

The Church Versus Women's Push for Change: the Case of Fiji

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Abstract

The burdensome impact created by the church on Pacific women has left rural women facing dire situations. Despite their doctrinal differences, most churches have similar expectations of women. This article concerns the difficulties rural Fijian women face in trying to meet their family needs while fulfilling their obligations to the Methodist Church. This pressure is compounded by the very close relations between the church, the state and the vanua. Women are torn between fulfilling their obligations to these institutions and caring for their families. The strengthening call from international Pentecostal churches and United Nations organisations to adapt both Christianity and tradition to western ideology emphasising individual agency, shows up the conservative Methodist Church to be ill-prepared, even to the point of intolerance. This paper suggests that the women's organisation within the church, despite the uphill battle it is presently facing, could be made a platform for change.

Introduction¹

The influence of Christianity on women's status and role in the Pacific islands cannot be over-stated (Bleakley 2002; Emberson-Bain 1998; Ravuvu 1988; Ryle 2001; Schoeffel 1979; Thaman 1975; Towandong 1996; UNICEF 1996). The impact of the churches on women's traditional role in Tonga is described by Claire Bleakley and 'Atu Emberson-Bain,

¹ This paper is based partly on a report commissioned by the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC) on Women and Development in 2004. I am grateful for their permission to include part of the report here.

while Penelope Schoeffel gives an account of changes in the Samoan women's traditional role. Relatively little has been written on the current burdensome impact of the church on women in their everyday activities. This paper aims to illuminate this problem by examining the case of Fiji. I will focus on contradictions and conflicts between Christian ideology and its impact on indigenous Fijian women in their daily lives.

The issues concerning women fall into two major categories: *strategic* and *practical* issues. *Strategic* issues concern the subordination of women and how to effectively challenge this, while *practical* issues deal with concrete conditions that affect their daily lives, for example, buying the basic necessities for daily consumption (Molyneux, 1985). My discussion will put emphasis on the latter. Although these issues may impact on all indigenous women who are active participants in their churches, I will concentrate particularly on rural women and their relationship with the church. Discussion will also include other institutions that overlap in personnel and ideology with the church such as women's organizations within and outside the church, the state, and the *vanua* (the latter encompasses land, people and custom). These institutions strongly intersect and their interplay tends to obstruct the promotion of development programmes that could improve women's lives. Thus, a problem urgently needing attention is how to break or weaken this link, so that the church might distance itself from the other institutions and be more easily persuaded to take a progressive stance on matters of great contemporary importance, especially women's rights and development. The question of how the church might become a platform for change is the central theme of the paper.

In Fiji, the historic mainline Christian churches are the Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic, the Anglican Church and the Presbyterian Church. There is also a growing body of Protestant Fundamentalist Churches (Ernst, 1994). My discussion deals mainly with women in the Methodist church. As there is little difference between denominations in their expectations of women, examples from other established denominations will also be used for illustration.

Four major aspects of the contradictions I refer to are:

1. The contradiction between the Protestant ethic of individual responsibility developed in the European reformation period and the collectivist-oriented ideology of the Christian churches in Fiji.
2. The tensions between mainline churches and the New Religious Groups (NRG), in respect to their views on women.
3. The tensions created by obligations imposed by the church and the *vanua* (traditional community) on village women in their everyday

lives. This section will include a discussion of the *Soqosoqo Vakamarama* (SSV), the main indigenous women's organization, and the state government and the attitude of these institutions to women and change.

4. The pressure from outside forces such as international organizations and NGOs for churches to reform and especially to implement modern human rights values.

Defining Development

The Brandt Report defined 'development' as encompassing both quality of life and improved productivity (Brandt, 1980 cited in Chilott and Lucas, 1985: 11). The first United Nations Human Development Report on the Pacific Islands asserts that quality of life and improved productivity imply 'sustainability, cultural change, community participation, the role of the non-monetary and non-formal sectors and the dynamics of development' (UNDP, 1994: 1). My analysis will emphasize these aspects.

Inglehart (1997) suggests that a concern with 'quality of life' means assisting individual attempts to move away from simply economic security to realizing values of leisure, happiness and self-expression. Of course, improving economic security is vitally important in Oceania, particularly in rural areas, and must be improved before 'quality of life' can be advanced. However, women cannot begin to enjoy economic security when they are already enmeshed by traditional *vanua* and church obligations, the fulfilment of which regularly takes so much of their resources in time, material wealth and energy. These demands often stretch their resources to the limit and leave them exhausted. Freedom of self-expression, enhancement of knowledge, and other modern human rights that appeal to many urban women may be felt to be important, but not a pressing issue when economic security is the priority. The needs of rural women are often very different from those of educated urban women who enjoy secure jobs and greater control over their affairs.

Major changes in the lives of women in villages in recent years are the increasing importance of consumerist values, compounded by the accessibility of the media and modern telecommunications. At the same time greater accessibility of roads and other forms of communication means that villages can be easily and quickly informed about wider traditional social functions and pressured to make their contributions. As well, regular visits from government and church officials and meetings organized by outside bodies and offices such as provincial council or church

headquarters have increased in frequency and add to the service demands women are expected to cater for. Again, this increased burden can be partly attributed to the easy access to means of transportation. Yet, most men, who are decision-makers, have not been willing to change their behaviour and expectations to ease women's burden (Kikau 1986: 65-67; Ravuvu 1988: 182-3).

