

**Submission to Senate Inquiry :
Australia's Relations with Papua New Guinea and the Island States of
the South West Pacific.**

Women and Violence in Post-coup Fiji :
The challenge for Donors and NGO recipients

By
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*The political crisis of May 2000 precipitated greater unemployment and political instability and enhanced the pace of economic and social change. **Poverty** has increased (more people are now poor and the poor have become poorer), relations between ethnic groups are strained and the social fabric has been damaged. People report feelings of **desperation** and have **diminished confidence in Fiji as a nation-state** that will provide and protect all citizens. Contention about **land-use issues**, the increased mobility and **break-up of families**, the growing number of people who are **depressed** and/or **suicidal**, escalating **domestic violence** and **uncertainty about the future** continue to profoundly affect children.*

Save the Children Fund

Study of the Impact of the Political Crisis on Children and Families in Fiji

December 2001

Summary

The issue of women and violence is a core area of focus for both women's non-government organisations in Fiji and the donor community who fund these groups. Recently there has been a strong tendency amongst non-government organisations (NGOs) and donors to favour legalistic approaches to this issue. Unfortunately the framework for action that results from these collaborative efforts often fails to confront issues such as economic disadvantage which, as the above-cited quotation makes clear, have become more urgent for Fiji and Fiji's women in the post-coup environment. In the following pages I argue that the precarious economic situation for women in Fiji means that they are both more likely to encounter violence in their day to day lives, and less likely to be able to access the legal resources that many promote as a means to alleviate this situation. The donor community's focus on good governance in the Pacific that has shaped NGO responses to the issue of women and violence may be seen as a "progressive" approach, but I would also contend that this emphasis has resulted in the framing of "solutions" that are potentially out of reach both of the state and those women they are designed to help. I conclude my submission therefore by calling for a more interactive approach to the task of aid provision and program design around the issue of women and violence; an approach which might allow for *both* an incorporation of mechanisms which highlight and address the escalating levels of urgent material need at the grass-roots level in Fiji, *and* a reinforcement of democratic and human rights values within legal frameworks.

Women and Violence

I have recently returned from a two month period of field-research in Fiji (based out of Suva) working with women's non-government organisations and focussing upon the issue of women and domestic violence. This issue has gained a high profile in the international arena in the last decade (recognised explicitly in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and implicitly in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women : CEDAW) and is a prime focus for donor organisations looking to fund development programs for women in South Pacific Island states. In line with other international donor organisations, AusAID has played an important role in funding work done in this area.

AusAID has established a strong and ongoing relationship with the **Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC)** and has put in place a substantial agreement to finance the centre's support programs for victims of domestic violence, as well as its other activities; counselling, community education and research. AusAID has also been associated with projects designed by the **Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM)** which are primarily concerned with lobbying government for legal reform with a particular focus at the current moment on family law reform and the promotion of legal literacy and rights awareness in the wider community.

Fallout from May 2000

Thanks to the efforts of women's organisations such as those outlined above the issue of violence against women in Fiji is now part of the public domain where it is openly discussed and confronted. However during the time I spent researching these organisations and other more localised NGOs I was made aware that it is impossible to confront the issue of violence against women without also examining the broader social and economic climate in which this violence takes place. I found that many representatives from these groups spoke about violence against women and the political upheavals of May 2000- the civilian coup - literally in the same breath. It became evident that many saw a strong correlation between the continuing fact of violence at the national level - the idea that Fiji was stuck in a "coup cycle", unresolved intercommunal tensions, rising poverty levels - and violence between men and women at the micro level.

The political crisis of May 2000 precipitated a severe downturn for Fiji's economy from which industries such as manufacturing, agricultural production and tourism are still struggling to recover. The effect of this in the long term has meant a significant proportion of the country's population are now consumed with the day to day task of simply making ends meet. This has put extraordinary pressures upon the nation's families as they cope with the prospect of job losses and decreasing weekly incomes. A study released by the FWCC in September 2001 found that in the post-coup environment women and children were more likely to suffer violent physical abuse in the home as macho "attitudes have become entrenched" and levels of frustration have increased due to job losses and decreasing weekly incomes (FWCC media release 3/9/2001). Other reports have pointed to high levels of stress in the community by identifying phenomena such as

increasing rates of suicide since the May 2000 upheaval and a rise in self-harming behaviors such as drug, alcohol and Kava abuse. (SCF 2001; Dr Odile Chang, Sunday Times 3/3/02; Daily Post 3/1/2002)

