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# Advocacy or activism: Gender politics in Fiji

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## Abstract

This paper asks whether new insights can be gained by differentiating between advocacy and activism when examining the work of civil society organisations in relation to gender equality. The scholarly community and practitioners in the field of development have shown increasing interest in the political activities of non-governmental organisations and civil society more broadly. Until fairly recently, these groups have been characterised as innovative and autonomous agents of reform. While this view has tended to provide a relatively homogenised view of civil society, it has also ignored the extent to which individual organisations within the ‘third sector’ negotiate space within a broader political culture that can at the one time place both opportunities and constraints in their path. This paper is part of a new wave of more critical literature which aims to provide a detailed portrait of this terrain’s complexity. Focusing upon the ways in which women’s organisations in Fiji approach issues of gender equality, I contrast strategies employed in the 1960s and 1970s with those adopted in more recent times and consider the extent to which the prevailing political culture has afforded these groups the space to exercise a critical political voice.



# Advocacy or activism: Gender politics in Fiji

NICOLE GEORGE<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Amongst the scholarly community and development practitioners interested in the promotion of global equality, enthusiastic attention has recently been devoted to the political activity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Until recently these groups were routinely characterised as the ‘third force’ in politics; autonomous and innovative agents for reform or social change.<sup>2</sup> Lately, greater attention has been given to the idea that NGOs and civil society groups respond to, and perhaps even reflect, the broader political culture in which they operate in order to maintain their political sway, a factor which may influence the design of their campaign strategies.<sup>3</sup> While

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<sup>2</sup> See David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st century: Voluntary action and the global agenda* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1992); Ronnie Lipschutz, ‘Restructuring world politics: The emergence of global civil society’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 21(3) 1992, pp. 389–420; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink, eds, *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic changes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Richard Falk, ‘Global civil society: Perspectives, initiatives, movements’, *Oxford Development Studies* 26(1) 1999, pp. 99–111; Mary Kaldor, ‘Transnational civil society’, in Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler, eds, *Human rights in global politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 195–213; Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Rikker and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘From Santiago to Seattle: Transnational advocacy groups restructuring world politics’, in Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Rikker and Kathryn Sikkink, eds, *Restructuring world politics: Transnational social movements, networks and norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 3–23; Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor, ‘Introducing global civil society’, in Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor, eds, *Global civil society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3–22; Ann M. Florini, ed., *The third force: The rise of transnational civil society* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of literature which takes a more critical line of investigation into the capacity of civil society and NGOs include Geoffrey Hawthorn, ‘The promise of civil society in the south’, in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds, *Civil society: History and possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 269–317; Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, *Civil society and development: A critical exploration* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001); Alison Van Rooy, *Civil society and the aid industry: The politics and promise* (London: Earthscan, 1998).

these themes have certainly been evident in literature examining the politics of gender and civil society,<sup>4</sup> there remains plenty of work to be done in this sphere.<sup>5</sup>

As a further contribution to this debate this paper considers the extent to which the broader political culture, local and international, conditions the environment in which women's non-government and civil society organisations operate and impact upon the design of their campaign strategies. Through an examination of the work of women's NGOs operating in Fiji in the 1970s and today I challenge the idealised view of NGOs as bodies which undercut the authority of the state via their participation in 'transnational networks' which promote a new type of 'globalisation from below'. I aim to present a more nuanced picture of this terrain which highlights the extent to which the political autonomy of women's NGOs in the developing world has depended upon the dynamics of a broader political environment which places both opportunities and constraints in their path.

4 For literature celebrating the capacity of women's civil society organisations at the local and international level, see Jutta Joachim, 'Shaping the human rights agenda: The case of violence against women', in Elisabeth Prügl and Mary K. Meyer, eds, *Gender politics in global governance* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 142–60; Jutta Joachim, 'Framing issues and seizing opportunities: The UN, NGOs and women's rights', *International Studies Quarterly* 47(2) 2003, pp. 247–74; Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for democracy: Women in grassroots movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Arvonne S. Fraser, *The UN decade for women: Documents and dialogue* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987); Hilka Pietilä and Jeanne Vickers, *Making women matter: The role of the United Nations* (Zed Books: London, 1996); Lois A. West, 'The United Nations women's conferences and feminist politics', in Prügl and Meyer, eds, *Gender politics in global governance*, pp. 177–93. For a more critical and localised examination of this terrain see Sonia Alvarez, 'Advocating feminism: The Latin American feminist NGO "Boom"', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1(2) 1999, pp. 181–209; Sabine Lang 'The NGOization of feminism', in Joan Scott, Cora Kaplan and Debra Keates, eds, *Transitions, environments, translations: Feminisms in international politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 101–20; Barbara Einhorn and Charlotte Sever, 'Gender and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe', *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 5(2) 2003, pp. 163–90; Jude Howell, 'Women's organisations and civil society in China: Making a difference', *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 5(2) 2003, pp. 191–215; Nadjes S. Al-Ali, 'Gender and civil society in the Middle-East', *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 5(2) 2003, pp. 216–32; Marcela Ríos Tobar, 'Chilean feminism(s) in the 1990s: Paradoxes of an unfinished transition', *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 5(2) 2003, pp. 256–80.

5 Jude Howell and Dianne Mulligan, 'Editorial', *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 5(2) 2003, pp. 157–62.

This paper begins therefore with a discussion of advocacy and activism and suggests that while scholars of global or transnational civil society networks<sup>6</sup> tend to use these terms synonymously when they describe the political negotiations of NGOs, there are, in practical application, important levels of difference between advocacy and activism which are not reflected well in the theoretical literature on this topic. In the first section of this paper I will contrast advocacy—a formalised style of political negotiation where the critical voice is potentially muted in order to achieve conservatively envisaged goals, and activism—a more confrontational, autonomous and informal brand of NGO activity. While there is a broad level of consensus amongst development thinkers, practitioners and policy makers as to the positive benefits to be accrued from incorporating civil society groups into the development process, I contend that in practice a general preference is shown for cooperation with groups who engage in advocacy rather than the potentially confrontational or more radicalised paths of activism. I conclude this section therefore by arguing that in the current political climate advocacy has achieved a high level of purchase amongst governments and donor agencies in comparison with activism a potentially more confrontational style of political activity which has suffered reduced legitimacy in the current political climate.

As a means by which to illustrate these ideas in greater detail the second section of this paper draws upon findings from field research conducted with women's NGOs in Fiji in 2002. I examine the strategies utilised by high profile women's organisations in relation to women and development and the issue of poverty alleviation, comparing recent campaign strategies with those of women's organisations who were outspoken on these issues in the 1960s and 1970s. An historical perspective of this terrain allows us to appreciate the defiantly critical and 'internationalist' activist agenda of women's groups operating in the earlier period in comparison with the more moderately toned and locally-focused advocacy strategies of women's organisations operating in the current context.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the transnational advocacy versus global civil society debate, see Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor, 'Introducing global civil society'.

The final section of this paper argues that in order to understand the different campaigning strategies across different periods of history, it is important to give some thought to the ways in which NGOs respond to the shifting nature of local and international political culture. I will therefore demonstrate how the local and international political environment in which women's groups operate today is a place of complex and multi-level demands which often has the effect of constraining organisations' activities and reigning in their critical voice. By contrast I will argue that in the immediate post-colonial period of the 1960s and 1970s the prevailing political culture occurring both locally and internationally was more tolerant of, or sympathetic to, activist strategies, and that women's groups were in fact at liberty to articulate a more radicalised vision of gender justice than in the current context. This discussion aims to emphasise the point that analysis of NGO strategies on various issues demands not only an examination of campaigns and the way they are framed,<sup>7</sup> but also a consideration of the ways in which NGOs are able to negotiate space within the local and international political culture. The shifting political terrain within which NGOs function demands our attention, for it has the capacity to enable or constrain NGO activity and thus shape NGO campaign strategies on questions of gender justice in decisive ways.

### ADVOCACY OR ACTIVISM

Moving between my field research findings and the theoretical literature on the subject of civil society, I have begun to consider the extent to which a distinction can be drawn between advocacy and activism. Is it possible to generate new insights by differentiating between these terms rather than using them interchangeably as researchers working on global civil society or transnational non-government networks are prone to do? This tendency is widespread, evident at first glance for example, in the title of Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's widely cited work on transnational civil society—*Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The framing of NGO campaigns in ways that resonate with the state has been a central concern in the work of Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders*. See their work on women's NGOs and the successful framing of violence against women as a human rights issue, for example, pp.165–98. Similar arguments are also advanced on this issue by Joachim, 'Shaping the human rights agenda', and Joachim, 'Framing issues and seizing opportunities'.

<sup>8</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders*.

Does the synonymous use of these terms, however, camouflage the extent to which activism and advocacy represent different forms of political activity or different styles of political negotiation? During the course of my own investigations into the history of women's organising over the last 30 years, and the ways in which issue-areas have been pursued by NGOs, both at the domestic level in Fiji, and internationally, I have become increasingly persuaded by the idea that in practical application the terms activism and advocacy represent different types of political activity undertaken by civil society groups, and that this level of distinction is not well reflected in the theoretical literature on this topic.

