

## ‘Starting with a Prayer’: Women, Faith, and Security in Fiji

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### ABSTRACT

*Scholars of global security have recently been captured by the idea that there is a link between ‘sex and world peace’. They argue that the security of states and the international system should be understood as conditional upon the social, economic, and political standing of women. Accordingly, they contend that societies and states that display chauvinistic and discriminatory sociocultural influences are more tolerant of high levels of gender disadvantage and violence towards women, and more likely to be marked by general levels of belligerence, violence, and insecurity. Ideologies of faith are identified as helping to fuel this scenario. Hence, proponents of the ‘sex and world peace’ thesis construct a strongly oppositional relationship between gender and faith on the one hand, and gender and security on the other. In this paper, I challenge the idea that efforts to build security, gendered or otherwise, are only effective if they are secularised. I draw on examples from the Pacific Islands to defend my case. While I concede that faith can be a source of insecurity in many parts of the Pacific Islands region, and is often invoked in ways that legitimise violence, I also discuss important examples that illustrate where and how faith is a resource for the region’s women peacebuilders who have resisted violence in interpersonal, intercommunal, and interregional contexts.*

Keywords: sex, world peace, Pacific Islands, women, peacebuilders.

### INTRODUCTION

In the Pacific Islands, conflict, like politics, is largely viewed as ‘men’s business’. During periods of political and social unrest, the media and academic focus is turned, predominantly, upon the actions of male protagonists. This means that while regional observers wring their hands over lawlessness in Papua New Guinea, coups in Fiji, and the continuing threat of unrest in Bougainville or Solomon Islands, there has been a general disinclination to consider how women’s peacebuilding activity challenges the alleged pervasiveness of regional conflict.

Even though it is little recognised, peace advocacy has been a continued feature of Pacific women’s political engagement since the period of Pacific decolonisation (George 2011). This advocacy has exposed the structural causes of regional insecurity and the more immediate impacts of conflict as it has occurred in various island settings. The impacts of this advocacy – national and regional – have been notable. Women peacebuilders have posed successful challenges to geopolitical violence such as nuclear testing in the region (George 2011), inter-communal tensions simmering at the national level in countries like Fiji or Bougainville (George 2010, 2012; Hermkens 2012), and insecurities borne by women at the conjugal level as a result of family and gendered forms of violence (Douglas 2003; George 2012; Jolly 1997).

The impacts of these campaigns provide important evidence of Pacific women’s political agency. They also challenge stereotypical depictions of the region as one where the lives of women are shaped by a pervasive gender disparity, manifest in commonly quoted indicators

that point to extreme levels of gender violence, low levels of female representation in institutional politics, and severe economic disparity between women and men (Burgmann 2011; Huffer 2006:38; True et al. 2013). Some theorists of gender and security have recently suggested that such circumstances are evidence of a 'gender gap' that, by itself, explains why states are prone to conflict (Verveer 2012). According to this logic, 'norms of cultural violence diffuse through religion, ideology, language' in ways that justify gender inequity and other social inequalities rooted in ethnic or religious difference and, in the long term, the tolerance of violence towards the oppressed and marginalised (Hudson et al. 2008:21). Notions of security – individual or state-based – are, from this perspective, dependent upon abstracted ideals of personhood where people become 'liberated' or released from the divisive and constraining influences of cultural violence. These perspectives on the relationship between faith, culture, gender, and security have generated a new excitement in foreign policy-making circles. Yet this lens tends to ignore the very concrete ways in which religion and culture also provide women activists with resources. As I will show in this article, religious and cultural values can also be drawn upon to legitimate women's demands for peace and their participation in projects that aim to foster more secure relationships in domains ranging from the interpersonal to the international.

The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate how women activists have drawn on faith values to motivate and legitimate their peacebuilding work. As I will show, faith in this context is discussed by women peacebuilders as something which provides, first, a motivation for them to actively confront the normalisation of violence in interpersonal, inter-communal, even international relations, and second, something which legitimates this activity. As I explain, these agendas are not pursued by women in a wholly individualised sense. Rather, faith is invoked here as reinforcing obligation and respect towards others, values which contradict a simultaneous tolerance of violence and insecurity.

