Gender Politics and Circumstance: Some Contingent Conclusions

What is the relationship between political circumstance and women’s political agency? This central question lies at the heart of my analysis of gender politics in Fiji and informs my development of a ‘situated’ history of women’s organising in this setting. This book has demonstrated the limitations of standard ‘cliff-top’ approaches to the study of women’s organising which assess political agency in terms of how well activities conform to ideal-type reform- or resistance-oriented benchmarks. In contrast, this study gives extended consideration to the shifting socio-cultural, political and economic currents or contingencies which, at particular historical junctures, have shaped the political agency of women’s organisations operating in Fiji.

The history of women’s organising which has been charted in the preceding chapters describes the complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory aspects of women’s political engagement. Eschewing the idea that women’s groups only appear ‘successful’ if their activities suggest a uniformity of purpose, this is a story that emphasises neither reform-oriented paths of increasing institutional gain, nor resistance-oriented paths of institutional disengagement. Rather, it is a history which is mapped with sensitivity to the contingent nature of civil society activity and the currents that have shaped domestic and transnational associational life in more general terms. Further, it seeks to explain how these currents have influenced the local, regional and international political engagements of Fiji-based women’s groups at various historical junctures.

To achieve these aims, the methodology employed in this study blurs the lines that distinguish the historical from the contemporary, the global from the local, and the disciplines of academic enquiry. As I have shown, a clear conceptualisation of the ways that colonial legacies configure political life in Fiji in the contemporary context has been critical to my attempts to demonstrate the contingent nature of gender politics in this setting and it has allowed me to demonstrate the historical basis of tensions which continue to shape the realm of gender advocacy some forty years after Fiji gained its formal independence. Similarly, sensitivity to the interplay between global and local spheres of political life has been crucial for my examination of the differing advocacy strategies that have been undertaken by women’s organisations on domestic, regional and international stages, as they have negotiated repeated episodes of local political upheaval and shifting international political trends.

The emphasis placed upon contingency in this study has not resulted in a postmodern deconstruction of gender advocacy, however. Rather, I have used
the term contingency here to signify the conjuncture of events and political circumstances which influence the political strategies employed by Fiji-based women’s organisations, at particular points in time, and within particular arenas of political activity. As such, I have developed a conceptual middle path which avoids reductionism and idealised conceptualisations of political agency but which, at the same time, does not go to the extremes of Foucauldian genealogy which emphasises ‘flux and discord’ and denies the possibility of ‘any order “out there” to be discovered’ (Ferguson 1991: 327).

Therefore, while my construction of the history of gender politics in Fiji has been ‘situated’ to the extent that it has been able to accommodate flux and variation, the nuances that are captured here are also ‘translated’ in ways which are relevant to broader intellectual debates on the nature of representativeness and participation in world politics; a question that will be considered in the final sections of this conclusion.

Before exploring the broader implications of this research, however, I will demonstrate the significance of applying a contingent perspective to the study of women’s political agency. I do this by returning to the themes of collectivity, progressive ideas and transnationalism; three aspects of women’s organisational behaviour that have featured throughout this book as characteristics conventionally understood to enhance women’s political agency. At this point, it is important to consider how the material I have presented might have been treated if a more standard cliff-top analytical approach, emphasising reform or resistance, had been applied to these themes, and to demonstrate what has been gained by utilising a ‘situated’ perspective.

**Collectivity**

When viewed from a reform-oriented perspective, it could certainly be argued that horizontal collectivity has been an important characteristic of women’s organising in Fiji and the region more broadly. With varying degrees of success, groups such as the YWCA in the 1960s and 1970s, and in later periods, the FWCC, the FWRM and WAC, have attempted to develop organisational structures that have avoided traditional and customary hierarchical lines of authority and encouraged horizontal cooperation amongst individual members, even across communal divides. At the inter-organisational level, collaborations between larger, high-profile women’s organisations and smaller, cultural or faith-based women’s groups have also increased, particularly on projects related to violence against women and the promotion of legal literacy. Equally, the success of collaborative initiatives such as the campaign for ratification of CEDAW in the early 1990s, or the joint-effort to raise the issue of Fiji’s discriminatory
citizenship law before the 1997 Constitutional Review commission hearings, attest to the spirit of collective effort which has been evident within the sphere of women's organising in Fiji.

