Women in post-coup Fiji: negotiating work through old and new realities

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Introduction

The political economy of post-coup Fiji has profoundly shaped women's lives, expectations and identities. Changes in gender relations were evident by 1987, but the unprecedented upheavals of the coups and subsequent political and economic restructuring accelerated change for Fiji's women. Initially, many bore the negative consequences of the coups as silent individuals; a few celebrated new opportunities as role models for their gender and ethnic group. Women have increasingly recognised, to varying degrees, a commonality behind the changes that have taken place. Change is a reflection of their cultures, the legacy of colonialism, the education system, the impact of the post-coup regime, and globalisation. For women, gender is the central thread through these changes; but they are also linked to other identities and hierarchies, and especially those of ethnicity and class. In part, this sheds light on the contradictory responses to change from women. Even the most progressive women eventually confront 'old realities', not just from the past but as a daily reality in the present. Similarly, women identified as traditionalists can rarely ignore local and global cultural, economic and political challenges. For most women these extremes are not polarised choices but rather represent what may seem to be a never-ending balancing act between old and new realities, in which personal and collective

identities are negotiated to varying degrees. This chapter¹ explores these issues primarily through women's work in Fiji. However, it is predicated on the recognition that it is futile to separate work from other components of women's lives.

Women and work, past and present

Women's labour was essential, providing food and services, during Fiji's initial participation in the global economy, before and after cession to Britain in 1874, when Fiji became dependant on the export of sugar, copra and gold. The plantation-dominated economy was responsible not only for Fiji's distinctive ethnic composition, it also shaped gender relations. For example, from 1879 to 1920 sugarcane was produced on plantations that relied upon indentured South Asian workers. However, regulations stipulated that forty per cent of indentured labourers should be female. Thus, the plantation system utilised women's cheap labour. After the last indenture in 1920, sugar production shifted to small family farms. Cane contracts were only issued to married men, but farms were too small to support extended families. Men therefore worked in sugar mills, harvesting gangs and other forms of off-farm agricultural work. Women and children's unpaid labour was vital for on-farm production.

Colonial policies also sought to regulate indigenous Fijian participation in the paid workforce. Indigenous Fijians were predominantly subsistence workers, but many also took up cash cropping and paid work to meet taxes and buy commodities (Emberson-Bain 1994b:7). However, customary controls on women's geographical and occupational mobility, which effectively restricted entry into paid work, were strengthened by colonial regulations. Nonetheless, women's village, fishing and horticultural activities, while not recognised as 'work' within colonial society, were essential for economic survival, financial resources and community obligations. Thus, I suggest that in common with other societies, women's work in Fiji's villages subsidised the costs, resources and care of the workforce.

Women's constricted involvement in Fiji's paid workforce continued after political independence. Although their participation in paid work expanded, these activities—casual or unregulated, as domestic workers, market vendors, in family businesses, or on farms—were largely unrecorded. Thus, by independence only 14 per cent of women workers were recorded as participating in the cash

economy. This increased to 30.5 per cent by 1992 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1996), representing over 55 per cent of Fiji's 'economically active' female workforce. There can be little doubt though that these figures severely underestimate the contribution of women. For example, only 4,857 women, 5.2 per cent of all, were classified as farmers in Fiji's 1991 agricultural census (Department for Women and Culture 1995). Women's farming roles are much greater, however, as subsistence and unpaid agricultural labour. Much of this work though is categorised as domestic work, and is thus statistically unrecognised, because it results in no direct remuneration. Labour force participation rates therefore reflect the gender bias of official statistics (Cameron, this volume). The assumptions, terminology and categorisation, and public identification by women of their working contribution to society can all lead to gaps in measurement (Waring 1990).

Women's formal employment opportunities are mainly in the public, retailing, financial, manufacturing and tourism sectors. Today, two-thirds of women in paid labour in Fiji are employed in government and manufacturing (International Labour Organisation/South East Asia and the Pacific Multidisciplinary Advisory Team (ILO/SEAPAT) 1997:15). Public sector workers may appear to be comparatively well paid, but their salaries were cut by fifteen per cent after the coups. Subsequent restructuring, through fiscal cuts, privatisation, and the corporatisation of government departments, has had major implications for the high proportion of women working in the public sector, most of whom are employed at lower levels than men (ILO/SEAPAT 1997). Thus, while by 1996 women accounted for 45 per cent of civil servants, females represented only 8 per cent of senior positions, 20 per cent of middle posts, and 48 per cent of lower-level positions (Booth 1994:18). Moreover, the gendered segmentation of the public sector labour market was indicated by female concentration in health and education. In 1996, 48 per cent of female civil servants worked in the Ministry of Education, Women and Culture, primarily as lower-level teachers. Even when women are appointed as head teachers they tend to remain in smaller schools. Similarly, 75 per cent of civil servants in the Ministry of Health were women, mostly employed as nurses (Public Service Commission 1996). The gender segmentation of the public sector labour market is blamed by unionists on management boards. For example, in teaching 'they say women aren't capable, they can't attend evening meetings,

or would feel uncomfortable with a mainly male management committee, but these are lame excuses' (*Fiji Times*, 13 February 1997).

