop collaborations with older and more established women’s groups such as church groups and women’s cultural organisations. In addition, it continued to raise its public profile by publishing newsletters and pamphlet material promoting an anti-violence message. During this period, the FWCC received funding in a fairly ad hoc manner, with partner non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Australia and New Zealand securing financial assistance for the Centre from state-based funding agencies such as the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB, later AusAID) (S. Ali 2002).

As previously shown, the FWCC was conscious of the need to frame the more political aspects of its activities in ways which did not challenge cultural or religious values in an overly provocative manner. Nonetheless, the political aspects of the FWCC’s work threatened to bring it into conflict with some of Fiji’s more conservative social elements. To avoid putting the practical focus of the Centre’s programs at risk, it was agreed that a new organisation should be created to take a more state-focused and overtly political path (Moore 2002b). Formed with the twin aims of improving the ‘inadequate laws’ protecting women and enhancing women’s political status, the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM) began operations as a sister organisation to the FWCC in 1986 (FWRM 2000a). Members of the organisation’s management collective included a number of women who had been involved in other women’s organisations such as Shamima Ali (FWCC), Imrana Jalal (YWCA), Peni Moore (FWCC), Kuini Bavadra (FWCC), and Ema Druavesi, a prominent member of the Fiji Trade Union Council (FTUC).

The principal focus of the FWRM’s early activity was the issue of sexual violence against women, with the organisation formulating an anti-rape campaign which was funded through a partnership formed with the Melbourne-based NGO, the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA). While the program aimed to promote awareness of rape, and a more sympathetic response to victims of rape at the grassroots level, this campaign focused principally upon the need for legislative changes to more effectively deal with this phenomenon at the state level (FWRM 2000a). In 1987, the FWRM held the country’s first anti-rape march which delivered to Fiji’s parliament a petition containing over 5,000 signatures in support of improved state responses to rape victims and stricter sentencing guidelines for those convicted of sexual violence.

The FWRM also aimed to promote women’s issues in the lead-up to Fiji’s 1987 general election through the surveying and publication of candidates’ responses to a number of questions deemed important to women’s status. The Fiji Labour Party, in particular, promised a range of far-reaching reforms which included the creation of a government department for women, legislative change to outlaw sex discrimination, the establishment of minimum wages for women employed in the garment industry, and ongoing public funding for the Women’s Crisis
Centre. This party was led by Dr Timoci Bavadra, an Indigenous Fijian from the country’s western provinces. Bavadra’s strong commitments to social justice drew on some of the antithetical traditions within the Fijian hierarchy which were unsettling for the Fijian establishment. Ultimately, he proved to be a strong contender in these elections and, with a coalition of minor parties, Bavadra’s Labour Party was able to form government and bring to an end seventeen years of conservative Alliance Party domination in Fiji (Emberson-Bain 1992).

Within a fortnight of victory, the Bavadra-led coalition had begun to act upon some of its electoral promises for women. In particular, Atu Emberson-Bain notes the preliminary work done to establish a Department of Women’s Affairs (Emberson-Bain 1992: 148). On 14 May 1987, however, the policy aims of the Labour coalition were abruptly halted when military forces, under the direction of a high-ranking officer, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, invaded Fiji’s parliament, took members of the government hostage for five days, and installed an interim military regime. This action was defended firstly as an attempt to ‘forestall threats to law and order’ (Fiji Sun 15 May 1987). Later, coup leaders argued that they were acting to uphold the interests of indigenous Fijians. In the weeks preceding the coup, an indigenous nationalistic movement entitled the Taukei, ‘a self-proclaiming insurgency … alleging to speak directly for the … people of the land or owners of the land,’ had begun to win strong support for its claims that principles of indigenous paramountcy and Fijian Christian identity were under threat from the newly elected coalition government which included a high proportion of Indo-Fijian members (Kelly and Kaplan 2001: 174).

Following Rabuka’s coup, efforts were made to resolve the resulting political impasse with the establishment of a government of national unity which brought together members of the conservative parties and some members of the Labour coalition. These moves did little to mollify the Taukei and the military. In September 1987, the armed forces again intervened, overturning this administration and establishing a military government with Rabuka at the helm. Fiji, at this point, was expelled from the Commonwealth. The country’s new political leadership declared the country to be a Republican Christian state and oversaw the creation of a new constitution, formulated to protect indigenous paramountcy and the political powers of Fiji’s Great Council of Chiefs. This new constitution also put in place a communal electoral system which ensured that indigenous Fijians would retain power should new elections be held (Kelly and Kaplan 2001). These took

---

1 Dr Bavadra’s wife, Adi Kuini Vuikaba, was a highly placed public servant who had led Fiji’s official country delegation to the UN Conference for Women in Nairobi in 1985. She had also been an active member of the FWCC and the FWRM prior to her husband becoming Labour Party leader. This undoubtedly helps explain the inclusion of women’s issues in the Party’s platform. When asked about the role she intended to undertake as the wife of the Prime Minister, she stated ‘I intend to help champion the rights of women in this country and to help the youth’ (Fiji Times 15 April 1987; see also Fiji Sun 15 April 1987).
place in 1992 and Rabuka, leading the nationalist Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party, was returned to power with a substantial majority (Sutherland 2000: 205).

Interpreting these events through a lens which highlights how racial cleavages are evident within the political life of the Fiji Islands obscures their class-based motivations and, particularly, how the political and economic ambitions of Fiji’s Eastern Chiefs have influenced political developments throughout Fiji’s colonial and post-colonial history (Robertson and Sutherland 2001; Sutherland 1992; Durutalo 1985). However, in the day-to-day political life of the nation, it was also easy to exploit the racial dimensions of the 1987 coups, with the result that divisions between Fiji’s various ethnic communities intensified in the ensuing years (Davies 2005: 47). Strong support for coup leaders from within the powerful Methodist Church, and Church leaders’ increasingly vocal demands that Fiji declare itself a Christian state, made the political environment difficult for civil society actors who were critical of the Taukei, the interim government and, in later years, the nationalist agenda of the SVT (Tuwere 1997; Niukula 1997).

Within the sphere of women’s organising, tensions developed between those sympathetic to the nationalist cause and those committed to democratic rule in Fiji. Many former members of the YWCA such as Vanessa Griffen, Claire Slatter and Amelia Rokotuivuna were strongly committed to the same principles of equity and social justice articulated by Bavadra. Rokotuivuna, in particular, led protests, public marches and prayer meetings in the days immediately after the coup, and was eventually arrested for these actions alongside women unionists Jackie Koroi and Druavesi (Emberson-Bain 1997; Rokotuivuna 1997; Griffen 2005). Other activist women maintained a strong media profile, with Slatter, Rokotuivuna, Arlene Griffen (also involved with the YWCA) and Peni Moore (FWRM) writing letters to the print media demanding an end to the Fiji military’s political role and a return to democracy. Appeals were also made to Fiji’s indigenous political elite, and especially the Great Council of Chiefs, to relinquish the idea that political power was their birthright (Fiji Times 5 June 1987, 12 June 1987, 22 June 1987; Fiji Sun 14 June 1987). In the subsequent months, a national ‘Back to Early May’ movement was formed to coordinate political activity in support of a return to democracy. Protests, petitions and marches were organised and women of ‘all ethnic categories and political persuasions’ were prominent campaigners (Emberson-Bain 1992: 159). Those engaged in this type of resistance were also subject to police surveillance and

---

2 John Kelly and Martha Kaplan translate this title as the ‘Party of the Chiefs’ (2001, 175), but also note that the leaders of this organisation dislike its title being translated into English.

3 Divided responses to these events were evident amongst Fiji’s powerful Christian leaders, and particularly within the Methodist Church throughout 1987 and 1988. For an account of these differences and the tensions brewing within Fiji’s mainline churches during this period, see Niukula (1997).
at times arrested for their anti-government activities (Emberson-Bain 1997: 280–86). On the first anniversary of the coup, a significant protest action was planned but had hardly begun before its organisers, a group which became known as ‘Democracy 18’ and which included activists Jalal, Emberson-Bain, Druavesi, Rokotuivuna and Moore, were detained by police overnight (Ricketts 1997). After a nine-month trial they were found guilty of unlawful assembly but not convicted (Emberson-Bain 1992: 159).