Keck and Sikkink's definition of transnational advocacy networks is just one example of how scholarship on this subject has tended to blur these terms. The authors first make mention of the work of activists as those who 'identify a problem, specify a cause, and propose a solution, all with an eye toward producing procedural, substantive and normative change in their area of concern'. As the discussion moves on, the function of the advocate is described as one who will 'plead the causes of others, defend a cause or proposition'.<sup>9</sup> Extending this idea further, Keck and Sikkink discuss the work of advocacy networks which, they argue, are 'organised to promote causes, principled ideas and norms' involving 'individuals advocating policy changes that cannot be easily linked to a "rationalist" understanding of their interests'.<sup>10</sup>

While Keck and Sikkink's emphasis upon change as the primary motivator for both the advocate and the activist is unproblematic, their definition also seems to hint at the differences that might exist between advocacy and activism without making this idea explicit. I would argue that Keck and Sikkink's reference to 'policy change' as they discuss advocacy is not insignificant and tends to support my own view of advocacy as a measured and formalised style of political negotiation between NGOs and governments or institutions where the critical voice is potentially muted. Activism on the other hand can, in my opinion, be viewed as a more immediate form

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

of political protest where the focus is on critical political activity and its potential to become highly confrontational.

If we refer to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* the definition of advocacy appears to be much the same as that employed by Keck and Sikkink; advocacy is described as the function of an advocate, one who pleads for another; one who speaks in favour of a proposal; defends, recommends or supports a policy. We can think of advocates as professional pleaders then, working within formal political circles, and indeed the term is commonly used to refer to the role of the professional pleader in courts of law. On the other hand, activism, again according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, refers to a policy of 'vigorous action in politics', the exertion of political 'energy or influence'. Mary Kaldor, in her description of the activist version of civil society, places emphasis upon active citizenship and 'self-organisation that takes place outside formal political circles'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore while the term advocacy can be understood to refer to a formalised process of political representation of causes or principles undertaken by civil society groups, the term activism perhaps describes a more autonomous realm of critical political activity that takes place outside the recognised circles of political negotiation. Here the focus might be upon public activities such as mass-protest, street demonstrations, strike action or public meetings rather than the more formalised processes of lobbying and negotiation that often take place between the advocate and the political elite.

While these distinctions may seem self-evident to some, or a rather elaborate exercise in hair-splitting to others, the delineation of these terms does have a practical application. It is not by accident that the term advocacy has achieved its current level of purchase amongst intergovernmental organisations, donor agencies, and even NGOs themselves as compared to the term activism. In current development thinking the discourse of 'good governance' is ubiquitous and places strong emphasis upon the necessity of civil society participation alongside that of the state in development policy

<sup>11</sup> Mary Kaldor, *Global civil society: An answer to war* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 8. Kaldor's definition of activist civil society has been helpful as I have sought to clarify how these terms might be differentiated, although in later paragraphs Kaldor too shows a tendency to blur the lines between advocacy and activism when she discusses the work of advocacy networks such as Greenpeace. See Kaldor, *Global civil society*, p. 9.

making.<sup>12</sup> The assumption here is that civil society is an ‘agency of reform’, an ‘important democratic check’ on the state that will force greater accountability within the institutions of governance.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, donor agencies appear to be enamoured with the concept of social capital and enthusiastically promote the expansion of civil society in developing regions as a ‘countervailing force to the expanding of markets and the declining authority of the state’.<sup>14</sup> However, as the following paragraphs will indicate the relationship between civility and advocacy is deftly forged with the focus primarily upon organisations whose challenges to the prevailing status quo take place in measured tones and through the formalised channels of political negotiation avoiding the more confrontational and radicalised protest strategies that might be adopted by groups who engage in political activism.

The extent to which bilateral donor agencies such as the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID) or the UK Department for International Development (UKDFID) have embraced the notion of NGO advocacy is clearly evident in their web pages devoted to civil society issues. The same can be said for multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the various agencies of the United Nations.<sup>15</sup> While the term advocacy has a respectable presence on all these sites, the term activism is rarely to be found. We can surmise therefore that governments and donor agencies formulating development policy in line with good governance precepts show a strong tendency to engage more comfortably with the reasoned and measured tones of NGO advocacy rather than the critical,

<sup>12</sup> Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor, ‘Introducing global civil society’, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Howell and Pearce, *Civil society and development*, pp. 39–41.

<sup>14</sup> Maurizio Carbone, ‘The role of non-state actors in development policy: Perceptions and changing practices’, *The Courier ACP–EU* 199 (July–August) 2003, pp. 14–15, at p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> The policy of multilateral and bilateral aid agencies has increasingly emphasised the importance of cooperation and negotiation with civil society groups as partners in negotiation and development as part of the effort to forge good governance in the Third World. For examples of this, see websites and recent web publications devoted to civil society issues of the United Nations Development Program <[www.undp.org/cso](http://www.undp.org/cso)>, World Bank <[www.worldbank.org/civilsociety](http://www.worldbank.org/civilsociety)>, UKDFID <[www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/DFIDwork/civilsociety.asp](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/DFIDwork/civilsociety.asp)>, USAID <[www.usaid.gov/locations/europe\\_eurasia/countries/ge/-advocacydfid071201.doc](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/countries/ge/-advocacydfid071201.doc)>, and AusAID <[www.ausaid.gov.au/keyaid/gover.cfm](http://www.ausaid.gov.au/keyaid/gover.cfm)>.

unruly and potentially confrontational paths of NGO activism. On this basis then, is it reasonable to suggest that advocacy, a measured and formalised style of political dialogue, has become the respectable alternative to activism, which has perhaps suffered reduced legitimacy as a path of political negotiation or protest in the current political environment?

During the course of my own research I have found sufficient evidence to support this idea. Moreover I would suggest that it is the increased emphasis upon NGO accountability which has often encouraged civil society groups to adopt a moderate tone in their political negotiations for fear that a more critical activist agenda might jeopardise relationships with local and internationally based benefactors. Maurizio Carbone argues that in the current context, civil society organisations have been forced to mediate a difficult line between upwards and downwards accountability, with upwards accountability referring to the responsibilities NGOs have towards trustees, donors and governments, and downwards accountability referring to NGO relationships with their constituency within the community. Carbone contends that the need to be accountable to donors and patrons often necessitates a more bureaucratic organisational structure for NGOs. This, he argues, may in turn stifle the spontaneity and innovation that are often assumed to be the hallmark qualities of the non-government development and aid sector and that which sets it apart from both the bureaucratised state and the commercially driven market.<sup>16</sup>

Of course the ramifications of this scenario demand that we think about the ways in which the NGO–benefactor relationship impacts upon NGO autonomy. In the current climate, NGOs who are able to generate a professional and non-confrontational profile both locally and internationally stand to win expanded political influence and financial support. This in turn may explain the increasing tendency for organisations to define themselves as advocates who professionally ‘plead the cause of others’ rather than activists prepared to undertake a ‘watch-dog role’ or to lead a more public campaign of protest and criticism. As advocates, NGOs will front political causes or represent the unjustly treated, pursuing strategies that fit the prevailing political culture and its formalised channels of political negotiation.

<sup>16</sup> Carbone, ‘The role of non-state actors in development policy’, p. 15.

As advocates, however, they are unlikely to follow the potentially more radicalised or confrontational path of political activism. Involvement in this type of activity may brand the organisation as extreme, damaging their professional profile and jeopardising their ability to attract important financial backing.<sup>17</sup>

My research into the history of women's organising over the last 30 years demonstrates how these ideas play out at both the local and international level. My findings support the thesis that increased pressure for NGOs to be accountable in both an upwards and downwards direction has in some instances meant that high-profile organisations have become self-censoring, shying away from pursuing a path of critical activism for fear that this may compromise their relationships with donor organisations and the state. This situation contrasts dramatically with the immediate post-colonial period in Fiji's history when, in the 1960s and 1970s, women's NGOs were often involved in campaigns of public activism which demonstrated a high degree of radicalism and a seeming disregard for the fact that such an agenda might bring them into confrontation with state authorities or international funding partners.

The next sections of this paper focus upon campaign strategies to improve the status of women employed by high profile, internationally funded NGOs in Fiji with a particular focus upon the way economic issues have been raised by these groups. I will examine recent campaigns led by the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) and the Fiji Women's Crisis Center (FWCC), and contrast these strategies with an earlier period in Fiji's history when the Fiji Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was a prominent organisation for women. I argue that the direction of campaigns undertaken by the two groups in the current context can be viewed as a relatively conservative style of political negotiation that, while it avoids

<sup>17</sup> This scenario was discussed in a recent study produced by the Australia Institute, which surveyed local NGOs operating in Australia, and which found that organisations were increasingly under the impression that they were being 'frozen out' of government policy consultation and fearful that the articulation of criticism would result in loss of access to funding opportunities or government contracts. See Sarah Maddison, Richard Denniss and Clive Hamilton, 'Silencing dissent: Non-government organisations and Australian democracy', Discussion Paper No. 65 (Canberra: Australia Institute, June 2004).

radicalism, also fails to confront the urgent and often dire economic circumstances faced by many of Fiji's women.

On the other hand examination of the activities of the Fiji YWCA, which was perhaps at the zenith of its political activities in the 1960s and 1970s, demonstrates a vastly different scenario. I argue that during this period the Fiji 'Y' engaged in a more fearless style of political negotiation that demonstrated a conviction that the prevailing political culture would be tolerant of the critical voice. The YWCA's protest activities on issues such as the future design of Independent Fiji's constitution, appropriate models of development, or working conditions for local women, sat firmly within the activist tradition and brokered new territory for women's NGOs at this time for they went far beyond the conventional framing of 'women's issues'. This type of subject matter certainly had a radical edge that caused disquiet amongst Fiji's more conservative social groups. Nevertheless the organisation did not suffer the types of sanctioning from local authorities or international funding partners that NGOs appear to fear in the current period. On the one hand this may indicate that the demands upon NGOs for upwards accountability were less stringent during this period than is common in the current setting. At the same time this tendency may also be explained by the fact that at both the local level and internationally, the prevailing political culture of this post-colonial period provided the political space for civil society groups within newly independent nations to shake off the legacy of colonialism and exercise an independent political clout. Political space for the articulation of similar agendas in the current political environment is, by contrast, severely constrained and radicalism of the type indicated above is generally viewed in a more suspicious light. As such, the high-profile women's NGOs operating in Fiji currently have generally chosen to tread a conservative political path rather than lose what political influence they may be able to exert at both the local and international level should they earn for themselves a more radical profile.

