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Promoting Women, Peace and Security in the Pacific Islands: hot conflict/slow violence

NICOLE GEORGE*

How has the Women, Peace and Security agenda been advanced in the Pacific Islands? While some observers argue that this region suffers from a contagion of unrest, violence and state weakness, these estimates commonly ignore the vital work women have performed in the region as promoters of peace and security. Even when such activity places them in direct personal danger, women across the region have spearheaded efforts to bridge communal boundaries and challenge the increasing normalisation of violence, gendered and otherwise, that accompanies threatened or actual incidents of conflict. As this article demonstrates, these efforts have had profound impacts on the ground in conflict-affected Pacific Island countries. They have also received increased recognition at the level of institutional politics, with member states of the Pacific Islands Forum recently accepting a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. This has been hailed as a significant achievement for the region's women peacebuilders. But much of this plan is focused on women's contributions to peacebuilding at the pointy end of a crisis. This overlooks the extent to which the 'slow violence' of environmental degradation, masculinised politics and militarism also compound gendered insecurity in the region. Attention to these issues offers a contradictory picture of the gains made in promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the Pacific Islands. While this advocacy framework has provided important opportunities for the region's women peacebuilders, it may also have discouraged broader reflection on the prevailing structural conditions at work across the region which function in an attenuated fashion to undermine women's security and the achievement of a gendered regional peace.

Keywords: conflict; gender; Pacific Islands; peacebuilding; Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

In November 2012, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat launched its Regional Action Plan (RAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). This was the culmination of a 10-year advocacy process led by women peace activists in

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the region. Eager to see regional institutional recognition of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325, and encouraged by their aid partners beyond the region, these women lobbied in both national and regional contexts to build awareness of, and support for, the plan. The development of a RAP was seen as vital to ensuring stronger institutional recognition of the heavy burdens borne by Pacific Island women as a result of the conflicts that have plagued the region since the 1980s. It was also viewed as integral to improving institutional engagement with the many groups of women in the region who are committed to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Institutionalisation of the plan in late 2012 was therefore celebrated as a development which created new political space for deliberation on gender and security in the region. In the main, however, the focus is on women's roles in active conflict. This means that the plan is predominantly focused on the insecurities for women that arise as a result of 'armed conflict, civil unrest, tribal fighting, and local level conflicts over resources, increasing violent crime and political crises' (PIFS 2012a, 5). The program of activities authorised by the plan concentrates principally on alleviating the conflict-related insecurities experienced by women and girls, mainstreaming women into conflict-prevention programs, and incorporating women's participation into the more abstractly defined area of 'security sector oversight' (PIFS 2012a, 14).

In this article, I examine the enabling and constraining aspects of this new regional framework for deliberation of WPS. I argue that while there is much to celebrate in this plan, it is important to see how this policy achievement sits within the broader context of women's regional peace advocacy as it has occurred since the period of Pacific decolonisation. When such an effort is made, it becomes easier to appreciate the limited tools that the WPS agenda provides for critique of the interplaying global and local influences which operate in the region in ways that fuel women's social, political and economic insecurity. My analysis of the plan builds on the previous historical work I have conducted into women's experiences of conflict and peacebuilding in the Pacific Islands (George 2011a). It is also strongly informed by recent critique of the WPS agenda within the United Nations (UN). In particular, I consider how an apparent aversion within the UN system to debate on the global structural conditions that compound women's disadvantage in conflict (as discussed by Gibbings 2011) may also be evident within debate on WPS in the Pacific Islands region.

In seeking to explain how this apparent aversion has become evident across the previous four decades, I introduce the concept of 'slow violence' as it has been invoked by Rob Nixon to identify the sources of violence, beyond those associated with 'hot' conflict, that contribute to women's insecurity in the region. While Nixon has most famously applied this concept to explain the attenuated but slowly compounding impacts of environmental degradation, I stretch his conceptual approach here to invite consideration of other phenomena that bring, in Nixon's (2011, 2) words, 'delayed destruction, that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not

viewed as violence at all'. While I briefly consider how Nixon's conceptualisation of violence allows us to understand how environmental risk in the form of sea-level rise can fuel insecurity for women in the region, I also demonstrate how this perspective enables consideration of the dangers posed to women by masculinised governance, or militarism. My contention here is that, in addition to regional environmental challenges, these things might also be viewed as sites of slow violence which, although 'low in immediate drama', have 'long term consequences' that are highly detrimental to the standing of Pacific Island women (Nixon 2011, 131).

