CHAPTER 11

Shifting Terrains of Transnational Engagement

Women’s Organizing in Fiji

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The women’s movement in Fiji has been described as one of the most vibrant, influential, and active in the Pacific.1 Representatives from this country’s women’s groups have been energetic participants on the local, regional, and international stage since the 1960s. Their efforts have been integral to raising the local and global profile of issues such as violence against women, women’s legal rights, women’s role in the media, and women’s political participation. Yet although these developments indicate ‘progress’ for women, historical comparisons of organizational activity on local questions related to reproductive health, and global questions of economic justice or rights to political self-determination, demonstrate important shifts in the way activists in this setting have understood the possibility of promoting feminist futures through transnational engagement.

In this chapter, I draw upon interview material gathered from women who have been active on the international stage from the 1960s onward. My aim, however, is not simply to document this activity, but also to demonstrate how the interplay of local and global factors influences transnational political behavior and hence, organizational abilities to promote alternate political agendas to the masculinist, state-oriented mainstream. I demonstrate how shifting geopolitical, sociocultural, religious, and economic imperatives on the local and global stage influence gender activists’ understandings of the viability of transnational activity at particular historical junctures. This approach allows me to demonstrate how the spaces for women’s transnational activity have been shaped by prevailing norms of gender subordination2 and other power relations evident within Fiji and international politics.
This chapter has three sections. The first briefly explains what is meant by transnationalism, transnational feminism, and its relevance to discussions of women’s political agency in Fiji. The second, longer section, examines the shifting terrain of women’s transnational political engagement in this setting. The concluding section outlines some of the recent, dramatic events occurring in Fiji at the end of 2006, with a view to illustrating how new contingencies are set to impact upon the transnational work conducted by women’s groups in this setting.

Transnationalism and Feminism

Interest in women’s transnational political engagement is particularly evident within feminist scholarship. In these works, the concept of transnationalism is loosely defined to signify “any actor, organization, or issue that could be either international or global in orientation.” This means that even where the focus upon women’s organizations is essentially localized, attention is frequently drawn to the local and transnational “frequency” of organizational activity. Hence, many studies describe how women’s groups use transnational networks to make local questions of gender subordination resonate at the international level. Reversing this lens, others focus upon the “significance of transnational advocacy and activist networks” at the local level, describing the various strategies employed by women’s groups to promote international discourses contesting women’s subordination.

The concept of transnationalism is especially pertinent to any consideration of women’s organizing in Fiji. In addition to their local activities, Fiji’s women activists are energetic participants on the international stage. On one hand, they have demonstrated to regional and international audiences the specifically local factors contributing to women’s subordination in Fiji. On the other hand, they have drawn upon internationally endorsed advocacy frameworks to protest phenomena that subordinate women in the local setting. However, as this chapter will make clear, the history of women’s transnational political engagement in Fiji has also altered over time, reflecting shifting contingencies within the prevailing local and global political environment.

These considerations are particularly relevant when examining how women activists from the region respond to shifts in transnational feminism. Despite the fact that there is a strong feminist orientation to the advocacy undertaken by the organizations described in the following pages, the relationship between women’s organizing and feminism in this setting has not been straightforward. Many of the religious and culturally aligned women’s groups operating in this region have often avoided the term “feminism,” which they view as posing a threat to the integrity of the family, highly valued in Pacific cultures, and promoting an agenda that is “anti-men.” For other women activists, the appeal of second-wave feminist thinking was strong but counter-acted by a perceived