Other women’s groups were equally energetic in their support for the actions of the Fiji military and the Taukei movement. In particular, the nationalists drew support from the mass organisation for indigenous women, the Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSVM), and the National Council of Women (NCW) which followed a moderate political path at this time and appeared keen not to jeopardise its relationship with the state through outspoken or critical advocacy.

Conflicting appraisals of the political situation also threatened unity within single organisations. This scenario was particularly apparent within the Fiji YWCA, a body which, as previous chapters have shown, had formerly voiced strong official commitments to democratic rule and multi-racial electoral representation. By contrast, examinations of the organisation’s records for this period demonstrate that some YWCA executive members were quick to dissent from this line, despite the fact that affiliation with the World YWCA required national associations to promote and uphold multicultural values (see Chapter 2).

In particular, the YWCA’s general secretary, Adi Finau Tabakaucoro, had been a notable public supporter of the Taukei movement, defending the protest actions of Fiji nationalists prior to the coup in letters to the print media (Fiji Times 29 April). In the aftermath of these events, she presented the view that democracy was a ‘foreign flower’ for which Fiji had the ‘wrong soil,’ a phrase that was to become a catch-cry of the Taukei and its sympathisers (Fiji Times 28 May 1987). While these comments were made in a personal capacity, YWCA records for the period from May to September 1987 show that Tabakaucoro’s association with a publication which ostensibly sought to explain women’s responses to the coup but which was written in a tone strongly sympathetic to the indigenous nationalist cause, raised the indignation of a number of YWCA board members, and also the head of the World YWCA’s regional office, Salamo Fulivai. The implication that the views expressed within this publication represented those of the organisation as a whole was deemed problematic. While Tabakaucoro acted to reassure the board that any links drawn between the YWCA association and the pro-nationalist publication were purely accidental, the media was not easily convinced on this score and once again showed intense interest in the political divisions emerging within the Fiji YWCA—a situation that was
particularly damaging for the YWCA’s profile in subsequent years (Fiji YWCA 8 and 10 August 1987, Management Committee Record Books; Fiji Times 9 August 1987; Bhagwan Rolls 2002a).

Goodwillie and Kaloumaira noted similar tensions evident within the FWRM membership during this period, arguing that the organisation became ‘polarised’ along racial lines as its Fijian members struggled to accommodate questions of indigenous political identity with the FWRM’s strong commitment towards the promotion of women’s rights within a democratic framework. In the short term, these concerns prompted some Fijian members to leave the FWRM. As Goodwillie and Kaloumaira observed, however, this was often only a temporary absence, with some members returning to the organisation in later years (Goodwillie and Kaloumaira 2000: 11).

Quite apart from the political challenges that the coup placed before women’s organisations, this was also a period in which local organisations struggled to address, in more practical terms, the urgent and escalating range of economic and social needs borne by women in the post-coup years (see Emberson-Bain 1992; Slatter 1994; Ram 1994; Griffen cited in Dé Ishtar 1994). Emberson-Bain observed that within a post-coup political environment marked by authoritarianism, women’s vulnerability was accentuated. Increased levels of violence in Fiji were apparent both in the short term, as a result of waves of race-motivated attacks and, in the longer term, due to a rise in pro-nationalist paramilitary aggression which took the form of vandalism, arson and local abductions (Emberson-Bain 1992: 153; Griffen cited in Dé Ishtar 1994).

A broader culture of political violence and political authoritarianism seemed to compound the risks borne by women in this period. The Crisis Centre observed a six-fold increase in violence and sexual attacks against women by 1989, with the majority of incidents brought to the Centre’s attention but not reported to police (Griffen cited in Dé Ishtar 1994). In those cases which were reported to authorities and successfully taken to court in the post-coup context, it was also found that the indigenous practice of bulubulu or ‘traditional apology’ to the victim’s family had become increasingly acceptable to Fiji’s judiciary as a factor to be taken into account to reduce the severity of sentencing for these crimes (Emberson-Bain 1992: 155).

The unguarded attitudes expressed by the country’s self-imposed leaders at this time, seemed to further legitimate the violent treatment of women. Rabuka’s widely reported jest that Fijian men use idle hours on Sunday, the ‘Christian Sabbath’, to kick ‘either a football or one’s wife around’ (Pacific Islands Monthly May 1994: 32), evidences the ‘proprietal and contemptuous attitudes towards women’ that were commonly held amongst the post-coup political elite (Emberson-Bain 1992: 153–54). Another indication of the regime’s extreme
gender prejudice was evident when Nationalist sympathiser and parliamentary member Ratu Telemo Ratakele stated that advocates ‘who promote legal education and social, economic and political equality for all women, made him feel like raping women’ (*Fiji Times* 2 May 1995). Together, these statements demonstrate the depth of chauvinistic thinking amongst the country’s political leaders. Beyond their offhand ‘normalisation’ of gender violence, they also issued sexualised threats against those women who were critical of the systems which upheld patriarchal privilege in their society.

Heightened physical insecurity was not the only thing Fiji’s women had to contend with during this period. Intensifying economic pressures were also creating difficulties. Emberson-Bain argued that the predicament of women employed in low-skilled areas such as garment manufacturing, was made even more precarious in this period as the military government developed policy to attract new investment to support a rapidly weakening economy. This included wage deregulation, the creation of tax free zones and restrictions on labour organisation. All of these measures had detrimental economic impacts for low-skilled female workers (Emberson-Bain 1992; Ram 1994). A raft of austerity measures enacted by the government in order to qualify for International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank assistance, only added to this economic pain (Emberson-Bain 1992; see also Slatter 1994; Ram 1994; Singh 1994). These included currency devaluations, the imposition of a value added tax, and a significant reduction in state welfare budgets. During the same period, government military spending doubled.

Within the newly created Ministry of Women, established by the military government in 1987, there appears to have been little willingness to confront or alleviate the types of burdens being placed upon Fiji’s women. Creation of this office as part of a broader-based Ministry of Women, Culture and Social Welfare may, on the surface, have appeared as an acquiescence to the long struggle waged by a number of women’s groups, and in particular the Fiji NCW, for the creation of women’s machinery at the state level. Government detractors, on the other hand, saw this move as a calculated attempt by the military government to portray itself as progressive and forward looking. They were particularly unhappy when the controversial YWCA and pro-Taukei figure, Tabakau coro, was appointed as head of this Ministerial office (Emberson-Bain 1992; Houng Lee 2002).

---

4 Workers within Fiji’s garment industry at this time typically had little union representation. The industry generally relied on employees working long hours for low wages (see Emberson-Bain 1992; Ram 1994).

5 Economic policies enacted by the government in the post-coup years included two currency devaluations that saw the Fiji dollar lose 33 per cent of its value and the introduction, in 1993, of a ten per cent value added tax which meant that those whose wage earnings were previously under the tax-free threshold (65 per cent of all wage earners) were now also contributing to the state’s coffers (Ram 1994: 243).
The Ministry of Women generally appeared reluctant to tackle the issue of women’s economic disadvantage and, with an operating budget that was largely taken up with salaries and administration costs, was unable to offer much in the way of concrete programs of assistance (Emberson-Bain 1992). In general terms, the government had significantly reduced its commitment to welfare funding and this prompted many women to turn to local women’s organisations as alternative sources of welfare support. As such, the practical demands placed upon local women’s groups such as the FWCC, the FWRM and trade union servicing sectors with high numbers of women employees were considerable. In response, the Crisis Centre began to run programs assisting families with school fee payments and also coordinated a ‘back to school scheme’ which recycled school shoes, books and uniforms between families (Griffen cited in Dé Ishtar 1994; Emberson-Bain 1992: 150).

In addition to these relief-oriented activities, organisations such as the FWRM, in close cooperation with the unions, began to lobby the state to provide greater protection for women workers employed in low-wage industries such as garment manufacturing or domestic work. The government made some legislative changes in these areas, for example ensuring the ‘far from adequate’ minimum starting wage for garment workers at 65 cents per hour (FWRM 2000b). In general terms, however, the establishment of these awards was by no means an assurance that they would be respected by employers or enforced by state representatives (Emberson-Bain 1992: 153).