Following global trends, much of the growth in new employment in Fiji is concentrated in an increasingly feminised manufacturing sector. Manufacturing became the main growth area of employment since the coups, accounting for about a quarter of formal employment (Fallon and King 1995:7; Sepehri and Akram-Lodhi, this volume). This work is generally poorly paid, insecure, usually non-unionised, and with low levels of responsibility. Undoubtedly, the garment industry has attracted the most attention in post-coup Fiji. This has become Fiji's main employment growth area and the biggest export after sugar. Garment production was integral to the post-coup government's drive towards a foreign investment-based export-driven economy. State support was delivered through tax-free factories and labour legislation outlined below. Structural adjustment policies, including currency devaluation, external trade liberalisation and internal deregulation, were designed to promote internationally competitive industries such as garments. The impact on female employment was rapid. In 1986 women comprised only 9.7 per cent of the manufacturing labour force. They now account for 50 per cent, equating to 14 per cent of formal sector employment (Forsyth 1996:8). By 1996 the garment industry had an estimated 14,000 workers, the majority of whom were women.

Women's work in garment production aroused controversy because of poor wages, poor working conditions, and little or no union protection. Reports revealed 60 hour work weeks without payment for overtime. They noted inadequate health and safety protection. They spoke of harassment of workers. They demonstrated no paid holidays, no leave for illness, and no maternity leave (Harrington 1996:3; Ram 1994:246). These reports, however, had a limited impact. Pay had been very poor, with many workers earning only F\$20 to F\$40 per week. In 1997 a new Wages Council Order set minimum rates at 90 cents an hour for beginners and F\$1.10 an hour for trained workers. The order introduced five days of sick leave for workers with three months employment. Garment workers also became entitled to annual leave, paid public holidays and national provident fund contributions. However, at F\$1.10 an hour, pay remains very low. Moreover, qualifying for sick leave is more stringent: other manufacturing workers are entitled to ten days leave with no qualifying period.

The focus on the garment industry has spurred awareness of poor remuneration and employment conditions elsewhere. For example, it is argued that the Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO), a government owned tuna cannery, has tapped into a 'captive labour market' (Emberson-Bain 1994a) of women from villages on Ovalau and nearby islands. Critics have condemned the exploitation of women through poor pay and working conditions. In 1994 these workers earned between F\$65 and F\$70 a week before taxation and other deductions. However, many women had costly loan repayments to Westpac Bank, so that cash-in-hand might, at the end of the week, be only F\$10. At the same time, because of the seasonality of the tuna industry many workers were casually employed, even if they had worked at PAFCO for several years. Emberson-Bain's report also considered the controls and inspection of health and safety for women inferior to that of men.

The position of women workers on Ovalau indicates the conflicting pressures faced by the majority of Fiji's women, who live in comparatively small rural settlements. Farming continues to be the biggest source of livelihood security for all indigenous Fijians, and women's participation in both subsistence and cash farming is essential. A recent study found that women did not regard farm work as 'the sole responsibility of males or that it was secondary to women's roles as wives and mothers. Farm work was perceived and defined as an integral part of women's work' (Fiji Association of Women Graduates (FAWG) 1994:51). Those who took part in the study worked up to five hours daily on family farms, except on Sundays or when selling produce at the market. Researchers throughout the Pacific (for example, Fairbairn-Dunlop 1994) suggest that women's workloads are burgeoning as rural communities become more integrated into market relations. This increased work manifests itself through not only the double shift of farm and domestic work but also through the multiplicity of often contiguous tasks in cash cropping, informal trading, subsistence and community activities. Similarly, women's role in fishing is widening to include not only subsistence activities but also collecting and processing fish and shellfish for the market.

Female farmers, compared to men, have less access to state and financial support. Women's labour has been essential to subsistence farming and cash cropping but there is little recognition, external advice or access to new machinery. Many women still have considerable difficulty in securing loans, lacking not only collateral and deposits but

also confidence. Thus, during 1993, 56 per cent of Fiji Development Bank loans went to agriculture but only 11 per cent were exclusively secured by women (Department for Women and Culture 1995:5). Similarly, Sue Carswell found that agricultural extension officers rarely consult women on farms. Overall, this 'affects not only the subsistence situation of rural families but also employability of women in agricultural activities' (Department for Women and Culture 1995:10).

Opportunities for off-farm labour are also gendered throughout Fiji, depending on access to industrial or tourist centres. Negative attitudes continue to persist about Indo-Fijian women in rural communities participating in formal work. Single women migrating to towns are considered morally vulnerable in some Indo-Fijian families. However, economic necessity and individual choice are pushing an increasing number into seeking off-farm employment. This has occurred though during the post-coup period, when Indo-Fijian women were susceptible to employment discrimination. As a consequence, in many regions off-farm work opportunities for women are limited to informal sector cash and exchange opportunities, such as producing crafts or providing services such as sewing. At the same time, migration depletes the availability of domestic and farm labour.

Rabuka promised better opportunities for indigenous Fijians but many have experienced greater economic hardship. Rising post-coup unemployment² and retrenchment in the public and private sectors led to many men being unable to support their families. As the financial onus fell on women, many could only turn to the informal sector. A survey of market vendors in Suva revealed ethnic disparity, with 44 per cent of Indo-Fijians supporting unemployed husbands, compared to only 12.5 per cent of female indigenous Fijian vendors (FAWG 1994:61–2). Ethnic occupational discrimination in the formal sector in however refracted through gender relations: obtaining work requires migration from villages, and this has implications for childcare which many women are reluctant to accept.

Education and gender

The education system, consciously and indirectly, has a key role in reproducing gender stereotypes. As elaborated below, these are being challenged, but gendered assumptions within Fiji's communities channel women into sectors of the labour market and hamper their

ability to negotiate gender and work (Leckie 1997a). Hindu, Muslim and Christian cultures, and ethnic, gender and class stereotypes, structured partly through colonialism, have mediated gender and work through education.

