6. ‘Working in a Different Way Now’: Division and Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of the ‘Good Governance’ Coup

On 6 March 2009, in the lead up to International Women’s Day, the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement launched a radio campaign aiming to promote democracy, human rights and rule of law in Fiji. The campaign featured various speakers articulating visions for the future of the country. These included wanting ‘a Fiji’ with a popularly elected political leadership, ‘a Fiji’ where equality of opportunity was safeguarded, and ‘a Fiji’ with a fair and representative legal system. The timing of the campaign was deemed important by the FWRM who argued that women’s status could only be improved if democracy, human rights and rule of law were already respected (FWRM 2009a).

Such calls were, of course, entirely consistent with the pro-democracy, human rights agenda which had been promoted by the FWRM since its establishment nearly two decades earlier. Yet, in 2009, these refrains carried a different political weight than they had in previous decades. At this point, the FWRM was operating within a civil society environment newly riven by the fallout of another coup, and widespread disagreement over the appropriateness of democratic models of governance in Fiji.

This chapter examines developments within women’s organising in Fiji from 2003 to 2009. In particular it discusses the turbulent nature of gender politics since late 2006 when Fiji again saw its elected government ejected from power by the military. I show that this event has encouraged a trend towards critical organisational self-evaluation and introspection amongst women advocates and an increasing interest in understanding the role that women can play in mending the country’s political divisions.

Fiji’s fourth coup in two decades, appeared to confirm the prediction that the legacies of 1987 were ongoing and the country was indeed stuck in a ‘coup culture’ (Madraiwiwi Radio Australia 11 March 2009). It ushered in a new era of political authoritarianism in Fiji which forced many women activists to consider the immediate and serious costs of critical political engagement. It also threatened to splinter the women’s movement generally, as deep division emerged between activists who opposed the military’s assault upon democracy and other women’s groups who interpreted the coup as mandated by a broader social justice agenda. Despite such difficulties, these local events,
in combination with shifting global political imperatives, also encouraged women’s organisations to explore new advocacy directions. This resulted in some groups asking hard questions about the sustainability of their activities and the means by which new leadership could be fostered within the women’s movement generally. High-profile groups began to broaden the former narrow focus of their activity to include a more far-reaching emphasis upon peacebuilding. These groups also began to display a renewed interest in ‘international’ perspectives of women’s disadvantage. This saw some women activists develop a more critical attitude towards regional hegemony and the foreign policy agendas being promoted in the Pacific Islands by neighbouring powers.

These shifts were evident within advocacy undertaken by Fiji’s women activists on the local, regional and international stage and contrasted in significant ways with the previous decades. But why did such shifts occur at this particular juncture? This chapter will aim to answer this question by, once again, examining the prevailing political context and describing the interplaying global and local political influences which contributed to these trends.

I will demonstrate how discussions about new leadership within women’s organisations reflected broader deliberations on inclusiveness and sustainable leadership taking place within the international women’s movement. At the local level, concerns were also being raised about the heavy personal toll borne by women activists with long-term experience working within Fiji’s volatile political climate. It will also show how increasing disquiet over the divisive nature of civil society relations in Fiji prompted some women activists to shift the focus of their advocacy away from previously predominant law and order concerns to engage more explicitly with issues related to relationship mending and community peacebuilding. It will also demonstrate how the increasingly isolationist international posture adopted by Fiji’s self-appointed military regime appeared to open the way for some women’s groups to also develop their own critical stance on questions of international significance—such as regional free trade and regional governance.

As Fiji entered a new era of military rule in 2006, many regional observers of Pacific affairs made gloomy predictions for the country’s future. Yet, despite the political instability introduced in the wake of the December 2006 coup, the military violence used to quell critical voices in the months which followed, and the contending visions for Fiji’s future which divided civil society, the vibrancy of the women’s movement remained undimmed. In the pages which follow, this vibrancy will become fully evident as deeper consideration is given to the activity undertaken by women’s groups in Fiji on local, regional and international stages and the prevailing influences which shaped their
work. This discussion will be followed, as in the previous chapters, by a more thematically driven consideration of how women’s organisations negotiated collectivity, progress and transnationalism in this period.

Local developments

In the previous chapter of this book, I demonstrated how the political forces unleashed during the 2000 coup continued to shape the prevailing political environment in the years directly following this event, bringing to power a pro-nationalist regime that frequently displayed hostility towards those actors within civil society that challenged its political sympathies or policy agenda. As the years passed, and the Qarase regime held on to power, little had changed in this regard. Women’s groups did successfully promote reform in some areas at this time; the most noteworthy instance being parliamentary endorsement of the Family Law Bill. In general terms however, the climate for advocates aiming to promote political and social change was a challenging one and, as I will show, only became more volatile as the years passed.

For many activists, and particularly the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), October 2003 was the high point of this period; a date which saw Fiji’s parliament finally pass the Family Law Bill. This was the culmination of a process begun some thirteen years previously, spear-headed by Imrana Jalal who was a key member of both the FWRM and the Fiji Law Reform Commission, and someone who ensured that the momentum needed to sustain the campaign for gender equity in law did not wane. Despite the many levels of consultation on the Bill that had taken place in the years prior, it remained controversial even after being passed into law. Some political and religious figures feared that the impact of the new laws would enable easier procurement of divorce, or the equitable distribution of matrimonial property following such an event. They argued that the changed family law framework undermined indigenous conceptions of leadership, property rights and inheritance and threatened the religious sanctity of marriage (Kanailagi cited Radio New Zealand 24 October 2003).

Despite such public misgivings, the government maintained its commitment to the new Family Law Act. Delays occurring during the implementation phase, which required Fiji to establish a new family law court, meant that it was two more years before the law officially came into effect. Finally, in 2005, Fiji’s new Family Law Court was opened by Fiji’s Vice President and former High Court judge, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (Madraiwiwi cited Government of Fiji, 2 November 2005).
Fem’Link exhibited a strong degree of organisational growth in this period as AusAID, the IWDA and the Global Fund for Women provided crucial sources of funding to support its programs promoting women’s media presence. This enabled the organisation to move from its temporary and somewhat makeshift office space, located in the foyer of the Caines Jannif Building in Central Suva, to its own premises. By 2009, the organisation had secured its own ‘community media centre’, occupying a whole floor of a small building at the edge of Suva’s town centre. Organisational ranks had also swollen beyond the two original members of fem’Link’s staff—Sharon Bhagwan Rolls and her video producer Peter Sipeli—to a much larger cohort in 2009. This enabled fem’Link to continue its community video projects, but also expand into areas such as community radio broadcasting and ‘suitcase’ radio transmission which saw the organisation use a portable transmitter to create radio programs in regional locations. The aim of these small-scale media projects was to increase the voice of rural and semi-urban women ‘whose stories and issues’ according to Bhagwan Rolls, ‘do not make the news or even dissemination through NGO information networks’ (Bhagwan Rolls 2007: 18). Fem’Link had also developed a media training scheme for young women entitled ‘Generation Next’, which aimed to increase the radio broadcasting skills of participants. As of 2007, the project had trained twenty young women who were charged with running fem’Link’s weekend broadcasts from the Suva offices (Bhagwan Rolls 2007: 21).

The fortunes of the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC) were also boosted in these years thanks to the continued support of AusAID which agreed to fund the construction of a new headquarters for the organisation. While the FWCC had operated out of an unassuming, small timber building only a short distance from central Suva since 1993 (a property originally purchased with AusAID’s assistance), working conditions had become cramped as the years passed and the organisation grew. Hence, AusAID was again approached by the FWCC and asked to help finance a new building project on the same land. The completed structure opened in November 2006. Comprising three stories, painted a dramatic shade of lilac, and hung with banners promoting women’s human rights, it was a far more imposing presence than the former premises and testimony to the local, regional and international profile of the organisation and its continued efforts to combat violence against women across a range of Pacific Island nations. Not since the 1970s and the heady days of the Fiji YWCA’s expansive youth training, education and advocacy programs had such a grand headquarters for a women’s organisation been constructed in Suva. This was something that fellow women activists across the country openly recognised and celebrated (fem’Link 2006).
Figure 6.1. Fem’Link’s expanded operations in 2009.
Source: Photograph by Nicole George.

Figure 6.2. New FWCC premises opened in 2006 and constructed with AusAID funding.
Source: Photograph by Nicole George.
Although these types of achievements gave women’s activists cause to celebrate, this period was also sadly marked by the death of long-time feminist activist and YWCA member Amelia Rokotuivuna in 2005. She had battled continued ill-health for some time but remained to the end of her life an important, if always unconventional, figure within activist circles across the Pacific. Before her death she had been recognised internationally for her life-long contribution to peacebuilding by the Swiss-based, Peace Women Across the Globe. This organisation was established with the aim of increasing global awareness of women peace builders and, in 2005, launched a campaign to have a list of 1000 women from around the world awarded the Nobel Peace-Prize. Amelia Rokotuivuna and Sharon Bhagwan Rolls from fem’Link were both included on this list (Peace Women Across the Globe, 2005).

Rokotuivuna’s funeral on 9 June 2005 saw women from across the Pacific converge on Suva to celebrate her life and remember with fondness and admiration her unwavering efforts to promote equality and justice for Pacific peoples. Her commitment to multiculturalism and the value of religious diversity was evident even at the end of her life, with her funeral combining Christian and Hindu elements (Goodwillie 2005b). Her death also focused renewed attention upon some of the hallmark themes that had defined her advocacy. In the days following Rokotuivuna’s funeral, Ruth Lechte addressed a group of twenty young women who had recently taken part in a FWRM program designed to promote leadership skills. Lechte described how Amelia had always ‘dared to be different’, often shocking fellow Fijians with her political viewpoints ‘not just for the sake of it, but … to effect change in addressing injustice and improving the situation of women’ (Goodwillie 2005a).

