



Fiji's Decade of Struggle

by Leti Boniol

“Several Pacific Island nations have tax-free zones. Wages in these zones are set by employers and are not negotiable. Workers are not allowed to organize and working conditions fairly stringent. Most of the tax-free zones in the Pacific are host to garment industries whose labor is predominantly women.”

In Fiji, the garment workers are among the lowest paid in the tax-free zones and work under the most intolerable conditions. Fiji in the past practiced tripartite bargaining as a method of settling disputes between employers and employees. With the advent of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), the government has abandoned tripartite bargaining and instead passed draconian labor laws with no room for wage negotiations, improvement of safety standards or of working conditions. This has worsened the condition of workers in Fiji. Whereas before there was a legislated minimum wage for the manufacturing sector, now there is nothing.”

“Obstacles to Peace and Human Security in the Pacific”

Plenary Speeches from the NGO Forum, Beijing 1995

by Amelia Rokutuivana

The year 1986 was a banner year for the women of Fiji, an archipelago in the south Pacific. It was during this year when a group of individuals associated with the Women's Crisis Center and the Young Women Christian Association formed the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM). Tired of being discriminated under the law and the treatment of women workers in the garments industry, the FWRM wanted to im-

prove the women's status, specifically their legal and political status.

In November 1996, the FWRM celebrated its 10th year. Fijians now consider FWRM a force to reckon with.

LOBBYING FOR CHANGE

Lobbying Parliament and government bodies, the FWRM wanted changes in laws and policies. Among them are constitutional rights, citizenship laws, family and rape laws and laws on employment status to target questions of women's inequality in the workplace and at home (unpaid labor and subsistence agriculture and fishing). They also wanted to campaign against domestic and community violence.

Among the movement's activities during its first years were:

- ◆ an inquiry into the conditions of women workers in the garment industry that was reported to the government's Garment's Industry Tribunal. The report outlined the plight of non-unionized workers and demanded minimum wages and improved working conditions for them. The Tribunal set a minimum wage that was far from adequate. The situation of some 12,000 garment workers has deteriorated since the 1987 coups.
- ◆ monitoring of media attitudes towards women and using the media to highlight government and judicial attitudes towards women. The FWRM was responsible for the progressive but short-lived guidelines promulgated by the Chief Justice in February 1988 commanding longer sentences for rape and an improvement in judicial attitude.
- ◆ the publication of a survey of political candidates that graded their attitudes on women's issues and discriminatory laws. The publication caused widespread consternation and forced all political parties to include women's issues on their agenda for the first time in Fiji's political history.

The coups of 1987 disrupted FWRM's activities. The movement's work influencing political parties was dissipated with the military regime's racial policies and restrictions on political activities. The racial policies destroyed the movement's potential to mobilize on the basis of gender than race. FWRM's membership was across class and race lines and the coups turned away women attracted to the organization's multi-race composition. The government arrested, jailed and convicted some of the women who were involved in pro-democracy activities.

Then, the organization chose not to deal with the post-coup government until the first democratic government was elected in 1992. Because of the five-year hiatus, the various rape and anti-violence law reforms worked at by FWRM from 1987 to 1992 did not get presented to the government.

It did, however, make substantial submissions to the post-coup Constitutional Review Committees set up by the government to elicit the views of the public on the new Constitution. It did not succeed in removing discriminatory provisions on citizenship and other rights from the draft Constitution but it was partly responsible in forcing the government to include gender discrimination in Article 16 of the 1990 Constitution. The newly published Reeves Constitutional Report includes recommendations to remove sexual discrimination from the Constitution. The FWRM initiated the move and the Women's Coalition for Women's Citizenship Rights (WCWCR) supported it. The WCWCR was spearheaded by FWRM.