At the regional and international levels, there have also been many instances where gender activists based in Fiji and the Pacific Islands have joined their efforts to campaign for institutional reform or to demand greater regional and international recognition of the challenges they face locally. The staging of the first regional conference for women in 1975, the protest action challenging the lack of women's representation within the SPC in 1980, the collaborative effort which brought political leaders and gender activists from the region together at the UN women's conference in Copenhagen in 1980, and the many regional initiatives on issues related to nuclear testing, decolonisation, violence against women, women in politics and women's legal literacy, can all be viewed as indicative of the strong level of regional cooperation and collective action that has been evident within the sphere of women's organising in this setting.

On the other hand, when considered from a resistance-oriented perspective, there is also evidence which suggests that horizontal collectivity has been difficult to sustain, particularly as engagement between women's organisations and formal political institutions has increased, and continued crises within the local political environment in Fiji have created more generalised political divisions. For example, it might be argued that in certain instances, horizontal collectivity within Fiji-based women's organisations has been undermined, most recently as a result of different perspectives on the military coup of 2006, or as a result of earlier ethno-nationalist extremism which saw a general hardening of communal allegiances in Fiji. As we have seen, this situation had particularly divisive ramifications for some women's groups in the wake of the 1987 coup. At the same time, the experiences of women involved in organisations such as the FWCC and the FWRM would suggest that, in certain instances, the issue of race has been exploited by some activists to cast doubt about the representativeness of particular women's groups or as a means by which to bolster the legitimacy of certain groups; especially as important funding relationships with external aid providers have been negotiated.

The nature of funding arrangements may also be viewed as contributing to the emergence of hierarchical relationships between organisations. As has been demonstrated at many points in this book, funding relationships can generate a spirit of competitiveness between women's groups, not only creating an environment of ‘turfiness’ (see Chapter 5), but also reinforcing the more general idea that those organisations which have negotiated strong relationships with external aid providers are more ‘successful’ or have a political authority which outweighs that of other groups. The success of the FWRM and the FWCC in this regard has meant that when these groups have been involved in regional
collaborative efforts such as the Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women or initiatives aimed at increasing women’s political participation, they have frequently been viewed as the lead or ‘agenda-setting’ organisations. Such findings might therefore easily be used to substantiate the claim that, as the groups’ institutional engagement increases, horizontal collectivity between women’s organisations becomes more difficult to maintain.

When viewed from a situated perspective, both the reform- and resistance-oriented positions on the issue of horizontal collectivity become more difficult to sustain, however. Certainly collaborative efforts between women’s organisations have accrued some institutional gains. These gains need also to be understood in context. The creation of women’s machineries within the Fijian Government in 1987 or the regional SPC in 1982 certainly came about as a result of sustained collaborative campaigns waged by women’s groups at the domestic and regional levels. However, as I have shown, the Fiji Ministry for Women has often operated in a way which has reflected the partisan policy agenda favoured by the indigenous Fijian establishment. Likewise, the creation of the regional women’s machinery, the PWRB, was shown ultimately to have been an office that was never able to push beyond the broader institutional limitations of the SPC and, since 2007, was officially disbanded.

From a situated perspective, issues of ethnicity can also be seen to have caused divisions within the domestic sphere of women’s organising in Fiji, and certainly to have disrupted gender activists’ ability to maintain horizontal relationships. This scenario is not presented as a failing of women’s organising. Rather, it is understood to reflect the broader historical contingencies that have ‘racialised’ many aspects of political, economic and social life in Fiji. From this perspective, the politics of race is not viewed as ‘intruding’ into the realm of gender politics in Fiji, but, instead, is treated as a pervasive and powerful local idiom which, since colonial times, has influenced institutional, political conduct and the internal operations of women’s groups, while also configuring the spaces available to women’s organisations within the broader realm of Fiji’s associational life.