With the resumption of parliamentary democracy in 1992, albeit within a constitutional framework which concretised principles of indigenous paramountcy, the FWRM began to extend the focus of its activities, lobbying the state to take a greater role in the regulation of discriminatory practices on a variety of fronts. A significant part of this campaign was focused upon government recognition of the United Nations women’s convention or CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). The FWRM acted as a secretariat for the local CEDAW committee which was comprised of a number of other Suva-based women’s organisations. After a series of meetings between government representatives and the committee, and a two-day convention in April 1995, Fiji acceded to CEDAW in August of the same year, only a few days prior to its participation at the UN Fourth World Conference for Women held in Beijing. While this move was generally welcomed by the local community of women activists, and reported by the local media as ‘an indication of Fiji’s firm commitment to equality of rights and respect of human dignity’ (Daily Post 14 August 1995), it was also felt that the timing of this event was designed to provide the Fiji government with increased political credibility at the international level (Bhagwan Rolls 2002a; Vere 2002a). Of particular concern for organisations such as the Crisis Centre and the FWRM,
however, were the reservations noted by Fiji on articles 5(a) and 9 of the convention; articles which oblige states to eliminate customary practices that are prejudicial towards women and also require men and women to be granted equal citizenship rights (FWCC 1995). Such reservations reflected post-coup sensitivity to questions about the discriminatory aspects of custom, citizenship and land-rights entitlements. The nationalist government’s accession to CEDAW with these reservations was clearly a political strategy which aimed to appease gender activists while also quelling Taukei fears that this step would lead to cultural sabotage or the subversion of indigenous paramountcy.

In 1993, Peni Moore, a Fiji citizen of European origin, who had been formerly employed as a coordinator of the FWRM, formed a new women’s organisation in Suva. This move was motivated in part by Moore’s dissatisfaction with the state-focused legalistic advocacy strategies being employed by the FWRM, which she felt were failing to make an impact for the substantial numbers of women in need at the grassroots level. Moore’s decision also came about in response to the increasing opposition she felt from some members within the FWRM who argued that having a white woman at the helm of the organisation was becoming a political liability (Moore 2002b). Convinced that she was well-positioned to make a valid contribution towards the advancement of Fiji’s women, but disappointed that her ethnicity was becoming a point of contention, Moore decided to leave the FWRM in March 1993. In November of the same year, she registered Women’s Action for Change (WAC) as a charitable organisation. In forming this new organisation, Moore was particularly interested in investigating how community theatre might be used as a tool of education to ‘empower and assist women’ (WAC 1999).

The primary aim of WAC’s activities during this period was to develop ‘alternative media’ such as drama, song, dance or story-telling as vehicles for advocacy in political contexts where there were often strong levels of resistance to advocacy messages which were felt to challenge traditional or cultural values (WAC 1999). The strategies employed by WAC aimed to soften the delivery of these messages by building upon local religious, cultural and social reference points while also creating a more empathetic response amongst grassroots communities towards those who suffer forms of discrimination. In later years, WAC became adept in a variety of community theatre techniques, but remained committed to the idea of developing alternative advocacy methodologies that might have a strong impact at the grassroots level.

The emergence of WAC demonstrated a new direction in women’s organising in Fiji, encouraged by the political events taking place at the beginning of this decade. The advocacy methodology developed by this group was an attempt to develop a more creative and covert style of operation within a relatively restrictive political climate. This shift is understandable given the prevailing
political conditions which shaped organisations’ understandings of what was ‘permissible’ in these years. For example, women’s organisations were clearly well aware of the significant level of material disadvantage being borne by women in Fiji. Yet, they also demonstrated a general reluctance to be overly critical of the state. The punitive nature in which political power was being exercised was coupled with a potent and chauvinistic indigenous nationalism. In this environment, advocacy to advance the status of women was easily dismissed as a seditious attempt to sabotage Fiji’s national interests. This severely constrained the political space available to women’s organisations.

For example, campaigns to alleviate the economic predicament for women that were articulated in legalistic form and focused upon wage regulation, achieved a limited success. Such strategies were clearly more acceptable to government authorities and less likely to meet with hostility than strike action or public protest activity, as the Fiji Nursing Association had found to its detriment when it chose to challenge the government through a prolonged strike action in 1990 (Leckie 1992). Certainly the post-coup regime’s decision to create a state-based machinery for women seemed hopeful, yet the general abrogation of institutional responsibility for the disadvantaged status of women in the post-coup political climate was also disappointing (see Slatter 1994; Singh 1994). Ultimately, this meant that women’s organisations were forced to work creatively and from their own limited resources to provide practical assistance where they could. And within WAC, alienation from the state was more pronounced as Moore began to develop advocacy strategies which aimed to bypass the state completely and promote the rights of women in ways that might encourage grassroots social change. This conviction would see WAC’s activity branch out in a number of different directions in later years.

Regional developments

Establishing new networks

While developments occurring within Fiji’s national political realm made it difficult for women’s organisations to legitimate their agendas locally, a developing focus upon regional engagement within organisations such as the FWCC and the FWRM helped raise the profile of these groups beyond Fiji’s borders. In particular, these groups worked to build upon the regional contacts established between women’s groups in earlier periods by organising a series of regional conferences and workshops to focus upon single issues which were felt to be contributing to gender inequality in ways that were common across the region.
The first of these events occurred in 1992, when the FWCC staged a regional meeting on violence against women. In part, this initiative was a response to requests from women activists throughout the region for literature and training materials on gender violence (S. Ali 2002). Through these requests, the FWCC became aware of an area in which it could potentially expand its operations. The 1992 meeting provided an important opportunity for the FWCC to develop a region-wide network of activists who were focused upon gender violence issues, and to also gain some idea of how they might develop a broader regional advocacy and training program to confront this issue (S. Ali 2002).

In the same year, a regional meeting staged by the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) network in Suva, brought together a number of activists and academics to examine the trajectory of political and economic development in the region. Participants included Emberson-Bain, Vanessa Griffen, and Claire Slatter from Fiji. Together, these women delivered a critically informed appraisal of aid practices, development projects and governance in the region. They also argued for more accountability in Pacific Island politics, greater grassroots participation in decision-making and the creation of alternative models of development that extended the focus from economic growth to economic and environmental sustainability (see Emberson-Bain 1994). Many of the presentations at this conference were highly critical of the aid and development agencies engaged in the Pacific Islands, and also drew attention to compliant behaviour of local governments in accepting restrictive and harmful development aid conditionalities (Slatter 1994; Singh 1994). Yet, such provocative readings of the region’s political economy appear not to have had a significant influence upon the activity of other women’s organisations engaged at the regional level in later years.

The legalistic focus of regional activities undertaken by the FWRM in this period provides further evidence of a predominating issue-specific approach to gender advocacy. In 1994, the FWRM conducted a regional seminar on Women and the Law in the Pacific, in association with the International Commission of Jurists. This conference brought together forty women lawyers and activists to examine how the law could be used as a tool for women’s empowerment. The FWRM’s legal literacy programs conducted in Fiji were discussed as possible models that could be applied in other Pacific Island contexts. In the same year, the FWRM, together with the Fiji NCW, staged a roundtable for women politicians and activists from across the region to discuss the issues that prevented women’s participation in electoral politics and how they might be circumvented. A

6 The Centre’s newly found international benefactors also encouraged this regional concentration. In 1990, the Crisis Centre’s regional partner, Community Aid Abroad, negotiated a four-year grant for the Centre from AIDAB (FWCC 1998a). While this money provided the Centre with its first core-funding, it was allocated through AIDAB’s regional funding window and required the Crisis Centre to develop a regional focus in its work, in addition to its Fiji-based operations.
Women In Politics (WIP) project was established in the wake of this meeting which, in later years, would become an important focus for the Pacific Office of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). In 1995, the FWRM also hosted a regional forum on Women, Law and Development which focused on the subject of legal literacy and the regional promotion of CEDAW. Here, FWRM representatives discussed their campaign experiences on CEDAW and advised women's organisations from across the region on how to promote this international instrument in their own countries.

The strong emphasis upon state-based reform in the areas of political representation and law reflected the primary focus of the FWRM’s activity at the local level. Nonetheless, the tone of deliberations taking place at these events suggests a far more positive assessment of women’s ability to have their concerns recognised at the state level, both within local parliaments and the law, than the more critical appraisals of this terrain that had been evident in the DAWN-sponsored regional meeting. Such differences illustrate the distinct nature of the methodologies employed by each of these networks as they identified various aspects of gender disadvantage, and the limited extent to which cross-cutting perspectives were identified or a cross-fertilisation of ideas took place. The issues raised by the DAWN network reflected concerns that were a strong focus of women’s advocacy in former years and tended to place the question of local disadvantage in an international perspective. By contrast, organisations such as the FWCC or the FWRM appear not to have given prolonged consideration to these questions or how they might also be relevant to their own more specific work aiming to promote the institutional visibility of women in law or politics.

