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The Impact of Tradition and Religion on Women's Lives in the South Pacific

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THE IMPACT OF TRADITION AND RELIGION ON WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the link between different institutions in Pacific Island societies and their impact on women in their daily intercourse within their environment. The discussion will focus especially on institutions of religion and those of traditional culture, and the organizations that represent women in their island countries today. The religions to be covered in the discussion are Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity.

The paper deals especially with religion and its relationship to two other institutions: the *vanua* (see footnote on p.3 for definition) and the state, and the way they are helping to perpetuate religious values and customary practices. The analysis includes the role of the state because the overlapping of the three institutions, as will be demonstrated later, cannot be overlooked in examining the issue of the autonomy of women's organisation. It is crucial that the relationship between the institutions be highlighted to demonstrate this point. The paper will particularly address the patriarchal and hierarchical system that permeates these institutional structures. Having clarified this link, the focus will turn to religious and traditional aspects that are hindrances to the contribution of women in the development process of the Pacific Island countries (henceforth I will refer to Pacific Islands to signify all island countries).

1.1 Pacific Island Cultures

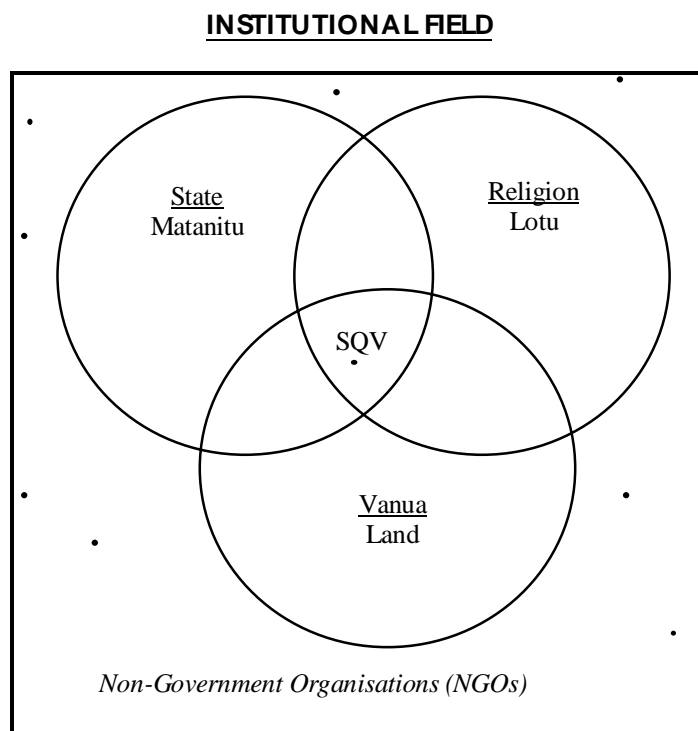
The cultures of the Pacific Island countries are collectivity-oriented and often have very similar customary practices. Values such as conformity governing all interpersonal relations, harmony, acceptance of authority, interdependence to name a few are inherent aspects of a collectivist culture. It is important to point this out because these values are enmeshed with religious values and working against their grain in pursuit of change will be a constant challenge. To uphold conformity and harmony in a collectivist culture, may also mean to insist on unquestioning loyalty to authority, such as those who represent the state or religion. Thus disturbing the status quo is often seen as something to be avoided at all cost. In sum, collectivism can be described as the obligation of actors to always "pursue the common interest of the collectivity" as this is defined by established leaders (Parsons, 1951: 41).

Although to a degree, the Muslim and Hindu cultures in Fiji may also display certain collective-orientations, these peoples are more independent in the way they interact in their daily encounters compared to the indigenous Pacific Islanders. Nonetheless, the hierarchical structure of their religious and traditional systems consistently supports the maintenance of a gender hierarchy that privileges males (Adinkrah, 2001). Adinkrah asserts that patriarchy is particularly salient amongst Fiji Indians as among indigenous Fijians. He concludes that "Hinduism, Islam and Christianity all uphold core patriarchal values that encourage gender stratification" (ibid: 11).

1.2 An Institutional Field

I am going to borrow Niukula's (1996) diagram here, adapting it to illustrate my earlier point that institutional structures such as religion, tradition and the state intersect to an important degree and so reinforce one another in their shared beliefs and values. This argument is crucial because it forms the major basis of this paper. Lin calls this relationship between structural institutions, an "institutional field" in which different organisations in a social community to some extent share a set of prevailing values and practices. Institutions and/or organisations dictate values, which become the lynchpin of ideology, rationalising and rhetoric, according to Lin. Such values become the rules of the game (Lin, 2001:101).

These rules can either be formal or informal. Organisations, individuals and networks “share rituals and behaviors, and subscribe to constraints and incentives as dictated by the social institutions” (ibid: 141). This is illustrated in Niukula’s analysis which shows how institutions such as the state (*matanitu*), *vanua*¹, and religion (*lotu*) share some common mores and values as depicted in the diagram below:



Nukulau, (modified)

(Modified from Niukula, P 1995)

Tuwere (2002) calls this link between (in this case Christian) religion (*lotu*), state (*matanitu*), and *vanua* as *lotu vaka-vanua* (Christianity in the *vanua* way). As he puts it, it’s a “form of captivity by the *vanua*” (ibid:160). A problem needing to be addressed concerns how to break or weaken this link - otherwise it will be difficult for the church to distance itself from the *vanua* and *matanitu* in order to take an objective stance on matters of crucial importance (e.g. womens’ rights and development).

As Thaman emphasises, the influence of religion in shaping the lives and the roles of Pacific Island women is a most powerful force to reckon with. In particular, Christian religion has reinforced traditional social structures in ways that have restricted “us women from developing our full potential” (1976: 27).

1.3 Definitions Of Development

A major objective of this paper is to illuminate the significance of gender in the development processes of Pacific Island countries. It is important to clarify what ‘development’ means in different situations. This is so for 3 reasons:

1. There is some confusion about what development means to the ‘receivers’ of development and what it means to those who dictate what development should be.

¹ The concept is also called *fonua* or *fanua* in other Pacific Islands. In Fiji *vanua* encompasses land, people and the custom (Ravuvu, 1988).

2. Clarifying what development should encompass will also illuminate equally important issues such as the close relation between institutions and organizations, and the networks that link them.

3. Linked to the above: examining the relationship between institutions will explain how social traditions, religion and other institutions or organizations reinforce each other, and help resolve problems that marginalize women and deprive them from developing their full potential for contributing to development. However, I must emphasise that this paper does not intend to propose solutions, only to suggest recommendations as a small step forward.

According to the Brandt Report (Brandt, 1980, in Chilott and Lucas, 1985) development encompasses quality of life and improved productivity. In the summary of the first United Nations Human Development Report on the Pacific Islands (1994) “quality of life and improved productivity” implies “sustainability, cultural change, community participation, the role of the non-monetary and non-formal sectors and the dynamics of development” (ibid: 1). My paper will attempt to incorporate these aspects into its analysis. But it is important to also address other definitions of “development” to avoid misunderstanding between the “receivers” of development and aid donors. For example, a more localised definition is Horan’s (1997) formula in the Tongan cultural context of the production of textile *koloa*.²

Horan argues that a hybridized Tongan concept of development is based on women’s notion of what constitutes ‘wealth’ and its accumulation to ‘do development’ as opposed to the Western concept of economic development – to make textiles, sell them for profit, and use that money to maintain and improve a living, the end result being self-reliance. Horan asserts that both the Western and Tongan formulae for development achieve self-reliance, but that the Tonganised notion of development operates through a complex social process before achieving profit in the Western sense.

Toren’s (1984) conclusion on what ‘development’ means to Fijians is intermingled with wanting to ‘*torocake*’ (mutually move upwards) but with ambivalence. The Fijians’ notion of ‘development’ is ambivalent because they see attempting to accumulate money as a threat to their social status quo. Thus, they fear letting the European sense of development, measured in terms of material standard of living and wealth, take over their lives. The fear is that such “development” might upset the social order and therefore it is best that any development should be an exercise where all move upwards together (see also Geddes, Chambers, Sewell, Lawrence and Watters (1982) for the comparable I-Kiribati definition). In reality, however, this hope of shared achievement is not being realised. Rather, the change is haphazard, with some people moving upwards way ahead of others, as Ravuvu (1988) cynically declares in his study. Ravuvu claims that ‘development’ (or “progress”, as his informants refer to it), means “a man of the big world, smart and skilled at handling national or international affairs” (1988: 6). Like Toren, Ravuvu highlights the contradiction Fijians face in their desire to preserve their tradition, while being at some time attracted by the strong desire to try out the new way of life promoted as ‘development’ or ‘progress’. He argues that such ‘development’ promises false hope amongst rural Fijians.