Equally, from a situated perspective, the ways in which institutional funding arrangements alter relationships within and between women’s organisations, and potentially contribute to the emergence of inter-organisational hierarchies, are viewed as a development that neither compromises the legitimacy of women’s organising, nor undermines the capacity of women’s groups to differentiate themselves from the realm of institutional politics. Rather, such developments are scrutinised in relation to the broader local and global political environment where emerging ideas about ‘good governance’ have translated into increased support for, and engagement with, civil society organisations. And, as my discussion of the events of 2001 and 2002 demonstrates, it is possible to over-emphasise the negative aspects of these funding relationships and overlook the
extent to which representatives from a wide variety of women’s groups in Fiji collaborated their efforts in spontaneous support of the Women’s Prayer Vigil and pro-democracy campaigns staged in the wake of the 2000 coup.

While accounts of women’s organising performed from a cliff-top perspective tend to insist upon horizontal collectivity as a characteristic that enhances women’s political agency, such claims become more problematic when the analysis is performed from a more situated perspective. As I have shown, conventional reform- or resistance-oriented analyses of women’s organising fails to take full account of the way that contingencies within the prevailing local, regional or international political environments shape the ways in which relationships are negotiated within and between women’s groups and has difficulty in accounting for the inconsistencies and apparent contradictions that are also part of this terrain.

**Progressive ideas**

When considered from a reform-oriented perspective, there is clearly a strong body of evidence to suggest that Fiji’s women’s organisations have played an important role in promoting progressive ideas and campaigning for progressive change for women. Since the early 1960s, women’s organisations have raised questions about gender violence, women’s institutional representation, women’s participation in politics, legal literacy and women’s human and reproductive rights. Campaigns undertaken by women’s groups have led to the establishment of women’s machineries in domestic and regional institutions, and encouraged institutional support for programs of law reform in the area of family law, sexual offences law and citizenship law. The efforts of women’s groups have meant that Fiji was the first Pacific Island country to ratify CEDAW (1995) and to deliver a country report to the UN CEDAW Commission (2002). Additionally the development of collaborative projects with domestic state bureaucracies has occurred at various points. While some projects have followed the more conventional path of awareness raising on issues such as gender violence or the promotion of women’s political participation, other projects, and particularly those undertaken by WAC within Fiji’s prison and education system, have been of a more unconventional and creative style. When the evidence is mapped in a way which privileges organisations’ reform-oriented activities, the conclusion that women’s organisations have played an increasingly important role over the decades in promoting progressive ideas which challenge the gender discriminatory status quo appears easily supportable.

Resistance-oriented analysis would undoubtedly examine these developments in a more critical and contrastive light, however. Here descriptions of political
activity would emphasise the provocative campaigns waged by women’s organisations in the independence era, and their willingness to challenge the prevailing status quo. This would be contrasted with organisations’ seemingly compliant relationships with donor agencies in later periods, and their apparent wariness of entering into overt confrontation with domestic authoritarian regimes. In the post-2006 coup context, questions might be asked about the extent to which debate about engagement with an anti-democratic regime could be construed as progressive. Undoubtedly, from this perspective, the trajectory of women’s political agency would be plotted in a way that suggested a regressive rather than progressive history.

Yet, when appraised from a ‘situated’ perspective, closer consideration can be given to the contingent factors within the prevailing political environment which have influenced activists’ understandings of viable courses of action at particular junctures. From this perspective, the locally provocative focus of political activity undertaken by the YWCA in the 1960s and 1970s is also shown to have been enabled within an independence-era political environment where civil society organisations responded to the idea that they were operating on a new frontier and were confident of their ability to challenge prevailing social, political and religious protocols. By contrast, in later and more tumultuous political periods, the political restrictions faced by women’s groups are shown to have encouraged a more cautious approach to gender advocacy, as organisations came to terms with a political environment increasingly marked by communalism, the rise of indigenous ethno-nationalism and, recently, a more extreme form of authoritarianism. This climate has hardly been conducive to women’s groups promoting the same types of provocative challenges to local sites of authority that featured in the advocacy of the past. Hence, I have shown how shifts in the prevailing political environment inclined women’s organisations to gravitate towards a more issue-specific and legalistic variety of advocacy. This said, as the last chapter of this book also demonstrates, recent developments occurring in Fiji and particularly the current regime’s tendency towards a more isolationist international posture do seem, ironically, to have opened the way for women advocates to take a more critical perspective on the international political economy. In the current context there does seem to be at least a peripheral interest in re-engaging with some of the themes that motivated gender activists in the post-independence period.