### **WOMEN'S NGOS OPERATING IN FIJI TODAY**

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement and the Fiji Women's Crisis Center are two highly vocal, secular organisations which regularly campaign on women's rights issues at the local level as well as being well connected to the international women's movement. The next paragraphs will illustrate the ways in which economic themes have featured in the advocacy strategies

employed by these two groups. I examine the FWRM's campaign for reform of the country's family law and the argument that a more efficient maintenance system will alleviate the financial burden of single parent families. I also discuss a recent campaign led by the FWCC, which approached the issue of gender violence from a development perspective, arguing that violence against women was a social phenomenon that negatively impacted upon Fiji's economic growth.

### **Fiji Women's Rights Movement**

The FWRM was established in 1986 as an independent body able to 'engage politically with the state' on behalf of Fiji's women. The central preoccupation of the organisation has been to put 'women's rights on the national agenda'.<sup>18</sup> To this end the FWRM has been principally involved in research and advocacy activities and has led important campaigns for legislative reform in areas such as sexual offences law and industrial relations law.<sup>19</sup> This organisation receives core funding from international NGOs<sup>20</sup> and international development agencies,<sup>21</sup> as well as receiving ad hoc funding from similar sources on a project to project basis.

Since 1991 the FWRM has led a campaign for gender-based discrimination to be removed from the area of Fiji's Family Law. This has been a protracted venture which has attracted substantial amounts of funding from international sources. A first stage mass media campaign designed to demonstrate shortcomings in the existing Family Law regime and win support for law reform was funded by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Then, in 1997, UKDFID donated a further FJ\$40,000 to fund a two year round of public consultations to inform a redrafting process.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Unpublished transcript of interview with Imrana Jalal, fem'Link NGO, Suva, October 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Gina Houg Lee, former Coordinator, FWRM, 4 April 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Oxfam currently funds the position of FWRM Coordinator

<sup>21</sup> State based donor agencies which fund FWRM include UKDFID and Canada Fund. Multilateral agencies that donate funds to FWRM include the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Asenaca Colowai, Human Rights and Advocacy Lobbying Officer, FWRM, 11 October 2002.

By May 2000, the FWRM's efforts appeared to be paying substantial dividends. A redrafted Family Law Bill had twice been tabled in Fiji's parliament. A coincidence in bad timing thwarted any further forward movement on this issue however. On the eve of the third and final reading which would have seen the Bill passed into law, Fiji suffered a civilian-led coup which saw the incumbent Labour government dismissed from power. A two-month political deadlock ensued in which the country's President, Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs and the head of the armed forces attempted to broker a solution. The conservative regime which was eventually appointed in a caretaker role stalled further discussion on the Family Law Bill. A democratically elected government did take office 12 months later, however the proposed program of Family Law reform had taken on a different hue in a more conservative political environment. Powerful leaders within the indigenous Taukei movement and the conservative Methodist Church were, in the post-coup context, far more likely to cast liberal agendas of reform as potentially threatening to indigenous paramountcy or in contravention of Christian principles.<sup>23</sup>

The FWRM has consistently campaigned against this view and argued that the Family Law Bill must be re-tabled in parliament. Their central defence of the Bill attempts to circumvent criticisms leveled at it by more parochial groups by arguing that it aims to relieve the predicament of the disadvantaged by recognising the 'rights of poor women'.<sup>24</sup> The Bill's provisions are regularly defended on the basis that they will have a 'major and positive impact on alleviating poverty in the poorest sectors of the community'.<sup>25</sup> The central idea here is that the Bill's maintenance regime

<sup>23</sup> Fiji's powerful and conservative Methodist Church has, for example, voiced concern that the Bill's focus on irretrievable breakdown in marriage as a basis for divorce, rather than the pre-existing fault-based regime, will make divorce easier to obtain and encourage wider family breakdown. Vocal opposition has also come from Fiji's provincial councils who fear that the Bill's provisions for illegitimate children will allow them to take over traditional land titles. Conservative indigenous women's organisations such as the Soqosoqo Vakamarama are opposed to the Bill's recognition of the rights of putative fathers and their ability to apply for custody of children and maintenance payments. Personal communication with Asenaca Colowai.

<sup>24</sup> Unpublished transcript of interview with Imrana Jalal.

<sup>25</sup> Imrana Jalal, *Report on the presentation of the first PIC country report to UN CEDAW (Government of Fiji Is.): At the 26<sup>th</sup> CEDAW committee meeting, New York (UK-DFID (Pacific) Regional Rights Resource Team, 2002), p. 12.*

aims to better provide for Fiji's single parent families, many of whom are headed by women who attempt to provide for, and educate their children, on a single wage. Fiji's current system gives little support to women to pursue maintenance payments, with only 15 per cent of 'poor women' successfully accessing regular income of this type.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the existing regime, the new Family Law Bill does not require women to appear before the courts but instead to put their case before a Maintenance Officer empowered by the courts to collect payment from fathers. The FWRM argues that the Bill also ensures that the unemployed or those living in rural areas do not escape their maintenance obligations by instituting a system of payment in kind rather than the cash-only payments that are a feature of the current system.<sup>27</sup>

The escalation of poverty has become something of a hidden problem in many Pacific Island countries.<sup>28</sup> However, with the local realities of economic deprivation, particularly in urban areas, becoming increasingly evident in Fiji,<sup>29</sup> we might expect that FWRM spokeswomen would garner

26 Personal communication with Asenaca Colowai.

27 Ibid.

28 In recent times estimations of poverty levels in Fiji have become highly politicised. A 1996 report undertaken jointly by the UNDP and the Fijian government estimated that one in every four households in Fiji lived in poverty with the potential for 'many more' to slide into 'poverty or destitution because their incomes are almost as small as in poor households'. See United Nations Development Program and the Government of Fiji, *Fiji poverty report: A summary* (Suva: UNDP/UNOPS Equitable and Sustainable Human Development Programme, 1997), p. 2. In 2003 the Fijian Council of Social Services (FCOSS) disputed government estimations that poverty levels ran at around 30 per cent by arguing that the proportion of Fiji's citizens living in poverty was more likely to be roughly 55 per cent. FCOSS claimed that the governments' conservative estimate failed to take account of the impact of adverse climatic conditions, the May 2000 coup and the expiry of land leases which forced many families to abandon their farms and move to urban areas. See Australian Broadcasting Commission, 'Fiji's government criticised over rising poverty', *Go Asia Pacific Breaking News Pacific*, 20 August 2003, <[www.goasiapacific.com](http://www.goasiapacific.com)>. Despite the fact that many of Fiji's citizens are facing declining living standards, Fiji is regularly described as 'one of the most developed of the Pacific Island economies'. Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *A Pacific engaged: Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea and the island states of the south-west Pacific* (Canberra: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, August 2003), p. 241.

29 See Australian Broadcasting Commission, 'Fiji's squatter population rising', *Go Asia Pacific Breaking News Pacific*, 10 August 2002, <[www.goasiapacific.com](http://www.goasiapacific.com)>, for a discussion of the rapid increase in the population of Suva's squatter settlements. Fiji's Director of Housing estimated that roughly 56,400 people or six per cent of the country's population lived in these areas.

broad-level support for the law-reform campaign they have led. This support has not been forthcoming however and, as the struggle has progressed, even some of the more liberal NGOs working in the welfare area have withdrawn their backing for the legislation.<sup>30</sup> A further round of government-funded public consultations on the Family Law Bill launched in 2002 revealed a broad level of deep-seated community mistrust about the Bill's provisions.<sup>31</sup> In the current political climate the likelihood of the Bill becoming law appears extremely remote.

Despite the provocative nature of this debate in Fiji, efforts to advance the status of 'poor women' through law reform can be viewed as a fairly conservative approach to the issue of women's economic disadvantage. While this strategy may face local resistance it does not overtly challenge the prevailing status quo in a way that is highly confrontational. Indeed strategies built upon the conviction that substantive links can be made between human rights ideals, legal frameworks and poverty alleviation sit very comfortably with the current international focus on human rights based approaches in development policy making. Since 1975 and the beginning of the United Nations Decade For Women, the idea that the law can be used as a 'political tool' that will enhance local women's participation in Third World development has gained in ascendancy. As Margaret Schuler, an eminent promoter of legal literacy as a tool for women's empowerment has noted, the rationale underpinning this push was that:

law, law-making and law enforcement needed to be 'democratised' in the sense of taking them out of the reified realm of the untouchable and inaccessible and putting them into the political realm to be shaped and re-ordered through organised political endeavour.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The Fijian Council of Social Services involved in the original consultation and drafting process has withdrawn its support of the Bill on the grounds that later drafts have borrowed too heavily from overseas family law models, particularly those in operation in Australia and New Zealand, which it feels is inappropriate for the local context in Fiji and fails to reflect locally held values. Personal communication with Hassan Kahn, Coordinator, FCOSS, 12 November 2002.

<sup>31</sup> See 'Women make money from maintenance', *Fiji Times*, 24 October 2002; 'Complaints on Family Law Bill shock state', *Fiji Times*, 2 November 2002; and 'Bill needs consultation', *Fiji Times*, 7 November 2002, for press reports and discussion of Family Law Bill public hearings.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Schuler and Sakuntala Kadirgamar-Rajasingham, eds, *Legal literacy: A tool for women's empowerment* (New York: UNIFEM, 1992), p. 33.