Blessing’s (1974) definition of development defends the church’s role in economic development. He argues that “development is a moral issue just as it is a social and economic one” (ibid: 3). For example, if the church promotes the “fullest development of human potential”, the question of care for the aged and the underprivileged arises.

In reviewing the definitions of ‘development’, the Brandt Report considers the concept of quality of life, or “productive and satisfying lives” (UNDP 1994). According to Inglehart (1997), a concern

² *Koloa* means wealth, objects of traditional value, ‘what one values’ (Horan, 1997).

with ‘quality of life’ means an individual’s attempt to move away from simply economic security to values of leisure, happiness and self-expression. But one must first be physically and economically secure before seeking this second phase of development, an improved “quality of life”.

These differences in definition should influence the policies for those in the rural areas or for certain other sections of the population who are economically secure but not physically secure, or vice versa. The needs of these groups may be different from those of people in urban areas who are educated and hold secure jobs.

For many women in the rural areas, economic and physical securities are crucial. Freedom of self-expression, enhancement of knowledge, and other modern human rights may be important, but not such a pressing issue if physical and economic security is the priority. That’s not to downplay the good work that NGOs and other organizations are doing in support of such rights, but there is a need to put things into proper perspective.

Toren’s and Ravuvu’s definitions clearly reflect the enigmatic predicament most Pacific people face, especially in rural areas. They are ambivalent about what ‘development’ should be for them. They are ambitious for the ‘European way’ yet filled with trepidation for fear of compromising their culture. In this conundrum, they are faced with traditional obligations to fulfill and the perhaps unrealistic hopes created by the promises of ‘development’.

Horan’s definition is a hybridized version of development, frowned upon by aid agencies. Yet the Tongan women’s *koloa* production she describes achieved the purpose it was supposed to serve: self-reliance of the women involved.

Although the various definitions discussed above put more emphasis on the economic definition of development, this paper will base its analysis on Blessing’s definition and the role of the church for women and development. These aspects need to be considered when formulating policies for development or simply in discussing and debating about development.

2. METHODOLOGY

I used only the qualitative method in my interviews. In all three island-nations visited (Fiji, Tonga and Kiribati), a total of 21 individuals were approached, of whom 5 declined to be interviewed. The 16 women interviewed represented churches, women’s organisations or government. Among these 16, there were two focus groups.

In Kiribati, 6 interviews were conducted. There were two female informants, one representing the government and a women’s organisation, the other a church. Two focus groups represented two other churches. There were two other unsolicited interviews.

In Tonga all six interviews were with individuals. Three represented different churches, one an NGO and another a government officer. The sixth, was a businesswoman and an ex Parliamentarian.

In Fiji four women were interviewed out of the six approached: two represented the Fiji Indian or Indo-Fijian (I-F) community and two represented their respective Christian churches. Of the latter two women, one worked within the church while the other was a public servant holding a position of responsibility.

My research took 5 weeks: A week each in Kiribati and Tonga and three weeks in Fiji for the conduct of interviews and library search.

2.1 Reception given to the Project:

This section refers mainly to the churches.

There were three different reactions to the project:

1. Some interviews were welcomed with full cooperation.
2. Some were viewed with reservation and suspicion, even at one time with hostility.
3. Some women did not turn up for the scheduled interview.

In (1) above, the strongly positive response might reflect either the informant enthusiastically making her own observations in order to make a critical summation of the church activities, or perhaps the informant herself being strongly involved in church programs with full knowledge and confidence of their goals, the directions of the programs and their progress.

Conversely, (2) and (3) might perhaps be the result of a 'sense of floundering about', not knowing the direction and purpose of the churches' programs for women. I myself believe that most churches are engaged in some form of programs for women but their directions have not been very clear because, objectives have not been clear from the start, or if they are clear, they are not for the women per se, but for the overall mission of the church.

2.2 Limitations of this research:

An important caution I must emphasise concerns the problem of the time constraint on this project. The limited time available for the field work meant that I had to seek quickly to elicit information on quite sensitive and controversial issues and some of the women I spoke to found this a little confronting. Participant observation over a period of several weeks in each country would ideally have been the more effective method.

3. THE ROLE OF RELIGION

My analysis will discuss the role of the three major religions, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, and their impact on the lives of women in the Pacific Islands. Christianity is the predominant religion in all Pacific Islands countries. Almost all Muslims and Hindus live in Fiji, with very few in other Pacific Island countries. My discussion will very generally address the relationship between beliefs, rituals and customary practices of the three religions and consider the impacts of these factors on women's everyday lives.

Religion and its ritual have often been dismissed as irrelevant to development or as barriers to economic, political and social 'progress'. Religious beliefs and rituals have a close relationship with traditional customs (Sweetman, C. ed.1998). In fact the close relationship between religion, culture and the control of women is evident in the growing body of literature on the history of human development.

3.1 Islam

Islam differs greatly in its practice from one country to another and one cannot overgeneralise any claim to hold true of every Muslim country. It is also true that the situations of Muslim women cannot be subsumed under a generalization that they all receive much the same treatment. Nevertheless, I will attempt to highlight how aspects of Islamic beliefs and practices impact heavily on women. The Holy Quran still forms the basis of prevailing family law in most areas of the Muslim world (Smith, 1987: 250). There has been much debate about certain privileges enjoyed by Muslim women. It is often argued that the Quran has given certain legal advantages to Islamic women. In many countries however, a dual system exists separating secular civil issues from religious and family issues.

Although the Quran teaches that women should only very modestly expose themselves to public view, village women often find this cumbersome due to their daily activities and so have not strictly observed it. In Fiji, the wearing of the veil, mostly by younger women, is a quite recent practice, and is more a statement of identity rather than an act of modesty and decorum (pers. comment, informant). Although women in the modern Islamic world have often been secluded and treated as second-class citizens, they have not been totally without power (Smith, 1987: 243). Nevertheless, male attitudes toward women, encouraged by certain aspects of Islamic traditions (not necessarily supported by the Quran), continue to play a major role in the lives of Islamic women.

3.2 Hinduism

The Hindu community of Fiji has inherited its tradition from the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal North Indian Hindu family pattern and ideology (Lateef, 1990). This history was partly submerged by the extension of the patriarchal hegemony of Islam into Northern India, weakening Hinduism to an extent but perpetuating the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal system. Perhaps this may explain why most literature on Indo-Fijian women do not differentiate the impact of the two religions on the lives of women - the social experiences of Hindu and Muslim women are in many ways similar.

Historically, the Aryan culture of North India with its patriarchal system, developed from a pastoralist and agriculturalist background, and, to some extent, merged with the culture of the aborigines of India over many centuries. This has influenced the character of Hinduism today. The changing status of women also depended on the changing rulers and kingdoms. There were times when there was a balanced complementarity between men and women, while at other times women's status declined. The subordination of women was sometimes imposed with the backing of sacred texts. For example, the Smitri text enjoined women to walk behind their husband, eat after him, and

according to the Code of Manu, they were to be protected
in youth by their fathers, in married life by their husbands
and in old age by their sons (Sharma, A. 1987: 101).

The smitri literature justified the strength of such male dominance. Even in the periods when women enjoyed certain freedoms, male dominance was never dislodged because women did not have their own independent access to economic resources and were confined to the domestic sphere.

The Code of Manu evolved to become a code of conduct for the whole Hindu community, enforced by law. It regimented all actions and relationships within Hindu societies, becoming the glue of the society, and providing the moral foundation and the fine elements of decency. According to Theodora (1983), this code's main emphasis was the *upholding, reinforcement and refinement of Hindu traditions*. It especially encouraged the elaboration of the caste system and prescribed the position of females both within and outside the family. The seal on female subjection and ignorance was set for many centuries by the texts known as the **dharmashastras**, of which the Code of Manu was pre-eminent (ibid: 21-22).

With the arrival of Islam and Christianity, also patriarchal religions, the situation of women worsened. The adherents of these new religions used violence to dominate the subcontinent of India and the concomitant subjugation of Hindu males provoked them to turn their frustration and hostility, arising from their powerlessness in the outer world, towards their wives. Islam and the

Code of Manu combined to further deny women a sense of self-worth. A purdah³ mentality set the trend which continues to this day to the subjugation of women within the family and the religious community.

Wilson (1979) asserts that Hinduism in Fiji remains essentially the same as in India. My discussion will not treat the Muslim and Hindu women separately because, as already noted, there are little difference in the social experience they undergo. I have avoided discussing the caste system because it no longer applies for most of the Indo-Fijian community. However, hierarchical relations in the family continue to be strongly maintained.

3.3 The Indo-Fijian Women's Experience

Lal (1992) claims that I-F women today have more freedom than their sisters in India. Nevertheless, certain old mores and practices in gender relations are still entrenched (eg. the frequency still of arranged marriage, sometimes with a concern about correct caste). Wilson (op.cit) alludes to this, and asserts that caste values reflect the social framework of Hindu religion, although in Fiji, as noted above, caste has almost disappeared as a principle of social interaction (see also Gillian, 1977, and Jayawardena 1971).