In the following sections of this article, I develop this argument in three steps. First, I discuss the regional collaborative strategies which encouraged the development of the Pacific Islands Forum RAP and demonstrate how the forces which are understood to undermine women's security are described in the plan. From here I examine the broader peace advocacy environment in the region and the extent to which the RAP's focus on active conflict contrasts with previous decades of peace advocacy, which tended to be more strongly focused on forms of 'slow violence' afflicting the region, particularly the impacts on communities dealing with the fallout—social and environmental—of nuclear weapons testing programs in the region and the continued colonisation of some Pacific Island territories.

In the third section, I return to the contemporary setting. Here, I show that even while the plan devotes considerable attention to increasing women's representation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, inattention to the contemporary manifestations of 'slow violence' undermines these ambitions. I describe the risks posed to women by climate change and rising sea levels, masculinised governance and militarism. I then speculate on some of the reasons why this inattention might occur, drawing particularly on Sheri Gibbings' observations of participants' similar disinclination to pursue these issues at UN-sponsored events on WPS (Gibbings 2011).

I conclude by arguing that although women peace activists have logged significant gains in progressing the WPS agenda in the Pacific Islands region, future efforts to promote gendered regional security will undoubtedly require greater attention to sources of 'slow violence' that also pose risks to women's regional well-being.

UNSC Resolution 1325: a policy framework for the Pacific Islands?

As the most important site for regional intergovernmental cooperation in the South Pacific, the Pacific Islands Forum has, in recent years, become far more attentive to gender issues than throughout its previous four decades of operations. This was particularly well demonstrated at the 43rd Forum meeting held in Rarotonga in 2012, where issues such as the regional incidence of gender violence, low levels of female participation in electoral politics and women's economic exclusion were identified as key areas of concern (PIFS 2012b). It is

also evidenced by the Forum Secretariat's establishment of a region-wide reference group in 2011 to tackle high rates of violence against women.

The development of the Forum Secretariat's RAP on WPS is a further indicator of the increasing attention paid to questions of gender disadvantage at the regional intergovernmental level. But it also reflects the increasing urgency of gender and security-related concerns across the region in the past decades. The formulation of UNSC Resolution 1325 in 2000 occurred at an opportune moment for the region's peace activists, who were confronted, in this period, with security challenges resulting from the outbreak of active conflict in some contexts and from the task of post-conflict reconstruction in others.

In Fiji, a third coup had occurred in 2000. This was an event which again saw the country's democratically elected government removed from power. However, in contrast to the coups of 1987, where the military maintained tight civilian control, the 2000 event was a chaotic rebel insurgency, which saw indigenous nationalist militias take to the streets and engage in uncontrolled and sporadic bouts of violence. These were often racially motivated incidents, and there is strong anecdotal evidence indicating that women were actively targeted with sexualised and gendered forms of abuse at this time (FWCC 2001; George 2012; Jalal 2002; Robertson and Sutherland 2001).

Elsewhere in the region, 2000 was also a difficult year. In Solomon Islands, there was an escalation in the inter-tribal conflict that had simmered since the late 1990s, and the elected government was also overturned by force. Generalised violence, which accounted for the loss of 50 lives, was fuelled by disputes over land and access to economic and political resources. Waves of internal displacement followed as communities fled the violence. This posed a severe challenge to the state police and government health and welfare providers. Women bore the heaviest burdens in these circumstances. Their ability to meet their caring and domestic responsibilities was severely hampered by the widespread breakdown of economic and social networks (Leslie 2000; Pollard 2000).

The conflict that had killed nearly 10 percent of Bougainville's population was, by 2000, in a process of resolution. The fragile peace which held in that territory had been made possible, in large part, by the energies of groups of women who had shown great determination to bring an end to the fighting (Sirivi and Havini 2004). However, at this point in the post-conflict phase, women watched as negotiations on governance structures occurred in a newly gender-restrictive environment where women's participation was not given high priority (Hermkens 2011). Male customary leaders' efforts to define distinctive Bougainvillean customary practices as part of their overall ambition of achieving autonomy from Papua New Guinea (PNG) involved a new policing of custom and authenticity. Ironically, these efforts often seemed designed to deprive the territory's women of the same sources of matrilineal customary power that had legitimised their peacebuilding efforts at the height of the conflict (ibid.).¹

Against this backdrop, UNSC Resolution 1325 licensed women in the region to bring greater attention to the gendered impacts of the conflict that had occurred in the region, as well as the gender-exclusive nature of most formal peace processes. The region's women peacebuilders appeared to need little convincing that UNSC Resolution 1325 was relevant to their situation. Their challenge lay in building institutional awareness of this policy framework amongst the region's male-dominated political elite.