As such legal strategies have become an integral feature of the 'political agenda' utilised by groups in the developing world to enhance the status of women, drawing their legitimacy from the fact that they have been endorsed at the level of international policy making. Schuler argues that these strategies commonly tackle issues such as the 'law's substance (the content of the law), structure (the courts enforcement and the administrative agencies of the state) or culture (the shared social attitudes and behaviours sustaining the law).'<sup>33</sup>

While this philosophy is clearly in evidence in the FWRM's Family Law Bill campaign, it has also been taken up in the broader Pacific context by the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), a Fiji-based NGO funded by UNDP and UKDFID, which attempts to promote legal literacy across the Pacific Islands region. In a recent publication, the RRRT defended its approach to poverty alleviation in the following terms:

... you need to think about what causes poverty in the first place. First you need to understand that poverty is not just financial. A person can also be poor in terms of how much or little access he or she has to resources, like education and information due to a lack of opportunity. Therefore having human rights provides a basis through which people gain access to the resources they have been denied as a result of social, political and legal inequalities. Until every person has access to human rights, the cycle of poverty will not be broken.<sup>34</sup>

The above-cited passage argues that the predicament of those who live in poverty can be alleviated if their rights are made redeemable. The consistent levels of funding for campaigns led by the FWRM and RRRT which advocate legal strategies as an effective means by which to reduce economic disadvantage, indicate that such undertakings fit neatly with the aspirations and philosophical approaches to development of international agencies who are committed to supporting local programs for women in developing regions. Within the broader political culture, legalistic strategies towards poverty alleviation have come to be seen as a sophisticated and progressive alternative to income generating schemes, programs to improve local infrastructure, or protest activities designed to pressure governments to increase

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 33–4.

<sup>34</sup> Regional Rights Resource Team, *Right Hia* 1 (January–March) 2002, p. 9.

welfare assistance, all of which might improve women's economic status in a more immediate sense, but in the current climate often tend to be viewed as unsophisticated or non-progressive solutions to disadvantage.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, the many difficulties that may prevent economically disadvantaged women from accessing the law often appear to be ignored by those who promote legalistic strategies for poverty alleviation. In Fiji, as in many developing economies, there is a strong gender bias at work in the employment market which encourages the exploitation of the already-poor. For many local women, employment is only available in what local academic Claire Slatter refers to as occupational ghettos: domestic work, cleaning, waitressing, teaching, nursing and garment construction.<sup>36</sup> The chances of advancement for women in these professions is often negligible and their full-time earning capacity is such that invariably only a minimum subsistence-level is guaranteed. In my own discussions with researchers examining the predicament of female garment workers in Fiji, for example,<sup>37</sup> it was brought to my attention that women earning only FJ\$45–\$50 per week and generally living in Suva's increasingly crowded squatter settlements, were in such a precarious financial situation that should their long working hours allow it, they were unwilling to risk even the bus-fare into central Suva to discuss their situation with legal representatives or state welfare authorities.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Crook, 'Editorial introduction', *International Development Studies Bulletin* 32(1) 2001, pp. 1–6, for a discussion of the ways in which bilateral and multilateral development agencies have twinned the good governance agenda with programs of 'rule of law' and 'law reform' as a means by which to rejuvenate 'state-relations with society' and encourage 'market-led growth' in developing countries.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication with Claire Slatter, University of the South Pacific, 6 November 2002.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Christie Harrington and Claire Slatter for sharing their insights with me on the working and living conditions of Suva's garment workers. For further discussion of this issue, see Christie Harrington, 'Fiji's women garment workers: Negotiating constraints in employment and beyond', *Labour and Management in Development Journal* 1(5) 2000, pp. 2–22; and 'Atu Emberson-Bain, 'Women, poverty and post-coup pressure', in David Robie, ed., *Tu Galala: Social change in the Pacific* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 145–62.

<sup>38</sup> At the same time the confident promotion of legalistic measures as a means by which 'poor women' can redeem their rights, generally also overlooks the extent to which poverty can also be socially disempowering and debilitating to the individual's self-esteem. As Naila Kabeer has noted in the Malaysian context, women in these situations may have limited experience in 'fending for themselves in a public space' or dealing with public officials. See Naila Kabeer, *Reversed realities:*

While the FWRM and the RRRT claim to speak for Fiji's 'poor women' as their constituency,<sup>39</sup> these groups often tend to overlook the fact that poverty-levels may function as an obstacle which denies the poor access to the much-touted laws designed to improve economic status. The interest here appears to lie chiefly in the task of crafting solutions to instances of poverty rather than investigating the factors that might contribute to local instances of poverty. As later sections of this paper will argue this type of debate ventures into territory which may invite radical critique of government policy on welfare or foreign investment, or the economic policy prescriptions of international development partners and aid agencies; territory which the FWRM and the RRRT have both generally seemed keen to avoid given that such strategies may in fact bring them into conflict with organisations who have provided them with important financial backing.

### **Fiji Women's Crisis Center**

The work of the Fiji Women's Crisis Center, a group working towards the elimination of violence against women in Fiji and across the Pacific region, has also faced resistance from local quarters for what is perceived as its 'anti-men, or anti-family' stance.<sup>40</sup> Religious leaders and members of Fiji's political elite have been known to be critical of the FWCC for the provocative manner in which condemnation of gender-based crime is expressed. A recent example of this occurred in December 2002 when Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase admonished the Center for its tendency to

*Gender hierarchies in development thought* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 246. The optimistic promotion of legal literacy as a tool of empowerment for women may seem less hopeful if we consider, as Gita Sen has, the interrelated nature of social dynamics and the extent to which class, gender and cultural values can become 'enmeshed' into an intricate and multi-levelled system of 'subordination'. See Gita Sen, 'Subordination and sexual control: A comparative view of the control of women', in Nalini Visvanathan, Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff and Nan Wieggersma, eds, *The women, gender, and development reader* (London: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 142–9, at p. 148. This scenario, I would argue, can severely curtail the autonomy of poor women and seriously impede their ability to access the law.

<sup>39</sup> Unpublished transcript of interview with Imrana Jalal.

<sup>40</sup> Jacqueline Leckie, 'The complexities of women's agency in Fiji', in Brenda S. A. Yeoh, Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang, eds, *Gender politics in the Asia-Pacific region* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 156–79. This point was reinforced to me during an interview with Shamima Ali, Coordinator, FWCC, 25 March 2002.

use the press as a vehicle of protest and suggested that the tactic of ‘quiet diplomacy’ might serve the organisations purposes more effectively.<sup>41</sup>

Despite facing local instances of resistance from time to time, the FWCC has maintained its operations since 1983. In this time it has gained a high profile as an organisation committed to advancing women’s rights and attracted significant local government and overseas agency support to fund its core operating costs and more specific projects.<sup>42</sup> The Center provides counselling and support services for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and designs public campaigns to promote awareness of this issue. The FWCC works at the community level and often in coalition with other women’s NGOs such as the Catholic Women’s League, the Soqosoqo Vakamarama or Fijian–Indian organisations such as Sri Sewa Sabha and the Fiji Moslem Women’s League, running education workshops for women on the issue of domestic violence. This organisation also works with Fiji’s police and armed forces to promote awareness of and a more appropriate response to gender-motivated crimes.<sup>43</sup>

Every year the FWCC takes part in a global NGO campaign to combat gender violence by staging ‘16 Days of Activism’ which are designed to raise public awareness of this issue. The Center holds workshops and public seminars around the country on violence against women and allows the public to tour its offices in Suva. The campaign benefits from the support of local political identities and sporting personalities and also attracts a great

<sup>41</sup> Laisenia Qarese, cited in *Fiji Times*, 22 November 2002.

<sup>42</sup> The FWCC receives substantial financial backing from the Fiji government. It also benefits from the support of international donor agencies. In 1999, for example, the organisation received FJ\$2.2 million from AusAID to fund its programs for five years, and in 2002 the Australian government’s Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee report recommended that AusAID continue to support the FWCC’s work and encourage the establishment of similar organisations in other Pacific Island countries. See Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *A Pacific engaged*.

<sup>43</sup> Cases of violence against women are reported in the press on an almost daily basis in Fiji and the Crisis Center is often called upon for comment. The FWCC commonly uses a rights framework to discuss these issues and, like many women’s organisations around the world, refers to violence in the home and the crimes of rape and sexual abuse as violations of women’s human rights. The Center’s spokespeople often refer to factors such as gender inequality, ‘societal behaviour towards women’, and Fiji’s ‘culture of violence’ as the causes for violence. At the same time the FWCC’s public advocacy also places a heavy emphasis upon legal strategies to combat this phenomenon.

deal of media attention. In 2002, the Center opened its annual campaign with a series of presentations which were designed to demonstrate the economic cost of violence against women. References to 'development' have been a common feature of the Center's advocacy in recent years, however in this campaign the FWCC looked to economic policy makers to bring the issue to prominence in the public domain. The opening address was given by the Governor of Fiji's Reserve Bank, Savenaca Narube, who argued that violence against women should be understood as a development issue with a negative impact on Fiji's GDP. Narube estimated that days lost in employment, welfare, law enforcement and health care for victims of violence cost the Fijian economy roughly FJ\$300 million per annum or seven per cent of the country's GDP.<sup>44</sup> Deliberation upon this theme was to continue in the months that followed and in February 2003 a regional conference on violence against women organised by the Pacific office of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) also echoed calls for violence against women to be viewed as an economic issue that retarded development processes in Pacific Island nations.<sup>45</sup>

The framing of women's physical security as a development issue has been a prominent theme in academic research in the past decade evident for example in the work of Roxanna Carrillo.<sup>46</sup> Carrillo has examined the impact of development initiatives designed to integrate women into the economy and exposed the potential for women to become the targets of violence as a result of such programs. She has found that while women's earning capacity generally increases as a result of joining income generating schemes, husbands may respond to the increasing financial independence of their wives with violence due to the fact that they feel as if they are 'losing control of the household'.<sup>47</sup> She has also found that in industrialising economies which often rely on women to fill demand for low-wage employment, female workers who are exposed to sexual harassment from

<sup>44</sup> *Daily Post*, 26 November 2002.