Regional preparations for Beijing 1995

In addition to the growing number of regional events coordinated by women’s organisations from Fiji, the South Pacific Commission (SPC) continued to play an important role in the coordination of triennial regional conferences for women during these years. In the lead up to the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995, a greater sense of energy became apparent in these deliberations as government and non-government representatives worked towards the production of a Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) for women’s advancement. It was hoped that the creation of a Pacific document would increase the profile of Pacific Island women and their capacity to inform global debate in Beijing (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2005). This was a need identified by the region’s government and non-government regional representatives who lamented the poor visibility of Pacific delegations at the previous UN Women’s conferences (see Chapters 1 and 2; Fairbairn-Dunlop 2000: 64).
In early 1994, the Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau (PWRB) encouraged member states of the SPC to conduct local research on the status of women; research which addressed areas of concern identified in the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (FLS) but which also noted the types of challenges that might be unique to the Pacific context. These reports were then sent to the PWRB and reviewed by a regional development specialist, Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop, in order to prepare a Draft Plan of Action. Two key meetings were held in May 1994 to oversee this process. The Sixth Regional Conference of Pacific Women staged by the SPC in Noumea (2–4 May), brought together over 200 government delegates and NGO observers from the region. At this meeting, government representatives worked on the draft document and formulated a regional declaration which became the preamble to the Pacific Plan of Action (SPC 1994a). At the follow-up SPC-convened ministerial level meeting, held a few days later, the PPA was delivered to, and accepted by, the region’s state representatives (SPC 1994b).

Fairbairn-Dunlop argued that the collaborative effort that went into this document reflected women’s growing regional sophistication and their ability to ‘look beyond their own immediate concerns’ and accept ‘different viewpoints’ (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2000: 65). With the PPA in hand, and these new skills in place, it was anticipated that regional representatives would be well-placed to make themselves heard at the final pre-Beijing consultation for the Asia Pacific region, staged by the United Nations Economic and Social Council for Asia Pacific (ESCAP) in Jakarta in 1994. While Fairbairn-Dunlop acknowledged that not all the concerns raised in the PPA were recognised in the final Jakarta Declaration, on the whole, she judged the exercise to have been successful. She was also confident that the document would provide an important list of considerations to be recognised in future ‘Pacific development interventions’ (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2000: 66).

Nonetheless, comparisons made between this document and the regional NGO Programme of Action, formulated during consultations staged by the ESCAP in Manila (November 1993) and Suva (February 1994) in preparation for Beijing, give a particularly powerful indication of the extent to which the broader political agendas of governing regimes in the Pacific Islands region also informed the perspective of women’s subordination evident in the official SPC version of the PPA (UNESCAP 1994). This fact, although not acknowledged by Fairbairn-Dunlop, is perhaps not surprising given the SPC mandate which bound its women’s office, the PWRB, to work principally with Pacific Island governments.

---

7 Further refinements to this Pacific Plan of Action were made in the final twelve months before the Beijing conference, during four sub-regional intergovernmental caucuses which were convened by the SPC to further consider the Plan’s provisions and recommendations. Three of these meetings were organised according to geographic location, with sub-regional caucuses formed in the Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian regions of the Pacific Islands. The fourth sub-regional caucus brought together representatives from the French Pacific—New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna.
rather than the region’s women advocates (see Chapter 2). The need to appease Pacific state representatives’ sensibilities seems to have had a profound influence on the final shape of the PPA.

The distance between government and non-government perspectives on women’s disadvantage was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the Regional and Global Framework section of the official PPA which suggested that the introduction of ‘democratic forms of government’ has placed ‘serious strains on the traditional ways’ of Pacific Islands communities (SPC 1995). While this was a position that corresponded to the perspective on democracy being endorsed by the incumbent nationalist political elite in Fiji during this period, fears about the appropriateness of democracy in Pacific Island contexts were nowhere to be found in the NGO Plan of Action.

Similar contrasts were also evident in the corresponding sections relating to women’s economic status. In the formal PPA, this discussion took place under the heading of women’s economic empowerment. Here, a highly entrepreneurial view of women’s wage-earning potential was promoted. The report noted the increase of women in formal employment due to the creation of industrial zones and commercial industries in the region. The increasing numbers of women successfully involved in micro-enterprises were also celebrated for the fact that they allowed local women to combine household and familial responsibilities with income-earning activities. The PPA did concede some failings in this area, noting that women’s rate of formal labour participation was lower than that of males, and that across the region, women were under-represented in senior business or management positions (SPC 1995: 12–13).

Yet, these issues were addressed from a far more critical perspective in the NGO Programme of Action. In this report, the section entitled ‘Economic Empowerment’, focused upon the issue of wage equality between men and women. It also discussed the lack of recognition given to the work of Pacific Island women in the domestic sphere and also in areas such as agricultural production where women’s contributions continued to be overlooked by economic and development policy-makers. In an additional ‘Labour’ section which focused more centrally upon the rights of working women, attention was drawn to the challenges facing women who undertook the dual roles of domestic duties and paid employment. Reference was made more clearly to the negative aspects of women’s factory work within industrial zones and particularly garment manufacturing and fish-processing, with attention drawn to worker exploitation and sexual harassment, the lack of adequate child-care and maternity leave for working mothers, and the need for more ‘responsible fathering’ in order that women’s wage earning and reproductive roles might be more easily balanced (UNESCAP 1994: 11, 17–18). As we have seen, these were concerns that had been pursued by women’s organisations in Fiji, and local
feminist academics with close connections to the women’s movement (Emberson-Bain 1992; Emberson-Bain and Slatter 1995). They had not met with a sympathetic response from Fiji’s government when raised in the domestic public domain however. It is not surprising, therefore, that a more labour-oriented perspective of women’s economic status was not present in the official PPA.

While there were some significant differences in the perspectives of women’s status evident in each document, the same sectionalised and issue-specific approach to gender disadvantage that had been evident in other aspects of women’s regional organising was also obvious here. This issue-specific focus diverted attention away from the identification of cross-cutting issues of a structural nature which contributed to women’s disadvantage in a more general sense. As such, the more internationalised perspectives of women’s economic disadvantage that called attention to the activity of international monetary institutions or the impact of international aid conditionalities were absent. This suggests, once again, that while regional networks were strengthened in these years, regional dialogue on questions of gender inequality tended to be more cloistered. Action on issues such as global economic equality or post-colonial political empowerment, were clearly a far less common advocacy focus for Pacific women than they had been in the past.

International developments

During the early 1990s, the United Nations sponsored a series of international conferences focusing upon specific areas of international policy-making. These included the World Summit for Children (1990), the Earth Summit (1992) and the World Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994). While women’s organisations were generally well represented at all these events, their participation at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993 is generally celebrated in feminist academic literature as being of particular significance. Their use of this occasion to successfully promote the issue of violence against women as a violation of women’s human rights, a campaign spearheaded by US-based activist Charlotte Bunch and her Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University, is argued to have been instrumental in gaining broad legitimacy for women’s rights to be recognised as human rights (Joachim 1999, 2003; Keck and Sikkink 1998). This campaign sought to widen what feminists had often viewed as the ‘gender myopia’ evident in human rights law which failed to recognise ‘oppressive practices against women as human rights violations’ (O’Hare 1999: 364). In Vienna, networks

---

8 In so doing, the traditional western privileging of civil and political rights over social and economic rights was challenged. In defence of the claim that the human rights framework needed to be broadened, Bunch argued that ‘much of the abuse against women is part of a larger socio-economic web that entraps women,
of women activists successfully campaigned for violence against women to be recognised as a human rights concern and an issue that states should be internationally obligated to combat (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Joachim 1999: 203). Further international activity on this issue saw the UN General Assembly adopt a draft declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in December 1993, which again recognised these principles. This session also saw the nomination of a special rapporteur appointed to investigate violence against women and its causes.