This was by no means straightforward. Amongst many decision makers in the region there is strong resistance to the idea that the UN should have influence over the business of sovereign Pacific Island countries. This resistance is particularly evident when it comes to matters of gender (see Levaopolo Talatou, cited in Tauafafi 2012). International instruments such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979), and later UN declarations which recognised violence against women as a human rights violation, have provided an important lobbying platform for women activists in the region, who hope to draw government attention to issues such as the prevalence of gender violence or the need for increased political representation of women. But activists often encounter resistance from those men and women in the region who view the UN-mandated language of rights as indicative of a 'heartless globalization and irreligion' that is directly at odds with local sociocultural values (Douglas 2002, 21; see also Johnson 1984; Jolly 1994, 1997).

In recognition of these doubts, gender activists have adopted translation strategies that aim to localise UN agendas and break down local levels of resistance. Since 2000, a trans-regional network of women's organisations from Fiji, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Tonga, known as the Pacific Peace-Women Project, has worked in this way to spread awareness of and win support for UNSC Resolution 1325 at the popular level. In its promotional documents, Pacific PeaceWomen encourages both a literal translation of WPS provisions into local languages and a more conceptual approach to the task of translation. As part of this broader effort, the network encourages its members to hold peace vigils in local churches (FemLINK Pacific 2010) and in this way develop political goals that have some resonance with the deeply held religious convictions that are interwoven with contemporary articulations of Pacific Islands culture, identity and personhood (Knauff 2010; Mosko 2010; Robbins 2010; Tomlinson 2011). In Fiji, peace vigils have become an important aspect of peace advocacy and have allowed women to yoke religious norms of non-violence with the secularised WPS agenda (George 2013a). Likewise, in Bougainville, Catholic ideals of Marian devotion, intertwined with matrilineal customary traditions, are drawn upon to legitimise women's ongoing work in upholding peace in that territory (Hermkens 2011).

The 1325 RAP

This effort to win popular support for women's involvement in peacebuilding is also twinned with strong lobbying for women's peacebuilding to be recognised within the region's formal political institutions. In this regard, the Pacific PeaceWomen Project has sought to promote awareness of UNSC Resolution 1325 and later associated UNSC Resolutions within national governments and the region's intergovernmental institutions. In June 2008, and based on the important work each member organisation had done in its home country, the network achieved its first success when it was granted permission to participate in a Track II Pacific Islands Forum dialogue on regional security policy. Later that year, Pacific PeaceWomen representatives were also invited to address the Forum's annual Regional Security Committee Meeting (FemLINK Pacific 2008). By 2011, the profile of PeaceWomen had increased to such an extent that it was able to stage an important side event on women's security at the annual Forum meeting (held in Wellington, New Zealand). While civil society actors generally decry the limited access they are given to Forum deliberations, this event indicated the growing status of this coalition of organisations within the Pacific Islands Forum (George 2011b). Deliberations continued in the following months between the Forum and members of civil society, and culminated with the successful launch of the Forum's RAP on WPS in November 2012.

The Forum describes this document as supporting and complementing national efforts to reflect the provisions of UNSC Resolution 1325 where Pacific Island governments have taken this agenda up. More importantly, however, the RAP is understood by the Forum to provide guidance to those countries that cannot afford to develop 'their own national action plans' or WPS policy framework (PIFS 2012a, 3). In this way, the Forum anticipates that the RAP will encourage greater regional commitment to the WPS agenda at both the regional and national levels.

This is an important development in policy terms. In large part, regional institutionalisation of the RAP reflects the persistence shown by women's civil society groups, and their donor partners, to make the WPS policy framework understood and valued both in their own countries and by the regional political elite. But another perspective can be offered on this policy 'gain' if we consider how this activity is situated within the broader history of women's peace advocacy in the Pacific Islands context. Women's efforts to build peace in the region did not begin with the advent of UNSC Resolution 1325, but have been ongoing for much of the post-colonial period (George 2011a). Awareness of this broader historical context offers a different perspective on the factors that determine what counts as 'progress' for women within the peacebuilding realm.²