Rural dwellers are deeply ambivalent about what 'development' should be for them (Ravuvu 1988: 14-23; Toren 1984: 44-52). They would like to achieve many aspects of the 'European way' yet are filled with trepidation for fear of compromising their culture. In this conundrum, they are constantly faced with traditional obligations to fulfil while holding perhaps unrealistic hopes created by the promises of 'development'. Therein lies a major conflict: the demand to meet traditional and church obligations, versus the desire for freedom to concentrate on improving their lives and their families, the most pressing desire now of many rural women. Their difficulty in reconciling their old role as guardians of their culture with their desire to lessen the burden of the old social obligations is especially problematic.

Strategic and Practical Gender Issues

Molyneux (1985) formulates a useful distinction between *practical* and *strategic* gender issues. *Strategic* gender issues are about changing structural power relationships, in contrast to *practical* gender issues, which are concerned simply with improving the daily life of a particular group of women within the limits of an established social system. However, they are really two sides of the same coin: *strategic* issues being associated with the goal of autonomy (self-determination for women) while *practical* issues are about improving practical living conditions or 'economic security', in Inglehart's term (1997). The church should ideally meet both the *practical* and *strategic* interests of its women members. The pursuit of *strategic* issues may be a futile exercise for rural women if everyday living needs are not first addressed. The church's development programmes will be considered from both perspectives, the *practical* and the *strategic*. The discussion will range from everyday activities of women (particularly in the rural areas), the activities of women's organizations within and outside the churches, and the Methodist Church's involvement in addressing *practical* and *strategic* matters. In rural villages there is typically little distinction between women's organization within and outside the church because the same women are expected to cooperate in fulfilling three sets of obligations: to the church, the *vanua*, and the

state. These demands are additional to immediate and extended family obligations. To many rural women, the church can sometimes offer a 'time out' from the everyday drudgery of demanding tasks. At other times it offers space where they can sit and exchange ideas especially with women from other villages. In other ways it offers them psychological relief in the belief that they will be blessed in heaven for their loyalty. Yet, at the same time demands from the church deprive women of much time, energy and wealth needed by their families.

As a potential facilitator for change, the church faces the dilemma that by helping women to become independent thinkers, more self-reliant and unfettered by old pressures to 'tow the line,' it would radically weaken itself as an authority. But these are *strategic* issues. At present the church's major responsibility in facilitating change is to give priority to helping women meet *practical* needs before addressing *strategic* issues.

The current literature on the churches in Fiji and their relationships with their women members is very limited. Ryle's (2001) account only distinguishes the general impact of the old established churches and the New Religious Groups on the Fijians, while Toren (1984) gives just a brief description of the women's major Fijian organization, the Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV), its link to development and women's role as homemakers and mothers. Similarly, the discussions by Ravuvu (1988) and Kikau (1986) focus only on the SSV but not on its relationship with the churches, especially the Methodist church. The latest UNICEF report (1996) on Fiji addresses numerous problems faced by women such as issues of health, employment and nutrition, but neglects the role of the churches in women's development. The Fiji Government's (2002) development plan for 2003-5 similarly ignores the role the churches could have in women's development programmes. However, Konai Thaman's remark on the influence of religion in shaping the lives of Pacific Island women in general, is very pertinent to my discussion. She complains that Christianity has reinforced traditional social structures in ways that have restricted women from developing their full potential (Thaman, 1975: 27). The following discussion on the impact of the church will attempt to illuminate this vexing issue.

The General Impact of Christianity in Fiji

The most influential Christian churches in Fiji are the Methodist and Roman Catholic churches. Both, but especially the Methodist Church, became strongly supportive of the hierarchical chiefly systems, which shaped the local socio-political system (Kaplan, 1990). As well as these

old established churches, there is also a growing body of fundamentalist church groups with strong influence on Fijian society. Ernst distinguishes these groups with terms such as the New Religious Groups (NRG) or the Most Recent Arrivals or the 'Breakaway' NRG. In this paper I shall refer to them all as NRG to distinguish them from the old established churches. The NRG include The Assemblies of God, Mormon Church, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and about twelve other smaller groups (Ernst, 1994).

Although there are rivalries between these old and new churches, their imprints are in some ways similar. They all established schools which became powerful agents for the dissemination of western culture and values. However, the old churches protected certain traditional customs and values, for example, the reinforcement of chiefly protocols in traditional presentations, whereas the NRG discourage their members from participating in such rituals. Despite the difference in their influences, most churches seem to have one major drawback. As Forman points out: they embody a 'folk church' representing the local society and reflecting some of its values and standards, rather than a prophetic church standing in opposition to society (1982: 103). They have not, therefore, been disposed to become a voice for the underprivileged (Ernst, 1994; *Fiji Sun*, 14 January 2005).

The changes brought about by Christianity and other modern influences, especially the market economy, were compounded by an increasing workload resulting from women's new responsibilities (Kaplan, 1990; Ravuvu, 1988; Ryle, 2001; Toren, 1984; Ward, 1995). For example, rural women may spend the day attending to household chores and gardening while in the evening they may go out to catch fish to sell the next day for school fees or to buy basic items for family consumption. On other evenings pre-packed pounded *kava* (in Fiji called 'grog'), is sold to local grog drinkers to meet these costs. Women have to juggle their time between household chores, traditional, church or communal obligations, and personal commitments. Ward sums up the change: '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).