Certainly, this was a period when questions relating to justice and equality were thrown into sharp national focus in Fiji, as political divisions deepened over the government’s efforts to promote various pieces of legislation that many felt catered too heavily to the interests of indigenous nationalists. The most contentious of these was the government’s Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity (RTU) Bill. The Qarase government defended this piece of legislation, arguing that it would help uncover the truth behind the earlier civilian-led coup of 2000. It established state mechanisms to administer compensation to those who suffered loss as a result of the coup and amnesty claims lodged by those found guilty of coup-related offences. The government used cultural arguments to justify these provisions arguing that such measures reflected principles of restorative justice that were built into Fijian culture and reinforced by a belief in

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1 The second piece of contentious legislation was known as the Qoliqoli Bill and aimed to return control of Fiji’s foreshore areas and offshore waters (currently under government control) to local communities. If passed into law, traditional owners would decide who might access these areas, how they might be used and the level of reparations paid by outsiders using these areas for fishing or tourism activities.
unconditional forgiveness held by Fijian Christians (Bhim 2007). Many rejected such arguments, however, and felt that the government was simply pandering to hardline ethnonationalists in order to win their support in up-coming national elections, scheduled for mid-2006. The Bill was seen to offer little in terms of national reconciliation and, in fact, was viewed as a measure with the potential to reignite racial tensions within the country that had simmered since 2000 (Bhim 2007).

From the outset, Fiji’s military, and most notably its commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, voiced strong opposition to the RTU Bill. As the government continued to stand behind the Bill, Bainimarama adopted an increasingly belligerent position and made many strong statements publically criticising Prime Minister Qarase. At certain critical points in this debate, uniformed soldiers were also sent in significant numbers to Fiji’s parliamentary complex; a portentous sign that the military could, and would, intervene politically should it so choose (Bhim 2007; Fiji Sun 28 March 2006).

The government won the 2006 elections convincingly. With his mandate secured, and little debt owed to the nationalists, Qarase appeared to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards opponents of the RTU Bill, choosing to soften many of its most contentious provisions. Bainimarama rejected these concessions, however. He continued to voice his dissatisfaction with the government’s alleged communalist politics and repeatedly made threatening statements regarding his intention to lead a military intervention should efforts to promote the RTU Bill, in any shape, continue.

By late 2006, a climate of political brinkmanship emerged as Prime Minister Qarase and Military Commander Commodore Frank Bainimarama appeared to harden their positions and began to trade accusations and threats in the media. Civil society figures urged the parties to end the standoff and come to some form of agreement, while foreign governments attempted to broker peace between the government and military camps. But local and international efforts to bring the leaders to agreement and avert political upheaval ultimately floundered. Fiji’s military seized power in December 2006 and made good on a threat that had hovered over the country for the previous eighteen months.

Bainimarama invoked notions of good governance as he sought to defend his decision to eject the Qarase government from power. He decried what he alleged was a ‘silent coup’ waged on Fiji by the Prime Minister through ‘bribery, corruption and the introduction of controversial bills’ (Bainimarama 2006). While he further stated that the military had observed ‘with concern and anguish the deteriorating state of our beloved Fiji,’ he also sought to assure Fiji’s citizens that ‘[a]fter a proper census and electoral system is in place,’ the caretaker government would ‘facilitate democratic national elections’ (Bainimarama
2006). These statements were, however, accompanied by a warning for those contemplating opposition that might disrupt ‘peace and harmony’ or pose a threat to what was termed the ‘life of the state’. On 7 December, the army followed up on this warning by declaring a state of emergency and suspending sections of the constitution which protected civil rights in the areas of freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and individual rights to liberty (*Fijilive* 7 December 2006).

In the days following the military takeover, a broad spectrum of civil society groups, ranging from the Fiji Public Service Association, the Fiji Nursing Association and the National Farmers Union, to the Fiji Council of Churches and the right-wing Assembly of Christian Churches, pleaded with the military to return to barracks and return the country to democracy (*Daily Post* 8 December 2006; *Fiji Times* 8 December 2006; Waqairatu 2006). Some high-profile women’s groups were also at the forefront of these debates, with figures such as Imrana Jalal of the Regional Rights Resource Team, Virisila Buadromo from FWRM and Shamima Ali from the FWCC all vigorously promoting a pro-democracy agenda through press-releases and general media commentary. These groups ignored the military’s warnings of the serious consequences that would be faced by those it deemed to be inciting dissent. They were soon to learn that the military meant what it said. Reprisals against anyone taking a public stand against the military were swift and violent and resulted in members of civil society organisations, as well as media representatives, former politicians, lawyers and business figures being detained by the military ‘for questioning’. Before long, allegations of serious human rights violations were being made against the military by detainees upon their release.\(^2\)

Buadromo gained a firsthand understanding of the military’s uncompromising response to criticism when she was taken for questioning to the military barracks in late December 2006 with five other pro-democracy activists. At this time, she was allegedly subject to verbal intimidation and physical abuse ending with a forced ten kilometre walk through the rainy streets of Suva in the early morning of Christmas Day (Buadromo cited SBS 2007). The military also placed Buadromo on a list of people banned from undertaking international travel. At a later date, the army also placed Buadromo on a list of people banned from undertaking international travel. At a later date, the army also placed a travel ban on the coordinator of the FWCC, Shamima Ali.

As the army’s campaign of intimidation increased and appeared to take on a more indiscriminate quality, with a series of unexplained deaths in custody coming to public attention (SBS 2007), pro-democracy groups began to adopt a more subdued posture of quiet and cautious observation. They called for all efforts to be geared towards finding a peaceful solution to the political crisis and condemned the military’s alleged human-rights abuses, but they also desisted from acting in a way that would provoke military hostility (Yabaki cited Fiji Times 18 January 2007; Suva-based activist, personal communication February 2007). A cautious approach was judged to be the most sensible course of action in this environment. Women activists were even discouraged from staging peace vigils, similar to those that had been organised amidst the chaos of the 2000 coup, for fear such activities might invite hostile military reaction. This cautious political stance also helped distance pro-democracy activists from the vocal pro-Qarase, Fijian nationalist camp who, in something of an ironic and uncomfortable twist, had now also chosen to promote themselves as guardians of democracy in Fiji.\(^3\)

Yet, opposition to the coup was not universal within Fiji’s civil society. A number of organisations also sought to challenge the pro-democracy campaigners; key amongst them the Fiji Human Rights Commission (FHRC), an independent, constitutionally-established body designed to uphold the human rights of Fiji’s citizens since 1997. This organisation, directed by Shaista Shameem, challenged those who described the military regime as unlawful. Instead it raised doubts over the assumed legality of the previous Qarase regime which had come to power in the wake of the 2000 coup—an event which it claimed had abruptly halted the incumbency of the legitimately elected Chaudhry government (Shameem 2007). It was also highly critical of non-government organisations (NGOs) promoting a pro-democracy stance, alleging that these groups’ political outlook had become compromised by their close relationship with ‘interventionist’ governments such as Australia and New Zealand (Shameem 2007). Describing this scenario as a ‘conflict of interest’, Shameem offered a negative appraisal of NGOs’ ability to independently assess the political situation in Fiji and respond in a way that served the interests of Fiji’s people (Shameem 2007: 24–26).\(^4\)

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3 The 2000 coup had been a catalyst for these individuals’ political ascendancy and, in the ensuing years, they had consistently voiced scepticism about the appropriateness of democracy in Fiji. In the changed political circumstances of late 2006, these same figures now rallied against the military, and espoused sentiments which indicated a recently found appreciation for democratic principles of governance.

4 Shamima Ali, as the only ‘legally and constitutionally appointed commissioner’ of the FHRC at the time of the coup, sought the assistance of a group of ‘highly respected senior lawyers’ (FHRC 2007: 1) to commission a response to these claims. This report, also published on FHRC letterhead, rejected Director Shameem’s allegations regarding the illegality of the Qarase government but failed to engage fully with the substance of criticisms made against the NGO community in Suva, other than branding them as ‘baseless’ and ‘derogatory’ [FHRC 2007].
Other civil society representatives including, most notably, members of ECREA, questioned the value of democracy for Fiji, arguing that although Qarase’s SDL party had been democratically elected to govern the country in 2006, this regime had hardly demonstrated a policy track record which served the interests of all Fiji’s people in any inclusive or responsible way (Casimera 2006). Ecumenical Centre for Research Education and Advocacy (ECREA) representatives were also critical of the seemingly flippant manner in which democracy was being discussed in the post-coup environment, and warned against pro-democracy NGOs becoming co-opted into an insincere ethno-nationalist platform which camouflaged narrower and more self-serving political aims (Casimera 2006; Barr 2007). According to this argument, the military’s aims to ‘clean up’ Fiji’s politics were built around social justice ambitions. The coup was defended as an opportunity to resolve issues such as the ‘explosive mix of fundamentalist religion and extreme nationalism’ that shaped the policy agendas of the previous government, as well as economic programs that were alleged to have intensified poverty and created ‘two Fiji’s’ (Barr 2007).

Longstanding figures within the women’s movement such as WAC’s Peni Moore, were also prominent within this broader group. Deeply dissatisfied with the Qarase government, they put their faith in Bainimarama’s stated vision for a more socially just and inclusive Fiji and committed to engage with the military’s efforts to establish a National Council for Building a Better Fiji (Moore 2007). They also voiced some disappointment in their colleagues who had adopted a more antagonistic stance towards the regime. They argued that deeper complexities underlay the current challenges faced by the country. According to this view, the achievement of a sustainable and enduring peace in Fiji required more than an unswerving faith in democracy (Academic and activist, personal communication, Suva 2007).