These findings have relevance for recent debate among scholars of Pacific Christianities who argue over the persistence of 'dividual' or 'individual' notions of personhood within Oceanic societies (see Mosko 2010; Robbins 2010). While much of the material I present here focuses upon the idea that individuals should take action to resist the influences that create local or regional insecurity, the focus is firmly maintained in the communal rationale, which drives these activities, and the communal rather than individual gains, which will accrue as a result. This perspective is perhaps largely at odds with those who have recently insisted that Christian faith has encouraged an increasing individualism within Pacific communities (Robbins 2010). However, this perspective on faith, community, and security has its analogue in Karen Brison's research on Fijian Methodism. Brison discusses how Methodists articulate a sense of 'communalism' that is the 'hard won and freely chosen achievement of an autonomous self' (Brison 2007:57). Like Brison, I am interested here in examining how individualised notions of agency are finely balanced with an emphasis upon community obligation within faith-based efforts to build peace (see also Tomlinson 2011:157–9).<sup>1</sup> In the concluding sections of this paper, I will consider the way women activists defend the idea of active personhood as a Christian and communal obligation.

This discussion proceeds in three parts. In the first part, I examine in more detail the recent debate in global politics that seeks to establish a correlation between gender inequity and state peacefulness. As I will show, proponents of this view understand faith as part of a broader system of cultural violence that contributes to gendered inequality and that also fuels communal and state insecurities. I contend that such perspectives obscure the extent to which faith encourages a sense of personhood that, for women peacebuilders in Fiji at least, is focused on personal and communal obligations to resist insecurity.

In the second part of this article, I examine women's peacebuilding advocacy and the ways in which principles of faith have been invoked to challenge insecurities occurring for women in

their interpersonal relationships,<sup>2</sup> as a result of Fiji's communal rivalries, and within the realm of regional geopolitics. Building on the work done on this issue in other Pacific Island contexts (Douglas 2002b, 2003; Hermkens 2011; Jolly 1996, 2005), this discussion challenges the idea that religious principles should only be understood as part of a system of cultural violence that necessarily undermines women's standing and their capacity to build peace.

However, while this article emphasises the idea that faith gives women a platform upon which to resist violence at a range of levels, the possibilities are not open-ended. Rather than romanticise the extent to which faith opens up 'political space' for women activists, the final sections of this article recognise the 'encompassed' nature of this type of activity in Fiji (Jolly 1994) and the simultaneous restrictions that are placed upon believing women who are activists within, and beyond, their faith communities.

### GENDER, CULTURE, PEACE

The most pressing global problems simply won't be solved without the participation of women. Seriously, guys. (Melanie Verveer 2012)

In a 2012 issue of *Foreign Policy*, Melanie Verveer (2012), the newly appointed US ambassador for women, argues that women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution is vital to the achievement of long-term, sustainable security. Since the early 1980s, and beginning with Sara Ruddick's ground-breaking work on the links between maternalism and peacebuilding (Ruddick 1989), such claims have become well-rehearsed within feminist circles. Nonetheless, Verveer's efforts to substantiate this claim are emblematic of a new vein of thinking on global security, spearheaded by scholars such as Valerie Hudson (Hudson 2012; Hudson et al. 2008) and Mary Caprioli (2005), who contend that societies that uphold the rights of women are inherently more peaceful than those societies that tolerate women's subordination.

Those promoting this line of argument identify cultural violence, diffused 'within religion, ideology, language', as the primary cause of gendered inequities (Hudson et al. 2008:21). To support this idea, they quote Johan Galtung who states, 'Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right, or at least not wrong' (Galtung 1990:291). This scenario is said to have negative implications for the security of women whose well-being is compromised by the resulting 'gender gap'. But cultural violence is also understood to undermine community and state security. A tolerance for gendered inequality generates an increased societal tolerance of insecurity and violence, and, so the argument goes, an increased incidence of intrastate and interstate conflict.<sup>3</sup> Hudson et al. therefore contend that,

If domestic violence is normal in family conflict resolution in a society, then that society is more likely to rely on violent conflict resolution and to be involved in militarism and war than are societies with lower levels of family violence (Hudson et al. 2008:19).