Church Activities

The focus of this paper is the rural village women. They now constitute little more than half of all indigenous women in Fiji. Unlike urban women, rural women normally have to entertain visiting government or

church officials, prepare traditional feasts and gifts for guests, and organise accommodation for visitors. These tasks require time, energy and sometimes cash; the burden of these demands has become a major concern to many village women.

During my field study² I heard a conversation among several women belonging to a local NRG church about a *solu* (the voluntary giving of money for a social purpose) organized for their contribution to the head church in Suva. At the end of the church service, members had an informal gathering where each had a story to tell about the amount they contributed. One could spare only 60 cents because she had to conserve cash for her grandchild's bus fare to the hospital, another gave only \$2 because some money was needed to buy the basics for the week, another kept some money for her children's bus fare to school, and so on. Only two gave '*noti*' (paper money), both of them women pensioners in their seventies. The *solu* came to only about \$46 in total, in sadly stark contrast to the church minister's original pledge of \$5,000.³

Such church fund raising activities are perhaps the most burdensome pressures on women and households. The goals of such activities are similar in most churches, including the NRG. An especially busy time for villagers to raise funds is their preparation for the Methodist church annual conference, usually involving several months' work. Fund-raising involves selling of wares such as food parcels, mats, *tapa* pieces, or *solu*. Competing to sell their wares to the same people such as teachers or others who are perceived to have a steady source of income can be quite frustrating because sellers outnumber buyers. In a village where I observed these activities, I heard one female customer comment: 'these people are getting on my nerves'. Yet the sellers are not turned away because people usually feel pressured to help even when there is little to give. Social pressure in a collectivist culture comes in subtle ways and it is a force to reckon with, because anyone who does not comply is consid-

² This study was conducted in 2002 in a rural town and its hinterland. The study is based on the social capital of the town community.

³ The congregation of this church consists of three families of about ten to fifteen adults. Not being able to reach their target, the minister and his family decided to go to another island to dive for sell sea slugs with the help of some villagers there. He left instructions with his congregation to send a truck load of food to feed him and his helpers every week and also prepare traditional gifts as a token of gratitude to the helpers. None of these requests were met by the congregation and when I queried about it, one responded: 'we are a poor lot!'

ered a 'renegade'.⁴

Ryle (2001) describes a former colonial practice still maintained today by the Methodist Church – the *tali vunau*, Sunday meals prepared by families (taking turns) for the minister or preacher, as thanks for the sermons given. This is an especially onerous task when it involves fishing or prawning at night, for the women feel that the best pot must be presented or the family is shamed. A woman with five grandchildren living with her, recounted her experience the night before when it was her turn to prepare the *tali vunau*. She spent four hours half submerged in the water but managed to catch only one fish. Her own family only had unappetizing boiled *bele* (local spinach) for Sunday lunch but her loyalty and sacrifice for the church had to come first. As two informants put it, 'women are the backbone of the church, ... the most used members of the community'. Informants agree that the major activities in the villages now revolve around the church and are labour intensive (see also Parliament of Fiji, 2002; Ryle, 2001). A Fiji Methodist church critic recently went so far as to allege that such church expectations that burden the poor congregation are 'a travesty of justice' (*Fiji Sun* 14 January 2005).

The difficulty in separating the institutions such as the state, church and the *vanua* is reflected in the state's coat of arms: *Rerevaka na Kalou ka doka na Tui* - Fear God and Honour the King. This is reinforced by another dictum: *Noqu Kalou, noqu Vanua* - My God, My Land, often declared in folk songs and political rhetoric to emphasize the relationship. It leaves an indelible mark in the minds of women, and Fijians generally, reinforced by the Church's biblical verse in Romans 13: 1 and 2. The sharing of ideology and power among the three institutions is reinforced by the warning in verse 2 that 'whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves'. This belief is ingrained in the minds of Fijians, as exemplified by the submission of the then ruling *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* po-

⁴ Collectivists share resources by contributing financially or materially, or with less tangible resources like time, affection and fun. In many church activities where contributions are expected, what is often overlooked is the 'pressure' to give when resources are scarce. The claim that church members give 'voluntarily', belies the fact that villagers are expected to give by subordinating their interest for the interest of the community such as a *solu* for the church, which is a form of 'pressure'. To sacrifice personal goals for the interest of the community augurs well for harmonious relationships in the village, thus part of the culture is to praise those who sacrifice personal interests for the common good even at the expense of the family. This subtle social pressure is often overlooked by the church.

litical party to the Constitutional Review Commission in 1995 (Norton, 2000: 99). There is a clear overlap between the *vanua*, the church and the state, 'clasped' together by the Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV), an organization that has strong membership overlap with all three institutions, and upholds their goals and values.

An Institutional Field

Niukula (1996) highlights how in Fiji institutional structures such as religion, state, and *vanua* intersect to a large degree and so reinforce one another in their shared beliefs and values. Within this intersection is a modern secular indigenous women's organization,⁵ the Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV), which serves the interests of the three major institutions, the church, state and the *vanua*. The SSV also overlaps in membership with the Methodist women's organization within the church. The strong interplay of these institutions maintains a powerful constraint on women who loyally try to fulfil their obligations to these institutions but with great difficulty. As a result, women find it difficult to prioritize their loyalties, which often result in family needs being compromised. The difficulties have not been made easier by the lack of understanding and sympathy from the decision-makers, who are mainly men. While the three major institutions put heavy demands on women, the women's organization in the church is trying to address the problems faced by women in its limited way, an issue which is discussed later.