In the weeks and months which followed, the military regime began to move away from its earlier statements regarding Fiji’s future return to democracy and became more non-committal on how or even when it might begin these reform processes. At the same time, there was growing evidence that the military’s violent intimidation of its critics was continuing unchecked. While concern over the military’s human rights violations of detainees spanned the pro-military, pro-democracy divide within Fiji’s civil society, there was also a growing appreciation amongst all civil society actors that a dramatic shift had occurred within the prevailing political environment, significantly contracting the space

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5 This Council sought to develop a People’s Charter for Change, Peace and Progress which would provide a future roadmap for Fiji, enabling it to become a more ‘culturally vibrant, and united, well-governed and truly democratic nation’ that observed the principles of ‘merit-based equality of opportunity, justice and mutual observance of everyone’s human rights’ (NCBBF 2008). The process was launched in September 2007 and a 45-member council was appointed to develop a draft report reflecting working group deliberations and findings from community consultations. The report was delivered in August 2008.
for critical political comment. In this climate, neighbouring countries’ calls for Fiji’s citizens to engage in strategies of civil resistance against the military (Downer cited Fiji Times 13 December 2006) were locally viewed as dangerous and meddlesome. Long-time activists within the women’s movement, who had previous experience of similar circumstances in 1987, privately voiced the view that only the politically naïve or irresponsible would choose to pursue anything other than a moderate public agenda in such a climate.

One particular organisation bucked this trend, however, and made a bold stand against the military regime. The Fiji Nursing Association’s struggle for fair pay and conditions in 2007 brought it into headlong confrontation with the interim government—but seemed to elicit unqualified support from women’s groups around the country, bringing a brief moment of unity to a movement that was otherwise deeply divided at this time.

This strike was a continuation of a dispute that had begun under the Qarase regime and seen nurses demand pay rises in accordance with agreements signed in 2003 that had never been fulfilled. However, if the FNA was ‘definitely not’ supportive of the Qarase government, it was also highly critical of the coup and newly established military regime (Lutua 2009). The Association was particularly dismayed by Mahendra Chaudhry’s decision, acting as the regime’s interim finance minister, to impose an across the board 5 per cent pay cut on the Public Service. For the nurses, this was simply more evidence to confirm their view that ‘coups equal salary reductions’ (Lutua 2009). Dissatisfaction simmered within the nursing association throughout the early months of 2007 but became more serious in July of that year when the Health Minister, Dr Jona Senilagakali, and the Public Services Minister, Poseci Bune, refused to move beyond an initial offer of a 1 per cent raise for nurses (Fiji Times 26 July 2007; Lutua 2009). Dissatisfied with the government’s seemingly ‘stubborn’ rejection of negotiation or formal arbitration, the Association voted to stop work indefinitely from midnight on 24 July 2007 (Fiji Times 25 July 2007).

Many women’s groups, including the FWCC, the NCW, fem’Link, and the SSVM, expressed strong support for the nurses’ action. They called upon the government to desist from blaming nurses for the breakdown in national health services in the wake of the strike and, instead, work towards a resolution of the crisis (FWCC 2007; fem’Link electronic communication, PACWIN 25 July 2007; Lutua, personal communication February 2009). They were also highly critical of the government request that police physically remove striking nurses from their hospital-based, or rural, health-centre living quarters.6

6 FNA General Secretary Kuini Lutua rejected some communities’ offers of assistance and housing for evicted nurses, arguing that she did not want to put these communities at risk of government retaliation.
As the strike continued, the FNA devised a new strategy to gain government attention. On 6 August, nurses gathered at the makeshift picket that had been maintained at the FNA offices since the beginning of the strike. Here they decided to stage a public protest at Suva’s Government offices where an interim Cabinet meeting was due to be held that morning. Lutua recounted to me how the action was planned and preceded,

I said ‘I need 20 volunteers and I want you to know that we will be arrested. We will be arrested.’ There were lots of tears that day. But we had to stand up to them—as mothers, as women of Fiji—we had to tell them they were wrong…. I rang the head of CID who is a friend of mine and told him what we were planning. I felt safer if the police got to us before the military. He was cross and told me to stop, but by that time we were almost there [at the government offices]. Within half an hour we were outside the cabinet meeting and right in front of TV1 [national television station]. We were the face of 1400 nurses. I told the nurses to stand in twos twenty meters apart. I knew if we stood together we could be arrested for protesting. But if we stood apart it could not be called a protest. Luckily the police got us first. But the charges against us were dropped. I had read the Public Order Act and knew that we had not broken the law. We were just given a warning (Lutua 2009).

After this ‘successful’ action (viewed as such for the fact that it captured media and government attention), the FNA decided to end the strike and pursue the matter through the courts. Rather than seeing the strike episode as a ‘bitter defeat’ (Fraenkel 2008: 455) for the fact that the FNA had failed to win widespread support from key unions or win concessions from the government, Lutua described these events in positive terms. She argued that the strike and later protest action made the nurses’ grievances clear, elicited a strong level of public support and demonstrated the weakness of the military regime and its inability to make a decision on the wage claims (Lutua 2009). In the months which followed, the validity of the FNA’s grievances was again recognised. Within the judicial sphere, the FNA won a court case against the minister of Labour, whose initial refusal to take the matter to arbitration was deemed illegal. The FNA was awarded FJ$18,000 in compensation but the government later appealed this decision and the matter remains before the courts.

While the strike generated broad support amongst women activists for its challenges to the government, such moments of apparent unity amongst women activists were not long lasting. As the lines of division within the movement began to harden, groups such as the FWRM began to ask themselves if their own adversarial style of advocacy was counterproductive and in fact contributing to Fiji’s ongoing political difficulties. In 2009, FWRM coordinator, Virisila Buadromo, described to me an important discussion which had taken
place within her organisation a year earlier. Suggesting that some members were becoming more self-critical about the tone and substance of their advocacy, she stated,

Last year we sat down and asked ourselves why do we keep getting into this situation? Not only the country but we, as an organisation. We had to be critical of ourselves and ask if we were contributing to the situation. FWRM is adversarial. We’re right and you’re wrong and this is what needs to be done to change. But we realise we have to work in a different way now (Buadromo 2009).

This more critical approach to adversarial forms of advocacy prompted the FWRM to investigate the utility of developing peacebuilding programs involving other civil society actors. Buadromo argued that while the military were disinclined to involve civil society organisations such as hers in national consultative processes, and indeed remained highly critical of groups it accused of promoting ‘irrationally senseless confrontation’ (Driti cited Fiji Times 30 March 2009), civil society actors themselves had to work to heal the divisions that had emerged in the wake of the 2006 coup. In early 2009, the FWRM was therefore proposing a series of civil society dialogues aimed at peacebuilding and had approached a neutral facilitator to coordinate these sessions across the country. In our discussions Buadromo admitted that this more negotiated form of advocacy emphasising peacebuilding departed in significant ways from the highly legalistic focus of activity undertaken by the organisation in the past. She stated,

FWRM is a ‘rule of law’ organisation—and for us, if we saw law and order we expected peace—we saw law and order as equalling peace. But we now realise that it’s more complex than that. There’s many dimensions to peacebuilding (Buadromo 2009).

Such introspection suggests that the fallout from the 2006 coup had generated a far more self-critical process of policy formulation within the FWRM than had been evident in previous periods and a broadening of the organisations’ advocacy focus. This was revealed in the organisation’s shifting approach to peacebuilding but also in other aspects of the FWRM’s activity related to trade and economic development.

At this time the FWRM had formed a close relationship with the regional organisation Pacific Network on Globalisation, or PANG, a group that was committed to promoting awareness of economic and trade issues in the Pacific Islands. PANG’s advocacy called attention to the negative implications of Pacific
Island States’ accession to trade agreements under negotiation with the EU, under the Cotonou Agreement provisions, and with Australia and New Zealand, under PACER.

The impact of this collaborative relationship began to influence the ways in which the FWRM examined regional trade-related issues in its own advocacy. This was clearly reflected in the FWRM quarterly bulletins, entitled Balance, which began to include critical articles on trade justice (FWRM 2008a), Australian and New Zealand efforts to ‘fast-track’ negotiations on free-trade negotiations within the Pacific Islands Forum (FWRM 2009b), and the gendered implications of current global trade negotiations under the Monterrey Consensus (FWRM 2008b). Such inclusions suggest that FWRM members were developing a more critical understanding of how developments within the international trade environment might impact upon local communities.

As the opening paragraphs of this chapter demonstrate, the FWRM’s consideration of regional trade-related issues and the organisation’s broader approach to peace making did not completely displace the ‘rule of law’ focus that had long been the organisation’s trade-mark area of political engagement. Neither did this move away from highly adversarial forms of advocacy result in the FWRM desisting from criticism of the interim government altogether. Nonetheless, as I have shown, these more ‘typical’ agendas were being complemented, at this time, with varieties of political activity that reflected a considered approach towards organisational self-evaluation and a new-found awareness that the agendas so keenly pursued in the past could have unanticipated and divisive consequences.

The FWCC and fem’Link sought to maintain pressure on the interim government, but in a way which respected the potentially divisive consequences of their public advocacy (Bhagwan Rolls 2009). Both organisations were particularly careful to avoid references to democracy in their advocacy and became more inclined to point out the gendered social impacts of the military government’s actions and policies.

For example, Shamima Ali argued that increased militarisation in Fiji had allowed discrimination against women to flourish (Fiji Times 25 February 2009). She claimed the military’s seizure of government had sanctioned a patriarchal form of authority which deprived women of a public voice. In particular, she was critical of the dissolution of the national parliament and, later, local councils—events which Ali argued had seen women deprived of access to the ‘places where they could speak out’ (Radio Australia 24 February 2009). At the same time, Ali also argued that militarism in Fiji was contributing to an
increase in violence against women as men combated generalised feelings of social powerlessness and disenfranchisement by punishing the women in their lives. Ali claimed this to be a strong pattern replicated after each coup in Fiji, whereby men were prompted to ‘take it out on the most vulnerable’ when they felt their ‘manhood had been taken away’ Radio Australia 24 February 2009).