For example, in the period of Pacific decolonisation (from the late 1960s onwards), the region's women peace activists were engaged in advocacy which was much more strongly focused on the damaging influences emanating from

outside the region that were understood to threaten the well-being and social cohesion of Pacific communities. In this context, women peace activists voiced strong opposition to militarism in the region—the environmental, health and social impacts of continued programs of nuclear weapons testing, which were begun on Bikini Atoll in 1946 and continued in the French Pacific territories until 1996 (Maclellan 2005). As an extension of these types of concerns, peace activists also opposed the continued colonial/settler presence that contributed to indigenous dispossession in territories such as New Caledonia, French Polynesia and East Timor. In the 1970s, some Pacific women activists extended their critical gaze even further to contest the economic activities of foreign enterprises in the region, whose agricultural, mining or tourism ventures were seen to similarly compromise the prospects for regional peace, as well as, more immediately, the economic standing of the region's women (George 2011a; 2012, 49–56). Looking back on this period of advocacy, Vanessa Griffen (1987, 6) has argued that activists' highly internationalised perspective was informed by the idea that the insecurities lived by Pacific women were compounded by 'conditions such as poverty, colonialism or imperialism, racism and white domination'.

Since 2000, this critique has become less audible. In the last decade, women activists have focused more directly on the local developments and pressures that are felt to fuel violent conflict in the region, and the local measures that might be put in place to aid conflict resolution. Further, women peacebuilders' invocation of UNSC Resolution 1325 as an international policy framework which will help cement peace in the region suggests a shifting perspective on the way that the global and local intersect when it comes to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Rather than invoking the 'international' as a realm that threatens the security of women, today it is more common for activists to consider how the 'international' supports the peace ambitions of the region's women, particularly through continued development of the WPS policy framework.³ This leaves little scope for examination of what I have chosen to describe here as the 'slow violence' which, in addition to instances of 'hot' conflict, also fuels regional insecurity, with generalised as well as gendered consequences.

Rob Nixon has coined the term 'slow violence' to describe the attenuated impacts of environmental damage. He argues that while violence is 'customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space', and instantly 'visible', our analysis of violence needs also to be attentive to the non-spectacular—that is, violence which is 'incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales' (Nixon 2011, 2).

Nixon uses this conceptual approach to consider how polluting industrialised development, the challenges of toxic waste management and the problems of climate change can be viewed as forms of 'slow violence' that undermine security. It is a perspective on violence that is particularly profound for Pacific Island communities, who live on the 'front line' of climate change. Here, rising

sea levels are not a future threat but a present reality. Communities such as those in PNG's Carteret Islands have, since 2007, been forced to resettle in Bougainville as salt water invades their living places and food gardens. It is ironic that Carteret Islanders have been encouraged to see Bougainville as a place of refuge—a territory where disputes over land tenure and land use have fuelled devastating conflict and remain sources of tension. Recent news media and film documentary reports have illustrated the precarious situation of this refugee population, who seek to make their homes, establish livelihoods, and protect their culture and identity in a territory that is, itself, still dealing with the after-effects of conflict-related social, political and economic upheaval (Marshall 2007; Moreton 2009; Redfearn 2011; Rakova 2009). The predicament of the Carteret Islanders confirms Nixon's (2011, 3) claim that, as environmental challenges make the 'conditions for sustaining life ... increasingly but gradually degraded', there is the possibility of rekindling 'long-term proliferating conflicts'.⁴

Nixon does not give close consideration to the relationship between gender (as a cross-cutting analytical frame) and 'slow violence'. Nonetheless, the experience of conflicts occurring in the region in the past 30 years suggests that Pacific women's security will surely be compromised in specific and profound ways as the challenges of environmental degradation and climate change become more urgent regionally into the future (Australian Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO 2011). But there is value in also stretching the concept of 'slow violence' in ways which draw attention to the other influences in the region that diminish, in attenuated, incremental forms, the security of women. Beyond its relevance to environmental degradation, the 'slow violence' conceptual lens might also be used to examine how women's security is impacted in a more attenuated fashion by other regional factors. In the following sections of this article, I defend this idea by examining how the prevalence of masculinised governance structures and varieties of militarism can be understood in the same vein as phenomena which undermine women's security in ways that are slow-building, but nonetheless dramatic.

