



Vanessa Griffin, of the Pacific

Vanessa Griffin, co-ordinator of the Gender and Development programme of the Asia Pacific Development Centre (APDC), was born and grew up in Fiji. Before coming to APDC, Vanessa helped organise the first Pacific Regional Meeting in 1975. In this interview with Isis' Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, Vanessa shares her views about the place she calls home.

Q: You are among the pioneers of feminism and anti-nuclear organising in the Pacific. What do you think are the mile-stones in women in development and anti-nuclear organising in the region?

A: In terms of women in development issues, we had our first Pacific Regional Meeting to prepare for the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975. I was a member of the conference's organising committee. That was the first meeting where Pacific women of various ages from 13 countries including colonies, associated territories, and newly independent states came together to look at the position of women in the Pacific and analyse gender inequality although the reference then was to "women's issues."

That year, I was also involved in the First Nuclear Free Conference in the Pacific, organised by ATOM (Against Testing on Mururoa). I was a member of the Fiji organising committee that organised follow-up activities to that meeting, working with Amelia Rokotuivuna of the Fiji Young Women's Christian Association and others, including Claire Slatter, the present general co-ordinator of DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era). My experience in regional networking and advocacy—it wasn't called that in those days—started then. The Pacific regional women's conference sent a group to the first U.N. conference on women in 1975. We spoke against nuclear testing and against colonialism in the Pacific.

In the Pacific, colonialism was linked to the nuclear issue. I responded to these movements very enthusiastically in 1975. I was then a young person concerned with the environment in the Pacific, concerned with genetic damage of nuclear testings, which at the time were being held above ground (atmospheric testing), to future Pacific generations and to my own children—if I had them. Nuclear test-

ing in the Pacific was an issue that united many organisations: trade unions, students, church groups, and women's groups. Even our political leaders and prime ministers were all against nuclear testing in the 1970s and it was a key regional issue.

Q: How were you exposed to women's issues?

A: I have had the opportunity to attend international women's meetings and learned a lot from my exposure to women's voices and experiences from around the world. I attended the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, an eye-opener. I have been an academic at the University of the South Pacific, teaching politics from 1989-1994. I also taught the one and only women and society course, a multi-disciplinary course at the university that I helped to build it up during my tenure there. The course was actually initiated by a male colleague and feminist supporter some years earlier.

Previously, in the early 1980s (1981-1982), I also worked at the Women's Programme of the Centre for Applied Studies in Development at the University of the South Pacific (USP) on a

project to produce resource books for women on key issues of concern. I compiled a handbook on simple technology for rural women. That was in those days when a lot of materials on appropriate technology were being produced. I am quite proud of the chapter on water supply and on how to construct different types of toilets. I also later produced a health handbook for Pacific women.

Mid-way during my under-graduate years at USP, I became interested in women's issues through exposures to women's writings of Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, etc. Their descriptions of gender inequality made a lot of sense to me and explained the experiences I encountered myself. So even before attending the First World Conference on Women in 1975, a group of friends and I, as young students, wrote the first articles on the women's movement and women's liberation in

the student newspaper. I wrote the overview article explaining the women's movement, gender inequalities, the question of roles, and socialisation for our underprivileged regional student body. We were somehow paving the way with those articles and became known on campus as "women libbers." We took a lot of ridicule and questioning although I think there was also a certain degree of respect. We were a minority but we continued to raise questions of women's inequality not just in our student newspaper but also later in our classes and with our student colleagues. As the student paper was then publicly distributed in the streets of Suva, the capital, other comments also came our way!

For the first Pacific Women's Regional Meeting for the U.N. conference in 1975, we wanted the reports to come from Pacific women and to be pertinent to Pacific women's

experiences. So even though those doing the organising were young, we made sure that women from the main women's organisations then were represented, which included church groups and so called traditional women's organisations. Our contribution as younger women was in setting

the agenda that analysed women's roles in society, in the church, in the economy, and covering new areas such as law and women. The kind of regional review and collective analysis done by women in 1975 has not been repeated for a long time in the Pacific. There has been relatively less regional analysis by women of the economic, social, and political structures that produce gender inequality and social injustice in the Pacific since then, although there are regional discussions on women's rights and gender issues.

In the late 1970s, I was the project officer in the Pacific Women's Resource Centre (PWRC), the first regional women's NGO that was intended to be a communication and networking centre for Pacific women. It was ahead of its time in that it was a regional information and resource centre for networking when no other regional models existed. It



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lasted from 1976-1978. We decided to close because the PWRC really should have been fed by inputs from women in the Pacific but the communication from Pacific women to PWRC was very slight, and we were concerned to have our work directed by inputs from Pacific women. We in Fiji as the secretariat could have continued disseminating research and analysis to Pacific women but, politically, we did not think it was the best process to do that at the time.

I later went to Papua New Guinea where I worked as a publications officer in the nutrition section of the Department of Health. I was very interested in doing development communications and learnt a lot from that experience. When I returned to Fiji, I worked as a research fellow of the Women's Programme at the Centre for Applied Studies in Development, University of the South Pacific, I wrote a health handbook and a simple technology book for Pacific women. The resource book was meant to be one huge manual. I started on a chapter on appropriate technology that ended up as a handbook called *Knowing and Knowing How: A Simple Technology Book for Rural Women*. We ended up doing two books, the second being a book on health information for Pacific women, which I wrote, produced, edited, organised, selected graphics and laid out. Called *Caring for Ourselves: A Health Handbook for Pacific Women*, the book was inspired by the Boston Women's Health Collective book. However, I reconceptualised and wrote the book based on Pacific women's health realities and needs. The *Health Handbook for Pacific Women* was published in 1983 and reprinted in 1993.

