

Pacific Feminisms

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Self-identified feminists in the Pacific continue to publically ask the simple question “what about women and gender inequality”? The struggle to uphold women’s right and to secure services for women and girls, let alone for gender non-conforming people, remains because gender inequality in the Pacific is a daily experience. Despite the existence of women’s ministries, CEDAW reporting processes, and ‘femocrats’, tradition and culture in the Pacific fuels the processes of exclusion and control of women in systematic and sustained ways. Consequently, individual and collective tragedies endure - of everyday sexual violence, sorcery killings, unwanted pregnancies, unsolicited bullying and intimidation, unjust distribution of resources and so on.

The result is a diverse manifestation of Pacific feminism – from self-declared and socially identified feminists, to those whose practices of social reproduction are aligned with sustaining gender-just livelihoods. The Pacific feminist movement includes radical LGBTQI groups (Haus of Khameleon), intellectual collectives (DAWN Pacific), creatively articulate advocates (DIVA for Equality), courageous and skilled human rights defenders (Voice for Change), dedicated legislators and policy makers (Regional Rights Resources Team), feminist human rights organizations (Fiji Women’s Rights Movement), youth-based organizations (Pacific Youth Council) as well as others.

Amidst the cultural diversity of peoples that constitute the Pacific, the politics of indigeneity adds further complexities. But in terms of gendered power relations, patriarchal privilege prevails to the detriment of women regardless of the hue of their skin, the superiority of their skill or knowledge, the quality of their education or their leadership potential.

In November 2016, the Charter of Feminist Principles for Pacific Feminists was launched at the Inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum in Fiji. The Charter is loosely modeled on the African Feminist Charter, but its Pacific flavor was palpable as feminists from Oceania recognized our common bonds of the sea (*wansolwara*), land (*vanua*) and ancestors (*tauanga*). This initiative tapped into important sentiments of gender egalitarianism from the past but also challenged pervasive contemporary leadership systems that privilege men.

The progress entailed by the Pacific Feminist Charter signals a new attempt to organize across diverse lines of gendered power relations to challenge historical patriarchal privilege as well as new asymmetrical gendered power relations. The Charter highlights a fundamental strength of the Pacific feminist movement – its roots in contemporary struggles for social justice and its diverse manifestations. It provides further impetus for change alongside, for instance, the Pacific Feminist Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Statement of 2013 and the Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women. The logic that underpins such efforts is shaped by a politics of knowledge, personal affective practices and a shared assumption that gender equality in the Pacific is imperative.

Deep Roots

Pacific people have long faced the often violent, increasingly militarized and deeply dogmatic devotion to global capitalist processes of exploitative accumulation that deepens gender inequality. Feminists in the Pacific have developed practices of radical alliancing (Fiji Women's Forum), awkward but nonetheless respectful engagement (Kup Women for Peace in Papua New Guinea), considerable creativity (Women's Action for Change) and fervent fortitude in the face of civil war (Nazarene Rehabilitation Centre).

Pacific feminism has deep roots in social justice struggles. In the 1960s the Young Women's Christian Association in Fiji campaigned for just tax systems and fair wages. In the 1970s, the East Sepik Council of Women provided nutrition programmes in palm oil plantations. Pacific feminists also recognized the importance of working regionally to challenge the vestiges of colonialism such as the continuation of nuclear testing, the intensification of extractive industries and the dearth of women's voices in national parliaments. Sadly, the gendered power relations in these regional challenges too easily succumb to patriarchal leadership and privilege, regardless of the fine intentions of a select few and the rhetoric of many more.

At different times and places, feminism emerged differently. In Fiji, the rights-based feminism of the 1980s International Decade for Women largely overtook the welfare based Pan-Pacific South East Asia Women's Association, established to support immediate colonial projects. Later, rights-based feminism informed the establishment of a network of organizations such as the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Punanga Tauturu in the Cook Islands, Women and Children's Crisis Centre in Tonga, Vanuatu Women's Center and Women United Together Marshall Islands. Some of these re-focused their activities on peace and democracy projects, such as in post-coup Fiji and in the establishment of the Autonomous Bougainville Government in Papua New Guinea.

Diverse manifestations: defying gender inequality

In the Pacific, people with non-conforming gender identities and women who do not biologically bear children are socially and culturally recognized for the contributions they make to raising children. This recognition challenges asymmetrical power relations, all of which are gendered. In the Charter, Pacific feminism embraces this diversity of people with explicit reference to LGBTQI and young women. In addition, women of faith, who have played critical roles in peace building, are also supportive of the calls for decriminalizing both LGBTQI and abortion.

As a political organizing concept, Pacific feminism is still weak and skepticism of its value prevails. The reasons include the postcolonial insistence on rejecting non-Pacific or 'western' concepts and naming practices in Pacific struggles; the growing influence of conservative, faith-inspired ideologies of traditional gender egalitarianism; as well as personal ignorance, misogyny and malice.

The clear ambition of those signing the Charter is for transformative change that upholds the rights of women, girls, and non-gender conforming people so that we get the "best full lives for ourselves and our Pacific communities". This is still a radical

ambition, but with the Charter, one with renewed momentum.

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