Keck and Sikkink argue that these developments ‘increased the synergy of diverse national and international efforts on violence against women’ (1998: 187). Bunch’s activities, both as the head of the CWGL, and as an international advocate for women, had a substantial impact upon the local work of the FWCC. In the same year that these developments occurred internationally, the Crisis Centre staged its first public march protesting against violence against women, and used this occasion to reproduce the ‘women’s rights as human rights’ message that had been endorsed in Vienna (S. Ali 2002). In later years, FWCC coordinator Shamima Ali undertook training with the CWGL in public advocacy around issues related to gender violence. In particular her training centred on ways to promote the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence (S. Ali 2002). Commencing on 25 November (International Day Against Violence Against Women) and concluding on 10 December (International Human Rights Day), this event, established by the CWGL and staged by women’s organisations around the world since 1991, draws attention to the links between violence against women and human rights. In Fiji, the early Crisis Centre ‘16 Days’ campaigns included radio programs, street theatre and public discussions on the issue of violence against women (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 185). Ali described the advocacy methods she had learnt at the CWGL, and particularly the Centre’s focus upon human rights, as highly influential and ‘important for what we do here’ (S. Ali 2002).

The UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 provided further international endorsement of human rights perspectives on gender disadvantage. The fact that the final intergovernmental conference document, the Global Platform for Action (GPA), ‘subsumes feminist goals under an umbrella of human rights’ and applied this perspective to a wide variety of issues apart from violence against women, such as health, sexuality and reproductive rights, was viewed as an indicator both of the success of this new strategy, and of the political agency of the women’s organisations that had worked transnationally to promote this perspective of gender disadvantage (Pietilä and Vickers 1996;...
Keck and Sikkink 1998; West 1999; Joachim 1999, 2003; Jaquette 2003). These deliberations did not take place without serious resistance from some delegations who felt the focus on human rights challenged religious values and promoted an ‘excessive individualism’ (West 1999: 189). Yet the fact that consensus was achieved on the GPA was generally hailed as a momentous achievement for women. As the intergovernmental meeting was brought to a close, UN Conference Secretary General Gertrude Mongella was moved to claim that the delegates present had ‘significantly expanded the horizons of previous conferences’ (Pietilä and Vickers 1996: vii).

Even so, the GPAs incorporation of a human rights framework generally tended to ‘obscure’ the connections between ‘human rights abuses’ and ‘current economic structures’, particularly in relation to the issue of violence against women (Guest 1997: 112; Bishop 1997: 11). Indeed, while the GPA noted the fact that women around the world were enduring the negative consequences of structural adjustment policies and deregulated markets, imposed as a conditionality of multilateral lending institutions, it also described structural adjustment programs as ‘beneficial in the long term’ and noted the importance of ‘trade liberalisation’ and ‘open, dynamic markets’ (UN Commission on the Status of Women 1995: para. 18, para. 16). This faith in the power of markets to lift women out of poverty linked empowerment with cash income but simultaneously overlooked the exploitative nature of women’s employment in many developing countries (Bulbeck 1998: 176–79).

As one observer put it, the problem of women living in poverty was conceptualised within the GPA as ‘liberal capitalism’s bête noir … nothing that a bit of targeted credit, business training and entrepreneurialship won’t cure’ (Guest 1997: 112).

Reports from the NGO Forum at Beijing, on the other hand, indicated that issues related to poverty and women’s economic deprivation were at the forefront of discussion for delegates from both North and South. Bulbeck (1998: 171) notes that of the 3,000 workshops convened during this event, 500 confronted aspects of poverty and their effects upon women. The critique of economic globalisation became something of a ‘mantra’ within the forum (Guest 1997: 110), emerging as ‘the single most critical issue’ overall (Agarwal 1996: 28). However, as Pacific Island women noted, the sheer number and diversity of presentations made at...
the Forum, which attracted over 50,000 participants, made it difficult to come to terms with the ways in which perspectives on disadvantage raised in one session might have implications for women in other areas (FWRM 1995).

For some Pacific women attending the Beijing Forum, the economic aspects of gender disadvantage were an over-arching consideration. This was particularly true for the DAWN Pacific network members. However, this question was by no means the primary focus of Pacific women’s activity at the 1995 conference which represented a diverse array of interests.

Over two hundred Pacific women participated at the Beijing Forum with over twenty participants present from Fiji alone (Rokotuivuna 2002a). Having learnt from previous international conferences, these women were keen to make their presence felt. Indeed, this was one of the key aims of the Beneath Paradise project, which involved a number of regional women activists and whose sub-theme was ‘See Us, Hear Us, Beijing’.

This project, funded by the IWDA, had brought together fifteen groups across the Pacific, including the FWCC, and aimed to document and ‘faithfully’ represent the ‘first hand statements, stories and declarations of Pacific Women’ (Beneath Paradise 1994). The project focused upon themes such as traditional and subsistence lifestyles, cultural events and practices, violence against women, education, political participation and health (Beneath Paradise 1994). In preparation for Beijing, the IWDA had funded the publication of a book edited by Emberson-Bain which brought together a number of the papers presented to the Pacific regional meeting of DAWN in 1992, and which was available from the Beneath Paradise booth at the Forum. Other perspectives on the status of women in the region were presented in a more immediate and interactive form. These included dance and theatre presentations, discussion on the work done by women’s organisations, participation in networking events and seminars, and meetings coordinated with regional aid partners and state representatives (Beneath Paradise 1995).12

Pacific women’s enthusiastic participation at Beijing was disrupted by the French government’s untimely announcement of its decision to resume its nuclear testing program at Muroroa Atoll in French Polynesia. This development

12 While IWDA provided support, training and funding for the project, the focus was upon building the capacity of local organisations to work on their own documentation projects in a way which would allow ‘grassroots women’ and organisations working with women to ‘speak for themselves to an international audience’ (Beneath Paradise 1994). Annelise Riles’ discussion of this project suggests that the ‘Australian design consultants’ brought in to provide training for local participants to this project compromised its authenticity (2001: 131, 207). While she claims this to have been a point of contention amongst local project members, my discussions with the Fiji-based women who took part in this project revealed no such misgivings. The collaboration between the IWDA and local organisations was said to have been highly beneficial, and in Fiji, formed the basis of an ongoing relationship between the FWCC and the IWDA that was much valued (S. Ali 2002; Costello-Olsen 2002).
was met with ‘anger and sadness’ by Pacific participants in Beijing (Beneath Paradise 1995). As it had in the past, this issue once again focused attention upon the twin issues of the Pacific nuclear presence and decolonisation in the region. And, working as a regional group, Pacific Island women used what means they could to draw attention to the nuclear testing issue—a task aided by the presence of members of another IWDA-funded project, Omomo Melen, which specifically focused upon bringing international attention to questions of Pacific decolonisation through participation at Beijing.

This project was headed by Susanna Ounei, a prominent Kanak activist from New Caledonia and member of the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre. This regional organisation that had grown out of the earlier Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement. It brought together representatives from East Timor, New Caledonia, West Papua, Tahiti and the indigenous communities of Australia and New Zealand. In 1995, Ounei represented the Omomo Melen Project at the final global preparatory conference for the Beijing conference which took place in the UN New York Headquarters. Here, she successfully argued that consideration of the plight of women in colonised territories should be included in the draft GPA (Riles 2001: 177). The regional preparations undertaken by the Omomo Melen network ensured that this group of Pacific women was well-prepared to lead regional activity on the nuclear testing issue in Beijing and employed a clearly defined conceptual framework which focused upon colonialism and indigenous rights to self-determination. Ounei spoke at a Forum plenary session entitled ‘Obstacles to Peace and Human Security’ and also participated in a global tribunal staged by the Asian Women’s Human Rights Council (Beneath Paradise 1995).

On the other hand, domestic political developments in Fiji meant that the country’s official delegation to Beijing articulated a soft line on nuclear testing issues within the intergovernmental conference, despite the fact that the newly appointed Minister for Women, former YWCA President Taufa Vakatale, had been involved in anti-nuclear protests after the French announced their plans to resume testing. Vakatale had, in fact, been relieved of her ministerial post for these actions. This was hardly surprising. Official relations between France and Fiji had become much closer in these years, particularly after a bilateral aid arrangement which saw the French government inject over FJ$10 million

13 This is a regional organisation that had grown out of the earlier Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement.