According to Shameem, writers such as Lal (1983) on the Girmitya period portray the I-F women's role in economic development and their political status as either "passive victims who were helpless in the face of their cruel social environment or as evil, devious whore who bartered their bodies to the highest bidders" (Shameem1987: 32). Shameem proposes an alternative framework for the study of I-F women, arguing that their experiences must be viewed in the light of the patriarchal gender system that is deeply ingrained in the traditional system, which undervalues women in their social, political and economic life.

Lateef (1987) argues that as long as women are absent from or marginalized from the economic sphere, with the reinforcement of the prevailing ideology, marriage is inevitable for I-F women, with their concomitant subordination. She explains that marriage in Hindu tradition, as in Islam, is encouraged because it is the sure way to control women's sexuality and to reinforce their most important roles as wife, child-rearer and homemaker (ibid: 70). As Lateef puts it,

The asymmetrical social power of males is constantly stressed and experienced in their everyday relations of family life (p: 75).

Another study by Lateef (1990), concerning domestic violence amongst I-Fs, claims that violence is an effective mechanism for the perpetuation of women's subordination in the I-F community, ensuring the maintenance and reproduction of traditional gender relations. Male dominance and female subordination are maintained by two powerful mechanisms:

1. Familial ideology which stresses female subordination to male dominance. The control of women is insidiously aided by women themselves who readily accept men's right to control them. While there are I-F women who have chosen to assert themselves, a large number are subjected to physical violence. Physical violence as a mechanism of control is hardly questioned. In fact generally both women and men of I-F society positively sanction it. The force of this ideology is strengthened by the relationship with in-laws, particularly with the mothers/sisters-in-law who influence the women in their households to behave according to their expectations. The privileged position of men is legitimated by the ideology of purdah.

³ Purdah refers to various ways of enforcing women's subjugation through seclusion such as "confining them to an enclosed space or by veiling them, the strict segregation of the sex, the "symbolic sheltering"" (Papnek, 1973, in Lateef, 1990) "of women and a moral code of conduct" (see Jeffery, 1979; Vatuk, 1982 in Lateef, 1990).

2. The purdah ideology basically centres on the “segregation of the sexes, the protection of women’s sexuality and the maintenance of family honour” (Lateef, *ibid*: 44). Restrictions such as the requirement that woman being inconspicuous around men and modest dressing are strongly encouraged. The strict segregation of males and females has relegated women to the private spheres while men remain in the public arena of economics and politics. Hence, a woman’s role is confined largely to household chores, bearing and rearing children and looking after her menfolk.

Adinkrah (2001) describes the impact of patriarchy on the I-F females as a “heavy burden...commencing at birth and continuing to the end of the lifecycle” (p. 7). The birth of a daughter tends to be regarded with disappointment by the parents. As she grows up, however, her sexual virtue will be seen as reflecting the honor and integrity of her family. The chastity of unmarried daughters is enforced with the backing of familial ideology.

Adinkrah explains that femicide in Fiji comes in various forms such as female infanticide, uxoricide, post-rape femicides and homicides resulting from male abduction. All such cases, he argues, must be understood in the context of the patriarchal ideology.

Femicides are committed for several reasons such as female infanticide where female babies are abandoned because of the strong preference for having sons. Femicide by affinal relations is often rationalized by complaints about the inappropriately assertive behaviour of the victims, or their rebuff of marriage proposals or sexual advances. It is sometimes said that these are understandable reasons to kill. Femicides by fathers are perpetrated because the children are females, reflecting the cultural mores of the I-F community. As well, consistent physical abuse of wives can take its toll on their children who sometimes in turn fall victim to abuse their mothers. Such behavior is the result of I-F women experiencing “chronic physical, emotional or psychological torments” in the hands of husbands or other male relatives and in some instances of affinal relatives (*ibid*: 29).

To help counter the predicament faced by many I-F women, NGOs and other organisations that seek to represent and assist them could benefit from financial support from the Government. However, according to a prominent spokeswoman, such support is non-existent (Jalal 1997, see also Subramani 1997).

4. CHRISTIANITY IN THE PACIFIC

This study was required to select three island-nations, representing the three indigenous cultural regions: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Fiji was chosen as an example of the Melanesian countries, Tonga the Polynesian, and Kiribati the Micronesian. The indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands belong almost exclusively to Christian denominations. This following section of the paper will consider Christian churches and programs that churches in the three representative island nations have implemented to assist women’s development. Several aspects will be highlighted:

1. A brief history of how Christianity spread in the Pacific. This is important for an understanding of a pattern created by the missionaries and the indigenous pastors and catechists in ‘carrying the gospel’ between island groups.
2. Specific findings from this research.
3. Recommendations for policymakers and women’s organisations.
4. Suggested by the analysis, further aspects that need to be considered.

4.1 History Of Christianity In The Pacific

Christianity came into prominence in the Pacific in the 19th Century with the work of missionaries mostly from Australia and New Zealand. In the eastern Pacific islands, three churches became especially influential in their quest to Christianize the people. They were the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Roman Catholic and the Methodist church in Tonga and Fiji. These three churches, including the Anglican, had similar influences in the Melanesia islands. There were other small denominations such as the Seventh Day Adventist and Mormon, but their influence was not as

marked. There were rivalries between these churches, sometimes each colluding with governments to outdo the other. At other times governments have used the churches' dissension to their own advantage.

Despite the rivalries, there were common imprints left by these churches (sometimes with the aid of the government), on the people they converted. Firstly, some of their traditional customs and values were protected. For example, in the Cooks, to prevent their land from being alienated, islanders were not allowed to marry Europeans, and in Vanuatu, the missionaries urged the British government to assume control in order to protect the people and their land from French settlers. Secondly, schools were established in many Pacific island countries and became powerful agents of western culture and values; although in Vanuatu and the Solomons, the emphasis was more on setting up medical facilities than schools.

The eastern Pacific islands were Christianised before the western islands, and when missionaries began Christianising the west they recruited indigenous pastors and catechists from their established churches in the east as 'gospel carriers' to accompany them. This is an important point to stress because in many ways the indigenous pastors and catechists brought their culture and church life and imposed them on the new recipients of the gospel. For example Samoan pastors imposed their beliefs and practices in the Kiribati and Tuvalu islands. As Macdonald affirms:

The Samoan LMS pastors introduced the Samoanised version of their christian belief and behavior into the new converts in Kiribati and Tuvalu. Such values and beliefs were grafted on to traditional structures to produce a modified Faa'Samoa (1987:40).

However, such impositions did not occur everywhere. Thus, although islander missionaries imposed their own cultural practices on some communities in PNG, the Anglicans "were noted for living closer to the people they serve (in PNG) being less inclined to lord it over the people or to impose their own cultural background" (Forman,1982: 57).

Everywhere in the Pacific, as Forman points out, "there appeared a 'folk church' representing the society and reflecting its standard, rather than a prophetic church ranged over against a society" (1982: 103). The church therefore has not been disposed to become a voice for the underprivileged against the dominant elites (Ernst 1994). A more insidious development, imbued with much enthusiasm and often with visible results, though in some ways detrimental for the women, are the fund raising activities of the churches. With some exceptions, the goals of such activities are similar in all churches, including the new religious groups such as the Assemblies of God and other fundamentalists, and the demands on the people are much the same (ibid; Fiji inform.). Women bear the main brunt of all these demands. As three informants expressed it, "women are the backbone of the church" (Fiji informant), "the most used members of the community" (Fiji informant) and "without the women, there is no church" (Tongan informant).

ANALYSIS

5. STRATEGIC AND PRACTICAL GENDER ISSUES

I must clarify the type of gender issues that this paper will discuss. van Wesemael-Smit (1988) distinguishes between practical and strategic gender interests. Strategic gender issues are about changing structural power relationships, in contrast to practical gender interests concerned simply with improving the daily life of a particular group of women. Although the former is perceived to be more radical in its approach than the latter, van Wesemael-Smit argues that both concerns are really two sides of the same coin (ibid: 277). She points out that the strategic gender issues are associated with autonomy (self-determination for women) while practical issues are about ordinary living conditions. This distinction parallels Inglehart's definition of development (under **Definition**

of Development p. 7) which distinguishes between quality of life and economic and physical security needs of the targeted group. The distinction also has important bearing on policy formulation. The churches' development programs for women will be analysed from both perspectives, the practical and the strategic.

6. LITERATURE ON WOMEN AND THE CHURCH IN THE PACIFIC

The latest UNICEF reports on the situation of women in Kiribati, Tonga and Fiji have not addressed women's role in churches, nor the development programs implemented by the churches for women. The report on Kiribati, however, does very briefly address the role of the churches in the community (UNICEF, 2002) and how church fund-raising has created economic and social pressure on the families. For Tonga, the UNICEF report (1996) devotes a page on the status of women but offers only a very brief outline on the role of churches and their influence.