The masculinisation of institutional governance

Across the Pacific Islands region, institutional politics is predominantly the domain of men, with an average of 3.65 parliamentary seats in the region held by women—or 16 women Members of Parliament out of a regional parliamentary population of 438 (Huffer 2006; Thomas 2002; True *et al.* 2013). This lamentably low level of female representation is beginning to gain attention from the region's aid providers and some Pacific Islands statesmen. The potential link between women's institutional political representation and women's broader insecurity has not been investigated with any seriousness in the region, however.⁵

I have shown elsewhere that women's absence from institutional politics may contribute to the high levels of gendered violence that currently flourish in

Pacific societies. Drawing on evidence gathered on Kanak women's political participation in New Caledonia, I have argued that when women in the region achieve a substantial level of political representation, they are in a position to more effectively mobilise state resources to address this issue than they can ever hope to do when they advocate from within civil society (George 2013b, forthcoming).

But women's absence from institutional politics compounds their physical insecurity in ways other than compounding their risk of physical violence. For example, regional public-health-spending figures over the past two decades reveal that male-dominated governments do not treat this sector as a priority area. This can have significant implications for the reproductive health and security of women in countries such as PNG, where levels of public health spending are some of the lowest in the region, ranging from 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1995 to 3.4 percent in 2011. These compare favourably only with Fiji, where recorded public health spending has hovered between 2.5 and 2.6 percent of GDP over the same period.⁶ What makes the PNG example particularly shocking, however, is that investment in public health has stagnated even while the country has posted regionally high levels of GDP growth of between 9 and 11 percent (thanks to a booming mineral extraction industry) in the last years (Trading Economics 2013).

In PNG, the gendered costs of this inattention to health funding become starkly apparent when PNG's maternal morbidity statistics are considered. Lesley Doyal (2002) has investigated how women's reproductive health requirements make them particularly dependent on public health systems. With such poor levels of investment in public health, PNG, unsurprisingly, has one of the region's highest levels of maternal mortality, with 2010 figures indicating that 230 women died for every 100,000 live births. Even though these figures have improved from 1995, when 390 deaths per 100,000 live births were recorded, they are nonetheless serious in global terms and present an alarming contradiction to those optimistic outlooks which confidently predict rising national prosperity as a result of the so-called 'PNG resource boom'.⁷

Improvements in maternal health have been made a global priority by the UN and nominated as a 2015 Millennium Development Goal. In PNG, such ambitions should be supported by regional cultural value systems which celebrate women's maternal roles as sources of cultural prestige (George 2010; Hermkens 2011). However, government inattention to this issue of women's reproductive security is allowed to continue because only three women legislators sit in the PNG parliament alongside their more than 100 male colleagues. This masculine political elite has shown a strong disinclination to support any proposal for electoral reform that might improve women's entry into institutional politics (True *et al.* 2013). The result is a parliamentary environment where masculine political priorities for public investment and spending easily trump obligations to uphold and protect the security of women.

Militarism

Militarism in the region can be viewed as another form of 'slow violence' that does damage to the standing of Pacific Island women. This occurs as global powers increase their military footprint in Pacific Island territories,⁸ and as home-grown military forces look to advance their national political influence.

Indigenous Chamorro experiences of waves of occupation on Guam (or Guahan in the Chamorro idiom) from Spanish, Japanese and US interests provide clear evidence of the attenuated violence produced by militarism. Since World War II, this southernmost island in the Northern Marianas chain has been annexed by the USA and borne a strong military-base presence. While local supporters of the military justify this story of indigenous dispossession as a return on the obligation owed by Guam to the USA for liberation from a brutal Japanese occupation (Camacho 2011), others ask how much more Guam's people are required to pay.⁹

These questions are becoming more urgent amidst increased US concern about rising Chinese influence in the Pacific region. These worries have prompted the US administration to announce its 'Pacific Pivot', a 'rebalancing' of US strategic engagement to more strongly focus on the Asia-Pacific region (Manyin *et al.* 2012). In this context, Guam has become newly prized by its US administrators. Coined the 'tip of the American spear', the island is to be (dubiously) favoured with a military build-up that will, by 2015, see military base expansion and the deployment of an extra 8000 (some allege this figure might be as high as 40,000) mainland troops to an island that has already surrendered one-third of its tiny territory to US military installations.