<sup>45</sup> ABC Radio Australia, *Pacific Beat*, 25 February 2003.

<sup>46</sup> Roxanna Carrillo, *Battered dreams: Violence against women as an obstacle to development* (New York: UNIFEM, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

their superiors often feel unwilling to complain for fear that they risk losing their jobs.<sup>48</sup>

A notable proponent of this type of work in Pacific contexts has been Christine Bradley who has examined the impact of development on the physical security of women in Papua New Guinea. Like Carrillo, Bradley also argues that development programs aiming to increase the financial well-being of local populations often increase the likelihood that women will be exposed to physical violence. Bradley contends that ‘rapid social change’<sup>49</sup> can follow in the wake of development leading to a situation whereby existing social norms are challenged, feelings of insecurity increase and social tensions rise. These factors often contribute to an increase in violent behaviour in domestic situations as men attempt to reassert control within their family. Bradley has found that on the one hand the financial burdens that come with unemployment will lead to stress within families and increased levels of domestic violence. Conversely she has found that a rapid rise in living standards as a result of development can also lead to an increase in levels of domestic violence if newly acquired income is spent on alcohol.<sup>50</sup>

The themes evident in both Carrillo and Bradley’s research support the idea that while the financial pressures of economic underdevelopment can increase the potential for women to be exposed to violence, the development process itself can also make women more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. The recent campaign led by the FWCC however did not rely on either of these logics when it chose to frame violence against women as a development issue. The FWCC did not examine the impact upon women of current models of development favoured by the government or international aid providers. Neither did the Center’s campaign question the appropriateness of these internationally endorsed models of development for local Pacific Island contexts. Instead the Fijian economy was placed at the centre of the argument rather than a consideration of the ways in which economic

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Bradley, ‘Why male violence against women is a development issue: Reflections from Papua New Guinea’, in Miranda Davies, ed., *Women and violence*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 10–28, at p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 16–24.

variables might increase the likelihood that Fiji's women are exposed to violence in their daily lives.

This advocacy strategy seems at odds with a substantial amount of locally generated research which has documented both the gendered nature of poverty in Fiji and the extent to which women's precarious financial condition has been compounded by local government economic policy and the conditionalities imposed on the government by international aid-providers.<sup>51</sup> Fiji's highly charged political environment has also come under scrutiny with authors such as Slatter, and Kushma Ram alleging that since 1987 and the first military coup which toppled the country's elected government from power, successive regimes have embraced the ethos of economic austerity as an attempt to restore the confidence of offshore investors and international lending and aid institutions. They argue that the consequences of economic reform for local populations have been largely negative with the public and welfare sector radically depleted, deregulated prices leading to spiraling inflation on basic goods, and government-led programs of 'labour reform' stripping 'workers and unions of hard-won rights'.<sup>52</sup> At the same time these governments have relied on the coercive power of the state's discipline forces to quell potential opposition to these policies from local quarters.<sup>53</sup>

While consideration of these themes has for the most part taken place within academic circles only, the fact that the economic status of women has declined in recent times has also begun to receive some level of attention from Fiji's daily newspapers.<sup>54</sup> Local women's NGOs on the other

<sup>51</sup> Claire Slatter, 'Banking on the growth model? The World Bank and market policies in the Pacific', in 'Atu Emberson-Bain, ed., *Sustainable development or malignant growth? Perspectives of Pacific Island women* (Suva: Marama Publications, 1995), pp. 17–38; Kushma Ram, 'Militarism and market mania in Fiji', in Emberson-Bain, ed., *Sustainable development or malignant growth?*, pp. 237–50; Emberson-Bain, 'Women, poverty and post-coup pressure'; Emberson-Bain, ed., *Sustainable development or malignant growth?*

<sup>52</sup> Slatter, 'Banking on the growth model?', p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Ram, 'Militarism and market mania in Fiji'; Slatter, 'Banking on the growth model?'

<sup>54</sup> See 'Champion of the poor', *Fiji Times*, 25 February 2002; 'Money woes hamper care for children', *Fiji Times*, 11 March 2002; 'Church leaders ignore poor', *Fiji Times*, 21 March 2002; 'The true survivors', *Fiji Sun*, 13 April 2002; 'A beggars lament', *Fiji Times*, 9 November 2002; and 'Once

hand have generally appeared reluctant to take the government to task on the issue of welfare provision, protection of worker's rights or the impact of international aid packages that come with conditions attached. When the subject of women and poverty alleviation or development is brought into the public domain by these groups the subject matter is, as the above paragraphs indicate, negotiated in a relatively indirect manner.

This situation contrasts markedly with the platform embraced by radical women's organisations operating in Fiji in the early 1970s. The next section of this paper examines the campaign strategies of the Fiji Young Women's Christian Association, an organisation which despite its somewhat conservative beginnings in the early 1960s was to evolve into a vocal and highly radical body committed to the advancement of local women.

## **YWCA**

The YWCA began its operation in Suva in 1961 at a time when the philosophy of community development guided local development initiatives across the Pacific Islands region. This trend in development policy making was often characterised by a narrow and stereotypical conception of gender roles. Development initiatives for women at this time generally began from the premise that the role of women did not extend beyond the family unit and that the interests of women and men were largely distinct. Women's participation in voluntary organisations at this time was encouraged at the local level by development professionals as a key means by which women could gain access to training primarily in 'home economics' areas and as such become integrated, as far as such limited initiatives allowed, into the development process.<sup>55</sup>

married now homeless', *Fiji Sun*, 14 April 2002 for articles discussing the impact of poverty at the local level.

<sup>55</sup> Evidence of how this development philosophy was applied to the Pacific can be found in the quarterly *South Pacific Bulletin*, published by the South Pacific Commission, which in the early 1960s featured various reports on the formation of voluntary associations designed to provide 'community education for women'. See in particular Marjorie Stewart, 'Training women for leadership in Fiji', *South Pacific Bulletin* July 1960, pp. 42–5; Marjorie Stewart, 'Fiji women enthusiastic about club work', *South Pacific Bulletin* October 1960, pp. 54–5, 70; Marjorie Stewart, 'Women in home and community', *South Pacific Bulletin* October 1962, pp. 42–4. A report released by the UN in 1972 highlights the continuing importance of community approaches to development. The report emphasised the benefits of this approach as a means by which 'the efforts of people

Under the stewardship of expatriate women's development specialists working for the colonial administration in Fiji, the early operations of the YWCA adhered in many ways to the prevailing development philosophy of the period. The principal focus of the organisation was to provide programmes devoted to 'spiritual, physical, cultural and social development' by providing opportunities for socialisation and wholesome instruction for young women in the areas of arts and crafts, sport and games or sewing and cooking. At the same time the organisation's leaders also felt a responsibility to represent the interests of women in the wider community and showed itself ready to 'take action within the community' where it was felt to be most needed.<sup>56</sup> However, in only a few years these two functions of the YWCA were extended in a dramatic fashion.<sup>57</sup>

Under the leadership of a new generation of university educated indigenous leaders, the organisation began to broaden its reach and engage at a more concrete level with the specific challenges facing women in Fiji in the immediate post-independence environment rather than simply attempting to apply the principles of community development at the local level. In addition to the more conventional focus of its programs, the YWCA also became involved in the provision of technical education and vocational training of young women as a means by which to improve their economic status. This extension of activities was accompanied by an increase in the political activities of the organisation. With the formation of a Public Affairs Committee in 1968, the YWCA's pledge to 'take action within the

themselves are united with those of governmental authorities ... to improve economic, social and cultural conditions of communities ... and to contribute fully to national progress'. United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, *Participation of women in community development*, E/CN.6/514/Rev.1 (New York: United Nations, 1972), p. 5. For a later critique of these types of initiatives which were viewed as approaching development from a standpoint that ignored local cultural specificities, see Penelope Schoeffel, 'The rice pudding syndrome: Women's advancement and home economics training in the South Pacific', *Development in the Pacific: What women say*, Development Dossier 18 (Canberra: Australian Council for Overseas Aid, 1986), pp. 36-44.

<sup>56</sup> Stewart, 'Women in home and community', p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> I am grateful to Amelia Rokotuivuna for allowing me access to YWCA records for this period which trace the evolution of the organisation, the expansion of the services that the YWCA offered to a wide range of community groups, and the political activities of the YWCA Public Affairs Committee. The paragraphs which trace the activities of the YWCA during this period are based upon the organisation's record books and annual reports.

community' was evident not only in the provision of services to that community but also in its efforts to enter into political debate and to promote alternative and critical points of view on social issues that, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate, were often contentious. It was in this last area that the organisation was to earn for itself a highly radical profile in Fiji.