For Fiji, the UNICEF report (1996) addresses numerous problems faced by women such as issues of health, employment, nutrition etc, but not the role of the churches in women's development. Similarly, the Fiji Government's development plan for 2003-2005 (2002) ignores the role of the churches for women and their development programs, and does not envision including this issue in the plan. The Solomon Islands UNICEF report (1998) does provide an informative account on the status of women, and highlights the important role the church plays in women's lives, although a detailed analysis of the impact of the church in women's development is not elaborated.

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INDO-FIJIAN WOMEN AND INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN PACIFIC ISLANDER WOMEN

Within the three religious communities, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian, there are women's organisations that are solely concerned with the 'interests' of their members. The TISI Sangam Women's organisation or the Zanana Women's League or the Soqosoqo Vakamarama, all in Fiji, are traditional, racial, rural-based NGOs that are concerned mainly with the welfare of their women in their cultural milieu (Jalal op.cit). Although the first two organisations are religion-based, the Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV) is not. The SSV does, however, work closely with Christian denominations, especially the Methodist church. Members of the SSV can also be members of women's organisations in the churches, such as the Soqosoqo Veitokani ni Marama ni Lotu Wesele, so that there is a substantial overlap. Actually, the SSV is not really an NGO in the conventional sense, but might well be termed a "GONGO" ("government NGO" - Subramani, 1997; see diagram p. 3 as an illustration), because it is heavily funded by government.

All the three rural-based organisations are welfarist in their approach (I-F inform; see Toren, 1984 on the SSV aims). Although there have been claims about the involvement of these women (especially Fijian women) in micro-financed projects and other activities (Fiji Times (F/T) 8-3-04; 31-5-04; Fiji government online), evaluations of these projects (if such have been made) are yet to be disseminated.

The difference between the I-F women's organisations and the SSV illustrates how deeply embedded the church is into the daily lives of the SSV members, in contrast to their I-F counterparts in respect to the Hindu and Muslim organisations. On the other hand, this strongly binding relationship between the churches and their women members has also created opportunities for Fijian women to assert themselves, as this paper will attest. In fact Christianity seems more tolerant to change than the Hindu and Muslim religious traditional 'fortress' that constrains the I-F women. For Pacific Islander women, the church is a public domain in which they have achieved considerable status and influence, whereas Indo-Fijian women do not have such a comparable domain.

Lateef concedes that for I-F women, there is very little alternative to an oppressive male-dominated environment where domestic violence is common, encouraged by the familial and purdah ideologies that give some legitimacy to such behaviours. The only way out for I-F women is to become economically independent (1987; 1990).

8. INDIGENOUS PACIFIC WOMEN'S TRADITIONAL ROLE

The influence of Christianity on women's status and role in the Pacific islands cannot be over-stated (Macdonald, 1998; Bleakley, 2002; Emberson-Bain, 1998; Towandong, 1996; Ravuvu, 1988; UNICEF, 1998; Schoeffel, 1979 and emailed questionnaire on Vanuatu). For instance, in the Solomons, Christianity has contributed to the exclusion of men from "key aspects of fertility and social reproduction" leaving the responsibilities to women (UNICEF, 1998). Similarly in Samoa, the prestige that was enjoyed by the *Aualuma*⁴ society was greatly weakened by the Christian churches. Instead, the wifely role was greatly reinforced. Moreover, these changes brought about by Christianity and modern influences (eg the market economy) were compounded by an increasing workload as a consequence of women's added responsibilities (see Horan, 1997; Small, 1987; Bleakley, 2002; James, 1997; Morton, 1996 on Tonga; Ravuvu, 1988; Sanga, 1983; Ward, 1995). As Ward points out,

the current transition from traditional subsistence to a 'modern' cash economy is exerting pressure on women, changing and often undermining their traditional roles as well as increasing their workload (1995:16).

The kinship system in the Pacific cultures is also under great pressure. The Tongan kinship system, called *kainga* is a case in point. *Kainga* is a system that embodies hierarchical ranking based on twin principles of patrilineal authority within the nuclear family and ceremonial rank in wider kin relations (Emberson-Bain, 1998: 63). Within the *kainga* system is the very important *fahu* relationship (discussed below).

8.1 The Fahu System Of Tonga

The *fahu* relationship⁵ is considered to be extremely important because it carries certain privileges such as the right to control and distribute all ceremonial wealth at the funeral (Small, 1987). In other words, it involves 'unlimited authority' in certain contexts of *kainga* life, according to Emberson-Bain (1998). The *fahu* has the right to "demand' goods and services from her brothers, her mother's brothers (maternal uncles), and other kin over whom she has *fahu* status" (ibid: 64). Bleakley (2002) discusses several factors that have been contributing to the weakening of the *fahu* system. Traditionally, it is the 'glue' in the family and *kainga* (wider kinship network) as a Tongan informant expressed it. Yet women have been disadvantaged by ideologies deriving partly from the churches that relegate them as wives subordinate to husbands. The domestication of women and their dependence as husbands has been strongly enforced by church teachings, and contrasts with the considerable status and influence women as sisters enjoyed in pre-Christian times (Emberson-Bain, ibid).

Some informants have claimed that the *fahu* system is breaking down, others say it is simply changing. Attempts are now being made to include within the *fahu* system imported wealth such as duvets and other goods including brand new cars (when Tongan migrants are involved). As an informant sums it: "*today it's more about what the fahu can get from the family*". The *fahu*

⁴ The *Aualuma* are the unmarried sisters and daughters of the village, girls and women who are members by right of descent or adoption. Their role was to provide hospitality for guests (Schoeffel, ibid: 2).

⁵ The *fahu* role is usually assigned to ego's "father's sister's eldest daughter", although there were variations to the traditional convention during the times before European influences (Small, 1987:120).

system has thus become increasingly onerous to others (Bleakley, op.cit: 2). As one informant explains, the *fahu* right is good if the sister needs support but it can also take advantage of brothers who cannot afford their obligations. Women can sometimes now oppressively exploit the *fahu* relation. For instance, the relationship has become a means to material accumulation, according to one informant, and the interest and focus is centred very much on ‘who becomes the *fahu*.’ The new pressures and competition can create ill-feelings and dissension.

On the other hand, the onus is on the women to maintain the system by honouring it, for a *fahu* “who abuses her right can destroy the (*fahu*) system”, one informant reasons. Furthermore, “if (your) *fahu* is so low (materially poor) or does not have money, it does not mean you disrespect that, acknowledge it”, the informant argues. Moreover, “it must be protected and maintained” (Tongan inform.).

If the *fahu* system is being practised on a diminishing scale (James, K. in Bleakley, *ibid*), then it follows that the extended *kainga* relation is breaking down (informant), perhaps all the more in the urban areas. More people are moving away from extended families into nuclear families, according to an informant, who reasons that “what is driving this trend is the inevitable rising cost of family expenses and the difficulty in splitting assets over a large group”.

Women are the “gatekeepers of our culture”, remarks a Cook Islander woman (Kingstone, 1990), they are “the custodians of indigenous knowledge.” A Fijian professional woman asserts (Fiji Times 25/4/95) since they are the ‘guardians’ of indigenous knowledge, and other aspects of tradition, they hold the key to what is allowed to be disseminated, enforced, and/or changed. If Pacific women “see problems and priorities in relation to their immediate needs and requirements of families and communities” (Kingstone, *ibid*: 104), then the onus is on them to preserve tradition if its to their advantage, or make changes if that seems the best option, or even to do away altogether with traditional practices that are obstructing their progress. A way of addressing the problem is the strategy of having women at various levels of decision-making to address relevant gender issues or working at the grassroots to raise awareness and/ or challenge established assumptions. This approach involves programs to educate and raise womens’ awareness of their rights or to challenge their assumptions about aspects of tradition that may hinder improvements to their lives.

8.2 The Kinship System: Kiribati

I-Kiribati identity centres on the family, the village and the island (Macdonald 1998). Traditionally, extended family households would normally include three generations although it is often difficult to draw distinctions between close and distant relatives.

Each village has a *maneaba*⁶ where elders meet to discuss and resolve community matters. The men are still the decision-makers in the *maneaba*; women are encouraged to attend as observers. More and more the *maneaba* is being used as a community centre where the Island Council discusses and executes ideas and regulations coming from the central government (the Council members are representative of all the villages in the island). Although the traditional role of these village elders is still effective, it is diminishing (Tabokai, 1985).