Fem’Link’s critique of the military regime also emphasised its patriarchal bias, demonstrated by an unwillingness to engage with women NGO representatives and community leaders. Bhagwan Rolls stated that this was particularly evident in the wake of the serious flooding which had occurred in Fiji’s Western Division in late January 2009. The military had established a flood rehabilitation task force but had, according to Bhagwan Rolls, failed to capitalise on the expertise and local knowledge that women had gained working at the forefront of informal disaster response efforts (Fiji Times, 15 February 2009).

Like Ali, Bhagwan Rolls also lamented what she described as the ‘continuum of violence in our communities’, from the military violence perpetrated at the national level, both symbolic and actual, to the domestic flow-on effects of this violence within families. She argued that as ‘women and as mothers in this country’, there was a need to ‘stand up and … say that enough is enough’ (Radio Australia 24 February 2009).

During this period, the coordinators at WAC were also paying close attention to the political consequences that might follow from their actions. In contrast to the groups mentioned previously, WAC had signalled a willingness to work with the regime. In 2007, Peni Moore was appointed to the military-sponsored National Council for Building a Better Fiji, and charged with establishing future guidelines for national governance. By 2009, however, WAC was also becoming dissatisfied with certain aspects of the administration’s policy. At this time, WAC was particularly disturbed by the actions of the military-appointed police commissioner, Esala Teleni, who had earned a prominent place in the media for his ethnically motivated public criticisms of Indo-Fijian police officers, accused of disloyalty to his command (Fiji Times 18 February, 20 February 2009). While the WAC members were dismayed at Teleni’s racially divisive outbursts, they were also careful to avoid public criticism of his actions that could invite potentially incendiary consequences. The organisation’s coordinators, instead, considered how they might make their complaints to the regime through their personalised government contacts rather than voicing them in the public domain (Moore 2009).

These assertions, indicating a level of latent stress within society, were also backed up in a newspaper report appearing in the Fiji Times around the same time discussing the Fiji Ministry of Health Figures that showed a highly elevated suicide rate for the first months of 2009—14 cases of suicide and 28 cases of attempted suicide in 51 days (Fiji Times 21 February 2009).
Such considerations demonstrate the complex nature of the challenges navigated by women’s organisations in the years since the 2006 coup. On the one hand, activists were forced to contend with a regime that displayed a low tolerance for criticism and a continuing disregard for the rights of those it deemed to be inciting dissent. On the other hand, the military’s seizure of power had produced deep divisions within the movement as individual activists and organisations re-engaged with the now decades-long debate about the institutional structures that would afford the country just, fair and inclusive governance.

Yet, such challenges did not detract from the vibrancy of the movement. In important instances, the 2006 coup appeared to encourage some new directions in advocacy. A strong inclination towards self-evaluation and consequentialist thinking within individual organisations perhaps explains this scenario. Fears about isolation from other civil society groups prompted members within the FWRM to consider how the organisation might broaden its advocacy from the narrower rule of law focus to better address the need for peacebuilding within the associational realm. At the same time, the trend towards self-evaluation prompted this same organisation to consider the divisive consequences of adversarial styles of advocacy and how these might be contributing to ongoing political crisis in Fiji.

Of course there were women’s organisations such as the FNA, whose advocacy issued far more provocative challenges to the interim regime. Yet, this activity was undertaken in a calculated and practically-minded way so as to minimise negative consequences. As I have shown, Fiji’s activist nurses were fully cognisant of the risks their protest actions would entail. Although they were not dissuaded from engaging in public protest, their General Secretary had clearly thought long and hard about how these risks might be minimised.

As the following pages will demonstrate, this trend towards introspection and consequentialist organisational self-assessment did not simply impact upon how women’s groups operated locally but also shaped their advocacy on the regional and international stage. Indeed, this trend towards self-evaluation appeared to encourage a return to a more internationally provocative form of advocacy that had not been evident since the pioneering days of the women’s movement in Fiji in the 1960s.

**Regional developments**

Despite the locally restrictive nature of Fiji’s political environment, and the fractured nature of civil society relations generally, Fiji’s women’s organisations continued their regional engagement during this period and looked to extend the local focus of their programs to other Pacific Island contexts. Fem’Link’s
regional activity centred upon efforts to promote the provisions of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women and peacebuilding. This involved lobbying to advance the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda within Pacific Island countries and also within regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum and was conducted in association with women’s groups located in Tonga, Solomon Islands and Bougainville (fem’Link 2008). The FWCC’s collaborative work with organisations across the Pacific aiming to combat violence against women also continued, as did the RRRT’s efforts to promote the regional ratification and implementation of CEDAW. While this activity was generally an extension of locally focused programs and, in some cases, a continuation of regional agendas developed in the preceding years, other Fiji-based women’s groups established new regional programs with a significantly altered advocacy focus.

These developments were clearly in evidence at the SPC-sponsored 10th Triennial Conference for women convened in Noumea in late May 2007 which I attended as an observer and rapporteur. The theme of the conference was ‘Stepping up the Pace to 2010’ and many of the presentations urged state representatives at the conference to follow through on their rhetorical commitments to gender equality in ways that saw actions match words. Not surprisingly perhaps, this meant a great many conference sessions were devoted to regional recognition of CEDAW and the challenges faced by Pacific Island states in achieving CEDAW ratification or fulfilling reporting requirements to the UN CEDAW Committee.

The SPC policy on gender also came under scrutiny, however, when it was announced that the PWRB would be disbanded and a gender focus mainstreamed across the SPC’s Human Development program (Mann 2007). This decision had come after an external review of the SPC’s human development program and was a victory for those who promoted the more bureaucratic aim of institutional efficiency. The SPC representatives argued that they were aiming to ‘concentrate on a few things and doing them well’ (Petersen 2007). Yet, representatives from the state delegations to the meeting complained that the SPC’s ability to focus in a concentrated way upon Pacific women’s needs and interests would be lost with this administrative change. Some argued that the SPC was already showing a waning commitment to programs for women and there was a risk that gender issues would be marginalised within the program overall. Many also voiced concern that the SPC had taken this decision without consulting SPC-member countries.8

Despite these dissatisfactions, the planned changes were agreed to by state delegations without further controversy. However, the mood of polite deliberation was ‘shaken-up’ not long after as NGOs began to have greater

8 Delegates from Fiji and Samoa and Tonga were the most vocal on these points.
input into the sessions. This change of mood was particularly apparent during a session led by the region’s gender activists which was entitled ‘Building a Women’s Movement’ which aimed to demonstrate how women’s organisations were able to advance the women’s agenda within Pacific Island countries.

From the outset, a defiant tone became apparent as the first speaker, FWRM coordinator, Virisila Buadromo, confidently asserted her identity as a ‘feminist Fijian woman’. Buadromo then described her organisation as concerned with critical feminist analysis which involved investigation of the ‘multiple levels of oppression’ endured by Pacific women (Buadromo 2007). She went on to describe the evolution of the women’s movement in Fiji. While her discussion discounted the early contributions to Pacific feminism by women active in organisations such as the Fiji YWCA during the 1960s and 1970s, her examination of later developments within the women’s movement accurately and honestly considered the challenges faced by NGOs that enter into close relationships with international funding agencies or policy-making institutions. Buadromo hinted at the potential for organisational cooptation when she asked, ‘are we shaped by the institutions we engage with?’ (Buadromo 2007). She also spoke of her own organisation’s difficulties in keeping the local community level engaged as the FWRM had become more involved in regional and international gender-advocacy networks. She stated that the FWRM had strayed from community engagement at the local level but was conscious of this and aimed to maintain that connection more effectively in the future. Buadromo was also honest about the divisions currently challenging the women’s movement in Fiji. Disrupting the idea of an activist ‘sisterhood’ with a note of understatement, she remarked, ‘We’re not one big happy family.’

Anna Padarath, also from the FWRM, contributed to this discussion by examining the role that younger women in Fiji played within the women’s movement more broadly. Again, this discussion raised some provocative questions regarding the evolution of Pacific feminism, as well as the participatory nature of the women’s movement more generally.

Padarath described her own participation at a workshop jointly convened by DAWN Pacific and the FWRM in the preceding year (Padarath 2007). These workshops typically involved asking young women to think critically about Pacific women’s disadvantage. For example, one session involved placing a can of tuna before the participants and then asking them to think about the local, regional and international factors involved in this product’s production and how these might have gendered implications. Consideration was given to the position of local women working in foreign-owned fish canneries, the circumstances...
of local sex workers meeting the demands of foreign fishing fleets docked in Pacific Island harbours, the environmental impacts of Pacific Ocean fish-stock depletion, and the ability of Pacific Island states to negotiate fair compensation for access to this ocean resource within the international trade environment. These types of exercises sought to provide participants with an understanding of the benefits of feminist analysis and its capacity to expose the interlinked phenomena, local and global, that may threaten the security of Pacific women (Padarath 2007).

Padarath’s presentation to the SPC women’s conference also critiqued the participatory nature of the Pacific women’s movement. In particular she questioned the willingness of older women activists to engage in what she termed ‘intergenerational dialogue’ rather than sending the younger women to the kitchens to ‘make the tea and do the dishes’ (Padarath 2007). Padarath urged the current generation of organisational leaders to think about delegating their authority. While she conceded that women leaders feared that the younger members of their organisations might ‘mess things up’ she also urged them to have more confidence. ‘You have nothing to fear,’ she stated, ‘we’ve learnt from you and you’ve done your job well’ (Padarath 2007).

Other Fiji-based activists took part in these discussions but their viewpoints demonstrated a less self-critical perspective. Shamima Ali, from the FWCC, adopted a narrower view of feminism, although one entirely consistent with her organisation’s public advocacy approach, when she defined her feminism as committed to the promotion of ‘women’s human rights’ (Ali 2007). Her assessments of the FWCC’s contributions to the forging of a women’s movement did not display the same self-questioning position adopted by her compatriots. Ali spoke confidently of the FWCC’s regional network confronting violence against women as the most vibrant in the Pacific and argued that locally women had been at the forefront of opposition to the military’s human rights abuses (Ali 2007).