Christian ideals of femininity (Ralston 1990:74–5) and appropriate education, long ago introduced by missionaries, remain prominent in Fiji. Many young women are encouraged or choose to pursue ‘caring’ or service occupations. The origin of these choices can be traced back to the colonial period: the colonial authorities fostered ethnically and gender-segregated education, which in turn was also segmented by traditional hierarchies and class. The élite attended boarding schools, but most indigenous Fijians had more limited village education, which in turn offered fewer occupational possibilities.

For many years Indo-Fijian women had less access to formal education than their indigenous sisters. In a sample of market vendors (FAWG 1994:21–5, 61), 44 per cent of Indo-Fijians had no education compared to only 2 per cent of indigenous Fijian women. Reasons for such disparities in education and the correlation with occupation are complex. Indo-Fijian communities have preferred to educate male children but the persistence of gender ideology needs also to be considered against economic constraints and family labour requirements. Moreover, expectations of early marriage and gender roles within families have been considerably disrupted by the realities of economic and social change during the past decade. Nevertheless, in 1996 Carswell was reminded of dominant attitudes among Indo-Fijian farming families: ‘the girls should be only educated up to class eight [age 13], then keep two or three years home, stay home, just get some education in cooking food and how to put their houses and then seventeen, eighteen they marry’ (Carswell 1996, personal communication). According to the Director of Fiji’s Council of Social Services, investment in education still favours boys rather than girls (*Balance*, September–October 1997:1). Economic pressures and increasing poverty influence gender choices in allocating money and time for education. Young women’s labour may also be needed, especially for childcare, if the mother is working within the family farm, business or elsewhere.

Having said that, education levels for all women in Fiji have increased during the past decade, with high levels of females attending primary and secondary school. Women comprise 45 per cent

of students at the University of the South Pacific (ILO/SEAPAT 1997:24)³. 'Whatever other aspects of Fiji culture limit the economic advancement of women, it seems clear that existing attitudes about gender have not stopped girls from attending and completing school in large numbers' (ILO/SEAPAT 1997:23). However, these impressive educational achievements are inadequately developed in the workplace, indicating that gender bias still channels women's employment. For example, unpaid farm work is acceptable for women in most cane farming localities but pursuing it as paid employment is frequently considered inappropriate. Community constraints are replicated at the wider state level, with little acknowledgment of women's farming skills in educational and agricultural extension programs. Before 1983 the intake of women at the Fiji College of Agriculture was restricted to two and in 1988 no females were enrolled there (Department for Women and Culture 1995:10). According to Carswell, some change is now evident, with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Agricultural Landlords and Tenants Act extension services beginning to recruit female officers, conduct gender awareness staff courses, and incorporate women into programs.

Significant gender disparities remain in technical training. In 1993 women were still concentrated in 'traditional' programs at the Fiji Institute of Technology: business studies, secretarial studies, hotel and catering services. Participation in all courses—which cover management, marketing, and business, with the exception of accounting and secretarial work, offered by the Fiji National Training Council—is mostly by males (ILO/SEAPAT 1997:20). Employers reproduce gendered training opportunities through their selection of sponsorship candidates. Teaching and nursing trainees are predominantly women. Women may comprise over half of the undergraduates at the University of the South Pacific but there is a marked drop in female participation in postgraduate and advanced professional studies.

The introduction of compulsory education in 1997 brought the promise of greater equity, but this was offset by rising educational costs for families and schools, a trend which was accentuated by currency devaluation in early 1998. Books, uniforms and equipment are imported and school fees continue to increase. The impact may however have been mediated by ethnicity. Some researchers argue

that Indo-Fijians have less access to a 'community safety net' (ILO/SEAPAT 1997) compared to many indigenous Fijian families living in villages. Indo-Fijian families are likely to bear educational costs as individual families, while indigenous Fijians usually have more communal and state support. However, as the joint United Nations/Fiji Government *Fiji Poverty Report* revealed, such assumptions no longer apply to all indigenous Fijians. Indeed, community care may have been lacking for some destitute women in the past (United Nations Development Programme/Government of Fiji 1997:90).

Ethnicity and gender

As this volume reiterates, Fiji's contemporary political economy bears the legacies of colonial practices. These established Fiji's ethnic population; current census figures indicate that 51 per cent are indigenous Fijian, 44 per cent trace South Asian ancestry, and 5 per cent identify with other ethnic backgrounds. This is a reversal from earlier patterns, when Indo-Fijians numerically exceeded indigenous Fijians.

Colonial and racially-bounded hierarchies reinforced ethnic and gender stereotypes and inequalities through both ideology and more visible structures. Ethnic divisions appear to have been cast in stone but in practice were undoubtedly flexible and negotiated (Robertson, this volume). Tensions between essentialised ethnic and gender constructions and their constituencies, and the increasing irrelevance of such categorisation and identity, evoke contradictory dynamics within Fiji society. The implications for women in the contemporary political economy of work are explored here.

Women's identities are more fractured than the seemingly rigid ethnic and gender boundaries moulded by colonisation and tradition. This disruption reflects changes of the past decade, including political upheavals, economic hardship, structural adjustment, changing gender relations, and changing expectations from women. Many progressive women acknowledge the 'messy realities' (Chhachhi and Pittin 1996) of balancing and challenging the gender expectations of their cultures. Despite this, representations of ethnic gender stereotypes are too often simplistic. These idealised qualities may have some purchase on reality; however, they intersect with newer pressures, exacerbated by the coups and late 20th century

globalisation. As noted, gender stereotypes are manifested in paid and unpaid work, sometimes confined to ethnicity, but more often cross-cutting these boundaries.