⁶ A *maneaba* is a public meeting house where strict protocol is observed during the meeting. It is viewed as a sacred place and a dwelling site of the spirits of the ancestors. Hence, any decision or rulings reached by the old men are believed to be witnessed by the ancestral spirits and anyone questioning their decisions is looked upon as questioning the *maneaba* and the authority of the ancestors (Kirata, 1985: 79).

Within the family, the authority and decision-making rests with elders. They are regarded as the protectors of the family, and the food providers (cutting copra to earn money and fishing for family sustenance). A very strong custom of the I-Kiribati is to look after old people. A person who neglects their elderly relatives can be a cause of shame for everyone in the family. It lowers one's dignity because public reaction will taint the family's reputation for generations (Iobi, 1985).

Cultural identity in Kiribati is based on the idea that a person is sacred. Therefore, an ideal I-Kiribati is kind, sincere, brave and merciful. Respecting elders, being kind to people who are less fortunate and being friendly and helpful to strangers are highly valued. Sharing and offering food to neighbours are part of the value of share and care.

8.2.1 *Changes*

The people of Kiribati are very conscious of their changing values affect their lives in many ways (UNICEF, 2002; Kiribati inform). One of these changes is the way children are brought up especially in urban areas where both parents are working. Parents today prefer not to leave their children in the care of grandparents because of new concerns about disciplinary practices, although this preference is quite contrary to Kiribati custom. Elders are traditionally regarded as "wiser than the younger people" and therefore would know what is best, yet today this belief may be regarded as irrelevant and an interference (Iobi *ibid*: 32). This may mean that the elders may feel less valued. Another change is the preference to live in nuclear families (Macdonald, 1998: 20; Iobi, *ibid*), because it is too expensive to cater for an extended family. Although this is weakening kinship ties, there are subtle ways of reminding 'renegades' of their obligations. For example, relatives working overseas are expected to send remittances and gifts and other goods to strengthen the family ties. As well, family members who have relocated for education and employment purposes are still expected to fulfill their obligations regardless. As Macdonald explains:

Individual wealth, conspicuous display, and action that brings shame to the family, or a failure to remember and provide for other members of the family, not only leads to family tension and an accusation of ignoring family obligations, but diminishes the wider reputation of both individual and family (1998: 20).

Literature on the impact of changes in the lives of I-Kiribati women is scarce. Every informant interviewed in Tarawa, however, agreed that some important changes are occurring. For example, widows can now speak in the *maneaba* when there is no male member to represent the family. Men are also recognising more strongly the importance of women's role in the community, and accordingly some women have been appointed to decision-making bodies and committees. The UNICEF (2002) report noted however, that they are still underrepresented in island and national government.

Women's role in their households and in communities, as in other island nations, has increased remarkably. As one informant concedes, "at the end of the day it is the lady who [does] most of the work". The changing social and economic status of women can take its toll on women-headed households, and this is a growing problem. Furthermore, the increase in domestic violence is "a major problem impeding the development of women" (*ibid*: 58). Moreover, with competing priorities, it is always difficult for women to juggle their resources and time between family, traditional, and church commitments. Often family commitment gets the least attention and resources compared to other obligations because 'shame' is involved if one does not attend to these demands. One informant stressed that "it is the women who shoulder the work, the decisions and the blame".

8.3 The Kinship System: Fiji

Ravuvu (1988) describes cultural aspects of the Fijian kinship system. The idea of ‘share and care’, as in Kiribati, is highly valued as customary practices (*i tovo vakavanua*). Central in the idea of “share and care” are characteristics such as being helpful, being considerate, friendliness, togetherness or *yalo vata* (of the same spirit). These are ideals that underpin the maintenance of harmony and solidarity within a community. Further, sharing of material goods and food and land resources is an expression of the ‘share and care’ value. And it is in the kinship network that the above ideals are expressed to bind “people together in reciprocal dependence” (ibid: 8).

Coupled with this spirit of share and care is the obligation to fulfill responsibilities to kin such as clan (*tokatoka*) members or village kinsfolk. As well, other aspects such as *oga vakavanua* (*vanua* responsibilities) and church obligations are perceived as important. But with the increasing influence of the monetised economy and the rise of consumerism amongst the rural dwellers, the scenario is changing with new values. Although Ravuvu says that “Individualism is loathed and discouraged for the sake of group solidarity and harmony” (ibid: 14), individualistic behaviour is now increasingly common.

For example, accumulation of wealth, both traditional and imported, is common and often a cause of dissension amongst kin. Moreover, the increasing obligations to the *vanua*, *lotu* and other institutions such as schools,⁷ have become onerous to men but even more so for women in Fiji (Vusoniwailala, 1984; Momoivalu, F/T ...-11-86; Ravuvu, 1988; Ernst, 1994; see also Bolabola, 1983 and Lukere, 1997 on changes enforced by colonial administration and the consequent increase in women’s responsibilities). This is also increasingly the situation elsewhere in the Pacific (O’Meare, 1993; Hauofa, 1978; Monsell-Davies, 1993; Jorgensen, 1993; Vail, 1995). In villages, “civic pride and self-respect have diminished and solidarity among villagers to work together, help and care for each other, are being eroded” (Ravuvu, op, and cit: 178).

Ravuvu talks about the village redistribution mechanism that has declined due to the decline of the chief’s authority. It is still in use, although the mechanism has been substituted by new ones, which have negative impacts on women. Traditionally, the chief who received tributes (first fruit of the land, and traditional wealth from weddings and funerals) was usually expected to redistribute much of this wealth to the members of the community. At other times, the chief provided community feasts and contributed most to ceremonial functions. Such activities were not onerous to the community members because there was reciprocation in the service from the chief to the people and vice versa.

New institutions such as the church, and personnel representing the government “have taken over some of the chief’s material prerogatives though not his material obligations” (ibid: 174). Ravuvu makes general observations on the decline of the redistribution mechanism but does not mention the impact of this change on women. To visitors from the church Head Office and other organisations (eg. government administration and politicians), villagers show their hospitality by preparing a feast or refreshment or even traditional gifts. Whatever form the welcome takes, time, effort and hard-earned cash are needed. It is most especially the women who have to meet all these expectations. It is always the women who prepare food, bake and organise and clean up. Villagers get nothing in return except a promise of blessings and future salvation (Kiribati and Tongan informants.) and assurances of material prosperity (according to Ravuvu).

⁷ Schools, especially primary schools, are often communally owned. Financing the building, staff quarters, and school furniture are responsibilities that come with the ownership. It is not unusual to have women fund-raising for projects such as building of flush toilets for the school or repairing old classroom etc.

To more vividly illustrate the problems, I here recount an example from my own observations in Fiji. A church official came on a round-the-island visit a few years back. It was decided that the women (in this particular village where I stayed) make a *gatu*, a piece of tapa of about 20x20 ft. Two weeks before the arrival of the official, the women were already busy working on the tapa everyday. It was plain to see how some were quite flustered trying to juggle their time between preparing lunch for the family and attending to other family matters while trying their best to join the tapa-making group. The visitor stayed for two nights which meant 8 meals of catering for the visitor and all the pastors and laypreachers from about 7 villages. For the rest of the week, catering was repeated on the third day for a group of government officials from the Health Department, and the last two days for the Tikina (District) Council meeting. Each woman was required to provide a pot each day. This meant that many of them had to spend 3-4 hours fishing at night, once the children were put to bed since most cannot afford to buy meat. A woman, in her frustration remarked: "Whatever little we would have liked to keep for our children is eaten away by these visitors".

9. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

This discussion is based mainly on information obtained on Tarawa (Kiribati Islands) and Tongatapu in Tonga. In Fiji, the discussion refers mainly to the rural village women, although not discounting similar problems experienced by urban Fijian families. The discussion of Fiji is limited to rural women because I believe that urban women tend to enjoy more control, given the lifestyle they live, compared to the village women. For instance, urban women would not be entertaining visiting government or church officials nor preparing traditional gifts even though traditional obligations such as funerals and weddings are just as burdensome as for the village people.

Most informants in this study agree that the major activities in the villages now revolve around the church (Kiribati, Tongan, Fiji inform.; Review of the Fijian Administration, 2002 for the Fijian context). One of the common scenarios in Tarawa is the 'bingo game', a church-run activity that takes place every day. The intensity of this fund-raising sometimes leaves people with little on paydays⁸ (informant). One I-Kiribati informant claimed that "the church uses up almost 70-80% of women's time on fund-raising or non-fund raising activity for the upkeep of the church". Non-fund raising activities would include attending to the pastor's household chores and cooking (including provision of food), cleaning the compound, and the church etc. Each household is rostered weekly (see Roach 1984 for a detailed account on the LMS church-related activities involving women in Samoa).

The accuracy of my informant's estimate of how much time women devote to church activities cannot be ascertained, but informants in all the three countries agree that fund raising and non-fund raising activities "milk" (Tongan informant) them of their time, energy and other resources. According to a Kiribati informant, it can take 2 or 3 days of engagement with these activities and sometimes more to help others who cannot afford to raise their contributions.