While these types of presentations offered varying, and indeed challenging, perspectives on feminism they were not accepted by the main body of conference delegates at the SPC without some discussion. One male representative from the Cook Islands echoed concerns first heard in the 1970s when he stated that feminism was not a term that sat comfortably in the Pacific and that the women who had participated in this session needed to think more carefully about the

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9 This account of the FWRM/DAWN Pacific Young Feminist Advocacy Training Workshop can be found on the FWRM website http://www.fwrm.org.fj/index.cfm?go+view&pgID+29 accessed 10 March 2009.

10 In some ways, Padarath’s observations were highly ironic. During the course of this research I have encountered many Pacific women activists who have said the same thing about their male family members, and who have been critical of the expectation that women will opt out of family decision-making and instead stay ‘in the kitchen making tea’.
social and cultural implications of this type of language. His concerns were
greeted by many women in room with supportive applause. Shamima Ali
responded by stating that such concerns made her feel that little had changed
in nearly twenty-five years, when Pacific women activists were condemned
by some as feminist radicals intent on ‘burning their bras’. She went on, ‘At
that point many of us didn’t even have money to buy a bra let alone think
about burning it.’ This comment was greeted with an even stronger round of
supportive applause from the conference participants.

The conference delegates’ mixed responses to this type of debate is indicative
of the contention that still surrounds the term feminism in the Pacific Islands.
The women who spoke were evidently untroubled by the idea of belonging
to a women’s movement and firmly committed to advocacy agendas promoting
women’s advancement. Yet, for some in the audience, the term feminism
continued to be viewed as an imported ideology that was difficult to embrace. It
is telling that the final conference session which was devoted to finalising a set
of draft conference resolutions, to be presented to the SPC-member countries’
ministerial delegations, saw all delegates vote to remove references to feminism
in the conference document.

The SPC had, somewhat unusually, provided the space for women’s NGOs to
address the regional conference and explain to government delegations their role
and political potential. Nonetheless, state delegations had the final word on the
shape of conference resolutions. For these parties, feminist language was deemed
unnecessarily contentious. While this indicates continued regional resistance to
the term feminism, it also demonstrates, once again, the restrictions placed on
the SPC’s regional policy-making by Pacific Island state representatives, who
expect the organisation to formulate programs which reflect their views.

**International developments**

The local obstacles that impeded critical political dialogue in the aftermath of
the 2006 coup saw many of Fiji’s women’s organisations place renewed emphasis
upon the importance of international engagement. In the early post-coup period,
the military had sought to clamp down on this activity by placing intermittent
international travel bans on those it termed ‘dissidents’ and restricting their
ability to voice international criticism of the regime. The fact that these travel
bans were ultimately withdrawn suggests that, in the longer term, the military
regime realised that it drew more negative international publicity from applying
the travel bans than was generated when opponents to the regime made their
criticisms heard on the international stage (*Radio NZ* 14 February 2007, 17 July
2007; *ABC Pacific Beat* 17 July 2007).
Even when they could not travel internationally, Fiji’s women’s groups were still able to make an impact internationally through their advocacy network connections. They often called upon sister women’s organisations operating in other countries to lobby their own governments to put pressure on Fiji to return to democracy. Virisila Buadromo described how the FWRM had sought to enlist the support of transnational advocacy networks to promote greater awareness of political developments in Fiji. The Fiji Nursing Association had also called upon organisations such as Public Servants International, the International Council of Nurses, and the Commonwealth Nurses Federation to write letters of support for striking nurses to Fiji’s President and the Interim Prime Minister. These transnational strategies had a local and international significance. While they enabled women’s groups to publicise their predicament internationally, they also ensured that a level of critical pressure was maintained upon the regime without local women’s groups themselves becoming the direct targets of further violent military intimidation. The US State Department’s decision to honour Buadromo with a Woman of Courage award in 2008 also increased the international exposure of the FWRM and placed Fiji’s military regime under increased international scrutiny.

Where they could, Fiji’s women activists also used their involvement in international events and conferences taking place during this period to assert the place of Pacific women in the Asia Pacific region. As previous chapters of this book have shown, since the early 1970s, Pacific women activists attending international events such as the UN-sponsored conferences for women had felt disgruntled by the fact that they were generally grouped regionally with activists from the broader Asia Pacific. They argued that their voices were being marginalised thanks to the numerical superiority of delegates from much larger Asian countries. The result, they claimed, was that Pacific women’s concerns were overlooked or downplayed in broader regional debates on gender issues.

To combat this situation a concerted effort was made to challenge what was regionally termed ‘the silent P’ (silent Pacific) within the international terrain of gender politics. In this period, Pacific activist women sought to increase their international visibility by attending international events in number, armed with professional and sophisticated presentation material. This endeavour was also recognised as important by international donors such as AusAID and UNDP, who provided assistance in the form of funding and technical training for international activity. This enabled Pacific women to make an important impression upon debate at events such as the triennial conference convened by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) in Cape Town.

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11 Buadromo recounted that she was heavily criticised by colleagues within the women’s movement for accepting this award from a world power whose militarised approach to foreign policy was resisted by many feminists.
in 2008 and the annual United Nations Commission on the Status of Women held in New York in March of 2009. At these events, the trend towards a selfevaluation of organisational life continued, with Fiji-based spokeswomen foregrounding the importance of inclusive participation within the women’s movement generally. Critical responses to issues of an international orientation such as climate change, and the 2008/09 global economic crisis, also became a more prominent part of Pacific women’s advocacy on the international stage at this time.

AWID Conference Cape Town 2008

At the end of 2008, a large group of Pacific women attended the AWID Conference convened in Cape Town, South Africa. While this group aimed to demonstrate the vibrancy of women’s organising in the region, they also offered a self-critical analysis of how the women’s movement had evolved in the preceding decades. Fifty delegates from Pacific Island countries attended this meeting, with representatives from Fiji including Sharon Bhagwan Rolls and Veena Singh Byar from fem’Link, Virisila Buadromo, Tara Chetty and Michelle Reddy from the FWRM and Noeline Nabulivou from WAC. To ensure that the Pacific delegations were coordinated and clearly visible at this meeting, a great deal of preliminary networking and organisation had taken place, largely instigated by Noeline Nabulivou and Tara Chetty. Aside from viewing the Cape Town conference as an opportunity to put the Pacific back on the advocacy map, Pacific delegates also voiced the hope that it might help ‘rejuvenate the movement’ by enhancing solidarity between older and younger generations of activists, and eliciting new interest in the feminist basis of women’s advocacy (Buadromo cited Lahari electronic post to PACWIN email list 14 November 2008).

On this occasion, a Pacific Woman was invited to make the opening address to the conference plenary. Lynnsay Rongokea, a Cook Islander with a long history of involvement with women’s organisations in that setting, but now working as the coordinator of the Thai-based regional organisation, Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development, gave a deeply thoughtful and honest response to the conference theme, ‘The Power of Movements’. Echoing discussion that had occurred at the SPC regional conference held in Noumea eighteen months earlier, an event she had also attended, she urged activists to examine the nature of collectivity within the women’s movement and to act to break down what she described as the ‘hierarchies of personalities and small cliques within our organisations … and the power play among the handful who make decisions’ (Rongokea 2008). Rongokea also examined the question of intergenerational exchange, urging her colleagues to ‘open up spaces for new voices, mentor, partner, empower those we speak for, including the younger generation and encourage them to speak for themselves’ (Rongokea 2008).
This introspective address set the tone for the FWRM’s activities at the conference which also examined the nature of women’s movements in the Pacific, the challenges which threaten collectivity and the sustainability of Asia-Pacific regionalism amongst the activist community. One FWRM-organised session entitled ‘Tok Talk: Nourishing an Asia Pacific Women’s Movement’ examined how younger and more senior activists might collaborate to address the challenges facing the region and how ‘power sharing’ within the women’s movement is shaped by an individual’s age, class and social status. Video clips were combined with panel presentations and audience discussion. The session was filmed to be used for a joint FWRM-APFWLD DVD project also entitled ‘Tok Talk’ (FWRM 2008c). In another session, Buadromo described the challenges being faced by the women’s movement in Fiji in the prevailing political climate. Buadromo again used this occasion to firmly state her commitment to feminism, and challenge the tendency for Pacific communities to negatively respond to this term as the ‘f-word’ (Buadromo, cited FWRM 2008c). This was an issue that Buadromo also addressed in a more personalised fashion through her decision to wear a t-shirt boldly emblazoned with the word ‘feminist’.

Ultimately, Pacific delegates to the A WID conference described the experience in highly positive terms as energising and contributing to a personal reawakening to the feminist project. The meeting was said to have generated new interest in developing critical regional collaboration around the issue of regional free trade issues, particularly negotiations on a regional structure for Pacific free trade (PACER-PLUS) and the development of feminist networks (Nabulivou electronic communication to PACWIN email list, 28 November 2008). ‘I feel like a walking light bulb, shaking with power,’ wrote one euphoric Pacific correspondent as she reflected upon the personal experience of connecting with women from diverse settings and cultures (Lahari-Williams electronic post to PACWIN email list, 15 November 2008).

This positive momentum carried through into early 2009, when a number of Pacific women NGO representatives travelled to New York to attend the UN’s annual Commission on the Status of Women sessions in early March. In the preceding months, the UNDP Pacific Centre had designed a program aiming to train representatives from Pacific women’s organisations in the skills they would require to become lobbyists at the CSW sessions and also to assist them financially to attend. This program aimed, once again, to increase the international visibility of Pacific women within the UN and to counter the poor levels of Pacific representation at CSW sessions in the preceding years (SPC 2008). Selection for participation at the 2009 session was on a competitive basis and representatives from four of the region’s women’s organisations were chosen to undergo training to attend. Sharon Bhagwan Rolls and Veena Singh Byar represented fem’Link alongside representatives from the Pacific Disability
Forum, Samoa AIDS Foundation, Cook Islands Women’s Counselling Service, Tonga National Centre for Women and Children, and a women’s organisation from Palau called Voices. These groups came together in September 2008 for a training session designed to assist them in developing country action statements to be presented to the Pacific government delegations. The issues they considered included the recognition of women’s unpaid work in the domestic realm, women’s participation in decision-making, the regional prevalence of gender-based violence and the needs of Pacific women living with disabilities.