In the Indo-Fijian community, Shireen Lateef has emphasised the reproduction of aspects of South Asian gender ideology in Fiji, most notably the cultural and spatial constraints of *purdah* (Lateef 1990b:44–8)⁴. This stresses gender segregation, male protection of women, and male responsibility for the material welfare of the family. An Indo-Fijian farming woman told Carswell that although she had impressive school qualifications and intended to pursue a career, her father blocked this by arranging her marriage so that most of her activities were confined to the family space. Her husband also prohibited her working outside the farm even when she was offered employment as an assistant teaching in a nearby school.

Limits over women's occupational and spatial mobility are reinforced through personal ties of love and loyalty, fear of non-acceptance in the local community, and bringing shame to the family. Control is also maintained through psychological and physical abuse. Lateef (1990b:43) identified the 'threat and use of physical violence against wives as a powerful and effective mechanism for ensuring the maintenance and reproduction of traditional gender relations among Indo-Fijians'. This is by no means specific to this ethnic community. Women can face violence when their paid work appears to be interfering with domestic work. Some men become angry over disruption to domestic routines, or when their role as family 'provider' reverses to that of dependent. Women can also reinforce gendered expectations and controls, both over themselves and other women.

Although violence against women features in all ethnicities, the wider context of fear in post-coup Fiji did have specific implications for Indo-Fijians. As targets of violence, many families tightened controls on women's mobility: 'for Indo-Fijian women the coups represent a retrogressive step in their struggle for greater freedom' (Lateef 1990a:121).

Not all indigenous Fijian women consider the coups to have enhanced their lives. Rabuka declared that he seized power in 1987 to protect and advance indigenous control of power and resources in Fiji. Colonial structures had incorporated these goals, provided they remained within precise ethnic boundaries. Indigenous Fijian

paramountcy was bolstered through the strengthening of chiefly authority and European guardianship (Lawson 1991:81–123). Colonial and native administrations and traditional structures and values specified roles that limited women's access to land, monetary resources and political authority. This has been challenged in the post-coup years, but Pauline McKenzie Aucoin's observations of life in the interior of western Viti Levu remains pertinent in the understanding of contemporary gender roles within indigenous Fijian communities.

Men exercise authority over women. Their authority derives from a number of sources. First, the fact that they are leaders at the societal level—the district, village and clan heads are always male—justifies extension of 'male authority' over family members. In addition, men have control over religious practices that center on the clans' men's houses (*na beto*). Finally, they are considered stronger than women, and strength is valued in Fijian society. These factors allow them to lead society and to be leaders within the clan and the household (McKenzie Aucoin 1990:26; see also Ravuvu 1987:261–80).

Indigenous Fijian customary and hierarchical links of authority and respect are not confined to traditional spheres but permeate gender relations in paid and professional work. For example, nurses have encountered political and family interference in the health sector with irregular appointments to top nursing posts, selection for post-basic training, scholarships and workshops. One nurse noted that 'clan favouritism and nepotism within nursing at CWM Hospital had overruled the power of wisdom and merit' (Fiji Nursing Association (FNA) archives, member to General Secretary FNA, 3 February 1993). Indigenous Fijian nurses complain about the influence of customary status in the workplace. Some tutors are appointed on 'qualifications of blue blood' which 'makes nurses quite passive'. Chiefly rank and state political connections have particularly controlled women's post-coup political and union activities. At the same time, victimisation was common after a major nurses' strike in 1990. Favourable duties, promotions, training and leave were allocated to non-striking wives and relatives of senior health officials (*Fiji Times*, 3 October 1990; FNA, nd).

Clearly, while the specifics of gendered roles in Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian cultures are significant, restrictive gender representations are common to women of all cultures in Fiji. These have proved convenient in hiring practices, low pay and gendered skill differentials, particularly in the garment industry, but also in

other paid manufacturing work as well. Clichéd stereotypes include women's 'nimble fingers', passivity and the assumption they should be grateful for any paid work as 'half a loaf is better than none' (Slatter 1987). This is because women are perceived by employers as supplementary wage earners, choosing to work for personal motives: 'lipstick', 'pin money', self-fulfilment or social interaction (Grynberg and Osei 1996:15). As a general rule, gendered stereotypes over skills and divisions of labour are carried over into factories. Men's and women's tasks tend to be segmented according to different classifications of skill and remuneration. In many factories men occupy most of the managerial and supervisory roles, work on fully automated machines and in the 'skilled' cutting sections.

Women also repeatedly identify how gendered stereotypes are reinforced by tradition to shape their working predicaments. For example,

[a]ttitudes about gender provide, first, the immediate motivation and a ready rationale for discrimination. Also, aside from direct discrimination and male actions that discourage them from advancing economically, many women themselves make choices about their lives—about family responsibilities, about training, about career options—that work to maintain the economic differences between themselves and men (ILO/SEAPAT 1997:3).

Imrana Jalal and Wadan Narsey have labelled this a 'culture of silence' that condemns women's assertiveness as disrespectful to those with traditional power. They stress that

why women remain silent is neither about being inferior, being less knowledgeable nor economically disadvantaged. It is a combination of many factors such as religion, culture, upbringing, the fear of retaliation, the lack of protection—dynamics which attribute to people's expectations of an ideal female in a patriarchal society such as Fiji (*Balance*, September–October 1997:8–9).