The people who are economically independent are managing the pressures, but there is often great hardship for those who are economically vulnerable (Kiribati, Tongan inform.). As a Tongan informant says, "the pressure is mostly on women to fulfill her obligations as a wife and mother to the church because the finger points at her if she does not fulfill". The church would do well, as another informant argues, "to use its network to put back to the community what it takes from them"

⁸ Fund-raising activities sometimes involve the women in selling their wares from door to door and collecting what is owed on payday. With many doing the same thing, it can be quite costly. An informant told me about a memo sent around the morning of the interview to inform employees that there will be no more advances of salaries. Salary advances are a common way of paying off credits and/or money owed in the cause of fund-raising.

(Kiribati inform.)”. It should “set aside money for women’s programs, children’s program, unemployed programs for youths” etc (Tongan inform.).

9.1 Who Is The Culprit?

Often, when the issue of the rising obligation to the church arises, the response from the church has been to point at the community as being the advocate of fund-raising strategies pursued by the church. To an extent the community is responsible for creating this dilemma: the concern to maintain the church and the concomitant burden of this commitment. However, the community does not shoulder all the blame. The church is also in part responsible for encouraging this difficult situation. The church and its community are two sides of the same coin, as Niukula pointed out (above page 3). This is a dilemma that must be addressed by both. The church leadership has a responsibility both to itself and to its members. And the community has a responsibility to know its priorities when it comes to the family. For example, bingo games⁹ at Tarawa are held at precisely a time when parents should really be at home with their families. One I-Kiribati informant admitted that “women (and men) spend their time there (bingo game) and neglect their families”, and another complained that “these are crucial hours when parents should stay home with their families”.

The church needs the money, but in the process of raising it, it is creating another problem, keeping the parents away from their families. One I-Kiribati informant explained that “we can’t stay away from fund-raising, otherwise we will pay out of our own pockets” (Kiribati inform.). Another argued that “it is not the church, I think it is the community themselves that are making themselves really tired and worn out at the end of the day with the activities”.

There is a fine line between the church’s responsibilities to its institution and its responsibility to its members and the onus is on the church to address it and take positive actions. What needs to be done is to scrutinise more closely what the funds are for and raise only the amount required¹⁰ (Kiribati inform.). If the church is serious about the welfare of its members and their families, then it has to take constructive steps to address the situation rather than leading church members on, then ‘passing the buck’ to the community when the question of irresponsible decision-making arises. As one Tongan insists:

My family first, and God can look after the church.
I have to look after my kids and when I don’t ...they’ll
turn somewhere else....I’ll just attend to my family first
and then the church.

10. WOMEN’S ORGANISATION AND ITS AUTONOMY

Two institutions will be assessed here: the state and the Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV). In particular, the Ministry of Fijian Affairs, which represents the state, will be critiqued. My discussion of the Ministry of Fijian Affairs will be confined to its role in relation to the SSV, whose affairs come under the authority of this Ministry. The relationship between the two is somewhat similar to the relationship in Papua New Guinea between the women’s groups and the Provincial Councils that are responsible to the state, which provides the funding. In PNG, despite state funding, there has been no “trickle down effect” (Towandong, 1996). Furthermore, policies, which link the National Council of Women and Provincial and District Women’s Councils, advocate a cooperative rather than a competitive approach (O’Collens, M. 1993). The cooperative attitude may mean maintaining the status quo to avoid changes, even though such changes could be beneficial for women. This criticism of the PNG situation, might be a useful reference-point for other Pacific Island countries.

⁹ Bingo games are held every day except Sunday, “officially” between 5-6pm but often extending at least another hour or so.

¹⁰ Competition often enters into these activities and the ‘spirit of giving’ enthruses members to give more than they can afford.

10.1 The Ministry of Fijian Affairs

One of the questions that has been persistently posed by activists is, how serious is the government about improving the status of women in their development (Fiji inform). One arm of the government that is responsible for the welfare of Fijian women is the Ministry of Fijian Affairs, part of which is the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB) which directs the Fijian Administration. The purpose of the Fijian Administration is to “ensure the continued good governance and well-being of indigenous Fijians in all areas of social, political, and economic participation in the society” (Parliament of Fiji, Vol 1, 2002: 125).

In 2001, a review was set up by the Ministry to examine and propose changes to the Fijian Administration. Amongst other requirements listed in the Terms of Reference, one of the needs that the Review Commission was required to examine was the “organisational relationship and linkages that the Fijian Administration has with other government and also non-government agencies”(ibid: 127). It listed some examples of NGOs that should be included in the review. Surprisingly, the SSV, the only “NGO” coming under the Ministry’s jurisdiction, was completely overlooked, despite the fact that the SSV has a delegate in every Tikina (District) council and Provincial council, representing rural Fijian women, more than 51% of all Fijian women (Bureau of Statistics, 1996). In a summary of the English language submissions in the Review report (some presented by non-Fijians), it was stated in the section on women that they were “treated as second class citizens” (the SSV representatives in the Provincial Councils are non-voting members (ibid. vol. 11: 160).

In its press release for International Women’s Day (FT March 8, 2004), the Ministry for Women, Social Welfare, and Poverty Alleviation continues to advertise itself as an advocate to “enhance the status and active participation of women in the development process” (ibid: 23). Yet representatives of Fijian rural women in the Provincial Councils have no leverage or a voice since the organisation became part of the Fijian Administration several decades ago. The review report noted, that the “presence of women is only visible in the preparation of food for the delegates” (Parliament of Fiji 2002, vol. 11: 187). In spite of the assertion in the summary report of the Fijian Submissions to the review “that women should be domiciled in the villages” (ibid: 257), it must be said that there are among these submissions equally strong advocates for a change in attitude and policy implementation for the benefit of women on both practical and strategic gender issues.

10.2 The Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV)

The SSV is a major organisation serving mainly Fijian women in the rural villages. It was started in 1924 as part of the Methodist church, but is now a government-funded body and therefore no longer a voluntary organisation (Geraghty, 1997) but a “GONGO” (government NGO). Ravuvu (op.cit) describes its aims as improving family living by teaching new skills in handicrafts and domestic work (see also FT January 30, 1992). It also involves itself in family education, community work and club management. These conservative aims have been modified, e.g. by the introduction of micro-financed development projects (cf Toren 1984). But the impact of these programs, as noted earlier, has yet to be assessed. As in Fiji, women’s organisations in Tonga and Kiribati, whether voluntary or government - funded, concentrate mainly on domestic skills (Emberson-Bain, op.cit; Ravuvu, op.cit; Kiribati and Tongan informants).

Ravuvu noted that the presence of the SSV in villages can cause domestic conflicts. This is partly due to husbands losing their control over their spouses when domestic loyalty has been redirected to organisations such as the SSV (see also Kikau, 1986). Another important point raised by Kikau is the perpetuation of the existing status quo by the organisation itself. For example, the SSV in its current situation as a GONGO is not in a position to challenge the provincial council meetings on gender issues because it has no voting power to begin with, nor will it get sympathetic response from male-dominated forums and councils, as Kikau attests (1986). In essence, it cannot be an

effective voice for the rural village women unless it becomes an independent NGO. As it is, it is an ineffective organisation as far as promoting development is concerned.

van Wesemael-Smit raises the question of “whose interests are being served” by certain actions taken by women in such organisations. The underlying message here is that similar rural membership based organisations such as the SSV is doing little to encourage and assist much needed changes at the rural level.¹¹ What it is doing is using the traditional redistribution mechanism by involving women members (from certain villages only) in handicraft shows to display and sometimes sell their wares. In exchange for this work the organisation gets publicity. The women themselves may be getting some remuneration, but the question that needs to be asked is, what is the SSV putting back to the community as its own input?

Riles’s (1996) thesis on networking amongst NGOs, and regional, and international organisations in Fiji, stresses the importance of extending one’s knowledge by knowing how to network with the people, NGOs and/or other bodies purport to represent. She states that training and information dissemination activities are not enough. One has to understand the needs of the people, what factors are constraining them, and the approach to take in negotiating sensitive issues. As she puts it, a representative of a target group may be very good at negotiating at national and international level, yet be quite poorly informed about the grassroots experience. This situation is aptly illustrated in a conversation I had during my 2002 field study. An informant was describing a workshop she attended and how she became concerned to know why it was organised. After her investigation, she came to the conclusion that the workshop was held so that it could be included in the report which was going to be presented at the Tikina Council the following week. Although the truth of this matter cannot be established, her final remark was telling: “We women are just pawns of the system”.