This radicalism does not appear to have alarmed the organisation's benefactors however. The YWCA continued to be successful in attracting the financial support for its operations from local and international sources and in 1969, at the end of a two-year fundraising campaign, managed to raise over FJ\$400,000 to fund the construction of a purpose-built headquarters in central Suva. Perusal of the YWCA records for this period show that the organisation received funding from local government ministries, partner-branches of the YWCA around the world, international development agencies and church-based organisations such as the Australian Council of Churches and the USA based Methodist Board of Missions.<sup>58</sup> The availability of new and larger premises which opened its doors in 1973 allowed the YWCA to expand its operations further and offer even more courses and activities for its local members and for Suva's young population generally. At the same time examination of the political endeavours of YWCA members at this time reveal that the organisation continued to pursue a highly critical activist agenda with little regard that such actions might offend the sensibilities of local or international benefactors.

As early as 1965, YWCA members had earned a radical profile for the organisation through their involvement in pre-independence discussions on the future shape of Fiji's constitution and their calls for the abolition of the colonially instituted voting system that differentiated electoral representation on the basis of race. In a country where the politicisation of racial difference was a deliberate byproduct of colonial rule,<sup>59</sup> the fact that young Fijian women chose to speak on this issue was both courageous and highly significant. By their actions these women challenged orthodox thinking in relation to Fijian paramountcy and the right to equal representation of both

<sup>58</sup> 'Donations to YWCA building appeal', *Fiji Times*, 29 December 1969.

<sup>59</sup> John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan, *Represented communities: Fiji and world decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

the Indian and Chinese citizens of Fiji, and also the appropriateness of young Fijian women to become involved in debate on such questions. The tone of press reports of the proceedings and the wave of protest letters appearing in the newspapers in weeks subsequent to this episode are revealing of both the radical nature of the arguments voiced by the YWCA members and the level of controversy they generated in the wider community.<sup>60</sup>

Dependency-oriented critiques of the international political and economic environment and the enduring legacy of colonialism for the newly independent nations of the developing world were a common feature of YWCA debate at this time. In 1973 the activities of high profile YWCA members Amelia Rokotuiivuna and Claire Slatter again put the organisation in the public spotlight. This time they were named in the country's parliament as contributors to a left-wing publication entitled *Fiji: A developing Australian colony*,<sup>61</sup> a work funded by the Victorian Trades Hall Council which critically considered the direction of development in post-colonial Fiji and the assumption that trickle down benefits for the people of Fiji would follow-on from local business ventures funded by Australian capital. This work was certainly controversial and its radical views were widely condemned by Fiji's political elite who were perhaps fearful of the backlash such a critique might generate in Australia.<sup>62</sup> In some respects, however, this text can also be considered as a product of the prevailing political culture of the period, for the emerging neo-Marxist school of critical historiography at the newly founded, Suva-based University of the South Pacific almost certainly casts a shadow across many of the contributions to this volume.

At the local level this publication certainly ruffled the feathers of Fiji's elected representatives. On the other hand it drew some level of legitimacy from the fact that the themes it presented also found correspondence with

<sup>60</sup> For newspaper reports of these events see 'Big range of women's views presented to Mrs White', *Fiji Times*, 29 April 1965; 'Letters to the editor', *Fiji Times*, 4 May 1965.

<sup>61</sup> Amelia Rokotuiivuna, et al., *Fiji: A developing Australian colony* (North Fitzroy, VIC: International Development Action, 1973).

<sup>62</sup> Personal communication with Claire Slatter, 6 November 2002.

broader political debates taking place at the international level regarding the place of post-colonial developing nations within global economic structures. At this time voices from the developing world were eager to demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional development policy, the imbalanced nature of the global economy and the confused administration of international aid.<sup>63</sup> These issues had been taken up by the G77 states at the United Nations during the 1960s and formed the basis of this group's demands for a new international economic order (NIEO). The United Nations General Assembly formally recognised these demands in 1974 when it adopted a Plan of Action for the establishment of a NIEO.<sup>64</sup>

In 1975, Rokotuivuna and Slatter again tackled the issue of local development initiatives through their involvement in a publication entitled *The Pacific way: Social issues in national development*.<sup>65</sup> In this work Rokotuivuna argues for the formulation of development plans which are built around 'quality of life' or 'style of life issues' rather than formal development 'growth' targets.<sup>66</sup> Calling for a more participative approach to development planning she reminded her audience that policy makers have a 'special responsibility towards seeing that equitable distribution becomes a reality ... what will you say when the majority ask, "What have you done for us?"'<sup>67</sup> Clearly Rokotuivuna felt that development policy makers have an obligation to approach development in a way that went beyond a concentration upon targeted outcomes and instead examined the impact of policies across all sectors of society. However, examination of the political activities of Rokotuivuna and other members of the YWCA Public Affairs

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of the international political activity of Third World nations during this period see Jagdish Bhagwati, 'Introduction', in Jagdish Bhagwati, ed., *The new international economic order: The north south debate* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 1–20; Jeffrey A. Hart, *The new international economic order: Conflict and cooperation in North–South economic relations, 1974–77* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983); J. Ann Tickner, 'Local self-reliance versus power politics: Conflicting priorities of national development', *Alternatives* 11(4) 1986, pp. 461–83.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas G. Weiss, David P. Forsythe and Roger A. Coate, *The United Nations and changing world politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> Slatter was one of the editors of this monograph while Rokotuivuna contributed a paper.

<sup>66</sup> Amelia Rokotuivuna, 'Are planners human?', in Sione Tupouniua, Claire Slatter and Ron Crocombe, eds, *The Pacific way: Social issues in national development* (Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1975), pp. 7–9, at p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Committee reveals that this type of thinking was not just an academic exercise in 'what ought to be'. The following discussion of YWCA efforts to improve the working conditions of household workers demonstrates just one of the ways in which this organisation sought to bring the idea of 'equitable distribution' to life.

The predicament of young women employed as live-in domestic helpers had occupied the minds of the YWCA leaders from the early years of the organisation's operations. In the early 1960s the 'Y' had begun running 'Housegirls Clubs' which ran one afternoon a week and provided the young women concerned with an opportunity for socialisation. To encourage attendance the YWCA director at this time, Ruth Lechte, had also written to the employers of household workers urging them to grant their employees enough time off so that they could attend these groups regularly.

Through the clubs, YWCA staff were able to build a strong rapport with many of the young women employed around Suva in this capacity. At the same time, however, YWCA staff also became aware of the extent to which this type of employment situation encouraged the potential exploitation of household workers who, as part of an unregulated industry, had very few means for redress at their disposal should they object to employer demands, employment conditions or rates of pay.

In 1970, as part of its vocational program, the YWCA began running household workers training courses in an effort to give the industry a more professional face. The course trained girls to operate electrical household appliances, and showed them methods for laundry work, washing up and efficient housework techniques. At the end of the course, graduates were presented with certificates and letters of participation. The aims of the course were to encourage the young women attending to approach their work in a professional way. At the same time the course was also designed to give the participant confidence when approaching prospective employers so that they could 'ask about any aspects of the job that were new or not understood'.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> 'New look in an old job: Housegirls go modern', *Fiji Times*, 17 December 1970.

In 1974, the Public Affairs Committee was asked to give support to the formation of a household workers union. A group of 20 to 25 young women who worked in the Tamavua area of Suva had formed a local association but felt that they would like to take the next step of forming this body into a union that may be able to campaign for improved working conditions. The Public Affairs Committee approached the Ministry of Labour for advice on this issue and a meeting was convened at the Labour Ministry Offices on 9 October 1975 to discuss household workers' employment conditions and wages. YWCA records of the meeting indicate that the government did not fully support the idea of union formation. There was a recognition, however, of the need to improve the working conditions of the young women in question to ensure that adequate wages and working conditions were being provided. The government representative proposed a number of alternatives to union formation which ranged from the creation of a national household workers association to the establishment of a household workers agency which might screen prospective employers.<sup>69</sup>

The range of initiatives designed by the YWCA to improve the lot of the household workers was clearly significant and contrasts in important ways with the level of attention women's NGOs in the current setting pay to the predicament of Fiji's women employed in low-wage and unregulated industries such as garment construction. On the one hand the YWCA entered into formal negotiations with the government on behalf of the women so that they might have access to a recognised avenue for representation. On the other hand the YWCA also demonstrated its 'active concern' for the household workers through the organisation of more informal activities which sought to provide training and support for the women concerned. While there was an increased consciousness amongst the young women themselves that their conditions could be improved if they were in a position to exercise their political voice through organised labour initiatives, so too was there a recognition within government circles that the conditions of the workers in this area needed some level of regulation. The YWCA played an important intermediary role in these processes.

<sup>69</sup> The YWCA Public Affairs Committee Record Books provide records of these discussions.

At the same time it can also be argued that the government's recognition of the validity of the YWCA-led initiatives for the household workers is indicative at a broader level of a more sympathetic attitude towards the conditions of low-wage workers at this time. Comparing this episode with the current scenario where academics and labour representatives have almost universally condemned the similarly precarious working conditions of women employed in Fiji's garment industry, we find stark contrasts in the extent to which government has demonstrated any level of understanding for worker's concerns. Indeed in the more contemporary setting it appears that successive governments in Fiji have been more likely to side with industry owners rather than industry workers, and have gone out of their way to offer concessions to local garment manufacturers in the form of tax incentives and the establishment of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) which have been designed to foster local and international interest in supporting this industry as a potential source of export revenue for the country. On the other hand the conditions of the women workers in this industry, while attracting the critical attention of local and overseas academics<sup>70</sup> and the press,<sup>71</sup> has largely been ignored by government. With the garment industry largely unregulated (in much the same way that the household workers industry was), low rates of pay and 'sweated labour' conditions the norm, garment workers have few avenues of recourse should they wish to negotiate for improved working conditions.<sup>72</sup> Therefore the fact that the YWCA took up the concerns of household workers in the earlier period can also be explained by the fact that at this time, discussions

<sup>70</sup> Ram, 'Militarism and market mania in Fiji'; Harrington, 'Fiji's women garment workers'; Emberson-Bain, 'Women, poverty and post-coup pressure'; Claire Slatter, 'Economic recovery on the backs of women workers: Women and tax free enterprises in Fiji', *Review: Diversity in Development* 12(19) 1991, pp. 18–28.