To return to the three institutions, their overlap may also be reflected in the positions of leadership. By supporting the chiefly hierarchy of the *vanua*, the church usually secures the appointment of church elders from chiefly families who may also be representatives of the *vanua* to the *tikina* (district) and provincial councils. This practice also dictates the selection of SSV leaders. In the SSV, the leader may be from one of the families, either of noble birth or married to a chief. This overlap between Christianity (*lotu*), and *vanua*, (traditional community) is termed by Tuwere as '*lotu vaka-vanua*' (Christianity in the *vanua* way), a 'form of captivity by the *vanua*' (2002: 160). Lin (2001) calls such a linkage among key institutions in a society an 'institutional field'. Closely linked institutions uphold common values, which become the lynchpin of a dominant ideology, indeed the 'rules of the game' (Lin, 2001: 101).

⁵ I use the SSV, the major indigenous women's organisation in Fiji, to illustrate its overlap with the Methodist Women's organisation. NRG churches do not usually work with the SSV since they have their own women's organisations.

Some observers have argued that the blend of *lotu* (church) and *vanua* has become a dominant Fijian culture in which elements of Christianity are made a central part of a chauvinist ethno nationalist 'voice' (Niukula, 1996; Ryle, 2001; Tuwere, 2002). Such a collective consciousness was reflected in the parochial flavour of a speech by the Prime Minister at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji in which he declared: '...they [George Speight's followers] are not alone in their pro-nationalistic Fijian feelings. The Great Council of Chiefs feels the same.... Members of the Methodist church have also voiced the same feelings' (quoted in Chand, 2001: 65).

Chand (2001) has pointed out a contradiction within this institutional overlap of *lotu* and *vanua*: If the term *vanua* represents the communal economy and belief system of the Fijians, then modern Christianity, rooted in western ideology, is really antithetical to the *vanua* ideology. The latter is at odds with European Christian ideology based on a methodical and rational approach to life and work stressing individual initiatives, in contrast to the traditional communal production and distribution of the *vanua* system. In Western Europe, a reformed Christian ideology evolved in which each individual's relationship to God is expressed in the conduct of his/her occupation/'calling',⁶ a disciplined individual agency that became entrenched in other spheres of life.

In stark contrast to disciplined personal agency is the collectivist-oriented 'mantra' of Fiji's Christian churches, especially the Methodist church. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries missionary Christianity was grafted into the established social framework of collectivist Fijian culture. By 1874, the Protestant mission in Fiji had changed its doctrinal focus from revivalism to fundamentalism (Ryle, 2001: 53). Instead of simply proselytizing, missionaries began to impose strict control over the civilizing of their subjects. This was true especially of the Methodist church which regimented a 'particular form of disciplined and re-fashioned body' in order to maintain grace (Eves, 1990: 124). Instead of putting emphasis on the original Protestant principle of individual conscience, 'outward appearance' was made the priority. This is still the case today, as reflected in wearing Sunday best and strictly observing Sunday rules, with church obligations taking precedence above everything else.

Today, without a doctrine centring on the concept of internally

⁶ The transformation became institutionalised by privileging the individual believer in her/his inner ability to discern religious truth rather than relying on other mediums such as priests. It became the principle of individual conscience (Schroeder, 1992).

driven individual agency, the old established churches of Fiji face an urgent dilemma. They are under siege from powerful, globally-connected Pentecostal churches that are pushing for universal values, rooted in western ideology and steeped in the idea of individual agency (Ryle, 2001: 53). As Ernst (1994) observes, individualism and profit-oriented thinking are now infiltrating the last corners of Oceania. Yet the established churches have so far failed to take heed of the call to adapt both Christianity and tradition to the rapid change in values arising from the increasing influences and affluence of modernity, a change being encouraged by the fundamentalist Pentecostal churches, the NRG.

Tensions between Mainline Churches and the New Religious Groups

The arrival of the NRG during the twentieth century gave rise to conflict with the old established churches. Under the rubric of the NRG are different denominations broadly designated as 'evangelical' or 'fundamentalist' or 'pentecostal-charismatic' (Ernst, 1994: 9-15). The NRG are perceived as superficial, especially by the Methodist church, because their ideologies, structure, and style of worship are antithetical to Fijian culture and history; to the *vanua* ideology. The NRG, on the other hand, see the mainline churches as 'skin-deep' Christianity (Ernst, 1994: 280). The NRG's charisma and emphasis on individualism are part of the globalizing trend, which appeals to many who join them. Individualism is promoted by discouraging members from participating in communal rites that observe customary practices such as kava drinking and collective gift exchange, and members are expected to be more economically enterprising. Ryle's description of the tension between the NRG and the old established churches is apt:

Whereas traditional leadership in church and politics in Fiji are intertwined and represent a seemingly regressive, older world of post-colonial struggles, the new churches are linked to global modernization and the values of a neo-colonial era of western civilization, bringing with it individualism, materialism, consumerism; in effect, a contemporary form of the nineteenth century wave of missionisation... at the same time new churches in many ways appear better equipped to lead people in the complexities of modernity (Rye, 2001: 271).