14 Riles’ account of the impact of the Omomo Melen Project focuses on the difficulties encountered by Pacific Island women during their participation in Beijing and discusses only one, apparently poorly attended press conference in which project participants attempted to draw attention to their particular cause. Riles’ account does not mention the fact that Ounei represented Omomo Melen at these more significant Forum events and the attention accorded her presentations as the nuclear testing issue took on greater urgency (see Riles 2001: 177–78).

15 While some local women activists such as Rokotuivuna had been disappointed with Vakatale’s political involvement with the post-coup regime, they welcomed her support on this particular issue, and recognised the courage of a political stance which contravened official government policy on this question (Rokotuivuna 2002b).
into Fiji’s national coffers (Emberson-Bain 1997). This aid was seen to provide a vital boost to a stagnating post-coup economy. It also ensured Fiji’s relatively compliant official response to Jacques Chirac’s renewed nuclear ambitions in the Pacific. For these reasons Fiji’s government representatives in Beijing delivered a conservatively focused country paper to the intergovernmental conference which avoided any mention of the regional nuclear testing issue, even though this would become a pointed advocacy focus for Pacific delegates to the NGO Forum in the final days of the meeting.

Such developments are indicative, once again, of the shifts which had occurred within the domestic political setting, both in the areas of foreign policy and Fiji’s economic development. Official silence on the nuclear testing issue clearly contrasts with the Fiji government’s earlier pursuit of this issue in the immediate post-independence context. The government’s punitive response to Vakatale’s involvement in anti-nuclear protests was also a clear demonstration of a shift in attitude amongst the dominant political class. At the same time, the framework employed to discuss women’s economic status was clearly more geared towards an entrepreneurial perspective of economic empowerment. Thus, the questions of wage equality or wage justice that had been prominent features of local academic research into women’s employment at this time were not apparent in government statements.

As we have seen, within the domestic post-coup political climate, these questions were not a political priority for the local political elite which was looking to promote Fiji’s economic credentials internationally in ways that emphasised a liberal approach to wage and industry regulation. This meant that all civil society actors, including women’s groups aiming to take up these types of issues at the local, regional or international level during this period, were operating within a far more constrained political environment than had been evident in the past.

At the domestic level, the rise of ethno-nationalism and political authoritarianism, together with the absence of constitutional democracy for over five years, inclined some women’s groups to alter their advocacy strategies towards a more cautious style of public engagement or to experiment with new advocacy methodologies. Similarly, within an international political environment shaped by an unswerving faith in neoliberal approaches to development, gender

---

16 French President François Mitterrand had announced a moratorium on nuclear testing in the Pacific region in April 1992.
17 On the other hand, in response to Australian calls that Beijing be made a conference of commitments, the Fiji paper stated that the government would increase support for the financing of women’s small enterprise ventures, aim to increase the participation of women on the boards of business and in local councils to 50 per cent, aim to increase the representation of women in all levels of government also by 50 per cent, take measures to eliminate violence against women, sexual harassment and child abuse, and eliminate gender discrimination in law (Beneath Paradise 1995).
activists were clearly less inclined to frame their advocacy in terms which emphasised how global political or economic structures were contributing to local disempowerment and disadvantage. Certainly, some discussion of these questions was apparent within networks such as the DAWN Pacific or Omomo Melen, yet this did not have the same far-reaching impact that was apparent in the past.

In the following section, I turn my attention more explicitly to the factors which shaped women activists’ negotiations of collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism during this period. I do this by again emphasising the ‘situated experience’ of the women in question and their own appraisals of the political contingencies that shaped their advocacy in these years.

**Collectivity**

Developments taking place within the terrain of women’s organising in the period 1985–1995 would, on the surface, appear to indicate that local and regional networks were flourishing. The creation of two new nationally focused women’s groups, the FWRM and WAC, and the establishment of a number of regional networks which were focused upon specific issues of gender disadvantage seem to support this idea. As we have seen, however, communal politics were also amplified in this period within Fiji. This dramatically constrained the political space available to those civil society actors who aimed to resist government authoritarianism and ethno-nationalist intolerance. And these conditions had important implications for the ways in which collectivity was negotiated by women’s organisations.

For example, in the immediate post-coup context, the YWCA and the FWRM had both issued strongly worded statements in support of a return to democracy. In the longer term, however, these actions contributed to internal divisions and, in some cases, loss of membership, as indigenous members struggled to reconcile loyalties to their communities with the political stance adopted by the organisation. The difficulties experienced by the FWRM in this respect were generally played out in private, and eventually saw Fijian members who had left the organisation voluntarily return in later years (Goodwillie and Kaloumaira 2000). The post-coup tensions within the YWCA were a much more public affair, however, and ultimately did long-term damage to the organisation. While the fortunes of the YWCA had been declining for several years, the organisation struggled to recover from its coup-related divisions (Lechte 2005; Goodwillie 2005; Slatter 2002). Ultimately, membership waned as the YWCA began to look more politically conservative, and young women’s interest in the work of newer women’s organisations such as the FWCC and the FWRM began to expand (Rokotuivuna 2002b; Vakatale 2002).
Moore’s recollections of her experiences as the FWRM coordinator are also telling and suggest that questions around ethnicity were not always resolved amicably within the newer women’s organisations. Moore’s decision to depart from the FWRM was motivated, in part, by the fact that she felt continually subjected to the questioning of her ethnicity (Moore 2002b). In the longer term, Moore found the situation at the FWRM untenable and began to explore the possibility of establishing a new women’s group with a more creative style of advocacy which might in some ways diffuse the focus upon race that had been problematic for her at the FWRM.

However, Moore’s recollections suggest that it was not only communal politics which created tensions within the sphere of women’s organising on the domestic stage. Her descriptions of the early years of WAC operations suggest that the competitive environment between women’s organisations that was described in the previous chapter had not abated and, if anything, had become more pronounced as groups became aware of the need to secure local and international institutional recognition for their work. Moore argued that pre-existing women’s organisations demonstrated a degree of wariness towards her new organisation, with some expressing concerns that WAC would duplicate other organisations’ work. A more collaborative environment did evolve in later periods, with the FWCC employing WAC to assist in its anti-violence campaigns. Nonetheless, the overall lack of enthusiasm which greeted the appearance of a new organisation, also working on women’s issues, continued to make the early years of WAC’s operations difficult, despite the fact that this group was developing a strong grassroots base of support for its operations (Moore 2002b).

This guarded response to the formulation of new women’s organisations is perhaps more understandable if we consider the limited civil society space available to women’s organisations struggling for recognition in the post-coup political environment. As we have seen, Fiji’s government was generally unresponsive, and sometimes openly hostile, to the demands made by women’s groups. In the short-term, it was only willing to make concessions to the indigenous women’s group SSVM, or the politically moderate NCW. In later years, it is clear that the FWRM and the FWCC did establish more cordial relationships with the government, particularly with Vakatale at the head of the women’s ministry. Yet, within a political climate where all political issues were interpreted through an ethno-nationalist lens, any territory gained by local women’s groups was hard-won, guarded defensively and not willingly conceded to newcomers.

Moore acknowledged the limitations she faced in this role as a white woman and made reference to the strong level of resentment she faced from indigenous political leaders such as Tabakaucoro, when she called for an examination of the uses of buluhula (traditional apology) in rape trials. This was clearly a difficult topic to raise within a political culture where any questioning of indigenous tradition could easily be framed as an attack upon indigenous cultural identity and an attempt to dissolve traditional values (Moore 2002b). On the other hand, Moore argued that ‘being white’ gave her advantages as a women’s activist in the post-coup era. She felt this allowed her to take a provocative stand in the public domain in ways that might not always have been possible for women from other ethnic backgrounds (Moore 2002b).
At the same time, funding issues were also a concern for all local women’s organisations and contributed to an increased level of competitiveness between groups (Lechte 2005). During this period, development agencies encouraged the participation of civil society actors in development programs. In particular, bilateral and multilateral development agencies began to boost funding for women’s groups as a result of increasing awareness that institutional development initiatives for women were, in fact, not meeting their stated goals effectively (see Chapter 2). Moreover, at this time, development agencies with connections to Fiji found engaging with civil society groups preferable to funding agencies of an authoritarian regime with undisguised ethno-nationalist sympathies. Nonetheless, the communal aspect of associational life in Fiji also influenced how donors working with women’s organisations negotiated these relationships, for they were careful to avoid accusations of partisanship. For these reasons, donors generally directed their support to issue-focused organisations rather than faith-based or cultural bodies whose affiliations to Fiji’s various ethnic communities were more clearly identifiable.  