<sup>71</sup> 'Boss under scrutiny', *Fiji Times*, 26 March 2002; 'Rag traders stitch the rip', *Fiji Times*, 27 October 2002; 'Firm cheated us, workers claim', *Fiji Times*, 2 November 2002; 'Firm rips off garment workers', *Fiji Times*, 6 November 2002.

<sup>72</sup> Emberson-Bain has demonstrated that despite the fact that a garment workers union does exist, Fiji Trades Union Council (FTUC) negotiations on their behalf have done little to alleviate the 'sweated labour' conditions that prevail in the industry. In 1991 she found that only 50 per cent of factories were prepared to pay the approved minimum wage and that the Fiji government's Labour Department showed 'indifference, even reluctance' to enforce the order. See Emberson-Bain, 'Women, poverty and post-coup pressure'.

of organised labour initiatives or industry regulation were more acceptable within the prevailing political culture than they appear to be today.

By contrast NGO advocacy on the issue of garment worker's employment conditions in the last ten years has been limited and in no way reflects either the scale of the industry or the extent to which exploitative conditions for garment workers have been documented. In comparison with the earlier period, when the interests of women workers were accorded a high priority by the YWCA and at least some degree of recognition by the government, a similar focus upon issues that are similarly urgent today is hard to find both in NGO advocacy and government business.

### **POLITICAL CULTURE**

On the basis of the points raised above, it might be easy to make snap judgements about current women's NGOs being out of step with the lived experience of poverty or the precarious living conditions faced by many of Fiji's women. On the other hand I would contend that it is more valid to consider the ways in which the prevailing political culture can shape the campaign strategies of groups lobbying for change. We need to consider therefore the extent to which NGOs are bound by the conditions of the prevailing political culture in which they operate and whether or not this culture provides the political space for organisations to pursue a more overtly activist agenda that might take the government to task on policy decisions that have directly impacted upon women's well-being.

While the YWCA certainly embraced a radical platform of activism at times and did not shy away from engaging in critical debate on issues to do with constitutional design, government policy on development or the protection of low-income earners, it should also be remembered that this type of debate was taking place at a time when the local political elite showed some eagerness to embrace the new possibilities that recently-won independence from colonial rule might offer. This tendency is particularly evident in the conduct of Fiji's foreign policy at this time and the newly emerging nation's determination to make its presence felt in international affairs on the issue of nuclear testing in the Pacific region.<sup>73</sup> The vigour with

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of these points see Yoko S. Ogashiwa, *Microstates and nuclear issues: Regional cooperation in the Pacific* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1991).

which the anti-nuclear stance was taken up by Fiji's statesmen within the Commonwealth and the United Nations demonstrates how this issue struck an emotional chord at the time of Fiji's decolonisation. Acting upon concerns that had been first raised in the public domain by the NGO community,<sup>74</sup> Fijian leaders at this time clearly articulated the idea that the time had come for Pacific Islanders' self-determination as they challenged the destructive policies of those colonial powers that maintained a presence in the region. When Fiji's statesmen raised this issue on the international stage they claimed therefore to speak both for the citizens of Fiji, and for the citizens of Pacific Island nations that had yet to win their independence.<sup>75</sup>

Fiji's political elite was eager to forge an autonomous path on this issue and their opposition to nuclear testing touched on broader arguments relating to the colonial powers' loss of legitimacy in the Pacific and the need for a redistribution of political power in the region. Similar arguments calling for a restructuring of the international political and economic environment and an end to Third World dependency were evident amongst the rhetoric employed by Third World statesmen and women at this time.<sup>76</sup>

The fact that the YWCA's activism often demonstrated a similar type of 'redistributive' ethos to that which featured in the international political

<sup>74</sup> The YWCA played an important role in this debate with many of its members also contributing their time and expertise to the Against Testing on Muroroa Atoll (ATOM) committee which was to become an important regional organisation involved in anti-nuclear protest and demands for decolonisation.

<sup>75</sup> The importance of timing when we consider the temperature of, and government receptiveness to, the anti-nuclear protests activities of the 1970s becomes particularly salient if we compare this era with a later period in the mid-1980s when the anti-nuclear position disappeared from Fiji's foreign policy platform despite the fact that the same governing party and indeed the same Prime Minister still retained power. While Fiji had chosen to ban US nuclear powered ships from using Fiji's port facilities in 1982, this decision was ultimately reversed only 12 months later. Ratu Mara justified this turn around by making reference to Fiji's obligations according to international law as well as Fiji's strategic interests, and cited political and economic considerations and questions of national defence and security as reasons for this altered direction in the country's foreign policy. See Ogashiwa, *Microstates and nuclear issues*, p. 50.

<sup>76</sup> Arguments about the imbalanced nature of global political and economic structures had been taken up by many newly independent nations within international fora at this time and in particular prompted the formation of the G77 grouping of nations within the United Nations as a counterpoint to the power wielded at the international level by the industrialised states who made up the G7.

negotiations between the developing regions and the more affluent industrialised states, and which pinpointed local and international factors as the cause for local instances of disadvantage, should therefore be understood as consonant, at some level, with the prevailing political culture of the period. At the same time, a sensibility to the types of challenges being faced by newly independent developing states was also evident amongst foreign donor agencies and international institutions who appeared willing to at least give cursory attention to the demands for a more equitable distribution of economic resources and political power that came from the radical caucuses of the Third World.

In the contemporary setting, however, the space for organisations to engage in critiques of current orthodoxies of economic policy making and the impact they have at the local level is in fact far more limited. For many organisations in Fiji, this space is only thinly defined and the boundaries of NGO advocacy for women have been firmly set. Within the local playing field NGOs can engage in political discussions of human rights or development that is non-controversial and does not overtly challenge government policy. As we have seen, women's NGOs are therefore at liberty to articulate agendas of law reform or to speculate in non-confrontational ways upon the trajectory of national economic development. On the other hand NGOs do not appear to be at liberty to focus in a more concentrated way upon economic policy decisions and aid conditionalities that impact negatively on women, or the working conditions for women in low-paying employment.

Campaigns which articulate 'women's issues' within a broader human rights framework—the notion of 'women's rights as human rights'—have become a predominant and internationally endorsed advocacy strategy amongst women's NGOs in the last decade. But the current purchase of this advocacy catch-cry appears to have prompted NGOs to turn away from examining the ways in which the prevailing orthodoxies governing economic policy making for developing states can function in ways that compound the economic disadvantage of women. While the rights agenda has come to be viewed as progressive advocacy strategy, broader critique of prevailing political and economic structures has come to be viewed as outdated, unfashionable or too radicalised, and as such, is unlikely to capture the imagination of international institutions or overseas donors.

Despite the muted tones of criticism evident within FWCC and FWRM campaigns, there have been recent occasions when both organisations have been subject to verbal censure by Fiji's government. Indeed within the local political culture these organisations are often held to articulate a 'radical' agenda which, as I have outlined, has often faced opposition from more parochial elements within Fiji's society. This would seem to indicate that current perceptions about what might be classified as radical political activity have shifted significantly in the three decades since Fiji negotiated its independence. The political space available to organisations to articulate a critical agenda in the fashion of the YWCA 30 years previously is severely constrained. Therefore rather than engage in a highly confrontational campaign on broad economic issues and threaten what political leverage they have managed to maintain in a more conservative political environment, both the FWCC and the FWRM have appeared to tread a political path that is roughly consonant with the prevailing political culture. As such debates which focus on the economic cost of violence against women, particularly when voiced by senior state bureaucrats concerned with economic policy matters hint, albeit in a roundabout way, that it would be in the incumbent government's own interest to confront this phenomenon in a more systematic way. Likewise, campaigns to improve the economic security of Fiji's women through law reform have certainly faced resistance from local sources but appear unlikely to invite a harshly critical response from government and have, from time to time, won the support of local legislators. In each case the organisations involved have judged it more expedient to enter into negotiation with the political elite rather than vigorous and critical confrontation. Indeed in a 2002 report discussing the experience of Fiji-based women's NGOs appearing before the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Committee, a prominent member of Fiji's NGO community argued that as a result of 'tempered' criticism of the Fiji government on the international stage, the Family Law Bill had been re-introduced into parliament. On the basis of this experience the author argued that NGOs should be conscious of the fact that a cautious route in negotiations with

governments can pay dividends and that ‘there is nothing to be gained from “bashing” the government in an aggressive manner’.<sup>77</sup>

For the FWCC the costs of a confrontational path would be tangible in an immediate sense. While the government has been an important source of funds for the organisation in recent years, it is not difficult to imagine that it might choose to withdraw this financial support should it feel that the FWCC is intent on sabotaging its broader interests. At the same time of course governments have means other than economic available to them should they wish to frustrate the political activities of NGOs. This was demonstrated to me personally in Suva in November 2002 when, in the wake of the government’s budget announcement, a public meeting was held by the Fiji Trade Unions Council (FTUC) to protest against a planned 25 per cent increase in government value added tax. While a significant part of Suva’s NGO community had privately voiced to me their grave concerns at the impact of this policy for an already disadvantaged urban underclass, only one leader of a women’s organisation was willing to take part in the public meeting. This situation becomes more understandable if we consider that Fiji’s government has implemented strict laws in relation to public protest marches which, in the wake of the 2000 coup, are now only permitted after the successful application for a permit. This meeting was not sanctioned by the government, and while it was held on FTUC premises, the state presence was highly visible with police vehicles making regular patrols of the premises every ten minutes. The low turnout to the meeting overall indicated that for the vast majority of NGOs working in Suva, association with this event was clearly judged to be a political risk. The fact that their involvement might be recorded and later jeopardise working relationships with state authorities or perhaps invite a more serious form of government sanctioning seems to have been, for many organisations, an effective persuasion against participation.