Like the old established or mainline churches, the NRG believe in the full authority of the Bible. What distinguishes the NRG from old established churches is seen especially in the baptism of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues) and in the rigid moral codes they impose such as boycotting traditional functions, which include music, dances, eating cer-

tain food and drinking kava. The moral and social ethics of the NRG are based on conformist passivity, in Ernst's description, where adherents are expected to obey regardless of their circumstances. Feminist ethics are rejected. This code is consistent with the Fijian culture in which women are expected to be subservient to men, a practice that the old established churches also favour. In Ernst's view, the NRG restrictions on women and the value of self-sufficiency 'contribute at best to the maintenance of a societal status quo' (1994: 280).

Women of the mainline churches face a rather different problem. What distinguishes them from the NRG women is the added duty of attending to the *vanua* and state obligations. The following discussion of these pressures also covers the SSV and how women's situation is often aggravated by the regressive attitude of state officials.

The *Vanua*, the State, and Women

Ravuvu (1988) maintains that the traditional redistribution mechanism has declined partly due to the decline of chiefly authority. Traditionally, the chief who received tributes was expected to redistribute most of this wealth to the members of the community. This reciprocation meant that the community members did not experience the giving of tribute as onerous. Ravuvu points out that new institutions such as the church and government 'have taken over some of the chief's material prerogatives though not his material obligations (1988: 174). However, he fails to mention the impact that this one-way economic flow especially has on women.

To highlight the nature of this impact, I recount an example from my observations in a village I visited in 1999. In preparation for a visit by a church official, it was decided that the women should make a *gatu*, a piece of tapa of about 20 feet by 20 feet as a gift. For two weeks before the arrival of the official, they worked hard on the tapa everyday. Some were clearly very 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's stay of two nights meant providing eight meals for him, and for pastors and lay preachers who came to meet him from about seven villages in the district. For the rest of the week, catering had also to be provided for a group of visiting officials from the Health Department, and for the Tikina Council meeting. Each woman was required to provide a pot each day, which meant that many had to spend three to four hours fishing at night because most cannot afford to buy meat. A woman complained in frustration: 'Whatever

little we would have liked to keep for our children is eaten away by these visitors'. Almost a whole week was taken up feeding visitors with scarce family and village resources. Such events are frequent and the women have come to consider them as burdensome.

The attitude of the Ministry of Fijian Affairs officials has not been helpful either. Coming under the Ministry, is the Fijian Affairs Board, which directs the Fijian Administration. Under this are the fourteen Provincial Councils that are responsible for Tikina and Village Councils. Each village has a branch of the SSV organization, which forms part of the Village Council. The stated 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, 2002 Vol. 1: 125).

In 2001 the Ministry initiated a review to examine the Fijian Administration and propose changes. The terms of reference included the requirement to examine the 'linkages that the Fijian Administration has with other government and non-government agencies', and listed some examples of NGOs that should be covered in the review. Surprisingly, the SSV, the only NGO coming under the Ministry's jurisdiction was overlooked, despite having a delegate in every Tikina and Provincial Council, representing rural Fijian women, 51 per cent of all Fijian women. A summary of the English language submissions (presented by non-Fijians) included in the Review report highlighted a view that women were treated as second-class citizens. One stark indication of the truth of this claim is that the SSV representatives in the Provincial Councils do not have voting rights (Parliament of Fiji, 2002 vol. 11: 160). This is a problem that must be rectified if the government is serious about improving the status of women in the rural areas.

The report of the review of the Fijian Administration noted that the 'presence of women is only visible in the preparation of food for the delegates' at the Provincial Council meetings (Parliament of Fiji, 2002 vol. 11: 187), and that the Fijian submissions commonly expressed the view 'that women should be domiciled in the villages' (Parliament of Fiji, 2002 vol. 11: 257). It must be stressed, however, that among the submissions to the review are some strong advocates for a change in attitude and policy for the benefit of women on both *practical* and *strategic* gender issues, although these advocates were mostly non-Fijians. The summary of their submissions highlights rural women's dilemma:

They (Fijian women) have always been the silent working hands in rural communities as they are often tasked by decision makers to raise financial and other resources for village or provincial projects. How-

ever, this 'resource worker' role has not been extended to include their involvement in the decision making process of developments, where their hard earned financial support has been used (Parliament of Fiji, 2002 vol. 11: 160).

The Ministry of Women, Social Welfare, and Poverty Alleviation (henceforth Ministry of Women) seems ignorant of the hard realities faced by village women. The Minister, Asenaca Caucau was reported in the vernacular newspaper *Nai Lalakai* (21 October 2004), alleging that village women might be responsible for the poverty, violence, and social ills Fiji is facing. Her statement may have reflected the assumption that women spend most of their time with their children and, therefore, the role of nurturing, disciplining and teaching children customary values is mainly theirs, as are the consequences. Her statement indicates that the dire situation faced by rural women is little understood at the national level.

The Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV)

If the Ministry of Women has serious shortcomings in meeting women's needs, one might expect the leading Fijian women's body, the SSV, to be succeeding in this. The SSV started in 1924 as part of the Methodist church, but is now a government-funded body and, therefore, no longer an independent voluntary organization (Geraghty, 1997). Ravuvu describes its aims as improving family living by teaching new skills in handicrafts and domestic work (1988: 122; see also *Fiji Times*, 30 January 1992; Toren, 1984: 51). It also is involved in programmes for family education, community work and training village women in the management of its local branches. Its conservative aims have been modified by the introduction of micro-financed development projects whose impact has yet to be assessed (Fiji Government Online; *Fiji Times*, 8 March and 31 May 2004). Leaders of the SSV branches in villages, usually women of high birth or marriage, are 'elected' by members through consensus (Durutalo, personal communication, February 2005). The SSV works closely with Christian denominations, especially the Methodist church, and many SSV members are also members of women's organizations in the churches, such as the Soqosoqo Veitokani ni Marama ni Lotu Wesele (Women's Fellowship in the Methodist Church).