I have also provided a ‘situated’ analysis of how the relationships between institutional benefactors and women’s organisations impact upon activists’ abilities to promote progressive ideas. It is certainly recognised that in the more contemporary period, certain types of donor support have encouraged women’s groups to ‘dovetail’ their agendas to those of their benefactors, resulting in a
'gentler political engagement'. From a situated perspective, however, the idea that this scenario equates to the more general cooption of gender politics in Fiji is problematic.

On the one hand, this tendency is not universal, and certainly groups such as WAC continue to pursue unconventional and creative advocacy strategies. And, as the events taking place in the wake of the 2000 coup demonstrate, even the more high-profile women's groups such as the FRWM, have been prepared to engage in provocative political activity upholding constitutional democracy. On the other hand, the troubled engagements between pro-democracy women's groups and the military regime in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 coup demonstrate that there has also been strong suspicion and some hostility shown towards non-government organisations that access support from external benefactors while also engaging in strident critique of local political leaders. Where women's organisations advertise donor support of this type they have often been accused of employing advocacy strategies or promoting agendas that are inauthentic to the local socio-cultural context, even when they are careful to frame their advocacy of women's rights in ways which seek to accommodate local cultural or religious sensitivities.

These considerations suggest that organisations’ capacities to promote progressive ideas are influenced in complex and contradictory ways and that this nuance is not easy to appreciate from a cliff-top analytical position. While there is little doubt that the relationships negotiated between women's groups and formal political institutions influence the tenor and direction of campaign strategies employed by women's groups, this book sets out to explain the complex interplay of global and local political influences which shapes activists’ own understandings of what progressive advocacy might be, and how viable it is to pursue at a particular historical juncture.

**Transnationalism**

When appraised from a cliff-top perspective, transnationalism clearly emerges as an important aspect of women’s organising in Fiji since the early 1960s. Representatives of women’s organisations have been active and energetic participants on the international stage, both shaping and drawing inspiration from the directions that international debate on gender disadvantage has followed. Hence, from a reform-oriented perspective, it could be argued that through their direct participation within international forums, representatives from Fiji-based women’s groups have contributed in significant ways to the emergence of consensual norms and a multilayered transnationalism within international feminism (Pettman 1996; Yuval Davis 2006). Certainly, Fiji-based
gender activists had early misgivings about the dominance of western and first world voices within international feminist networks. However, they also logged some early success in drawing international attention to the particular kinds of structural disadvantage faced by Pacific Island women. During the early years of the UN Decade for Women, for example, Fiji-based gender activists, in coalition with women from around the Pacific Island region, successfully used their access to international and regional conferences to promote awareness about nuclear testing in the Pacific Island region, the struggles for decolonisation waged by Pacific Island communities, and the neo-colonial aspects of economic engagement in the Pacific from near, and more powerful, regional neighbours.

In later periods, Pacific gender activists’ mistrust of the universalising aspects of international feminism began to give way, as a more issue-specific approach to gender disadvantage became predominant. This development allowed for global consideration to be given to common phenomena contributing to women’s disadvantage such as violence against women, while at the same time accommodating recognition that these scenarios might be lived by women differently according to their context. Certainly, the local adoption of human-rights focused gender advocacy frameworks in relation to issues such as gender violence by the FWCC, or economic justice by the FWRM, could be viewed as evidence of a flexible and creative approach to this type of advocacy which is attentive to the importance of accommodating prevailing cultural, religious, political and even economic sensitivities. Such practices could certainly be viewed as consonant with the idea of a multilayered, transversal feminist politics accommodating of local specificities (Yuval Davis 2006).