This is not the only example which demonstrates the constrained space for public programs of protest and critique within Fiji’s current political environment. The de-registering of Fiji’s Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF) as a charitable organisation in 2001—a body that has been fiercely

<sup>77</sup> Jalal, *Report on the presentation of the first PIC country report to UN CEDAW*, p. 8.

critical of Fiji's current government which, it argues, has repeatedly ignored the provisions of the country's constitution—has served as a potent reminder to all NGOs that the role of government watchdog is a potentially risky undertaking.

While the heavy-handed response to the activities of the CCF and the FTUC protests are clear examples of the ways in which local authorities can use regulatory mechanisms to place restrictions upon NGOs, more informal government strategies which seek simply to discredit NGOs can also fetter protest. In April 2002, for example, Fiji's Information Minister Joesfa Vosanibola questioned the 'mandate of the CCF' and whose interests the organisation claimed to represent. He argued that the CCF was 'dependent on foreign donor assistance' and as such there was a risk that the organisation derived 'its mandate to speak on national issues in Fiji from ... foreign donors'.<sup>78</sup> The fact that the foreign funding relationships that sustain NGOs such as the FWRM and FWCC are well publicised, to some extent also makes them easy targets for critics determined to promote the idea that NGO activity is skewed in directions favoured by overseas interests.<sup>79</sup>

All of the points raised above clearly indicate that the political culture prevailing at the local level provides only limited space for women's NGOs to engage in vigorous critique of government economic policy. Examination of the ways in which economic themes feature in the campaign strategies of women's NGOs in Fiji should therefore also consider the fact that in the post-coup scenario, women's NGOs in Fiji have chosen to suspend their critical voice in a bid to avoid confrontation with state authorities that in the longer-term might be detrimental to their political standing.

In a similar vein, however, it should also be recognised that there are influences operating at the international level which also constrain the political space of locally based NGOs and hamper their ability to engage in autonomous forms of critique. For example, international funding agencies such as AusAID or the World Bank may find that support for organisations whose piercing critiques of globalised capital or the local implications of

<sup>78</sup> 'State questions CCF', *Fiji Times*, 4 April 2002.

<sup>79</sup> For a particularly cynical examination of this issue see 'The growth and foreign influences of Fiji's noisy but unaccountable NGOs', *Yellow Bucket Column*, 23 March 2003, <[www.Fijivillage.com](http://www.Fijivillage.com)>.

structural adjustment run counter to their own development philosophies and goals.

While there has been a significant shift towards the incorporation of NGOs into the business of aid delivery in the Pacific, the stand-out priority for international development agencies continues to be ‘modernisation’ and sustaining the ‘economic growth model’.<sup>80</sup> For the FWCC in particular the adoption of a highly critical activist agenda which exposed the negative social impacts of Fiji’s push to be part of the global economy would most certainly bring it into conflict at some level with its most important international benefactor, AusAID. This agency’s development policy platform advocates the importance of the competitive market place and a dynamic private sector as a means by which to secure ‘sustained development’ defined as ‘job and income creation’, and the ‘efficient use of resources’.<sup>81</sup>

AusAID is not alone here of course. In the post-Washington consensus era the ‘free market mantra’<sup>82</sup> has become a non-negotiable pillar of the international political culture endorsed by development policy makers within the powerful Bretton Woods institutions, state-based development agencies and more generally by the international community of statesmen and women. In the 1995 *Beijing Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women*, a document unanimously endorsed by all present at the United Nations intergovernmental World Conference for Women, structural adjustment programs are referred to as ‘beneficial in the long term’ and world trade liberalisation is also uncritically accepted as a vehicle by which to raise global living standards.<sup>83</sup> This endorsement of current practice in development economics stands in stark contrast to the positions adopted on similar questions by the developing world’s representatives at the first United Nations World Conferences for Women held in 1975 and 1980. Here

<sup>80</sup> Premjeet Singh, ‘The Pacific aid regime: Continuity and change’, in Emberson-Bain, ed., *Sustainable development or malignant growth?*, pp. 51–62, at p. 57.

<sup>81</sup> Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), *Good governance: Guiding principles for implementation* (Canberra: AusAID, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-orienting western feminisms: Women’s diversity in a post-colonial world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 172.

we find statesmen and women from the Third World, and an important proportion of the NGO community from these regions as well, arguing that the continued economic dependency of developing nations compounded disadvantage at the local level. They therefore were more likely to emphasise the need for a redistributive ethos to guide global economic policy making. Compare the acceptance of structural adjustment cited above with the position taken by Third World nations at the Mexico City conference who, in a document co-sponsored by 74 developing nations which became known as the Mexico Declaration, argued that:

The issue of inequality ... is closely linked with the problem of underdevelopment, which exists as a result not only of unsuitable internal structures, but also of a profoundly unjust world economic system.<sup>84</sup>

There were significant tensions within the international women's movement over the appropriateness of these broader concerns being raised at the United Nations World Conferences where the focus was purportedly supposed to be concentrated exclusively upon women.<sup>85</sup> At the same time however the fact that Third World statesmen and women were willing to raise these types of concerns on the international stage opened the way for non-governmental bodies to follow suit. The ground had in some ways been prepared for women's NGOs both at the local and international level to engage in a type of radical activism that called for a more equitable reformulation of global political and economic structures. At the local level

<sup>84</sup> United Nations International Women's Year Secretariat, *Meeting in Mexico: World Conference of the International Women's Year, 1975* (New York: Center for Economic and Social Information/OPI, 1975), p. 55.

<sup>85</sup> Western delegates to these conferences often bemoaned the fact that such deliberations simply attempted to hijack debate away from more serious discussion of feminist agendas and the question of women's rights. Representatives from the developing world countered these criticisms by arguing that the predicament of local women could not be isolated from the broader challenges faced by disadvantaged populations of the Third World as a whole. For a more detailed account of the tensions that were played out during the Mexico City World Conference for Women in 1975, see Tinker and Jaquette, 'UN decade for women'; Elisabeth Reid, 'Between the official lines', *Ms.*, 4(5) 1975, pp. 88–91, 98–101; Vina Mazumdar, 'The non-aligned movement and the international women's decade', *Development: Seeds of Change* 4, 1984, p. 112; Fraser, *The UN decade for women*. For a discussion of the way the same tensions were evident within the local women's movement in Fiji see Vanessa Griffen, ed., *Women, development and empowerment: A Pacific feminist perspective: Report of a Pacific women's workshop, Nabouini, Fiji, 23–26 March 1987* (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Center, 1989).

these groups sought to expose the structural causes of women's disadvantage, social, economic and political. And at the level of international policy making, these groups, in coalition with other NGOs from around the developing world, argued for an expanded conceptualisation of the obstacles preventing women's advancement by demanding that feminist debate demonstrate a greater awareness of the specific difficulties faced by populations in the non-Western world. The activism of the Fiji YWCA during this period can therefore be understood in these terms. This organisation's political engagement went far beyond the conventional framing of 'women's issues' through its focus also upon broader questions relating to Fiji's international political and economic standing. By contrast women's organisations today operate in a far more constrained political environment which does not provide the necessary political space for the articulation of similar agendas.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing comparisons between the activism of the women's organisations working in the 1960s and 1970s and the advocacy undertaken by organisations in the current setting demands that we take account of the extent to which the prevailing political culture conditions the environment in which groups operate and hence, shapes their campaign strategies. In the wake of independence, Fiji's local political elite appeared eager to embrace the new possibilities that decolonisation might offer and did not close themselves off from often very radical areas of debate. At the same time the international political environment during this period also appears to have been swayed by the radical arguments voiced by a strong coalition of newly independent nations on the international stage who had begun to demand that the international arena of policy making demonstrate a 'redistributive' ethos that took greater account of economic and power imbalances in international relations. In this environment the way was perhaps more clear for groups such as the Fiji YWCA to challenge policy prescriptions endorsed at the international level by the industrialised economic powers and the highly influential Bretton Woods institutions.

Women's NGOs operating in Fiji today, on the other hand, do not have anything like the same opportunities to articulate similarly activist agendas. At the local level the political elite appears to be mistrustful and suspicious of NGOs and is more than willing to sanction those groups whose radical

challenges to the status quo are felt to go beyond what is deemed to be acceptable. There is an international dimension to this issue, too, however, for the high profile women's organisations operating in Fiji have negotiated important funding relationships with bilateral and multilateral donor agencies. The impact of this international benevolence is not always benign, as this type of financial support makes it difficult for recipient organisations to take a critical position in relation to the broader interests or development philosophies and goals of foreign donors.

The restrained agenda embraced by women's NGOs in Fiji in the current context contrasts dramatically with the types of activities undertaken by women's groups viewed as radical in earlier times. This tendency can be explained by the fact that within the broader political culture today, there is less tolerance than there once was for the tone and substance of the YWCA's type of activity and the potential for confrontation that comes with this style of activism. The good governance agenda which has shaped the direction of development policy making for the last decade emphasises the importance of strengthening civil society as a fundamental democratic check upon the state. This has meant widely expanded opportunities for local NGOs. But, as this paper illustrates, there have been important constraints also put in the way of these groups. Today it is NGO advocacy which is part of the lexicon of good governance, not NGO activism. This, I contend, reduces the scope of NGO activity and limits their critical potential.

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