

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre

by The Women's Crisis Collective

Early in 1983 in Suva, Fiji, two men broke into the house of a woman government worker while she was alone one night and raped her. A police spokesman told the press after the incident that a number of rape cases had been reported that year. In some of the cases, he noted, the women "tempted men by undressing in a room where they could be seen from the street"; in others, by "going out alone at night". The officer also admitted that the police could do little about the rising incidence of rape.

"We appeal to women to take more care," he said.

The incident served as catalyst to a group of women concerned by the frequency of sexual attacks on women in and around the city, and the total lack of support services for the victims. They met and resolved to work toward providing such a service. Initially, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre aimed to service rape victims only. However, the more the women looked into the issues involved in rape in Fiji, the more they realized the magnitude of the problem of violence against women in general, and domestic violence in particular. The

center broadened its charter and now offers support to all women and chil-

dren victims of violence.

Fiji has practically no legal protection for women. Non-molestation orders exist but these are wholly inutile. In rape cases, for example, the survivors' previous sexual experience remains admissible evidence in court. Also, marital rape is not considered a crime.

Services and support

The Centre provides crisis counseling, and legal, medical and other practical support services for women and children survivors of violence com-

mitted against them by men. It is also involved in public advocacy and community education on gender violence. The group's strategies stem from its members' conviction that violence against women is a fundamental human rights and development issue. The Centre addresses all forms of violence against women including rape, beating and sexual harassment, as well as abuse of girl children.

The group's membership has changed over the years, too, with the majority no longer composed of expatriates. Most of the organization's 21 active members are locals. The Centre used to be run by volunteers but the increase in the number of women seeking its support made full-time staff absolutely necessary. It operates as a collective, adhering to democratic policy- and decision-making. Members hold regular workshops to review their work and discuss issues concerning the Centre.

The women at the Centre bring to the group not only a rich variety of cultures and races, but different backgrounds, philosophies and motivations. Their reasons for involvement in the



Fiji Women's Crisis Centre staff

Violence Against Women

Centre's activities vary, from religious commitment or feminism, to personal/close experience of violence; from simple abhorrence of violence against women, to an aversion to all forms of injustice. Some women are propelled by a combination of all these factors. The Centre functions with remarkably little disharmony among members. Their philosophical differences pale in importance compared with the problems they seek to combat.

Funding has always been a problem since work dealing with violence against women does not fit into the women-and/in-development projects that donors prefer. In addition, the Centre has to contend with a resistance to financing administrative operations common among funding agencies. But the group persevered and in 1990, was granted a four-year grant by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB).

Activities

Over the past four years, the group has done pioneering work to document, analyze and support the development of practical programs and services that will deal with the problem of violence in contemporary Pacific society. It organized and conducted the first ever Pacific Regional Workshop on Violence against Women in 1992. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence against Women, with the Centre acting as the coordinating body. It offers two types of training for government and NGO personnel, one covering the establishment and management of crisis counseling services and organizations, and another touching on the basics such

as the cultural, social, political and economic factors related to violence against women; violence against women as a human rights issue and development issue; and public advocacy and campaigns.

Every opportunity is used to lend a gender perspective to social issues, including events such as International Women's Day, Mother's Day, International Day of Action for Women's Health and the Sixteen Days of Activism. Workshops are conducted in the rural areas in the vernacular to encourage women's participation and leadership in the struggle to eliminate violence against women.

Community response

Acceptance in the community has been slow—many see the group's members as radical anti-family feminists. Initially, the group's approach was confrontational, but it has learned to strategize and work from within certain influential groups more than from the outside. In Fiji, religion (mainly Christian) and culture play a significant part in people's lives, so the Centre also took to work from a the perspective of human rights and adapted the various religious teachings (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam) to its principles of non-violence, equality and justice.

Criticism comes not only from men and other institutions but also from the feminists in the academe who find the Centre lacking in the 'proper' feminist analysis. As well as, long-established conservative women's groups see the group as a threat to their power base.

"We at the Centre say that in a country where bureaucratic processes are particularly cumbersome and life moves

at a pace called 'Fiji Time'; where sexism is blatant, education standards are low, and consciousness of personal rights and expectations of justice even lower; we have survived," the organization declares.

The Centre is now recognized, although sometimes grudgingly, as a respectable professional organization. It has succeeded in influencing public opinion in Fiji such that many sectors of society now support the need for emergency services and sustained support for women subjected to any form of violence. As a result of its strong lobby work and cooperation from other groups, the Fiji Court of Appeal recently recommended a more appropriate minimum sentence for rape; the Police Force has established a Sexual Assault unit with specially trained personnel; and the plans for a government-run Child Protection unit are under way.

Because of a racist constitution and recent political upheavals, Fiji's women activists, particularly the grassroots workers and academe-based feminists, are divided on the ethics of working with the government. The Centre approaches the issue from a practical point of view: "We could wait for the constitution to be reviewed, but who knows when this will happen? Meanwhile, women continue to be killed or maimed everyday; their basic rights are violated everyday, regardless of their race." The women cannot wait.

contact details:
Fiji Women's Crisis Centre
88 Gordon Street
P.O. Box 12882
Suva, Fiji
phone: (679) 313300
fax: (679) 313650