A wariness of civil society communalism in Fiji meant that organisations such as the FWCC and the FWRM were the principal beneficiaries of external institutional assistance (in these years, usually brokered through partner NGOs located in donor countries). But overall, the pool of externally managed funds that might support such groups was limited. The fact that new organisations such as WAC were now also asking to be considered as deserving recipients of overseas assistance only helped to intensify the competitive aspect of inter-organisational relationships in these years.

### Progressive ideas

In keeping with a trend that was emerging towards the end of the Decade for Women, a more issue-specific approach to women’s advocacy continued to be evident within the sphere of women’s organising in Fiji. This approach was viewed as progressive because it allowed women’s groups to develop expertise and advocacy methodologies that were particular to their areas of concern. For example, FWRM was principally engaged in state-focused advocacy programs designed to promote the rights of women through the law or through increased parliamentary representation. By contrast, WAC was engaged in advocacy which was disengaged from the state, and aimed to encourage social change at the grassroots level through programs of community theatre. And the DAWN Pacific network, which focused upon the regional impact of neoliberal economic development strategies, presented another, more research-focused, advocacy model.

19 The negative aspects of this situation are considered in greater detail in Chapter 5.
On the one hand, this trend towards issue-specific organisations and differing advocacy methodologies had important benefits. It allowed organisations to gain specialist knowledge and professionalise their operations. It also allowed them to create their own particular organisational identity, something that was necessary to avoid the accusation from potential funders of women’s groups duplicating each others’ work (see previous section). This increased specialisation also appealed to the media and donor agencies who increasingly sought out engagement with individuals or groups who might claim ‘on the ground’ expertise.

On the other hand, the issue-specific focus also encouraged a cloistered style of dialogue on women’s issues which worked against local organisations and regional networks identifying cross-cutting issues that compounded women’s subordination. This was an important development which contrasted with the way women’s organisations had functioned in earlier decades.

This shift towards an issue-specific emphasis is certainly evident in the activities undertaken by women’s organisations operating at the domestic level in Fiji. It is also starkly apparent in the text of the PPA and the corresponding regional NGO Programme of Action, formulated prior to the participation of Pacific women at the 1995 UN World Conference for Women in Beijing. Those who described the PPA, in particular, as a ‘manifesto’ for Pacific women (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2000), clearly saw this document as representing a significant institutional outcome and a clear testimony to the long struggle women had waged for regional recognition since the days of the protest outside the SPC meeting in Port Moresby in 1980. Yet, such celebration tended to ignore the extent to which this document was predominantly focused upon government perspectives of gender disadvantage and, hence, provided a relatively moderate analysis of the factors contributing to women’s subordination across the region. This is not surprising, given the role that the SPC and the PWRB had played in its production; these regional entities were primarily committed to working with Pacific Island governments rather than the region’s NGOs.

Nonetheless, the failure to incorporate an analysis of the cross-cutting factors contributing to gender disadvantage in the Pacific becomes more clearly apparent when we consider the remarkably offhand manner in which the issue of women’s poverty is treated within both the PPA and the NGO regional documents prepared for Beijing. For women’s organisations operating in Fiji, and particularly the FWRM and the FWCC, increasing economic disadvantage

---

20 This idea of specialisation is particularly relevant to the media profiles that women’s organisations have established in Fiji. The FWCC is routinely cited in media reports of gender violence and sexual abuse. The FWRM is generally the first women’s organisation called upon by journalists to comment on broader political developments in the Fiji Islands. By contrast, the WAC’s media profile tends to be generated through feature articles which examine its community-theatre programs or projects designed to assist a particular disadvantaged group.
in the post-coup years was a concern which intensified, particularly in the wake of the military government’s retreat from involvement in the welfare sector. Local women’s groups were under increasing pressure to fill this gap and provide assistance from their own limited resources. The fact that no discussion of poverty or economic hardship borne by women appears in the pages of the NGO Programme of Action, therefore, seems at odds with the practical experience of women’s organisations in Fiji in the post-coup years. It also runs counter to the observations made by participants in the DAWN seminar staged in Suva in 1992, where the economic marginalisation of women was described as an increasingly prominent phenomenon across the region (see Emberson-Bain 1994).

As I have shown, women’s organisations in Fiji were operating in a highly restrictive political climate in the post-coup years and drawing regional or international attention to the incidence of poverty was not a strategy welcomed by the prevailing political elite. Indeed conduct of this type tended to be viewed as an attempt to sabotage Fiji’s international reputation and damage its future potential for economic growth (Slatter November 2001).

The apparent inattention of gender activists to the local and regional incidence of poverty in the ESCAP documents can also be explained by the pervasive nature of the free-market economic ethos both regionally and internationally. Slatter’s examinations of Fiji’s political economy at this time described the considerable influence of the IMF and World Bank and the extent to which these institutions had successfully encouraged the Fiji government to adopt structural adjustment policies as a means by which to increase Fiji’s global economic competitiveness (Slatter 1994). Slatter argued that many Pacific Island governments had succumbed to similar pressures from the Bretton Woods institutions but were generally keen to present these policies to domestic constituents as of ‘their own inspiration’ (Slatter 1994: 17). Premjeet Singh suggests that such strategies helped to circumscribe the political outlook of local civil society actors and discouraged critical political activity on questions of economic disadvantage (Singh 1994: 57–58).

Domestic, regional and international political contingencies, therefore, meant that women’s organisations were disinclined to engage in sustained campaigns on questions of women’s material disadvantage. Although the perspectives of regional development outlined during the 1992 DAWN regional conference appear as a noteworthy exception to the rule, in general it can be said that

---

21 In the official PPA, the issue of poverty is raised, although this discussion takes place in a highly abstract form, justified by the fact that poverty ‘was not presented as a critical area of concern for the region’ (SPC 1995: 26). While it is acknowledged that poverty does exist, and is of particular concern within women-headed households, the chief emphasis is placed upon the incorporation of women into the wage-earning market as a mechanism of poverty alleviation. Ultimately the Platform argues that ‘[p]ublic policies and private initiatives that address women’s skills and potential by providing the necessary resources and opportunities will lead to equitable economic growth’ (SPC 1995: 27).
women’s organisations tended not to engage in advocacy that criticised the prevailing economic orthodoxies which promoted entrepreneurial models of economic empowerment rather than welfare as the key to alleviating women’s economic disadvantage.

If structurally inclined perspectives of gender disadvantage were no longer viewed as progressive, human rights advocacy frameworks were gaining in ascendancy and increasingly seen as providing women’s groups with a progressive and politically empowering agenda. This is clearly evident at the international level, where institutional recognition of the human rights dimensions of women’s subordination increased dramatically during these years. At the same time, groups such as the FWCC viewed these strategies as particularly important in the local context.

In a local and international political environment which was clearly not conducive to women’s groups engaging in a structurally inclined critique of women’s subordination, the shift towards human rights can be considered a ‘neat fit’. This type of advocacy tended, in practice, to encourage a more localised examination of state capacity to protect women’s human rights rather than scrutiny of more contentious internationalised themes such as the gendered impacts of global inequality.\(^{22}\) It is therefore not surprising that the human rights advocacy focus employed by the FWCC was clearly supported by aid agencies attached to governments with strong interests in the region, such as AIDAB (Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, later AusAID) which, in the 1990s, provided core funding to the FWCC for a four-year period through an NGO partner scheme coordinated by Freedom From Hunger (FWCC 1998b).

The FWCC’s good fortune in this regard contrasts significantly with that of Omomo Melen, a gender advocacy network whose emphasis upon Pacific colonisation and nuclearisation more closely resembled the style of advocacy employed by women’s organisations in previous decades. It was anticipated that in the post-Beijing context, the Omomo Melen project would continue to support women activists living in Pacific territories still subject to colonial rule. The project ultimately proved to be short-lived, however, failing to secure continuing financial support as potential donors worried about the political implications of being seen to meddle in the affairs of another country through their support of local independence activists (Riles 2001: 175–76). The Third Worldism of the 1960s and 1970s may have increased the political weight of issues such as indigenous populations’ rights to political self-determination, and broadened the local and transnational space in which they could be pursued by civil society actors, but the international political currency of such questions had waned significantly in this later period.