Chamorro women have been at the forefront of efforts to resist this military 'build-up' and have drawn on their matrilineal traditions to legitimate their leadership in this area. Against the 'tip of the spear' rhetoric, indigenous women have argued that 'we are the people of the land' as they draw attention to the risks that militarisation poses to the island's fragile environment, which is already under stress from the existing base presence, and the survival of indigenous culture and identity.¹⁰ In this regard, women activists have also raised concerns about the insecurities borne by women in a socio-political context where physical force is associated with honour and where the transactional sex industry, which inevitably accompanies large military installations, will undoubtedly flourish (as it has elsewhere in the Pacific Rim where US bases are established).¹¹

Elsewhere in the region, women suffer attenuated insecurities as a result of 'home-grown' forms of militarism. In Fiji, the military's decision to assume political control of the country in 2006 was justified as a necessary step towards the achievement of stable and accountable governance (George 2012). In this context, military leaders have defended their political legitimacy by arguing that they were uniquely placed to deal with communal division or dissent (Fijilive, December 7, 2006). But, as women activists in Fiji have found, this efficiency

relies on political oppression. Those women who have challenged the authority of the current military regime have experienced periods of detention without charge in military barracks or police stations and, at times, episodes of intimidation and physical abuse by military agents (George 2012, 186; 2013b). Others have had their rights to international travel temporarily revoked (George 2013b).

According to some local observers, this authoritarian approach to dissent has also encouraged authoritarianism in the home. As the lines that define military and civilian aspects of social and cultural life become more comprehensively blurred in Fiji (Halapua 2003; Teaiwa 2005), Fiji's gender activists have, since 2006, described a 'continuum of violence' that extends from the military barracks to the lives of families around the country (FemLink 2009, cited in George 2012, 193). They claim that male family members struggle to come to terms with the authoritarian political environment outside the home and vent their frustrations against vulnerable members of their family, frequently with violence and most commonly against women (Ali 2009).¹²

These cases demonstrate the attenuated violence that accompanies institutionalised militarism in the region and how this can compromise women's security. In the last decade, there has been increased regional debate amongst WPS activists and the region's policy makers about the links between a prevalence of small arms in some communities and the insecurity experienced by women when these have fallen into the hands of informal militias, as was the case in Bougainville in the 1990s and Fiji and Solomon Islands in the early 2000s (Hakena, cited in Australia Network 2012; Bhagwan-Rolls 2011; Bishop 2013). This is an important security challenge in the region that continues to threaten regional stability. Nonetheless, it is also significant that WPS deliberation in this area has not been connected to a broader critical examination of formal military institutions and how these can also become potent sources of gendered insecurity in some Pacific Island contexts.

UNSC Resolution 1325 and 'slow violence'

These examples make clear the invisible but dramatic gendered impacts of 'slow violence' at work across the region. In contrast to past generations of peace activists whose activity was strongly focused on the relationship between 'slow violence' and insecurity, current debates occurring in the region on women's security tend to be tightly linked to UNSC Resolution 1325's WPS framework. This means they are more strongly focused on the links between gendered insecurity and 'hot' conflict, and leave questions of attenuated and structural violence to one side.

This became particularly apparent to me during interviews with staff from the Political Governance and Security unit at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat conducted in 2013. Here it was argued that the recently developed RAP on WPS was most relevant to the Melanesian countries of the Pacific Islands—that is,

those countries understood to have had direct experience of conflict-related violence. Hence, throughout my discussions on the development of the RAP, references were repeatedly made to Bougainville, Solomon Islands, PNG and Fiji as particular countries of regional concern.

Each of these Melanesian countries has experienced outbreaks of conflict in the recent past and is dealing with the legacies of this in the current context. When pressed, Forum staff recognised that other issues, such as militarism, might be relevant to debates about women's security and could be addressed in future iterations of the plan. But questions of resource allocation in terms of where and how the Pacific Islands Forum might best support the plan were also raised as impediments to any future extension of the plan's focus. It was also argued that Forum member states may be opposed to a broader application of this type of agenda. These concerns are not without foundation. A recent observer to the 2013 Pacific Islands Forum Regional Security Committee Meeting (5–6 June) indicated to me that the New Zealand delegation was particularly hesitant about the contributions to debate which focused on the rise of sorcery-related killings in the region for example (George 2013b), climate change or 'failed development models', arguing that the retreat should be more closely focused on 'narrower' (read more conventional) security concerns (Anonymous source, May 2013).

Sheri Gibbings has noticed how similar sensibilities have shaped debate on women's security within the UN. In this context, she describes the tepid reception given to an 'angry' presentation made by Iraqi women at an event sponsored by the UN Working Group on Women, Peace and Security in 2003. On this occasion, the women protested against US occupation in their country, making critical references to global militarism, US and UK imperialism, and the inadequate responses of the UN itself (Gibbings 2011, 524). Gibbings describes the affronted reactions to this type of protest from UN bureaucrats, fellow women peace activists and member state representatives. Offence was deemed to have been caused because the language of the presentation did not adhere to the 'speech norms' that shape debate within the UN Working Group on Women, Peace and Security and, more generally, within the UNSC (525). These norms encourage women activists to avoid placing the blame for gender insecurity at the door of particular member states, and instead offer hopeful and uplifting messages about how women themselves can be the future drivers of peace and security (526). According to Gibbings, the ability to be 'intelligible in this space' (526) depends on activists framing a narrative that is 'positive' and 'future-oriented' (527).