While the delegates travelling to New York in March 2008 found the intricacies of the UN Commission procedures a challenge to negotiate, they also valued the insights they were able to gain into international policy-making processes. Pacific Island States were represented at the commission through a collective delegation sent from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and chaired by Niue’s Minister for Health and Women’s Affairs, O’Love Jacobsen. Some Pacific Island states also sent their own formal delegations comprising both institutional and civil society representatives. But the aforementioned UNDP-sponsored women’s representatives were not accredited to government delegations. This meant that their efforts to have input into the CSW deliberations relied on their ability to effectively lobby the officially recognised CSW participants. As such the group was required to spend long hours poring over official documents to find where Pacific Island governments and regional intergovernmental institutions had made statements on issues related to the concerns identified by NGO representatives. This ‘agreed’ language was then put forward as a legitimate inclusion in the final regional and individual country statements to be delivered to the Commission. The culmination of this process saw the Forum delegation give an important and well-supported statement which covered themes such as the gendered impacts of climate change, gender-based violence, the need for temporary special measures to increase women’s parliamentary representation and the impacts of the global economic crisis (Guttenbeil-Likiliki electronic post to PACWIN email list 11 March 2009; fem’Link 2009).

While the efforts had been painstaking, the final outcomes were viewed by the women’s NGO delegation as a triumph for the Pacific Island region as a whole. The region’s government delegations successfully argued for the CSW to include references to the gendered impacts of climate change in its final declaration. These were listed as including women’s ‘displacement from income-generating activities’ and dependence upon ‘sustainable ecosystems’ that sustain ‘livelihood and daily subsistence’. In addition, the Pacific Island delegations put forward a statement on the negative impacts of the global economic crisis which was also accepted. This statement reminded states to recognise and respond to women’s
and girls’ increasing economic vulnerability and called upon states to continue their financial commitments to gender-equality programs despite the looming economic uncertainty (SPC 2009).

NGO representatives from the Pacific Islands interpreted these inclusions as a demonstration of their capacity to shape international negotiations and draw global attention to the specific nature of challenges facing the Pacific. Ofa Guttenbeil-Likiliki, an NGO representative with the Tongan delegation, summed up this idea when, after a nightlong session of negotiations on the CSW Agreed Conclusions, she stated, ‘It just goes to show that no matter how small the Pacific may be, amidst a room full of powerful people … WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE’ (emphasis in the original, electronic post to PACWIN email list, 13 March 2009).

These international developments indicate the beginnings of a changed direction of gender advocacy in the Pacific. Echoing agendas promoted by YWCA women in the 1960s and 1970s, new themes in advocacy began to emerge which challenged the centrality of the human rights discourse that had dominated Pacific women’s advocacy in the preceding decades. At the same time, there was also a renewed interest in examining the women’s movement from a more critical perspective than had been evident in previous decades. This involved close examination of collectivity within the movement and how a more inclusive participatory ethos might be encouraged. At the same time, renewed attention was also focused on feminism as a strategy that might provide the basis for greater solidarity within the movement.

In the following section of this chapter, I will provide a more analytical account of the events described here by concentrating upon Fiji-based activists’ negotiation of collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism. As in previous chapters, I will show how this activity was shaped by local political instabilities as well as shifting political influences prevailing globally.

**Collectivity**

This chapter has highlighted the turbulence shaping civil society relations in the wake of Fiji’s 2006 coup. It has also discussed the divisions which had become deeply felt amongst activist women who were, at one level, nominally committed to the cause of gender equality, but also in strong disagreement over broader-ranging questions relating to Fiji’s political future, and the legitimacy of the military government and its proposed agendas of reform.

My discussions with women activists in these years indicated that groups that had formerly collaborated closely now operated in a more isolated manner
(Buadromo 2009). There were some who expressed puzzlement over this situation. They were confounded by the fact that they no longer enjoyed close relationships with former allies and struggled to understand how they had come to occupy opposing sides of this post-coup political gulf (Moore 2009). There were others who accepted these difficulties philosophically, perhaps reflecting the fact that women’s groups have been constantly challenged by authoritarianism and intra-movement disagreement since the ‘pioneering’ days of the 1960s.

Activists associated with the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, adopted a less accepting line, however. Recognising that while overt challenges to the military were unwise and dangerous, divisions within civil society could be acted on and not allowed to further harden. Concerns about organisational isolation seemed to prompt this move, as the FWRM coordinator explained,

> We were becoming isolated. It was different to earlier coups where other groups would have been saying the same things as us. Now we felt like we were the only ones. Civil society was split this time. We were isolated by civil society organisations and by other women’s groups. Even by members of our families who took a different position to us. At present CSOs are ignoring each other or when they get together they’re simply not talking about the elephant in the room. (Buadromo 2009).

To address the divisions within civil society or as Buadromo described it, ‘the elephant in the room’, the FWRM was therefore proposing a series of civil society dialogues aimed at mending relationships and achieving a more conciliatory civil society environment.

The women’s movement was not the only sector within civil society to experience such discord, as I learnt while interviewing Kuini Lutua about the FNA strike undertaken in July 2007. While Lutua had conceded that the nurses’ strike had generated a brief moment of unity within the women’s movement, this unity was not replicated within the labour movement more generally. In particular, Lutua felt that the strike action had cost the FNA support from formerly close union allies such as the Fiji Public Service Association and the Fiji Teachers Association.

Speculating upon why this shift in support might have occurred, Lutua stated that a fear of military retaliation played a big part, again reiterating the idea that activists within civil society were making conscious decisions about the possible consequences of their actions. Lutua recounted her own experience of attempted coercion during this period, stating that aside from anonymous threats directed
towards the organisation, she had also been subject to personal intimidation and threats for her strike activity. Lutua advised those who threatened her that she ‘would not be stopped’ but she also conceded that there were many within the union movement who were disinclined to stand up to the regime and had generally become ‘accepting of what is dished out’ (Lutua 2009).

These types of developments clearly put questions about the nature of collectivity within Fiji’s women’s movement into sharp focus. But the emphasis was not solely placed upon the challenges of political division. As the previous discussion has indicated, a stronger trend towards introspection seemed also to encourage debate on the need for new leadership and the role younger women might play as advocates. This was apparent within the FWRM, as my discussion of Anna Padarath’s presentation to the SPC conference of June 2007 has indicated. Here Padarath raised important concerns regarding the participatory nature of the women’s movement, in particular emphasising the issue of generational leadership. Padarath was critical of the older generations of women activists who tended to maintain positions of seniority within women’s groups while also dismissing the contributions that younger women might make to the organisation as inconsequential. Padarath’s references to young women being sent to the kitchen to ‘make the tea and do the dishes’ illustrated this point with eloquence.

Certainly, as one of the more established women’s organisations, the FWRM had demonstrated a willingness to bring young women into the organisation and assist them in forging their own public profiles as defenders of women’s rights. Since 1987, the FWRM had also changed organisational leadership several times. This tendency was less apparent within the FWCC where Shamima Ali had maintained the position of coordinator and principal media spokesperson for over twenty years. Ali’s dominant presence within the FWCC had provided the organisation with continuity in leadership and advocacy focus over the preceding two decades. But this also meant the absence of the participatory ethos that was evident at the FWRM—a situation which perhaps raises doubts about the FWCC’s long-term sustainability, particularly if Ali were to retire in the near future.

Similar organisational challenges were also faced by WAC in this period. From the time of its foundation, WAC’s organisational structures reflected a strong participatory ethos, with the organisation welcoming new faces and

12 In a public address to the ACS alumni in 2008, Wadan Narsey, a USP academic and vocal critic of the regime, echoed these sentiments, lamenting the fact that so few civil society figures had dared express their views candidly for, or indeed, against the regime since 2006. He also speculated that if the former ACS head student Amelia Rokotutuoiva had still been alive, no-one would be in doubt of her views on the current regime. Remembering with admiration her vehement articulation of political principle, regardless of what this cost her personally, Narsey asked why there were presently ‘so few Amelias’ in Fiji’s public life (Fiji Sun 14 November 2008).
younger members to assume part of the ever increasing workload. However, even though WAC was administered by a management collective, there was a strong tendency for members of this collective to defer to the organisation’s coordinator, Peni Moore, a charismatic personality, who seemed to command a natural authority over the group. In 2005, this situation changed with creation of a new organisational structure which divided the task of coordination between two individuals. While Moore became the organisation’s creative coordinator concerned principally with the management of the WAC Theater, Noeline Naboulivou, was appointed as advocacy coordinator—a position that drew upon her skills and experience gained through community development and advocacy work in Fiji and Australia. This appointment enabled WAC to take a much more engaged stance on a range of policy issues and raised the profile of the organisation generally. It also indicated that WAC was thinking about leadership succession and the consolidation of organisational structures that would enable younger women to assume positions of authority within the organisation.

This was a concern that Moore had raised with me during our interviews in earlier years, as she speculated on the ongoing challenges facing civil society organisations in Fiji and the personal energy required to remain politically active on questions of principle in an uncertain future. In the wake of the 2006 coup, similar concerns also became evident within the FWRM. Buadromo’s experiences of military intimidation demonstrated to the organisation the high personal costs borne by activists committed to engaging in provocative forms of public debate. In the following year, the FWRM had begun to discuss the need for activists to take time out to protect their health and wellbeing and to work more collaboratively to ensure that the burden of their work was shared (FWRM 2008b).