From my own research I found disturbing evidence of the links between increasing poverty and family breakdown at the micro-level. From various sources I was informed of the current epidemic of single mothers in the Indo-Fijian community whose jobless husbands have walked out on them in shame because they can no longer support their families. Stories of single mothers living in squatter settlements on Suva's periphery and attempting to provide for themselves and sometimes up to three children on a weekly earnings from the local garment factory of less than 50 Fiji Dollars (AUD 42.00) were repeated to me with a disturbing regularity. While Women's Affairs Minister Asenca Caucau has recently stated that government statistics show 30 per cent of Fiji's women now living below the poverty line, other commentators estimate that levels could be much higher (Radio Australia 27/5/02). In concrete terms this scenario translates into a situation where women make hard choices alone on a daily basis as they attempt to juggle the costs involved with meeting the nutritional, clothing, educational and health needs of their children.

Challenges for NGOs and Donors.

This situation poses significant challenges for NGOs working on the issue of women and violence in Fiji, and for those agencies who fund NGO programs. Talking about issues such as women's human rights may seem a little "pie in the sky" for many of Fiji's women in the current context if the cold hard fact of increasing poverty is not also factored into the equation. For example holding a workshop in the settlements of Suva's urban periphery designed to increase women's legal literacy and make them aware of maintenance provision in the law, or their right to protection from marital assault might seem like a good idea. But what happens if the economic situation of the women who attend means they are unwilling to risk even the bus fare into town to find a solicitor who might represent them, let alone the other costs involved? Undoubtedly from this perspective the workshop might seem simply like a talking shop that provides little in terms of solid or usable outcomes for the women it is designed to aid. In this context what is needed first is not legal literacy training but liaison services which put women in touch with social welfare programs and show them how they can be used to protect their right and their children's right to a decent standard of living.

In the same way lobbying for legal reform so that a more sophisticated system of maintenance provision can be established might also seem a desirable strategy that will increase the economic power of deserted women and mothers. However we also have to consider the ability of the state to enforce and support this new structure. In the case of Fiji, it appears doubtful that the state would have the capacity to establish and adequately fund the types of broad-reaching institutional frameworks that the new Family Law Bill (currently under debate in Parliament) would require, in order to be effective.

NGOs in Fiji have produced solid research demonstrating a causative link between political turmoil, escalating poverty and an increasing risk of violence at the domestic

level. At the same time however the poverty issue often seems to vanish when strategies designed to address the women and violence issue are formulated. I would argue that this is due in part to the current focus of foreign aid destined for the developing nations of the South Pacific which emphasises issues such as "good governance" - the need to support democratic institutions and protect human rights values. No-one would deny that issues relating to good governance are of the highest priority for all the citizens of Pacific Island nations. But at the same time I feel that it is a mistake to focus upon these priorities to the exclusion of all else.

The current emphasis upon legalistic solutions to women's issues is generally considered a "progressive" approach by donors and this, as a consequence has shaped the way NGOs frame their programs. However it would be a grave miscalculation to assume that once a legal framework is established, ratified and publicised all else will fall into place. The issue of women and violence cannot be considered in isolation. While there is an expanding body of evidence which suggests that economic, social and political forces increase the likelihood that women will be the victims of violence, there is also plenty to suggest that economic, social and political forces diminish the likelihood that women in Fiji and in other parts of the Pacific will have free and equal access to legal frameworks that have been designed to resolve this situation. I therefore would urge international donor organisations such as AusAID to rebalance their approach to this issue. Teaching women about their rights within legal frameworks is undoubtedly part of the way forward as we confront the issue of women and violence. But we also need to devise strategies which allow grassroots women to speak for themselves so their concrete and immediate needs can be identified with greater accuracy and addressed with greater efficacy. An approach which addresses rights in conjunction with material needs will do a great deal more to alleviate the pressures bearing down on Fiji's women at the current moment than programs that separate out political rights from economic need and treat the two intertwined issue areas in isolation.

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