The FWRM officially launched its anti-rape campaign in the latter part of 1988. It aims to educate the public and law-associated agencies about the social and cultural aspects of rape and to push for law reforms. The campaign included research on the socio-cultural and legal aspects of violence and a nationwide outreach program. It also included the publication of articles in the mass media, the production of pamphlets and posters and the production of a video entitled *Forceline* (forceline is a local term implying that rape is an acceptable cultural practice). Public television aired the video "*Forceline*" for the first time in 1992. Also included in the campaign were street drama and education workshops with schools, medical personnel, police officers and judicial personnel. FWRM also conducted workshops and seminars for rural women's groups in an attempt to educate women about rape and to obtain their support for its law reforms.

As its first presentation of the rape law reform package, the government told FWRM to get the support of the majority of the population, in effect, a referendum for law reforms. The movement refused to comply, pointing out that no other reform required a referendum. But as of November 1996, FWRM has already obtained the signatures and support of the majority of women's organizations and other human rights organizations in Fiji.

FWRM's other accomplishments include:

- ◆ the submission of its recommendation to the Fiji Law Reform Commission
- ◆ the appointment by the government of one of its members as the Family Law Reform Commissioner
- ◆ the securing of funds to launch a short-term project to lobby members of parliament, the judiciary and other powerful lobby groups to convince these bodies to support the law reforms
- ◆ the conduct of the first training of women paralegals in March 1993 on law and women. With available funds, FWRM intends to continuously train women to become effective paralegals on the more detailed aspects of the law
- ◆ assistance in the setting up of a similar paralegal training program for women's groups in other Pacific island states
- ◆ making women's voices be heard publicly on a day-to-day basis and accessing the public domain significantly. The women wrote regularly in a regional magazine, *Pacific Island Monthly*, submitted a weekly column in the largest newspaper, *Fiji Times*, and contributed in various radio programs in Fijian and Hindi. FWRM's views are constantly sought on all women's issues aired in media. The organization is regarded as a legitimate mouthpiece of women.

CURRENT WORK

FWRM is currently working on a project that will bring about awareness of women's conditions in employment. It is also lobbying for legislation that will improve women's conditions in paid labor, obtain legal recognition for women's unpaid labor in the home, in subsistence farming and agriculture. FWRM also wants to improve women's economic rights and for this has adopted a strategy similar to that employed in the anti-rape campaign.

In February 1994, FWRM hosted the first Pacific Island Regional Roundtable Meeting on Women and Politics. It brought together a cross-section of women politicians and political activists to discuss ways of improving women's participation in politics in the Pacific Islands.

In April 1994, FWRM hosted and conducted the first Regional Seminar on Women and the Law in the Pacific Islands, bringing together over 40 women lawyers and activists from 16 Pacific Island nations. This was in collaboration with the International Commission on Jurists.

ORGANIZATION RESTRUCTURING

Primarily because the previous organization structure set up by the first constitution of FWRM did not adequately cater to the size and breadth of its projects, the organization had to restructure in August 1993. The organization had not imagined that it would become effective or that it would be able to access funding or that its projects would be big. Therefore, the initial organizational structure had envisaged a small group of women doing primarily volunteer work and its constitution provided little in terms of accountability in so far as paid staff was concerned. The restructuring set up of Management Committee that more closely coordinated the activities of paid staff who enabled FWRM to continue its current project temporarily brought to a halt by the restructuring.

A FORCE TO RECKON WITH

Allusions to FWRM are not always positive though. Sometimes, its members are openly threatened but FWRM sees this as a measure of the organization's effectiveness. FWRM has enormous potential to mobilize women of all races and classes on the basis of gender and has significant potential to promote women's status.

FWRM member Imrana Jalal says that the movement has been a driving force and, seeing it grow from a nascent movement into a powerful political force, is a personal source of tremendous satisfaction. "It has been perhaps the strongest focus of my life, even though it has meant many personal sacrifices for me over the years."

Viniana Secto said her association with the movement is very much the result of a heartfelt conviction to join other sisters in the national and global struggle to eliminate the subordination for women in every area of humanity. "Being part of the movement allows me to partake of its programs and activities and, to some extent, contribute to the processes which facilitate and advocate changes in the status of women." ☺