Health activist Mridula Sainath (1997:3) found restrictions still applied to business women who were attempting to break out of traditional gender moulds. Although discrimination in accessing loans and credit appeared to be declining, 'what women were really up against were the hostile cultural and traditional environment which does not encourage women to own property and assets. In most families, the purse strings and investment strategies are men's domain'.

Women in Business was founded by Nur Ali Bano to counteract women being ostracised and stereotyped as weak in business dealings (*Fiji Times*, 25 April 1998). Indigenous Fijian representations of men as *qwaqwa*—‘hard, strong, tough and resistant’—and women as *malumaluma*—‘soft, weak, gentle and easygoing’ (McKenzie Aucoin 1990:27)—can apply to women of any ethnicity. Such stereotypes affect professional women. For example, women may numerically dominate teaching but, as already noted, promotion to higher levels can be constrained by culture and tradition (*Fiji Times*, 1 April 1996). This also reinforces the concentration of women in primary teaching (Booth 1994:42–6).

Likewise, nursing (Leckie 1997a) illustrates how multiple hierarchies of gender, family, politics, colonialism and ethnicity overlay one another. The ‘Nightingale tradition’ of nursing (Bradley 1989:193–4) as an autonomous female space has shaped nursing discourse and practices in Fiji. This fitted into indigenous female healing roles and missionary ideals of femininity, which together resulted in chiefly women being considered as suitable nursing trainees (Fiji National Archives, F48/168 1936). By way of contrast, although Indo-Fijian communities formerly considered nursing to below status, today it is an acceptable career for women and can be valuable when seeking work abroad. Pay and working conditions for nurses in Fiji do not though match this positive status. Many nurses explicitly attribute such discrepancies to the gender inequalities within Fiji’s cultures. As one has said,

customs and traditions have continued to place women in an inferior position. This cultural background colours the attitude of the Ministry of Health, male society as a whole, in regard to nurses and their problems. From time immemorial, therefore, nurses in Fiji have generally accepted their inferior role as an integral part of their existence (FNA archives, FNA General Secretary to Minister, Women’s Affairs and Social Welfare, 9 August 1988).

Since the coups, ethnicity and politics have further cut into workplace relations and added to gender discrimination in promotion and training for Indo-Fijian women in the public sector. Some indigenous Fijian women have also found that favours based on regional, kinship and political ties increased during this period. Family relationships are evident in the health sector, where many female nurses are married to male doctors. These ties were invoked to break the 1990 strike. Some nurses kept their strike participation a secret from their husbands in order to avoid conflict with his political identity. Those

women who defied their husbands' censure of strike participation were challenging his authority as household head. Contradictions among attitudes to the nurses' strike were reflected in Rabuka's support of their cause while his government declared it illegal.

The coups ushered in a resurgence of indigenous Fijian traditionalism and nationalism but this representation, particularly over gender, was highly contested. Fiji appears progressive at a global level, through the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, cultural and traditional values supersede gender equality, as Fiji has entered a reservation to two CEDAW articles⁵. This diluted acceptance of the CEDAW is at odds with the declaration of gender equality in Fiji's 1997 constitution.

While some Hindus and Muslims have advocated the maintenance of traditional gender roles to strengthen religious identity, conservative gender roles have been particularly reinforced by post-coup Christian fundamentalism. Christian morality is linked with indigenous identity. A spokesperson for the Methodist Church regarded any differing gender roles or sexualities as a threat to indigenous Fijian values when they stated that

Fiji must also be cautious of Western influences. Not all good things come from Western civilisation. We must base our future with sound Christian doctrine...we should treasure family values and teach our people to live a healthy moral standard (*Fiji Times*, 13 July 1994).

Christianity remains the religion that is invoked to control labour in Fiji. In the aftermath of industrial unrest at PAFCO during 1993, management encouraged prayer meetings that preached obedience, non-confrontation, love, unity and 'family togetherness' in the factory. Christian values were also reinforced through a company prohibition on adultery, which could illegally result in instant dismissal (Emberson-Bain 1994a:160).

Christianity has also been central to nursing discourse in Fiji, with the nursing establishment encouraging nurses to seek solace through the Nurses' Christian Fellowship rather than engaging in militant or activities. A nursing unionist was frustrated by some members accepting their poor pay because 'nursing is seen as a vocation...[A] real calling...[with] healing hands in place of Jesus. The Lord will reward you' (field notes 1996). The applicability of Christian discourse in the caring professions is however contested not only by non-Christians but also

by committed Christians. Biblical texts have been invoked to rationalise rebellious behaviour and to challenge the status quo (Leckie 1997b:135). A prominent FNA official resolved any incapability between her religious beliefs and taking strike action when she said

the message was loud and clear to me, see the message I was given was Romans 13, I still remember that, it says that we have to honour the government, the government of the day is the one that god, the interpretation that was given to me that the government of the day has set out the strategies to follow in this time of crisis and that we had followed...industrial action was also within government strategies for such a situation which we have done...So that was really clear in my mind, God had chosen this government, this government had given this provision and we were working within that provision. That to me was enough (field notes 1996).

Women and poverty

If subjective gendered stereotyping has few ethnic boundaries in Fiji, so too does the harsh reality of poverty. The gendered impact of poverty reflects women's inferior position in the labour market and changing family structures. Between 1989 and 1991 the percentage of poor urban households doubled from 20 to 40, while in 1993 one in three rural households were estimated to live below the poverty line (Bryant 1993:74). More recent estimates of Fiji's poor vary from the *Fiji Poverty Report's* quarter of the population (UNDP 1997:39) to the Fiji Council of Social Services's half of the population (*Fiji Times*, 28 January 1998). Estimates of the poverty line in 1995 ranged from a low of F\$45 per week to a high of F\$94.20 per week (UNDP 1997:32–40). The 'economic miracle' of export manufacturing created jobs for women, but the low levels of pay documented above mean that wages, particularly in tax-free factories, fall short of minimum household weekly income levels, trapping many in poverty. One survey found 55.5 per cent of Fiji's female-headed households lived in poverty and among all poor households, 20 per cent were headed by women (Bryant 1993:79). Eighty per cent of very poor families housed by the Housing Assistance and Relief Trust have a female head (Booth 1994:59).