Similar expectations have, in my view, shaped the current iteration of the RAP. This document seems to have evolved in ways which suggest a strong sensitivity to the sensibilities of member state representatives and regional observers. The opening conceptual sections of the RAP provide an impressive overview of the cultural, material, geopolitical and even climatic factors that contribute to high levels of gendered insecurity in the region. However, while this section of the plan makes plainly obvious many of the structural drivers of

women's insecurity in the region—factors which have a strong similarity to those I describe in the previous section as forms of gendered 'slow violence'—the more substantive focus of activities that are authorised by the plan does not address these challenges. Rather, these activities are more strongly focused on the need to place women at the centre of efforts to uphold the pillar areas of prevention, protection and participation in contexts where conflict-related violence is threatened or is under way (PIFS 2012a, 21–25). Here, the focus seems to be heavily placed on what women can achieve as agents of security and peace, rather than recognising the broader impediments which compound women's insecurity in an everyday attenuated fashion.

This helps to explain why women activists from Guam, for example, professed no knowledge of UNSC Resolution 1325 or the more recently formulated Forum RAP when I asked them how such things might assist their opposition to US militarism, both on their island and across the Micronesian region (Natividad, personal communication, July 2013). While these groups have mounted an impressive campaign against an increased US military-base presence on Guam itself and visited many Pacific Rim countries as part of this campaign, the WPS framework has not been seen as useful to these efforts. This is not as surprising as it first appears if Gibbings' account of the norms that shape UNSC Resolution 1325 advocacy is considered. As she has demonstrated, there is an evident disinclination shown by some WPS activists to voice criticism of US militarism as a source of gendered insecurity.

Likewise, in Fiji, women activists have tended to desist from sustained criticism of militarism as a phenomenon which contributes to women's insecurity. While there is a strong tradition of women's peace advocacy in this context, it is currently more common for peace dialogues to focus on the communal, racial or political divisions that have emerged as a result of coup-related conflicts and what this has meant for women. In a repressive political environment, this has been a safer political strategy than focusing sustained energy on the links between militarism, gendered insecurity and the more general political marginalisation of women.

For the moment, there seems to be a vast distance between the regional framing of the WPS agenda and forms of activism that oppose the slow violence of militarism or gendered political marginalisation. The RAP certainly offers important programmatic guidelines to increase the agency of women as peace negotiators when localised instances of conflict occur in the region. But it does not open the way for critical analysis of broader phenomena—climate change, militarism or gendered political marginalisation—that also compound women's insecurity, albeit in an accretive and slow-moving fashion.

Conclusion

What can be drawn from these contending perspectives on gender, violence and insecurity in the Pacific Islands? How do we understand progress in this arena

of feminist advocacy? It would be a mistake to imagine that the arguments presented here indicate my scepticism about the utility of the WPS framework in this geopolitical context. Such conclusions would too glibly overlook the important work and unstinting energies that have made this agenda a new focal point for regional intergovernmental deliberations on security, particularly within the Pacific Islands Forum. The activities of activist women from a range of Pacific Island countries, assisted by donor partners and supporters within regional UN agencies, have meant that UNSC Resolution 1325 and later associated Resolutions are well understood by Pacific Islands Forum member states. Moreover, the Forum Secretariat today has the policy frameworks in place to respond much more effectively to the security needs of women should conflict occur in the region into the future. It must now also assist member states to accommodate women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. These are significant, and regionally unique, developments which contrast positively with the limited attention paid to the WPS framework within the institutions of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations operating in the broader Asia-Pacific.

But while these developments are important, it should not be concluded that the current RAP is attentive to all the security challenges borne by women in the region. As I have shown, various forms of 'slow violence', as a result of climate change and rising sea levels, masculinised governance structures and militarism, produce attenuated and gendered insecurities for women that are currently not identified as priority concerns amongst WPS activists or within the current WPS policy documents.