On the other hand, a resistance-oriented perspective of gender politics in Fiji might suggest that as engagement has increased between local women’s organisations and international institutions, the nature of transnational engagement has become more conservative. Hence, the gravitation from structurally inclined and internationalised forms of advocacy in the 1960s and 1970s towards more issue-specific, human rights-oriented forms of advocacy might be presented as an ongoing consequence of global power politics allowing continued western dominance of discussion about the causes of gender disadvantage. It might be argued that for too long, transnational feminisms have been disinclined to confront the idea that there is an inescapable link between the unequal distribution of global economic and political power and the economic, physical and social vulnerability of women in developing contexts, a scenario which suggests that the consequences of an enduring western feminist hegemony have not been diminished.

When appraised from a ‘situated’ perspective, however, these developments are shown to reflect broader global and local contingencies. I have shown how the internationalised and structurally inclined focus of advocacy undertaken by
women’s organisations on the global stage in the 1960s and 1970s was enabled by a prevailing Third Worldism evident within global politics in this period. I have argued that the prevalence of redistributive themes in world politics increased the transnational space in which Pacific women could protest against prevailing international structures, political (colonial) and economic (neo-colonial) which led to disempowerment and alienation within their communities in general terms. Further, I have shown how this political climate also enabled women from the Pacific to draw international attention to the unique ways in which global economic and political power imbalances were manifest in local contexts and contributed to the subordination of women.

In more contemporary periods, the shift towards issue-specific forms of advocacy which privileged human rights ideals, and which were frequently articulated in legalistic terms, has also been described in a manner that has drawn attention to broader domestic and international political circumstances. Hence I have described how activists’ abilities to focus upon the ‘bread and butter’ aspects of women’s disadvantage in an ongoing manner were distracted by domestic political crises and the continued requirement to confront questions related to the democratic future of Fiji. At the same time, I have shown how the transnational space available to women’s groups aiming to promote a structurally inclined critique of global economic or political relations was severely reduced within a global political climate governed by neo-liberal orthodoxies, which have tended to emphasise the capacities of the individual and their ability to create their own market and political opportunities. As chapter five of this book demonstrates, efforts to liberalise trade in the Pacific Island region will necessarily have serious economic ramifications for Fiji’s women in the future, and undoubtedly increase the economic vulnerability of many Pacific women. Yet, in a global and domestic political environment where the language of economic governance emphasises economic opportunity over economic redistribution or structural change, the political space available to women’s organisations aiming to contest this scenario has been extremely limited. Of course, overplaying this narrative also ignores the evidence presented in the final chapter of this book. Here I suggested that domestic political conditions may have encouraged the pendulum to ‘swing back’ a little with some women activists showing more interest in challenging regional moves to develop a more liberalised trade environment.

Ultimately, my efforts to develop a ‘situated’ analytical perspective of women’s political agency have resulted in a more nuanced account of gender activists’ transnational political engagements than would have been possible from either a reform- or resistance-oriented perspective. Leaving aside the contest of ideas which promotes international feminism either as a terrain of consensual norms, or as a realm of enduring western feminist hegemony, I have instead given closer consideration to the ways that the transnational strategies employed by
women’s groups in Fiji have been shaped by contingent factors. As such, I have demonstrated how the circumstances of the prevailing political environment, local and international, have configured the political space available to women’s organisations enabling more provocative forms of advocacy in certain contexts and discouraging women’s groups from contesting the political and economic status quo in later periods.

In sum, analysis of women’s political agency that emphasises contingency is clearly a complex undertaking and requires a detailed understanding of political circumstance, past and present. Yet, as this brief resume of some of the key findings presented in this book suggests, a sensitivity to context and the situated experience of gender activists certainly enables a fuller understanding of what has been achieved, and what is possible in particular political circumstances, than investigations of women’s organising which are framed in more ideal-typical reform- or resistance-oriented terms. While such observations have an important relevance for the broader academic analysis of women’s organising and women’s political agency, they are also pertinent to a more generalised discussion about the nature of political participation in world politics.