Ravuvu (1988: 123-6) noted that the presence of the SSV in villages could cause domestic conflicts, partly due to husbands losing control over spouses who become active in the organization. Kikau (1986) also draws

attention to the perpetuation of the status quo by the organization itself. For example, the SSV cannot effectively challenge the provincial council meetings on gender issues because it has no voting power, nor in any case would it get a sympathetic response from such male-dominated forums and councils. It cannot be an effective progressive voice for village women unless it becomes a truly independent NGO. In its present form, it is certainly not an effective organization for promoting development.

In a field study I conducted in 2002, a male informant asked rhetorically 'what is the SSV for?' to which he answered, 'its only for show!' Indeed, the SSV organizes shows where women display their wares and are encouraged to exchange ideas and sell their artefacts. In return the SSV receives publicity, but its own input into the community is minimal and is doing little to encourage and assist much needed change at the rural level. This minimalist engagement by the SSV was criticised by a high chief when he sought my help to organize a project for the women's organization in his village. He asserted that 'they [the government Ministry and the SSV office] are of little use to anyone'. Such incidents raise the question of whose interests are being served by these activist women (see for example van Wesemael-Smit, 1988).

Riles's (1996) thesis on networking amongst NGOs, and regional and international organizations operating in Fiji, stresses the importance of extending knowledge by effective networking with the people that NGOs and other bodies purport to represent. A potentially effective leader has to understand the peoples' needs and constraints, and adopt an appropriate approach in negotiating sensitive issues. As Riles points out, a representative of a NGO may be very good at negotiating at national and international level, yet be poorly informed about the grassroots experience. This problem is well illustrated in a conversation I had during my 2002 field study. An informant described to me a workshop she attended, organized by the Ministry of Women in partnership with the SSV, and how she became concerned to know why it was organized. After her investigation, she came to the conclusion that the workshop was held so that it could be included in the report to be presented at the Tikina Council the following week. Although this cannot be confirmed, her final remark was telling: 'We women are just pawns of the system', conveniently used so that the office is seen to be active. Her comment seems to echo the concern of one of Riles' NGO informants on the critical importance of networking at the local level:

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 (Riles, 1996: 174).

Kikau (1986) concluded that a lip-service approach seems to be the 'rule of the game' for certain women's organizations. Indeed any development benefits for women are more likely at present to be the result of the 'trickle-down effect' of national development initiatives rather than from initiatives of women's organizations (Kikau, 1986: 66).

To recap, a major obstacle to change is the Ministry of Fijian Affairs. To maintain an old status quo for women, the Ministry ensures that the SSV remains under its wing so that the organization will continue to play to the Ministry's 'tune' by expecting SSV members just to attend to traditional duties to the *vanua*, church, and state, and ensuring that SSV representatives to various councils, from the village to the provincial level, stay 'mute' on both *strategic* and *practical* issues.

The Ministry of Women, an institution that surely should properly understand the women it purports to represent, seems to display an indifferent attitude, especially to village women. While the Fijian Administration takes advantage of rural women's silence to avoid dealing with the need for radical changes, the Ministry of Women concentrates mainly on *strategic* issues (for example, human rights) that make it seem relevant to the urban population and other stakeholders (for example, foreign aid donors). It is giving much less attention to rural women. For its part, the Ministry of Fijian Affairs has done very little on either *strategic* or *practical* matters.

When seeking support, women are most inclined to turn to the church. Although the church is hierarchical and paternalistic, it is the only institution that is clearly visible in rural villages, having a building and an official and an established network that organizes activities helping to give meaning and direction to its members. Most importantly, the church provides a 'space' for women to vent their feelings or just to socialize and escape briefly from their chores, without harassment from their spouses. However, only the church itself can address the question of whether the it could become a facilitator for change.

The Methodist Women's Division

The Women's Division of the Methodist Church came under a new leadership in 2001. Now there are over 20,000 members. The organization is called the *Soqosoqo Veitokani ni Marama ni Lotu Wesele* (SVMLW). The mission of the Women's Division is based on John Wesley's teachings: teach, preach and heal, with the aid of prayer. My

principal informant believes that this work is as much part of development as are economic activities. Activities organized by the Women's Division include workshops, training programmes and rallies. Wesleyan theology has shaped the programmes prepared for all workshops and training sessions conducted since 2002. A leadership training session has as its first aim: 'To train women so they can be liberated to become transformed women and better mothers, better housewives, better helpers to their husbands, to the church and the community in which they live' (SVLMW Organization Plan, 2002).

This is very much a replication of the SSV's conservative aims explained earlier. The training programmes have covered most major islands, and at every meeting there were calls for more frequent and longer sessions. In 2004, thirteen circuits had similar training sessions and workshops on the same theme: Liberating, Learning, Discipleship, and Citizenship for Transformation (a five year theme). Sometimes certain NGOs or government departments use the opportunity to work with the SVLMW to address health issues, especially HIV. Men from the Methodist church and other denominations are often welcome to attend women's training sessions and workshops in villages if they are interested. In her work for the training programmes, my principal informant faces challenges all the way from the national level of the church hierarchy down to the grassroots. 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', to be acceptable, her work must often be confined within the limits of biblical doctrine.