These handbooks were published to fill an information gap for Pacific women and when I did them, it was meant to be a year-long project. I then had worked in editing and publications, and I am also a writer. As a writer, I was committed to writing and producing information in an accessible way for

Pacific women. I also wanted to help ensure distribution because I think it is really vital for those of us who are skilled as communicators to convey crucial information and ideas to women in a form that can be easily understood. While doing the health book, I read a lot of medical and women's health materials but thought that the information still needed to be related to what health services and conditions were like in the Pacific. There were things that women, when writing for a U.S. audience, would presume other women in the world knew but which I knew Pacific women would not generally know. So I decided to rewrite everything and that is how the women's health information project took so long.

It was very difficult work, but in the end I was happy with the Pacific women's health

book because even people who had not finished high school could read it. Husbands were reading it for their wives! The feedback that I received from that book has been a very positive reaffirmation to me on not just the power of information, but that one can and should make information accessible and available through the use of language in a simplified manner.

Q: How did you become involved with APDC?

A: I joined APDC in 1995. Many think APDC's Gender and Development Programme is an NGO and it's probably a compliment that we are thought of as such. But in fact we are not an NGO. We are also not a donor agency. APDC is an autonomous regional inter-governmental organisation created to be an independent think-tank for the Asia-Pacific region on key development issues. Its mandate is to be a research, training, and advocacy centre for member governments and for the region at large. APDC has a number of programmes on poverty alleviation, energy, gender and development, regional co-operation, public management, and information technology.

Past Gender and Development Programme

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(GAD) projects covered key development processes and their impact on women. The early work focused on women in development planning to show how women were marginalised or ignored in development planning and processes. The GAD Programme has done pioneering regional agricultural change farmers, industrialists, women workers, and economic policies their gender impact, gender equity and poverty alleviation. The GAD Programme has also played a key role in participating in the Asia-Pacific NGO preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women, as well as in assisting governments in the process of developing national plans for that conference.

Since 1995, APDC has initiated a series of follow-up, post-Beijing activities focusing on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Our post-Beijing projects focus on analysing the BPFA implementation, sub-regional support for Indochina and Mongolia, information dissemination through a monthly Asia-Pacific post-Beijing fax newsletter and an annual Asia-Pacific Post-Beijing Implementation Monitor.

APDC has also moved into refugee women and women in situations of armed conflicts and gender issues in the forestry sector. These are new areas of concern that, we think, have not been looked at so consistently on a regional basis. APDC held a regional consultation on the first issue and our project will continue to raise issues of conflict, conflict resolution and the position of refugee women in the region.

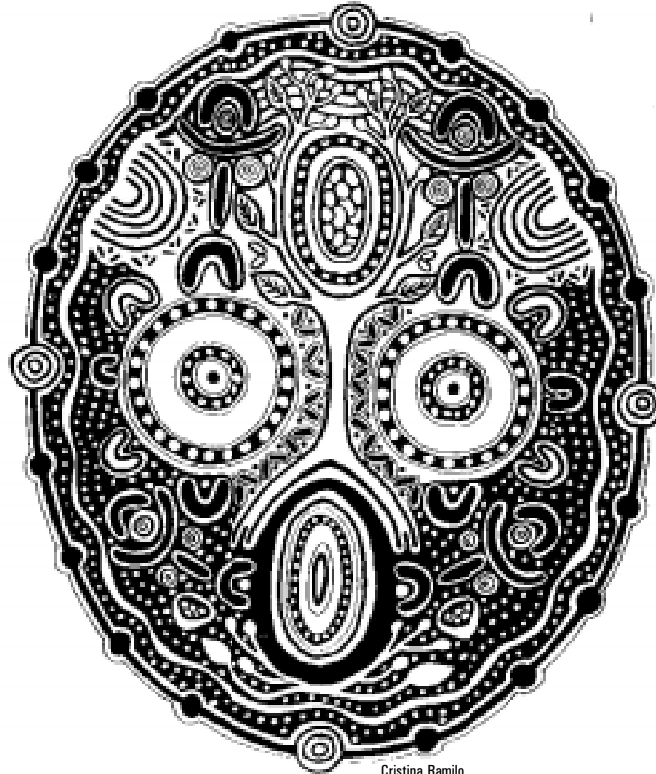
Q: Coming from the Pacific and looking at it now from outside, what do you think are the issues of women in this region?

A: In the early days, the key issues in the Pacific were the nuclear issue, women's inequality, the law and its role in both discriminating

against women, and addressing gender inequality. We have also been involved in the peace and anti-militarisation movement for a long time, and women are still very much a part of the regional peace and anti-colonial movement. There is an active Pacific network on the issues of self-determination for East Timor, New Caledonia

Polynesia which are involved in.

Now, the issues are very and far ranging. Biodiversity and nuclear testing were issues raised in Beijing. Violence against women has also become a key issue in the region, as well as economic development, democracy and political participation and environment issues. Some other issues include women's roles in mineral and manufacturing women and natural legal and human rights



Cristina Ramilo

But I think work is needed on developing a regional and national analyses of economic policies, and how international policies and changes affect the Pacific. Economic policy is not being addressed enough by Pacific women NGOs. Questions of class, social inequalities, poverty need to be addressed by women. Women need to look at government policies on labour, economic development, natural resource management. We need to do more solid sectoral analysis and have more gender disaggregated data on women's productive and reproductive roles. Compared to other countries, the Pacific does not have enough documentation on women's economic contributions and on women's reproductive roles in the Pacific.

Finally, there have been a number of meetings on women and politics that focused on getting women into politics, which is important. However, in the Pacific, we need to also address the politics of decision-making.