**Civil society and global politics**

Many scholars working in this area are concerned about the lack of representativeness within formal structures of global governance and the normative orientation of policy-making activity. They describe widespread public disenchantment with formal models of political organisation, and a pervasive ‘capital driven style of politics’ (Falk 1998: 102) or ‘turbo-capitalism’ (Keane 2003: 65) which is alleged to have eroded institutional accountability (Falk 1995: 1; Held 1995, 1998; Archibugi 1998; Keane 2001, 2003; Kaldor 2003). The formulation of ‘new social, political and economic’ relationships (Keane 2003) is needed, it is argued, which might underpin systems of governance built upon principles that are democratic, participatory, non-violent and humane. Increased recognition and participation of civil society within global governance is viewed by many as the way forward (Falk 1995, 1998; Held 1995, 1998; Archibugi 1998; Kaldor 2003).

However, civil society is conceptualised in many of these accounts in highly idealised terms. Seen to be a realm of ‘bottom-up’ political engagement, it is understood to provide a site in which those who are marginalised by prevailing local or global political structures are able to ‘mount their protests and seek alternatives’ (Cox 1999: 10). From an international perspective, the transnational networks of civil society actors are seen to provide a sphere for counter-hegemonic political engagement, with the capacity to complement or
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reshape international institutions and contribute to a more participatory and just system of global governance (Falk 1995, 1998; Held 1995, 1998; Archibugi 1998; Kaldor 2003). Put bluntly, civil society features here unproblematically as a benign force for the good (Howell 2005); a sphere with the capacity to increase democratic representativeness and normative accountability within the structures of global governance.

The findings presented in this book tell a different story and coincide with a more critical vein of civil society scholarship which challenges such idealised perspectives of civil society capacity (Hulme and Edwards 1997; Van Rooy 1998; Howell and Pearce 2001; Khilnani 2001; Chandoke 2002, 2003). These accounts have all drawn attention to the contextual factors which influence the conduct of civil society actors in domestic and transnational spheres but they are usually overlooked in much of the international relations scholarship on civil society which tends more often to construct positive ideal-type representations of this realm as progressive and naturally reform-oriented.

The Fiji case clearly demonstrates how a complex interplay of socio-cultural protocols, religious values, colonial legacies and geo-political influences have configured the domestic realm of associational life in specific ways at certain historical junctures. In many instances, these influences have clearly shaped the conduct of women’s organisations. For example, socio-cultural protocols relating to social rank or ethnicity have frequently influenced the way relations are negotiated between gender activists, and they have often made for tension or division within the sphere of women’s organising more broadly. In other instances, communal identifications or broader political allegiances have prompted some women’s organisations to lend their support to the divisive political agendas promoted by Fiji’s political leaders. This type of activity is clearly antithetical to the liberal norms assumed by many to motivate civil society actors. It is argued that global governance structures should be broadened to enable these actors’ participation on the basis of their capacity to promote these liberal values. Yet, in Fiji, such partisanship within civil society is entirely consistent with the local terrain of political life where, since colonial times, divisions have raged over the legitimacy of proposed models of governance for the country and the values systems that they should reflect. Moreover, as I have also demonstrated, trends within international politics also configure the spaces available to women activists and place some significant constraints upon their ability to push for a normative reorientation of global governance. As has been made clear, recent trends in development policy-making have encouraged closer engagement between institutions and civil society in order that program delivery can be made more participatory and responsive to the needs of grass-roots communities. Nevertheless, as the final chapters of this book also demonstrate, the broader policy paradigms relating to good governance and market liberalisation have
in many ways come to define how engagements between civil society and international institutions are structured and have often placed limitations upon how far civil society activists are able to question these global trends.

International relations’ scholarship that celebrates the emergence of a global civil society and anticipates that this presence in world politics will contribute to a re-orientation of global governance structures, making them more just, participatory and accountable, clearly presents an illustration of future possibilities which is highly appealing. Yet it may also be overly hopeful. As this study has shown, when the political agency of civil society actors is examined from a ‘face to face’ perspective which allows for an increased sensitivity to circumstance, it becomes possible to appreciate activists’ ‘situated’ appraisals of what has been achieved and what is possible at various political junctures. Studies of the role to be played by civil society actors in world politics would therefore benefit from less idealised conceptualisations of these actors’ political agency and a closer scrutiny of the ways that political engagement is shaped by circumstance.