In respect to *practical* issues, the SVMLW works closely with the SSV in micro-financed projects because most SVMLW members are also SSV members. Some projects are individually managed and others are group managed. They include chicken farming, vegetable gardening, flower/horticulture business, *voivoi* (pandanus) planting and selling, and screen printing - to name a few. Most projects are being undertaken in the peri-urban areas rather than in rural communities. The SVLMW also uses its radio sessions to promote these programmes.

A Critical Assessment of the Methodist Church Women's Division

With its limited funding and the difficulty it has in maintaining regular contact with its members, the Women's Division of the Methodist Church will face challenges if it is really serious about 'developing its people, not infrastructure', in my informant's words. For example, the

micro-financed projects are currently mostly based in peri-urban areas (a decision probably made by the Ministry of Women) thus excluding over fifty per cent of Fijian women. However, the church could perhaps readily now include themes in its training programmes to challenge women to think beyond their role as traditional 'gatekeepers' to become agents of change. It might also include gender themes that challenge men to become progressive agents of change (if they are present in the training sessions) especially in relation to women's issues.

One aspect that needs to be clearly defined is the aim of the SVLMW, quoted above, to 'liberate' women. It is not stated clearly what women are to be liberated from, whether it is from subordination to male elders or from oppressive demands of various institutions or both. The SVLMW could perhaps also focus on everyday *practical* matters such as prioritizing women's present obligations. Women may be provided with relevant advice to help them make informed decisions on matters that affect them daily. Additionally, the media can be used to reach out to the SVLMW members in isolated areas. Most important of all, the church leaders themselves could make the first step by reducing their demands on women's time, energy and material wealth so that these can be deployed more strongly to meet the needs of the women and their families.

The Church as Platform for Change: An Alternative Model

Women's participation in church rituals in the Pacific islands progressed slowly; they built their places in the churches through their own organizations as well as through their church offices (Forman, 1984). In Fiji the SSV, initially called the *Qele ni Ruve*, was formed by the Methodist church and eventually became a national organization for all indigenous Fijian women. There have also been many changes in church offices such as the appointment of women as lay preachers or their selection to receive theological training for ordination. In other denominations, women have been elected to the central governing assemblies of their churches. However, these changes, according to Forman, have come about due to an external push from powerful international churches rather than from indigenous pressures. There have been some progressive leaders but they were unable to gain support from a largely ethno nationalist Methodist church. Most church leaders (predominantly men) continue to have a reactionary view against liberal progressive ideas. The discussion that follows considers what churches in Melanesian societies might offer as an alternative model for Oceania generally, and whether the model could work in Fiji.

Current developments in Melanesian societies (for example, in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea) suggest an alternative model to Western feminism for the Pacific region. Jolly (2003) discusses how women in some Melanesian societies are emerging as powerful agents through their church groups, to improve their families' welfare, protest against domestic violence and alcoholism, and raise funds for school fees and churches. Within the church, Melanesian rural women, like their counterparts in Fiji, are attempting to address domestic and community problems with limited resources and understanding of women's rights and feminist ideology (Dickson-Waiko, 2003:109). Collective networking through the church provides opportunities to share ideas and identify strategic interests, and allows time out from mundane everyday activities (Scheyvens, 2003). Rallies and women's combined church services with other villages provide opportunities to discuss common issues. Meeting women from other villages also strengthens a sense of self-worth and confidence to attend meetings and other social functions where they exchange ideas that 'encourage a sense of dignity, a desire for literacy, and a broader horizon' (Jolly, 2003: 140).

Douglas (2003) asserts that participation in women's church groups in the Melanesian societies 'constitutes an alternative Melanesian feminist experience to that imposed by liberal (Western) feminism' that may be just as relevant more widely in Oceania (2003: 3). What characterizes this alternative model is that it does not confront or challenge the institutions or authorities, but rather works with them by seeking to enlist their cooperation and support, especially from their men folk. This is a worthwhile idea but fraught with problems because of the difficulties in changing the entrenched assumptions of the men that authority in social affairs is their prerogative.

How might this model apply in Fiji? To answer this, the discussion now turns to the uphill battle women and women's organizations in churches might face, especially in the Methodist church. Whether women in Fiji work with the established authorities or independently, to change their situations requires a degree of clout to exercise their right as agents of change.

Indigenous Fijian Women as Agents of Change

Pacific women are the 'gatekeepers of our culture', remarked a Cook Islands woman (Kingstone, 1990). Vakatale, a Fijian professional woman asserted that Pacific women are 'the custodians of indigenous knowledge' (*Fiji Times*, 25 April 1995). As they are the 'guardians' of

indigenous knowledge, they perhaps hold the key to what is allowed to be disseminated, enforced, and/or changed. Whether or not as gatekeepers of tradition, women need to become agents of change by supporting programmes to educate them and raise their awareness of their citizen rights, and to challenge their conservative assumptions about aspects of tradition that may hinder improvements to their lives. Persuading women to become agents of change will not be easy if they are not challenged and convinced of the need. Many women will be inhibited by two concerns: a desire not to lose their time-honoured role as conservators of the status quo, and a fear of disrupting social harmony by challenging what they still see as men's proper role as initiators of change. If they can overcome these concerns, women, given their enormous contributions to the church, could justifiably use the church to facilitate the much-needed changes. They might well begin by selectively 'down-sizing' their church and *vanua* obligations and requesting cooperation from the church leaders in implementing new programmes with themes that address *strategic* and *practical* issues.