Women's vulnerability to poverty is associated with shifting family structures over the past decade. Accurate figures are not available but it appears there has been an increase in the number of nuclear households, an increase in the number of female-headed households,

and an increase in the number of sole parent households (UNDP 1997:76–7). Of 260 female garment workers surveyed in 1993, one-third were sole income earners (Harrington 1994:90). Up to 70 per cent of the mostly female casual vendors at Suva market are sole family income earners (FAWG 1994:27–8, 62). The poverty position of female-headed households has been documented, but given the overlap between female-headed and sole parent households, it is worth noting that conservative estimates derived from the 1990–1 Household Income and Employment Survey of the very poor suggest at least four out of five widowed household heads and two-thirds of separated and divorced household heads are women (UNDP 1997:52). Separated or divorced women are more likely to live in urban areas, where they are dependent on a cash income. However, older and widowed women also may lack support. That

almost 40 per cent of women heads who are over 60 years of age are economically active is quite remarkable and demonstrates the degree of economic need they experience. In other words, if their families were supporting them, as the stereotypical view of family support nets proposes they do, then this pattern would not be seen. Women are disadvantaged by the job market and must often seek menial jobs, such as domestic workers (UNDP 1997:57).

The economic pressures faced by sole mothers were compounded when maintenance support for divorced women was sliced from between F\$10 and F\$15 a week to between F\$5 and F\$7.50 after the coups. To compound this, only 19 per cent of maintenance orders are regularly paid and almost half are defaulted on by ex-husbands (UNDP 1997:64). The meagre resources of welfare agencies, such as the Bayly Clinic, have been under unprecedented pressure since 1987. During 1997 Fiji's Department of Social Welfare exhausted funds to assist the very poor.

Agency and resistance: contradictions and gender

The post-coup decade appears to have cast a gloomy despondency over Fiji's women. In many ways economic pressures and political and cultural discrimination have sharpened women's subordination. Yet during these years there have been strong visible actions by women to redress not only their circumstances but also those of others in Fiji. Political contestation, albeit focused on indigenous and ethnic issues, has accentuated concern over women's rights in Fiji.

Although many women are self-congratulatory over their more public assertiveness, this is usually tinged with caution. The contradictions of women's agency were summed up to me by a young nurse who protested about pay and conditions but shrugged her shoulders in defeat and said 'we are women, can't fight' (field notes 1996). This does not mean that women passively accept the status quo but that gender identities and stereotypes override or reinforce other hurdles women encounter in the home, community, workplace, and at national and global levels. Despite these parameters, women do individually and collectively resist the limitations of gender, ethnicity, tradition and poverty, but often covertly. Within both the home and workplace this can be, for example, through sickness or absenteeism. For example, the Indo-Fijian woman described earlier became anorexic after her father forbade her to pursue nursing as a career. She says that she 'really cried for the work and still I don't go well now. I didn't eat food for I think about a week' (field notes 1996). Industrial sabotage and low productivity may also indicate resistance to the labour process. Christy Harrington (1999) reported women protesting by smearing lipstick on clothes or shoddily sewing garment pieces together. David Forsyth (1996:16) attributed the high labour turnover in factories to 'an adversarial and unhappy environment'. This equally reflected employer tactics of keeping costs low by dismissing employees qualifying for full pay rates.

When women publicly negotiate their roles, it is often through established community structures such as religious groups, women's village committees or service organisations. However, beginning in the 1970s, and particularly in recent years, increasing numbers of women have been dissatisfied with 'silent resistance' and conventional 'ladies' organisations. This mirrors global shifts, where women have become more proactive through new feminist movements and within existing organisations, notably trade unions, to confront worsening economic realities. These two strands of collective activism have coalesced over common issues in post-coup Fiji but also diverged over methods, aims and ideals.

Women's networks, involvement and solidarity were vital in workers' protests and achieving union representation. Women in Fiji are active as unionists in occupations where they numerically dominate: nursing and teaching in the public sector, and banking in the private sector. However, overall there has been limited female

involvement in Fiji's paid, unionised workforce, and in some service sectors such as tourism representation is seriously lacking. According to a 1993 South Pacific and Oceanic Council of Trade Unions survey, female union membership in Fiji is, at 22 per cent, much lower than in Western Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands and Kiribati (South Pacific and Oceanic Council of Trade Unions (SPOCTU) 1993).

Initially, the military-backed government banned unions in Fiji's tax-free factories. However, in 1989 the Fiji Association of Garment Workers (FAGW) gained registration as an industrial association. When employers opposed this, workers took strike action (Leckie 1992). In 1990, for example, an international ban loomed when government rejected a dispute over the dismissal of three union activists from Lotus Garments (*Fiji Times*, 2 November 1990). Workers struck for a month over 'appalling working conditions and extremely long hours'. Wages and conditions have improved in some factories, but discontent remains. Despite initial optimism, the FAGW has not been able to maintain this momentum, with membership plummeting from around 2000 in 1992 to less than 700 in 1996 (Forsyth 1996:15). This is due to obstacles from employers—only 2 among 200 firms recognise the union—labour laws, the state, and, admittedly, internal problems within the FAGW.