In summary, it is clear that Fiji’s military coup of 2006 had important ramifications for the way women activists’ negotiated collectivity within their own particular organisations and the women’s movement more generally. In the first instance, this event encouraged the emergence of differing views within the movement regarding the legitimacy of the military’s takeover and the ensuing regime’s long-term vision for Fiji’s future. In some cases, these differences hardened over time creating distance between groups, feelings of isolation and, to some extent, confusion within individual organisations. Yet, although such developments might have been cause for pessimism, the coup also appeared to encourage a mood of introspection within some high profile women’s groups which had positive ramifications. This mood saw organisations such as the FWRM become more critical about the impact of their advocacy and act to broaden their approach to peacebuilding so that civil society rifts that had emerged since the military take-over might be repaired. At the same time, these developments also
threw into sharp focus the high personal costs borne by those engaged in public advocacy on questions of political principle. Some organisations therefore began to see the benefits of harnessing the energies of new generations of women activists to their cause. And this scenario also opened the way for individual advocates to challenge the cultural protocols that tended to confer authority upon senior members of women’s groups and discount the political importance of young women’s political contributions.

It can therefore be argued that while the fallout from the 2006 coup posed important challenges to collectivity within the women’s movement it also encouraged women activists to critically engage in open debate on this question; a shift which augured well for the sustainability of key women’s groups and the overall vibrancy of Fiji’s women’s movement into the future.

**Progressive ideas**

Between February 2007 and February 2009, I made a number of trips to Fiji and was struck by the extent to which women’s organisations in Suva seemed to develop an increasing interest in peacebuilding as a progressive aspect of their broader advocacy agenda in this period. While organisations such as fem’Link had, since 2001, developed a strong focus upon peacebuilding in their advocacy program and, through their lobbying, to promote increased awareness of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, this emphasis became more generalised within other organisations in the years following the 2006 coup. In this context, peacebuilding seemed to represent a progressive means by which to address the phenomena that compounded gender inequity in Fiji and, in many ways, seemed to displace other forms of advocacy that, up to this point, had been more prominently focused upon the promotion of women’s human rights.

Women’s organisations approached the task of peacebuilding in various ways however. As I have shown, the FWRM was particularly concerned about rifts within civil society in Fiji and sought to develop a national program of civil society dialogue which might ease the tensions which had created isolation and division since 2006. Buadromo recognised that this more negotiated style of peacebuilding signalled an important new shift in the FWRM’s advocacy agenda and, as I have previously shown, an appreciation of the fact that the achievement of peaceful social relations required more than a strictly defined emphasis of ‘law and order’ issues (Buadromo 2009).

In the previous ten years, WAC had been highly critical of the limited reach of advocacy focused on ‘law and order’. Yet, in this later period, this organisation also sought to broaden its approach to peacebuilding. This meant that in addition to the advocacy around stress and trauma healing that had already
been a strong aspect of WAC’s community theatre activities for many years, WAC became deeply involved in advocacy around conflict resolution and community mediation. This focus saw the organisation develop education programs that aimed at promoting peer mediation amongst young adults and school age children. The aim was to develop a nation-wide network of young mediators interested in how the principles of restorative mediation and justice could be used to achieve peace (WAC 2009).

Such broad interest in peacebuilding amongst activist women also paved the way for the establishment of a new organisation in 2008 specifically devoted to the promotion of peace. Led by Koila Costello-Olsen (who had formerly been associated with ECREA), the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding (PCP) sought to work locally in Fiji and regionally to promote peaceful conflict resolution and train communities in mediation practices.

The newly placed emphasis upon peacebuilding within the women’s movement was generated by strongly held concerns about the divisive impact of Fiji’s apparent coup cycle (Costello-Olsen 2009). At the same time, international donor agencies active within the Pacific Islands region were also increasing the emphasis they placed upon peacebuilding as part of their own development programs. This focus was particularly evident within AusAID which, in 2002, had released an important policy statement on the development implications of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. In this document, AusAID stated its intention to increase program support for local processes of dialogue that aimed to resolve conflict and to give particular prominence to the peacebuilding skills of women (AusAID 2002). At the same time, donors were also incorporating peace and conflict sensitivity analysis into their programs; a shift which required them to consider how their own programs may in fact be contributing to community tension and unrest which may escalate into more serious conflict. According to Costello-Olsen, AusAID’s work in this area had prompted local organisations to also consider how their work might contribute to conflict and how they might better engage in peacebuilding processes, either working individually or through collaboration (Costello-Olsen 2009).
This meant that while local women’s organisations were responding to the ‘on the ground’ challenges to peace that had recently become evident in the wake of the 2006 coup, they were also being encouraged to engage in peacebuilding dialogue by international donor agencies. However, if the need for peacebuilding was foremost in the minds of Fiji’s women activists, as a result of local and international influences, there were also interesting debates taking place within activist circles about who should be included in such programs and whether engagement with the military was appropriate.

WAC gave strong approval to the military leaders’ vision for a more inclusive Fiji. As a result, the organisation became more closely aligned with the military regime than other civil society groups, and Moore became directly involved with the ‘people’s charter’ process. According to Moore, the WAC’s willingness to engage with the military reflected an inclusive approach to conflict mediation. She argued that while efforts to build peace usually involved groups who were
generally liked and respected, the participation of actors who were less well
regarded, or seen to ‘oppose or oppress’ such as the ‘military, [those] in prisons
or violent offenders’, was also necessary (WAC 2009).

Other women’s groups seemed to be also motivated by this idea. Fem’Link
was opposed ‘in principle’ to the military’s intervention but also committed to
‘undertake conciliatory dialogue with all parties to conflict’, with the particular
aim of seeing such processes result in the local implementation of SCR 1325 and
the increased participation of women in crisis resolution measures. Bhagwan
Rolls also argued that her advocacy program required her organisation to engage
at the community level and relay her findings back to policy makers operating at
the national level, and that this work could only continue, safely and efficiently,
when fem’Link remained in communication with the military powers. While
fem’Link’s donors were not entirely pleased with the fact that the organisation
maintained a commitment to dialogue with the military regime, Bhagwan Rolls
pointed out that the military regime would remain in power for at least three
to five years and that fem’Link’s involvement in peacebuilding could only be
maintained through a process of engagement (Bhagwan Rolls 2009).

The benefits of constructive engagement were also reiterated by PCP members.
Costello-Olsen argued that although her organisation had been required to
justify its decision to engage with the military to potential donors, the broader
goal of peacebuilding necessitated dialogue rather than provocational forms of
criticism and opposition. When asked if this commitment towards engagement
with a militarised regime undermined her organisation’s ethical commitment
to peace advocacy in any way, Costello-Olsen was quick to point out that
engagement did not mean organisational cooptation. ‘We challenge them,’ she
stated. ‘You bet we do’ (Costello-Olsen 2009).

As I have shown, organisations such as the FWRM and the FWCC initially
counted as some of the most strident pro-democracy voices in 2006 and early
2007, and they refused to consider engaging with the regime at any level. This
gained them a great deal of local and international media exposure but, as we
have seen, individual members such as Virisila Buadromo also paid a heavy
personal price for publicly upholding such a tough oppositional stance.

By early 2009, however, the hardline attitudes of two years earlier had begun to
dissipate to some extent. While the FWCC continued to rule out any engagement
with the interim government, arguing that it was ‘wrongly appointed’ and
therefore would not be offered the assistance of the FWCC (ABC Radio National
24 February 2009), the FWRM had begun to rethink the utility of this approach.

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13 Moore had not argued this in earlier interviews conducted with her in 2002, however. On these occasions,
she defended her desire for WAC to operate at a distance from the ethno-nationalist Qarase regime as a matter
of political principle.
This was indicated to me personally by Virisila Buadromo who expressed some misgivings about the impact of continued criticism of the military regime by organisations. ‘If you’re too critical you’re backing the regime into a corner,’ she stated. ‘It’s got no allies and that’s dangerous’ (Buadromo 2009). Here she seemed concerned that the FWRM was provoking the military in ways that produced aggression and hostility and undermined the broader prospects of Fiji achieving any kind of peace into the future. At other points, Buadromo’s observations suggested that the FWRM was looking to modify its stand towards the military. While she stated that the FWRM was committed to the ‘rule of law’ and would therefore not be able to work directly with the military government, she also seemed interested in the possibility of developing a more forward-looking form of engagement with the regime. She stated, ‘We realised that we can’t keep being critical without providing solutions.’ This suggested again that the FWRM was becoming less averse to the idea of engagement with the regime at some level and perhaps more inclined to follow the lead of other women’s organisations that had shown some readiness to work with the regime in the interests of promoting peace.

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, women activists in Fiji had been giving increasingly close consideration to the utility of broad-based political engagement in the preceding years. Even in the wake of the 2000 coup, figures such as Imrana Jalal seemed more critical of the provocative forms of advocacy that had been so emblematic of the women’s movement in Fiji’s independence era. In this later period, this debate continued, with activists now considering how engagement and negotiated forms of peacebuilding could move Fiji forward from the cycle of coups that marked its recent political past. For international donor agencies such as AusAID, peacebuilding was also viewed as a progressive aspect of development policy at this time, and a project they were happy to support across the Pacific in a bid to avert dire predictions of a regional decline into political crisis and instability (Borgu 2002; Henderson 2003; May 2003; Windybank and Manning 2003; Wainwright 2003; Reilly and Graham 2004).

While women’s organisations employed varying peacebuilding methodologies, it is also clear that activists’ views on the importance of forging a peacebuilding agenda that engaged with the military began to converge. By 2009, many activists had became more sensitive to the social and political costs of a continued adversarial opposition which was seen to only harden lines of division within civil society and to risk provoking further military aggression. Accepting that these scenarios did little to enhance the long-term prospects for peace in Fiji, even those groups which had formerly been highly critical of the military’s actions now began to consider how strategies of engagement might help to advance the peacebuilding agenda and, by extension, progress the long-term interests of Fiji’s women.
Transnationalism

Transnational engagement continued to be an important part of women’s advocacy during this period and, indeed, took on a special significance when women activists were placed under travel bans or involved in activity which might incite hostile reaction from the post-coup regime. As I have shown, both the FNA and the FWRM used their contacts within broader transnational networks to publicise their concerns and to write letters in support of their claims to Fiji’s political and military leaders.