This type of comment reflects several problems:

- i) that many women at the grassroot level no longer seem to have any faith in the SSV.
- ii) that the SSV and its government office seem to make themselves available only when it suits them and if it serves their purpose.
- iii) that they are unaware that women they purport to serve, can be very perceptive¹² shortcomings.
- iv) the short notice given to the workshop participants showed that the officer was ill-informed about women’s busy schedules at the village level. Village women are no different from employed women when juggling their time between different responsibilities. As one Tongan informant claims: “(village) women value their time...and only if they think programs are beneficial to them, will they attend because there are meetings galore (and responsibilities) they have to attend to”.

The comment above seems to echo a view of one of Riles’s informants on the critical importance of networking at the local level. As she puts it:

...You eat whatever they eat, you sleep with them and they will believe you, because these days you cannot say that you can fool around with them. They are very clever. They have to see you living practical, you know the practical part of what you say (1996: 174).

¹¹ A high chief reinforced this message to me when he sought my help to organise a project for the SQV organisation in his village.

¹² The informant also related to me how disappointingly low the turnout to the workshop was and how the officer had complained about this - to which my informant reacted strongly. It seemed that the women participants were given only a short notice to prepare for the workshop.

As Kikau concludes, a lip-service approach seems to be the ‘rule of the game’ for certain women’s organisations. Because of their ineffectiveness, any development benefits for women are likely to be the result of the ‘trickle-effect’ of wider development initiatives (1986: 66).

11. WOMEN’S ORGANISATIONS WITHIN THE CHURCH

Most churches in Kiribati, Tonga and Fiji have a department for women. Churches such as the Seventh-Day Adventist or Mormon would have similar arrangements in most island-nations where they have members. Other churches would mostly differ only by degrees. In Tonga, the Free Wesleyan Church and the Roman Catholic Church each have a special department for women, and a similar situation can be seen in Fiji. Only in the case of one church in Tonga did the spokeswoman I interviewed state emphatically that women in this church have no say, except on purely domestic matters. Any attempt to make a slight change to women’s status in the church, according to this informant, is automatically rebuked by church elders, who are usually men.

Programs that involve women in most of these churches are domestic-oriented. Even where there is a combined effort between women’s organisations and the government, most activities centre around domestic skills (Tongan, Kiribati, Fiji inform). For this reason the analysis below will focus only on two churches that are attempting to achieve more than just domestic skills. The approach taken by the Roman Catholic Church in Tonga and the Methodist church in Fiji in regard to strategic and practical gender issues will shortly be discussed. But first I must give a brief outline of women’s status within the churches.

10.1 Women's Positions Within the Churches

Women’s participation in church rituals in societies of the Pacific islands progressed slowly (Forman 1984). Its development was partly due to educational opportunities that were made available to girls when female missionaries arrived. Women missionaries also created opportunities within the churches for pastor’s wives to provide leadership training for women in the church. In addition, in many Polynesian societies, such as Tonga and Samoa for example, women’s high traditional status helped to ensure status for them in the church. For islands such as Kiribati and certain parts of PNG, the importance women acquired in the church was partly the result of the imposition of cultural practices of the LMS islander pastors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1960s, the Methodist organisations in Tonga and Fiji had also opened up positions of female leadership.

Forman remarks that “women carved out their places in the churches through their organisations as well as their offices” (ibid: 162). For example, the LMS church in Samoa established a national women’s assembly, which was emulated by other islands such as Tuvalu and Kiribati etc. In Fiji, the SSV, initially called the Qele ni Ruve, was formed in 1924 by the Methodist church, and eventually became a national organisation for all Fijian women. There have also been many changes in church offices such as the elevation of Methodist women who were appointed as lay preachers or received theological training for ordination. In other denominations, women have been elected to the central governing assemblies of their churches. Forman reasons that most of these changes have come about more from external rather than from indigenous influences.

The adoption of universal patterns evident in many churches (in varying degrees) are not so readily accepted in churches that emphasise sacrament and hierarchy such as the Anglican and the Roman Catholic churches. Interestingly, the discussion below of the Roman Catholic Church in Tonga tends to contradict this statement. There is little written on the progress of women’s status in churches since the 1980’s, but the new development taken by the Roman Catholic Church in Tonga (discussed below), and to an extent in Fiji (with the Methodist Church) may be an indication that the churches’ perception of women is changing.

10.2 The Methodist Church In Fiji – Women’s Division

The Women’s Division of the Methodist Church in Fiji had been in existence for a number of years before the present Secretary took over in 2001. There are 20,000 to 22,000 women members under her department’s jurisdiction. This section will discuss the “practical gender issue” activities addressed by the department. However, because my interview with the Secretary put more emphasis on workshops, training programs, and rallies conducted by her office, my discussion will briefly address this aspect in order to highlight the church’s extensive network and potential influence, and the kind of topics covered in the training programs.

10.2.1 Methodist Women’s Fellowship and the SSV

The women’s organisation within the church is called the Soqosoqo Veitokani ni Marama ni Lotu Wesele (SVMLW). It works closely with the SSV in micro-financed projects because most SVMLW members are also SSV members. Some projects are individually managed while others are group managed. Projects include chicken farming, vegetable gardening, flower/horticulture business, voivoi (pandanus) planting/selling, and screen printing - to name a few. Most projects seem to be concentrated in the peri-urban areas.

10.2.2 Workshop and Training Sessions

The mission of this department is based on John Wesley’s theology: teach, preach and heal, accompanied with prayer. The informant believes that this work is development and that the economic activities (described above) are just part of it. The Wesley theology shapes the programs prepared for all the workshops and training sessions conducted since 2002. Such sessions on leadership training have as their first aim:

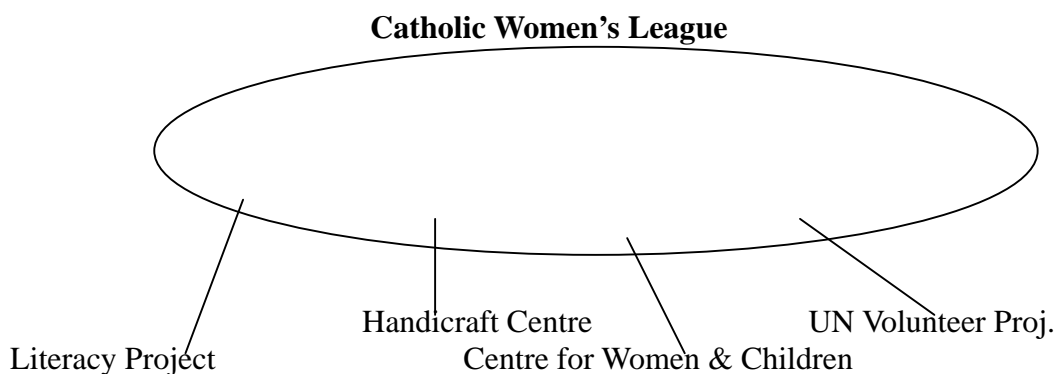
To train women so they can be liberated to become transformed women and become better mothers, better housewives, better helpers to their husbands, to the church and the community in which they live.

This is a replication of the SSV’s conservative aims explained earlier (the Ministry for Women, Social Welfare, and Poverty Alleviation funded a session in September 2003). These training programs have covered most of the major islands in Fiji, and at every meeting there has been a call for more frequent and longer sessions. This year, 2004, 13 circuits (the number of villages in each circuit varies) will have similar training sessions and workshops on the same theme: Liberating Learning, Discipleship, and Citizenship for Transformation (a 5 year theme). Other NGOs or government departments sometimes work with the SVLMW to address issues on HIV and other health matters. As my informant explains, “I develop people, not infrastructure”.

In her work my informant faces challenges from the national level of the church hierarchy, down to the grassroots. Without invitation, men from the Methodist church and other denominations often attend village women’s training sessions and workshops. Whether she is targeting discourse on “egalitarian values” at village men or challenging the male-dominated top echelon of the church hierarchy “to respect women who want to take control of their lives”, her work has to be confined within the limits of biblical doctrines.

10.3 The Roman Catholic Church of Tonga- Catholic Women’s League

The Catholic Women’s League of the Roman Catholic Church in Tonga is an example of an organisation promoting strategic gender issues. The League (CWL) has four arms that help promote ‘autonomy’ for women in Tonga. ‘Autonomy’ in this context implies “control over one’s life and body with respect to other people” (van Wesemael-Smit op.cit: 269). The four arms of the League are illustrated in the diagram below with the detailed explanation following:



10.3.1 Legal Literacy Project

This project works closely with the Regional Right Resource Team (RRRT- a NGO) to provide training on legal rights. The Legal Literacy project also works with the United Nations volunteer project in promoting this training. Supported by these two arms of the CWL, the RRRT works to promote the main 16 articles of CEDAW at all levels, from the grassroots to government. The process of promoting the CEDAW articles is also an exercise to raise awareness amongst the Tongan women on their rights, especially at the village level. In addition, the project promotes issues concerning Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Moreover, the project also provides free legal advice for women who need them.