In contrast, nurses are strongly unionised with around three-quarters belonging to the FNA. There is considerable contestation within the FNA about the association's methods and its identity as a union and as an organisation representing primarily women. Contradictory views on unionism and industrial action were evident during the 1990 strike. The key issue of demands for safe night transport for nurses highlighted deeper labour discontent in the health sector over salaries, understaffing, inadequate promotions and arbitrary transfers. Nonetheless, some nurses who went on strike experienced guilt, describing the strike as a 'sad occasion.....It's unprofessional to go on strike.....the ministry should look after nurses and their welfare' (field notes 1996). One nursing activist was frustrated over divided solidarity within Fiji's wider union movement for the FNA, in part because of its status as an association, and in part because of the FNA's identity as a mainstream women's organisation. Frustration focused around affiliation to the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC). She said of affiliation that

It's still a main issue that comes up in the AGM of the FNA, every year we have to vote to stay in. I have always maintained when we are out on our own we will never be able to do anything, if we stick with our other brothers and sisters especially the ones in the public service then hand in hand we could fight issues together. Out on our own the Fiji government could do whatever they want to do and I have always maintained this issue is religious because that most of the people want us to get out of [F]TUC. They see it as a satanic organisation, this is the way they think...There is one argument that says that it [the FNA] was a women's organisation and the Fiji Nurses Association is one of the most popular women's organisations in Fiji. I said that only because we are together with our other brothers and sisters. If we went out on our own we are nothing, that's what I maintained, we fight it, we fight it together (field notes 1996).

The ability of unions to represent women workers has been tested by labour legislation introduced in 1991 to tighten control over unions and to shape the labour market to meet the need to be globally competitive. Amendments to the Industrial Associations, Trade Unions (Recognition) and the Trade Unions Acts (*Fiji Republic Gazette* 1991; Chand, this volume) had specific implications for women workers, as many were unorganised and new to the labour market. During 1990 and 1991 garment workers had organised under the FAGW and taken strike action (Leckie 1992). Local and overseas unions were lobbied to provide solidarity but the new labour laws impeded this. Industrial associations, which technically deal with relations between members rather than between employers and employees, and which include the FAGW, could no longer engage in labour disputes. It became illegal to take direct action to achieve union recognition. One of the biggest changes in the legislation was the registration of enterprise and employer-dominated unions. This widened the scope for ethnic fragmentation within organised labour. It also reinforced the isolation of many women workers in small enterprises, especially waitresses, retail workers and domestic workers.

The newer women's organisations have been confronting the realities of women's agency and choices with Fiji's traditions and economic and political pressures. The two spearheads of feminist organisation in Fiji are the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), both founded in the mid 1980s. The FWCC intervenes in situations of sexual assault and violence against women and children. It educates about these

problems, and lobbies for law reform in these and associated areas. It is based in Suva but in response to an increase in demand since 1987 centres have been opened in Labasa, Lautoka and Ba.

The FWRM also has its roots in responses to violence against women and to economic exploitation, as became visible in the garment industry. Its constitution states that it aims 'to improve women's domestic, social, legal, economic and political status in Fiji and to promote the equality of women in Fiji'. Workplace discrimination heads FWRM's objectives, as outlined in its constitution: 'to remove discrimination against women in the work force such as discriminatory wages, sub-standard working environments, unequal opportunity, restricted access to jobs and promotions, discriminatory and inadequate terms and conditions of employment and sexual harassment'. Linkages between women's economic vulnerability, workplace exploitation, violence and poverty converged in FWRM's Women, Employment and Economic Rights Project. Like the FWCC, the FWRM has extended its activities outside the capital. Its legal literacy, anti-violence and wages for housework campaigns now focus on farming localities.

The FWRM has concentrated its efforts in seeking to change labour laws by removing discriminatory employment legislation which works against women (Emberson-Bain and Slatter 1995), by introducing protection for non-unionised workers, and by enforcing employment equity. To date Fiji has not ratified ILO Convention 100, covering equal pay for work of equal value, and ILO Convention 111, which provides for equal treatment regarding employment.

The debate over women doing paid night work highlighted differing interests over women's rights in post-coup Fiji. Pressures to remove legislative prohibitions on female night employment came from both employers and women's activist groups, notably FWRM and the FWCC (Sharma 1996:1). Garment employers sought an extension of women's working hours to further secure cheap labour and boost production. In practice, women have been doing evening work in Fiji, both legally—for instance as health and hospitality workers—and illegally—for instance as garment workers. Feminists pushed for legislative change, as existing laws were discriminatory. They sought legal sanction for women's right to choose or refuse night work.

They also rejected arguments that had stressed the protection of the 'weaker sex'. Protectionist laws had excluded women from categories of employment, such as underground mining, and could be conveniently invoked when women's labour was not required. Women's restricted mobility was tied to cultural and moralistic strictures which equated the 'breakdown of the family' with women working outside the home. Union voices in post-coup Fiji queried these latter views, but still opposed women's entry into night employment on the basis that it would increase the scope of women's exploitation and increase women's workloads in both paid and unpaid work. The ban on women working at night was lifted in 1996.

Conclusion: old and new realities and women's working futures

For many women in Fiji, questions about the impact of the coups may be difficult to isolate from personal changes during the past twelve years, including gendered expectations from family, community and state. The meaning of the coups varied for women of diverging ethnicity, class, region and religion. These are not easily quantified allegiances, as women sharing such identities may still have diametrically opposed views on the coups and Fiji's post-coup political economy. This has been evident within the FNA.