Are Churches Prepared to be Facilitators of Change?

The demands for change emanate partly from powerful external forces such as certain Pentecostal churches well-connected at the global level, and international agencies such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission that demand that universal values be adopted. Demands for change also come from civil society organisations and more importantly, from women members of the church.

The fact that the mainline churches and the NRG are establishing their own ministries for women might give the impression that these churches are now enthusiastic for change. However, there remains the problem of the hierarchical and patriarchal church structure. Changes within the churches encouraged mainly by external forces have had little direct effect on the attitudes of ordinary men and women. The opposition to change from male dominated church leadership needs little explanation. Ironically, there is also likely to be minimal cooperation from women. Melanesian women prefer to try to enlist support from their menfolk rather than use confrontational tactics to seek change. Enlisting men's support could certainly be a challenge, but convincing women to accept and become agents of change may also be problematic. A major reason for this reluctance is that women view their role as cultural gatekeepers and peacemakers very seriously. This role is deeply embedded in their psychological makeup and in some ways it is strongly in their inter-

est that the role be reaffirmed for maintaining meaning and pride in their lives. Thus, women's identity in their traditional context will be difficult to challenge. Moreover, many women might not perceive their problems within the church as being related to the paternalistic and hierarchical nature of their societies, as this is expressed in family and local community life generally, and in the attitudes and actions of government leaders and officials. This will be a very challenging obstacle for those who hope to see changes soon.

There is, however, the possibility that women's church groups could assert their autonomy from the patriarchal church, rather than maintaining a conservative compliance. Here it is worth considering the course taken in recent times by the Catholic Women's League in Tonga, which is an example of an organization that is promoting *strategic* gender issues, working very closely with government ministries, the United Nations, schools and other NGOs such as the Regional Rights Resource Team that promote human rights issues. It has four arms, three of which are helping to promote 'autonomy' for women. 'Autonomy' in this context implies 'control over one's life and body with respect to other people' (van Wese-mael-Smit, 1988: 269). The three arms promoting autonomy are the United Nations Volunteer Project, the Legal Literacy Project and the Centre for Women and Children. The United Nations Volunteer Project consults women's grassroots organizations to identify issues that affect women and which the government is urged to act on. It also works with government ministries by organizing forums and workshops for civil servants to attend and visiting schools to give talks on women's issues. The Volunteer Project also works with the Legal Literacy Project by providing training in legal rights, awareness raising programmes, and free legal advice. The Centre for Women and Children conducts workshops and seminars, and publishes booklets to promote gender equality and rights issues. Perhaps the most important point to highlight is that the Tongan women's body has been successful in carrying out such bold steps due mainly to the availability of funding from aid donors. This resource that might well be available to the SVMLW in Fiji if it wants to operate independently of the church leadership.

Conclusion

Indigenous Fijians generally acknowledge and celebrate the important role the church plays in community identity and solidarity. However, to properly address the needs of the underprivileged and the voiceless, the church should now accept a responsibility to curtail or reduce certain

church activities that burden women and constantly siphon off scarce resources (including much money) from the household. The church also should recognize a responsibility to promote programmes that aim to address *strategic* gender issues especially in rural villages. The most urgent present need in the villages, however, is to address its *practical* issues.

If it is to effectively meet both kinds of issues, the church must tackle some powerful obstacles. The sharp contradiction between the old established churches' continued emphasis on collectivist ideals, and the push from other agencies, such as the globally connected Pentecostal churches and international bodies, to promote individualistic values, shows up the established churches as being ill-prepared at present to meet the strengthening demands for change. To some extent, these churches do acquiesce to the demands from outside agencies by creating women's organizations. However, these measures seem unable to accommodate much needed changes. There is also the contradiction created by the NRG's emphasising individualism while rejecting feminist ethics. Thus, neither of the two church doctrines concerning gender roles (the old and the new) is working to the advantage of women.

Another vexing contradiction in this complex situation arises from the oppressive nature of both the *vanua* (traditional community) and the state, both of which ought to be tackling difficulties experienced by rural women, but instead are tending to compound the problem. Women's revered role as gatekeepers of culture is taken advantage of by the very institutions, which, while purporting to represent them, insist that they shoulder increasing burdens of service. The strong ties and mutual support between these two institutions and the church makes it difficult for women to freely determine their priorities. Women are sandwiched between the pressure to fulfil the institutional obligations, and their increasing desire for a freer life to be able to concentrate their time, energy and finance on their families rather than on institutions, which give them little that is now helpful in return.

Both *strategic* and *practical* issues are critical to women. However, the question of which of the two is most important now for a particular group of women depends very much on the context of their circumstances. To most rural women, *practical* issues of conserving resources for improving family and community living standards are still most critical. Church leaders can address them by making a concerted effort to drastically reduce the burden of women's obligations. *Strategic* issues such as human rights will only be fully appreciated and acted on when the *practical* needs are first met.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to all the women I interviewed and who welcomed me to observe their activities during my field study. My thanks also to the referees and the editor who gave useful suggestions to improve this paper.

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