\(^{22}\) This view is similar to the critique of human rights advocacy advanced by legal anthropologist Sally Engle Merry (2003a, 2003b).
Transnationalism

In this period, the concept of women’s human rights became ‘transnationalised’ (Merry 2006a: 48) and increasingly important to the terrain of women’s advocacy (Ackerly 2001; Joachim 1999, 2003). This occurred largely as a result of sustained and successful NGO-advocacy campaigns which called upon international policy-makers to recognise aspects of women’s subordination as violations of women’s human rights. These efforts accrued important institutional dividends at the Vienna Human Rights conference in 1993, and the UN World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995.

This type of advocatory strategy was said to be about much more than a universalist position that reinforced the global cultural hegemony of the west. Increasing numbers of feminist scholars argued that women’s rights advocacy could be articulated or ‘translated’ (Merry 2006a) in ways that accommodated specific reference to locally specific factors—cultural, political or religious. For these reasons, women’s human rights advocacy was said to have an important transnational resonance which directly contradicted the allegation that feminists’ use of a ‘human rights framework’ necessarily denigrated the local and the traditional as backward or retrograde (Jolly 1997, 2003, 2005a; Ackerly 2001; Wing 2002; Douglas 2003; see also Chapters 1 and 2).

The human rights advocacy undertaken by women’s groups in Fiji during this period had both global and local resonances. Since its formation in 1983, the FWCC had become adept at articulating its opposition to gender violence in ways that accommodated prevailing religious and cultural sensibilities (see Chapter 4). In the post-coup context, these skills were of even greater political significance. Therefore, while the FWCC clearly embraced the internationally endorsed human rights approach to violence against women, it also saw the value of framing this discussion in ways that did not antagonise a political elite highly protective of indigenous cultural values and clearly suspicious of such ‘universalised’ frameworks. The Crisis Centre’s strategies to promote women’s human rights were therefore often articulated in a way that emphasised local religious and cultural reference points. Its advocates did this by aligning human rights perspectives of gender subordination with arguments about respect for women and gender reciprocity framed in theological terms. Similarly they also described how customary values encouraged a complementarity of gender roles and did not necessarily sanction discriminatory relations between the sexes, or the blanket acceptance of patriarchal authority (FWCC 1998a; S. Ali 2002).

Yet, when asked more explicitly about this idea of articulation or culturally appropriate advocacy methodologies, I frequently found that my interlocutors had views of these processes which were difficult to reconcile. Figures such as
S. Ali, Rokotuivuna and Gina Houng Lee, former director of the FWRM, all acknowledged that the promotion of ‘universal values’ was particularly difficult within a political climate shaped by ethno-nationalist sentiment, increasingly audible demands that Fiji declare itself a Christian state, and a wave of political rhetoric which described democracy as a foreign flower (Houng Lee 2002; Rokotuivuna 2002a; S. Ali 2002). A more flexible articulation of human rights claims was therefore recognised to be a critical campaigning strategy for gender advocates at this time. Yet, in the same breath, these figures would often counter this position by also stating their steadfast commitment to universal models.

For example, when asked about the need to negotiate religious and cultural sensitivities, Ali argued that contextually appropriate frameworks were ‘definitely’ crucial to the FWCC’s work, but later argued that these were employed ‘much against my will’ (S. Ali 2002). On the same subject, Rokotuivuna also appeared to have something of a dual position. On the one hand, she argued that cultural sensitivities could be dealt with ‘fairly easily’ and did not require a sensitive type of negotiation. Then, some minutes later, she also conceded that in certain contexts concessions were important. Describing her dealings with government she argued, ‘You don’t want to create a situation whereby you’re talking to government but they’re not there, they’re not listening. When I’m talking to government it’s within the paradigm that they establish’ (Rokotuivuna 2002a).

Similarly, Houng Lee (2002) argued that she personally favoured a ‘universal model’ for the promotion of human rights, but later also acknowledged that women’s groups had to think carefully about how they ‘deliver the message’. And another FWRM member voiced similar sentiments. She argued adamantly that human rights were universal, that there was no need for advocacy to be modified and that there were ‘no Pacific rules’. Yet only a few minutes later, when discussing a new public campaign she also advised her colleagues to engage someone to find passages from the Bible that supported women’s rights, and to locate a sympathetic Methodist church minister who might appear alongside a FWRM staff member for a scheduled television panel interview.

Houng Lee’s (2002) stated fear that women’s groups could become ‘boxed in’ if they conceded too much ground to more parochial actors was instructive on this point and perhaps helps explain this tendency towards contending positions on the place of local culture within advocacy, and points to the importance of understanding these processes of articulation in a contingent fashion. It is certainly clear that cultural articulation was strategically important for
women’s groups operating within a public sphere where communalist values predominated. Nonetheless, activists also voiced strong concern that the normative content of the human rights message could potentially be compromised through these practices. For example, such strategies presented clear contrasts to the ways that earlier YWCA activists had confronted the issue of customary or religious influence. Independence-era gender advocates’ activities on issues such as political representation or reproductive rights regularly challenged those aspects of tradition or religion which they argued effaced individual will and capacity for choice (see Chapter 2). While activists in this later, post-coup period, were operating in a much altered political context, there also appears to have been a fear amongst some members of the local gender activist community that conciliatory efforts to ‘culture’ the human rights message were too indulgent of ethno-nationalist particularism and compromised the values of equality and justice which lay at the heart of the human rights message.23

Conclusion

The threat of being ‘boxed in’ by culture, religion and broader political division hung over Fiji’s women advocates in the years between 1985 and 1995. At the local level, Fiji experienced an intensification of communalist politics as a result of the 1987 coup, and the rise to power of an authoritarian, ethno-nationalist regime. The hardened ethnic divisions that were evident within the local realm of associational life were also manifest amongst women’s organisations. Divided responses to the political upheavals of 1987 compromised the unity of some groups, and tensions surrounding individual members’ ethnicity also became problematic. At the same time, competition for resources and political influence undermined relationships between women’s groups.

While many women’s organisations struggled for political recognition in a domestic setting where all political questions were now scrutinised through an ethno-nationalist lens, the regional and international realms of political engagement appeared to provide more enabling avenues of political engagement. Yet, in these contexts too, the contingencies of the prevailing political environment shaped the political agency of Fiji-based groups. Regional network building certainly flourished at this time, but tended towards a more issue-specific style of advocacy. While this increased organisations’ specialist

23 Sally Engle Merry describes this scenario as ‘the paradox of making human rights in the vernacular’ (2006a: 49). She contends that the human rights translators must walk a ‘fine line’ between ‘replication’ and ‘hybridisation’. On the one hand, they must ensure that human rights ideas are presented in ways that do not alienate local communities. On the other hand, they are required to develop culturally appropriate ‘translations’ that do not skew or undermine the human rights message, making it unrecognisable to the ‘global community’ (2006a: 49).
knowledge in particular areas, it was not an approach that encouraged groups to engage in more structurally focused critiques of the factors contributing to women’s subordination.

Certainly, many activists and scholars were inspired by the international ascendancy of the human rights gender advocacy frameworks that occurred at this time and that were seen to augment the transnational political agency of women’s organising. However, such strategies tended to ‘localise’ the focus of advocacy in a more ‘state-centric’ direction, diverting attention away from the broader issues of global economic and political inequality that had been such powerful concerns of Third World gender advocates in the past. In addition, as my discussion of the costs of ‘culturing’ the human rights debate has shown, the political contingencies that shape the associated processes also need to be clearly understood. While activists from this period clearly acknowledged the importance of framing advocacy in ways that were considered appropriate to the local socio-cultural context, in the post-coup setting, they were also worried that they were conceding so much territory to the more parochial actors on Fiji’s political landscape that the normative content of the human rights message was potentially being undermined in the process.

The following chapter will consider the period from 1995 to 2006, and demonstrate once again the need for a contextual appreciation of women’s political agency. Political reforms introduced at the beginning of this period were greeted with great optimism within the local terrain of women’s organising and it was widely anticipated that less communally oriented civil society actors would enjoy a more enabling and tolerant political environment. This hopeful political outlook was ultimately short-lived, however. Developments occurring in later years forced organisations to reassess their capacity to act within a domestic political environment where race and the protection of indigenous paramountcy were again predominant themes and efforts to contain political instability resulted in new waves of political authoritarianism.