Women's working lives in Fiji highlight the need for caution in reductionist arguments that attribute gendered changes purely to the coups. The baggage of culture and colonialism is persistent, while globalisation both reinforces past and new pressures. Women in Fiji, as elsewhere, are increasingly in paid work, are household heads, are making significant gains in education, and are active in existing and new political and social structures and movements. Women are also vulnerable to economic exploitation, sexual discrimination, poverty, violence and inadequate political representation.

What of the specifics for the future of women in Fiji, especially within the workplace? Fiji ranks relatively low on the UNDP's gender empowerment index, reflecting women's small share of earned income (ILO/SEAPAT 1997:4). Moreover, the instability of Fiji's political economy does not bode well for women. In many households women experience the direct effects of a faltering economy and a higher cost of living. Economists disagree over the impact of the 1997–98 East Asian economic crisis on Fiji. Nonetheless, the Fiji dollar was devalued

by twenty per cent in early 1998, ostensibly to attract foreign investment and tourists. This means little to consumers, for whom the price of imports, including many basic household items, have increased. Fiji long ago ceased to be a tropical idyll of self sufficiency. Dependence on cash income embraces almost all families, including those in very remote villages as well as recent migrants to urban areas.

Garment manufacturing was heralded as a panacea for the economic gloom of the 1980s. Despite low wages, many women welcomed this as an attractive option to work in the informal or domestic sectors. Exporters have relied upon not only cheap labour but also protective trade agreements, which are due to be lifted or renegotiated. These include the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) and the Multi-Fibre Arrangement. The percentage of Fiji's garment exports destined for New Zealand declined from 55 in 1989 to just eight in 1994 (Chandra 1996:56). Fiji now faces competition from lower cost suppliers in Asia in the wake of the East Asian crisis. Government economist *Ratu* Sakuisa Tuisolia predicts that 7,000 garment workers may face redundancies because of the increased costs of importing raw materials under SPARTECA and because of sharper competition in markets flooded by cheaper Asian exports (*Fiji Times*, 5 February 1998). There seems now little chance that wages in Fiji's garment industry will improve. Indeed, even with relatively cheap female labour, employers have resorted to recruiting foreigners. In 1996 approximately 2,000 garment workers were hired, some illegally, from China, Taiwan and the Philippines (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions 1997).

Women who remain on sugar farms also have an insecure future, with the possible renegotiation of sugar quotas to the European Union as a consequence of the end of the fifth Lomé Convention. This has coincided with sugar growers facing the renewals of leases from state or indigenously-owned land. A severe drought has caused the most recent rural crisis. Such transitions and upheavals cast uncertainties over family security in Indo-Fijian sugar communities. Occupational diversification is trumpeted as an answer to dependency on the sugar industry, but women's options remain circumscribed. It seems however that many Indo-Fijian farming families have abandoned strictures for daughters to remain on farms. Education for girls has greater urgency, while young women may be encouraged to leave families for employment or to marry abroad.

Education can open greater employment diversity and personal choices but Fiji's healthy statistics concerning female scholastic achievements have not been commensurate with professional and personal advancement. The public sector continues to attract many well-educated women, but into familiar territory: nursing, teaching and clerical work. Gender stereotypes have not disappeared with a more educated workforce. The FWRM's 1997 campaign against sexual harassment was greeted by some with amusement or disbelief. Public sector unions condemned the removal of employment appeals legislation in 1987, although gender was never recognised as grounds for appeal. The reconstitution of the appeals system under the 1997 constitution recognises appeals against discrimination based on gender. Structural safeguards are an important step in dislodging more subtle forms of discrimination and women's resignation to the status quo.

The acceptance of gender stereotypes and discrimination inside and outside the home is being challenged by women. The ability to negotiate work reflects wider cultural values. Proactive groups, including the Women's Coalition for Women's Citizenship Rights, recognise that traditions are not fixed and as interpretations of tradition sharpened gender divisions and inequalities in the past, so can thorny issues be renegotiated in the future, without condemning important cultural identities. Such processes are never easy but contestation over tradition, culture and political rights has been ongoing since the coups, although not given legitimate public space until the review of the 1990 Constitution. As the implementation of Fiji's new constitution unfolds over time, it remains to be seen how this will translate into women's rights, given the cultural and economic realities of the present.

Endnotes

1. *Vinaka vakalevu* to Fiji's Ministries of Health and Labour, the Public Service Commission, the Fiji Nursing Association, the Fiji National Archives, and the nurses who shared their life histories with me. Most interviewees must, however, remain anonymous. This chapter gratefully includes insights from Sue Carswell and Christy Harrington. Our research was assisted by an Otago Research Grant and was affiliated to the Development Studies Programme, University of the South Pacific. This chapter is based on a paper

presented at the International Conference on Women in the Asia-Pacific Region: Persons, Powers, and Politics, Singapore, 11–13 August 1997, which was initially revised and published as Leckie (1997a).

2. Ganesh Chand (1996:28–31) queries official unemployment rates of 10.2 per cent in 1987 and 6 per cent in 1995. His revised 'back of the envelope' figures suggest 10.6 per cent and 19.3 per cent respectively.
3. University figures are not broken down by nationality so the proportion of female students from Fiji is unclear.
4. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988:66) deconstructs the universalist applicability of *purdah* and the negative implications of this for Muslim women.
5. These are: article 5(a), which aims to achieve the elimination of prejudices, customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women; and article 9, covering the equal rights of nationality and the nationality of children.

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