The current obsession with 'hot' conflict has been intensified by the tensions and unrest that have afflicted the Western Pacific countries of Melanesia in past decades. But the challenges of militarism, equitable governance and rising sea levels cannot be overlooked, as they are equally pressing, if perhaps more attenuated, security concerns for women. The challenge for women peace activists, regional aid partners and regional intergovernmental agencies into the future lies in establishing where and how those productive discussions on WPS that are already under way can intersect with these broader questions.

Notes

1. Anna-Karina Hermkens' (2011) discussion of the prohibition placed on women wearing T-shirts depicting the *upè*, Bougainville's national symbol, is a particularly evocative illustration of this trend. Hermkens argues that while this symbol took on great significance for Bougainvillean identity during the conflict, it was also originally considered the cultural property of women—something which male elders today conveniently ignore.
2. Elsewhere, I have developed a more extended comparative analysis of this activity as it has shifted over time (George 2011a). Here, I draw from that analysis in a synthesised form to explain this idea.
3. In my previous work (George 2011a), I have shown that conflicts in the Pacific Islands are often fuelled by interplaying local and global influences. Such was the case in Bougainville,

where the secessionist war was sparked by the economic interventions of the Australian mining company Conzinc Riotinto and the troubled environmental record of its Panguna copper mine (Denoon 2000). This view disrupts other, more generalised, commentary on conflict in the Pacific Islands, which stipulates that it is particular configurations of solely local factors—cultural and political—which make instability and violence endemic (see, for example, Reilly 2000).

4. While the need for increased attention to what has been termed ‘non-traditional security threats’, such as the impacts of climate change, has recently been the subject of UNSC deliberations (UNSC 2011), attention to the gendered consequences of such threats has been, thus far, harder to detect amongst WPS advocates and policy makers.
5. For example, the current Samoan prime minister, Tuilaepa Malielegaoi, has recently overseen the successful creation of a bill which gives women access to five reserved seats in the national parliament (RNZI 2013).
6. By comparison, Samoa’s health spending has increased from 3.3 to 6.3 percent of GDP, Solomon Islands’ health spending has increased from 3 to 8.4 percent and Tonga has recorded a more moderate gain from 2.7 to 4.4 percent in the same period. Figures for neighbouring states show Australia currently spending 6.2 percent of GDP on public health and New Zealand 8.4 percent. These figures have been compiled using the online economic indicator resource Index Mundi (<http://www.indexmundi.com>), which draws together the most recent global figures on health spending from World Bank, United Nations Development Programme and World Health Organization data.
7. Regional comparisons drawn from 2010 Index Mundi estimates show Tonga and Vanuatu recording 110 deaths for every 100,000 live births, Solomon Islands and Samoa recording 100 deaths for every 100,000 live births, and Fiji recording a regionally low figure of 26 deaths. By contrast, Australia records a figure of 7 deaths for every 100,000 live births and New Zealand 15. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s average is 18. Overall, the figures for the region are high, prompting one recent study to observe that every day five women in the region die in childbirth (NZPGPD 2010, 1).
8. Greg Dvorak’s (2008, 55) examination of hegemonic masculinities in the Marshall Islands (he depicts them as the ‘Martial Islands’) illustrates the long historical legacy of militarism in a region where island territories appeared to the world’s superpowers as convenient ‘stepping stones’ for the accomplishment of global strategy. He shows that in the Marshall Islands, as elsewhere in the region, these calculations were made with little regard for the welfare or wishes of indigenous inhabitants.
9. This sentiment was voiced during my interview with Linda Lisa Natividad, a Chamorro activist and scholar, which took place on Guam 5 May, 2010.
10. Hope Christobel (2013) made this statement as she outlined indigenous women’s responses to the military build-up during her appearance on *Beyond the Fence*, a weekly radio program which is broadcast on Guam by Radio KPRG. Podcasts of the original program broadcast on 10 May 2013 are available at the KPRG website: <http://kprg.podbean.com/2013/05/>.
11. In my interviews with women activists working in the area of social welfare on Guam in April 2010, fears were repeatedly expressed about the dangers militarism posed to the lives of young women living on the island, and how indigenous Chamorro male members are equally placed in danger by this behaviour. The argument here was that young men often respond violently towards outsiders who show female family members unwanted sexual attention.
12. Cynthia Cockburn (2011) has noted in other contexts that the impact of increased militarism in any society is almost never positive for women, who contend with a scenario where norms of violence seep beyond the military context from the ‘barracks’ to ‘the bars, the streets, to the bedroom’. Such observations indicate the ways in which gendered ‘relations of power’ operating through state institutions can structure gender relations beyond the institution and encourage a normalisation of gender violence (Connell 2002, 59).

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