10.3.2 Centre for Women and Children

The Centre was started by the CWL. It conducts workshops, hosts seminars, and publishes booklets to promote gender equality issues and women's rights through education. It addresses the "Gender and Development" policies that promote equality in all areas (political, social, economic and educational). Since it is now funded by New Zealand Aid, the Centre has become a national organisation and therefore independent.

10.3.3 United Nations Volunteer Project

This branch of the CWL employs a UN volunteer and a research and policy officer for CEDAW. It works with all women's groups and organisations, from the grassroots to the government levels. Its objective is to find out from women's groups and other organisations, the 5 crucial areas of development affecting women. In other words, the UN Volunteer Project works hand in hand with the Literacy Project and RRRT teams, to raise awareness. In line with the CEDAW issues, women should be encouraged to identify five main concerns that are of crucial importance - e.g. issues on health and education. Their findings will be collectively commented on by NGOs and then submitted to the government for future rectification in accordance with CEDAW guidelines. The UN Volunteer Project is funded by the UNDP.

A national CEDAW workshop for women was held in Tonga involving government officers. Issues were considered in the Tongan context for future ratification. Schools were visited for information dissemination on gender issues and male students, especially, were targeted to challenge their assumptions. In churches where a recent workshop on HIV Aids was conducted for all church leaders, issues of women's rights and the CEDAW articles were also discussed. As a result, a submission was made to the government for future ratification. Interestingly, my informant noted that when there were disagreements between the workshop organisers and the other participants, the organisers defended their own views by using biblical principles or texts (see also Sweetman, op.cit). There is a consistent use of the media such as the radio and TV to promote their cause.

FINDINGS and ACTIONS

Gender and the Indo-Fijian Community

The major problem for the well being and autonomy of women identified is the culturally sanctioned violent enforcement of male authority and the women are compounding their predicament by upholding the familial and purdah ideologies. With very little funding from the government or other sources, the I-F community is disadvantaged in any quest for change through educational programs.

Identified Needs

1. The importance of funding NGOs within the I-F community to raise awareness and suggest further actions to take.
2. Access to funding for the promotion and strengthening of strategic and practical gender issues.
3. The need for further research to establish ways and means of breaking the cycle violence and subjugation that besets many families.

Actions

1. Provide annual grant to fund the following:
 - i. Information dissemination – provision of brochures and booklets in Hindi language to inform and educate the community.
 - ii. Use of media advertisements – TV and radio to promote available services.
 - iii. Strengthen the use of services provided by other NGOs eg. Women’s Crisis Centre.
2. Government to provide funding to women’s organisations within the community to promote both strategic and practical activities.
3. Government to fund further research.

PACIFIC ISLANDER WOMEN

Gender and the Kinship System

The family is the most important unit in the Pacific island society and the harmonious relationship between men and women/husband and wife is essential to glue the society together.

The point above must be presented from a point of view of a disadvantaged group eg. women that should be treated as an equal on the basis of the traditional value of ‘share and care’.

Gender equality between women and men/husband and wife cannot be fully appreciated if both acknowledge their full potential and work to rise to the occasion.

That family support services are important to address and meet the priority needs of families.

Identified Needs

Members of the communities need to acknowledge and appreciate that to maintain a harmonious relationship within the family and the community, the basis of ‘share and care’, two things are required:

1. To recognise that women are a disadvantaged group and therefore the community must address situations that constrain them from developing their potentials, such as minimising traditional obligations, which require reproductive work. This recognition should encourage changes that will conserve energy and time for the family’s benefit.
2. The challenge for both men and women to acknowledge that certain cultural practices that now do not enhance family and community cohesion should be scrutinised for modification or elimination.

3. Family support services are essential to educate the community on gender sensitive issues. There is also a need to address the problem of prioritising so that families are not affected. In other words, to help them 'screen' their priorities so that resources are not channeled elsewhere at the expense of the family.

Actions

Use of established networks

1. Networks of organisations such as churches, women's organisations such as SSV in Fiji, AMAK in Kiribati and provincial and district councils are useful apparatus, especially in rural areas, to promote awareness programs on gender issues.
2. Government to provide funds to promote socio-economic activities (micro-financed projects) using rural networks above.
3. In consultation with other NGOs, develop and implement educational awareness programs to promote gender sensitive issues such as sharing of household chores and teaching children the same.
4. Provide a platform where issues on customary practices can be debated.

GENDER, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

For various reasons such as urban lifestyle, monetised economy, and changing values, more people prefer to live in nuclear families, an indication that the wider system of kin relations is weakening. This trend points to the need to put new emphasis on preserving some traditions, especially obligations to care for elderly kin and the disadvantaged. Attention to crucial issues such as shared decision-making in the family and in the community is essential for the maintenance of a robust community.

It is also important to examine the traditional redistributive mechanism and to critically assess its contemporary vitality and relevance, and how it might best be preserved and used for supporting development.

The fact that women have the cultural positions of gatekeepers and custodians of traditions means that they more than anyone else hold the key to preserving, adapting, or eliminating those customary practices that are now uneconomical. But there should be consultation with the whole community on such issues with a view to reaching a consensual agreement on the course of action to be taken.

Action

1. Modify or possibly even eliminate certain traditional and church practices through educational awareness programs
2. Encourage and support cultural displays for traditional handicrafts and promote among women gender awareness especially in regard to their crucial role as gatekeepers and custodians of their indigenous culture.
3. Take positive steps to modify cultural values to create a consistency with economic and social development - e.g. need for changes to be made to the traditional values of redistribution which are now often an obstacle to enhancing the material well-being of modern families.
4. Promote a practice of sharing between men and women, and the community, in the process of decision-making for social, economic, and cultural development.

GENDER AND POLITICS

The national women's machinery has not always been given the attention it deserves. There is a need to strengthen it and to use its machinery to promote gender empowerment through educational awareness programs.

Related to this is the importance of including men in the educational awareness programs to encourage a change of male attitudes and stereotypical thinking. Since women are still underrepresented in public and political life, equitable gender representation should be promoted.

Government NGO's

There is a need for NGO's in the government machinery to be independent from the state, religion, and *vanua* to become an effective advocate for women especially in rural areas.

District And Provincial Councils

The councils will never be serious about their roles as gatekeepers to the well-being of indigenous women in the modern economy, society, and political system, unless the councils are willing to critically examine and possibly change their established mechanisms and culture. There is now a dire need to promote gender awareness programs to challenge certain established assumptions in these bodies.

Action

1. Strengthen the National Womens' Council or umbrella bodies machinery and linkages with NGO's, the Ministry for Women, Social Welfare, and Poverty Alleviation
2. Promote gender awareness programs and ensure that they are accessible to both men and women
3. Promote equitable gender representation at all levels of the political process and public life
4. Foster womens' organisation within the state machinery to ensure an autonomous and effective voice for women
5. Encourage and strengthen gender sensitivity in every political decision

GENDER AND ECONOMY

This analysis acknowledges the negative impact of migration on women-headed households as well as the positive aspect of remittances from overseas. These households often face great poverty due to loss of income-earners through migration and unavailability of land for subsistence. On the other hand it is certainly true that remittances help to meet the needs of many families.

There is a need to emphasise economic activities such as handicrafts to sustain a living. Equally essential is the continued promotion of women's participation in income generating activities in rural areas and amongst families at the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

Actions

1. Foster income-generating activities with women in rural areas and in poor households.
2. Encourage and support women from women-headed households in their pursuit of economic independence.

GENDER AND CHURCH

As Blessing argues, it is important to re-formulate the definition of "development" as a moral issue in the church programs, so that the churches' focus is not only spiritual, but "political", economical, and educational – an all encompassing approach. Re-orienting its focus means that the church can become the advocate for the underprivileged and the voiceless.

The wider society does acknowledge the important role the church plays in strengthening community identity and solidarity. However, in representing the underprivileged, the church should also recognise its responsibility to curtail or minimise certain church activities that burden women and constantly siphon off resources from the household.

The church has an equally important task of promoting and implementing programs that pursue strategic and practical gender issues.

The church should promote equal opportunities for men and women in its hierarchy.

Actions

1. Foster gender issues in re-orienting the church's focus as an advocate for the underprivileged.
2. Promote educational awareness programs as a platform to raise issues for debate concerning religious and family responsibilities.
3. Implement and foster programs that advocate strategic and practical gender issues.
4. Promote equal opportunities for men and women in the church hierarchy.

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Evaluate the success of micro-financed projects funded by women's organisations, from the viewpoint of women's development needs.
2. Study the progress of women's status in the church hierarchies since the 1980s.
3. Study of remittances received by households and to what extent they are used in ways that improve women's lives.
4. An ethnography of a village highlighting the peoples' use of time and resources to achieve different commitments, and the steps they take to compromise competing priorities.

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