This activity was also complemented by another variety of transnational engagement which more squarely focused upon global developments and how they were contributing to Pacific women’s disadvantage. This trend towards a globally engaged form of transnational political activity was particularly evident on the occasions when Fiji’s women activists sought to increase debate about how feminism might be defined in the Pacific context.

Raising this issue was a bold move on the part of the activists involved, for it was a question that had not received a sustained level of regional attention since the discussions led by Vanessa Griffen in the mid 1980s. And, as my discussion of the responses to Buadromo’s statements at the SPC forum in 2007 has demonstrated, the term feminism was still contentious in Pacific policy-making circles. This debate touched on questions relating to the local authenticity of feminist ideals and provoked a fear that such ideals were in conflict with the socio-cultural protocols regulating behaviour in the Pacific Islands. However, in these years, this discussion also indicated that some Pacific women activists were becoming dissatisfied with articulations of feminist goals that tended to emphasise legal reform, human rights or violence against women. There seemed to be growing interest in the ways in which feminist advocacy could offer broader insight into the multiple influences that contributed to Pacific women’s disadvantage.

This shift did not occur within all organisations. As I have shown, influential women activists, such as the FWCC’s Shamima Ali, continued to define feminism in a way which privileged the idea of women’s human rights. As previous chapters have demonstrated, this advocacy focus tended to result in a localised focus of activity that avoided examination of how global, political and economic structures compounded Pacific women’s subordination. However, during this period, these perspectives on feminism were also broadened. As we have seen, this involved Fiji’s women activists voicing concern about the local impacts of changing international regimes governing foreign aid distribution, international negotiation on free trade and the regional implications of climate change.

In many ways, the more internationalised focus of transnational engagement echoed themes that characterised women’s advocacy in the 1960s and 1970s but...
had been more difficult to discern in the later decades. As the later chapters of this book have demonstrated, ‘gentler’ forms of political engagement tended to prevail in the restrictive local and global political environment of the 1980s and 1990s and during the first years of the new millennium. It may, therefore, seem counter-intuitive that this more contentious form of gender advocacy would emerge during a period where Fiji’s advocacy community was operating within a political environment marked by an even greater level of authoritarianism than in previous decades. Nonetheless, a careful examination of the local political environment prevailing at this time provides the key to understanding why such a shift in the construction of feminist advocacy occurred.

Although the local political environment was even more authoritarian than it had been under the ethno-nationalist Qarase regime, Bainimarama’s interim administration also developed a far less compliant international posture. This seems to have opened the way for women’s organisations in Fiji to take a more provocative stance towards the policies being promoted in the region by states such as Australia and New Zealand.

For example, Fiji’s military regime had, since the coup, developed an increasingly antagonistic posture towards states neighbouring the region and even other Pacific Island leaders, arguing that Fiji’s problems were Fiji’s to solve and not the subject for international or regional commentary (Finin 2009).14 As criticism mounted from countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States and even some key Pacific Island Forum states, the interim government increasingly responded with a ‘tough talking’ and strongly isolationist rhetoric. While this prompted many external observers of Pacific Island affairs to predict that Fiji’s uncooperativeness would see it become the “‘Burma’ of the Pacific’ (Lal 2009), this international recalcitrance appeared, somewhat ironically, to open the way for local civil society actors to, themselves, adopt a more critical posture on issues of international political consequence. Hence, women activists began to voice strong criticism of the allegedly heavy-handed role played by Australia and New Zealand in promoting PACER-PLUS (FWRM 2009b, 2008a). In so doing, they were moving away from the more accepting position they had taken on questions of Fiji’s economic development in the past, particularly on the local impacts of foreign aid conditionality and structural adjustment programs (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Local political conditions also encouraged this shift. Activists making critical appraisals of international political developments and their regional ramifications did so safely, with no threatened backlash from Fiji’s highly sensitive and

14 Bainimarama’s attack on the Samoan Prime Minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, who spoke out in opposition to the Fiji military in February 2009, was interpreted as a violation of the longstanding political protocol that has seen Pacific Island leaders desist from making public criticisms of each other (Finin 2009).
increasingly volatile post-coup regime. Indeed, this activity coincided in interesting and perhaps unintended ways, with the interim government’s own attempts to discredit regional institutions, such as the Pacific Island Forum, that had repeatedly called for Fiji’s return to democracy. In the government’s view, this regional body was working under the hegemonic influence of the region’s dominant powers, Australia and New Zealand, and no longer operating to serve the interests of Pacific Island countries.

Such activity also sidestepped some of the more difficult questions challenging and indeed dividing the movement in this period, as women’s groups struggled to reconcile their opposing views on the legitimacy of the military’s intervention with their collective broader vision regarding women’s advancement and the achievement of gender equality. Defining feminist politics in a way that engaged with questions of international economic significance, therefore, provided women activists with a less locally divisive focus of activity and an area where their views might more easily come into alignment.

Of course, as I’ve shown, this more internationalised perspective did not displace the formerly dominant human rights focus of Fiji-based activists’ transnational activity; something that was clearly evident when Shamima Ali described her own vision of Pacific women’s feminism at the SPC women’s conference in 2007. Nonetheless, as the previous discussion demonstrates, this emphasis upon human rights was also being challenged by new discussions amongst women activists keen to see feminist engagement extend beyond the narrow concerns that had predominated in earlier decades. This newly emergent critical interest in global phenomena such as international trade liberalisation, climate change and the 2008/9 financial crisis, echoed themes that had characterised the advocacy undertaken by the pioneering generation of women activists in the 1960s and 1970s. It suggested the emergence of new perspectives challenging the sectionalised and issue-specific approach to women’s advocacy that had predominated across the previous twenty years.
Conclusion

The Easter weekend of 2009 saw the military further entrench its control over Fiji. In reaction to a High Court ruling, which declared the military’s seizure of power and subsequent efforts to establish a government to be illegal (9 April), the regime moved, with the support of President Iloilo, to abrogate the 1997 Constitution, sack the country’s judiciary and suspend democratic elections until 2014 (Fijilive 11 April 2009).

In the following days, the military acted with haste to quell potential sources of dissent. Media outlets were warned against publishing critical material that might negatively depict the situation. Subsequently, members of the discipline forces were placed in all media premises to ensure that no material inciting ‘disorder … or public alarm’ was published (Fijilive 12 April 2009). Later, the military went further, shutting down the local radio transmitter carrying broadcasts from Radio Australia and deporting a number of foreign journalists from Australia and New Zealand for their alleged critical reporting of these events. Amid intense speculation over the extent of the military’s media scrutiny, the advocacy community became nervous about the security of email communications and seemed to shy away from making any public comment on the court ruling and subsequent military actions. Regional electronic discussion sites that had, in the previous years, served as important venues for the transfer of information during political crises, and which had also carried statements of support for Pacific women caught up in such events, now ‘went dark’, with almost no discussion of the 2009 developments. Even those women activists who had articulated a strongly adversarial line against the regime in the past, and used these forums to make their positions known internationally, now recognised that such activity might place them in a situation of extreme vulnerability.

Internationally, these events saw Fiji become further isolated and economically imperilled. In May 2009, Fiji was expelled from the Pacific Islands Forum. With the economy in severe downturn, the Reserve Bank moved to devalue the Fiji Dollar by 20 per cent (Fiji Times 16 April 2009) and introduced measures to halt the outflow of capital (Lal 2009). Such developments appeared to confirm the many dire predictions made by observers of Pacific affairs regarding Fiji’s future.

There is no doubt that the current outlook for Fiji has few points of light, but women activists in Fiji have continued to meet these challenges philosophically. Certainly, there are those who have lamented the military’s decision to tear up yet another of Fiji’s constitutions, questioning how this act can assist its supposed ‘good governance’ agenda. Others have sought to justify the military’s action,
arguing the regime had little alternative. Such differences of opinion have been evident in the wake of each of Fiji’s former coups. But, as this chapter and indeed this book demonstrate neither Fiji’s coups nor the differences they provoke within civil society prove fatal to the realm of gender advocacy. Fiji’s women activists are now well used to dealing with division, repression, expulsion and recession. They have continually shown their capacity to work within and around all that the ever volatile local and global political environment throws at them.

Certainly, Fiji’s changed political circumstances suggest that, presently, there is only a remote possibility of the country returning to constitutional democracy. But for Fiji’s women activists, projects continue to run and questions about leadership, peacebuilding and definitions of feminism continue to receive close attention.

The international community may wring its hands over Fiji’s repeated tendency to ‘disappoint’. It may also lament the apparent divisions emerging within civil society in the wake of the 2006 coup. For Fiji’s women activists, however, a ‘life goes on’ attitude seems currently to prevail (FWRM electronic posts to PACWIN April/May 2009; WAC 2009; Bhagwan Rolls cited ABC Radio National 15 April 2009). Continued despair and blaming is, for them, useless and provides no-one inside or indeed outside Fiji with a pathway forward. This perhaps explains why many of Fiji’s women activists have begun to place an increasing emphasis on the utility of constructive and non-adversarial engagement with the military regime. Some may judge this as an abandonment or betrayal of liberal political ideals. Others may describe it as evidence of civil society cooptation. But such views are mistaken. In Fiji, women activists’ determination to maintain a political presence has relied upon their ability to decide upon viable courses of action in an always-changing political environment. This capacity is, in many ways, their hallmark. It has allowed them to continue operating through periods of intense political upheaval and has not undermined their broad-based commitments to women’s advancement. For these reasons, we should not be surprised when the courses of action they decide upon demonstrate their determination to work within a complex local and global political environment. This has been a well-established pattern within the realm of women’s organising over the past forty years.