Proponents of this theoretical position are so confident of the correlation between gendered insecurity and state insecurity that they boast its predictive capacity, contending that 'the best predictor of state peacefulness is how well its women are treated' (Hudson 2012:1).<sup>4</sup>

Such views are based on an understanding of the causal relationship between gender discrimination and conflict that is easily critiqued. For example, this formulation ignores the fact that 'gender discriminatory norms and practices may be a symptom, rather than a cause of war and violence' (Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011:496). In the Pacific Islands, it has not

been uncommon for newly emerged 'post-conflict' political elites to act in ways that regulate and police the actions of women whose dress, social behaviour, or political ambitions are deemed threatening to cultural values. These trends have been observed in the political rhetoric of leaders who have assumed power after periods of conflict or unrest in places such as Bougainville, Fiji, Vanuatu, or Tonga (ABC 2009; Douglas 2002a; George 2010, 2012; Hermkens 2011; Jolly 1994; Mera Molisa 1991).<sup>5</sup>

This is not unique to the Pacific. Analyses of gender politics in a variety of post-conflict contexts suggest that women are frequently subject to similarly restrictive pressures as masculine elites move to shut down the 'transformational' opportunities that present to women when conflict erupts. These opportunities may occur because women become economically or politically active out of necessity (self or familial protection), because they actively provide support to the parties involved in a conflict, or because they actively resist conflict (Chinkin and Charlesworth 2006:941; Meintjes et al. 2001:64). Analyses that posit a causal link between supposed 'civilizational' norms of gendered disadvantage and the prevalence of conflict overlook these complex post-conflict dynamics. They also seem problematically imbued with 'neo-colonial' ethos, which claims a need to 'liberate women in other parts of the world from . . . "cultural" or "traditional" – gender-discriminatory norms and practices' (Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011:496).<sup>6</sup>

It would certainly be unwise to deny the links between faith and insecurity in the region. However, it is also unwise to imagine religion can only be a source of regional insecurity. The important point here is that across the Pacific Islands, the relationship between gender, faith, and security is far more complex than those promoting a macro-perspective of 'sex and world peace' would have us believe.

In Fiji, there is strong evidence to support the idea that religious values can be invoked in ways that undermine well-being at a range of levels. Fijian Methodism has been described as making 'frequent reference to the Pauline edicts of wifely submission' to ordain patriarchal privilege in marriage (Jolly 1994:154). The image of Christ, the 'suffering servant', has been used by religious leaders to encourage women's tolerance of conjugal violence and their continued respect for the religious sanctity of marriage (Meo 2003:156).

John Kelly has likewise shown how faith values have been invoked to 'safeguard' women within Fiji's Indian communities. Indian nationalists' early political claims frequently hinged upon religious arguments about the protection of Indian women's virtue from the 'radical pollution' of colonial indenture and emergent rivalries occurring between Hindu and Muslim groups (Kelly 1991:2, 232). This obsession with women's virtue has created a contemporary situation whereby many Indian women are rigidly controlled by a patriarchal religious conservatism and subject to familial sanction if they transgress the cultural or religious protocols that define their propriety (Lateef 1990:45; Trnka 2005:285–6, 288–9).

The links between faith and insecurity are similarly evident in Fiji's inter-communal relations. The faith identities of Fiji's different ethnic populations have frequently been drawn on to demarcate communal boundaries. Some members of the political elite have chosen to describe these boundaries in language that is demonising and discriminatory (Hill 2010; Thomas 2001; Tomlinson 2009, 2011).

Even at the geopolitical level, religion has been viewed as accommodating insecurity and violence. For example, at various points in the last two centuries, the Pacific Islands mainline churches have all been accused of failing to speak loudly enough against the actions of the global political powers in the region. The colonial and later strategic and developmental agendas that contributed to the displacement of whole island communities, as well as widespread environmental degradation, loss of indigenous autonomy, and a hardening of gendered divisions in society seem to have been met with a quiet church acceptance (Finau and Garrett 1989:174; Wadell 2008).

Yet acknowledgement of these various scenarios does not make the link between religion, violence, and insecurity inevitable in Fiji, or the broader region. As this article aims to demonstrate, faith-based ideals have also been yoked to more peaceful ends, an observation that is particularly important when examining women's peacebuilding work in the Pacific Islands. In this regard, women peacebuilders' references to religion go far beyond the typical practice of starting meetings with a prayer.

#### FAITH AND SECURITY IN THE HOME: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Since the early 1980s, women's organisations in Fiji have looked to challenge the pervasive nature of gender violence and the insecurities experienced by women in the conjugal setting. Here, as in many other Melanesian countries, violence against women is said to occur at extreme levels. While this violence is often blamed on the patriarchal norms prevalent within both Fijian and Indo-Fijian society (Ali in George 2012:101), pervasive gender violence is also seen as a product of the 'coup culture' (Tarte 2009:209) that plagues Fiji's institutional politics and the increasing militarisation of Fiji's society, which encourages a high tolerance for displays of masculine violence (FWCC 2012a; see also Halapua 2003).

Women's groups in Fiji have drawn increased public attention to the issue of gender violence, through media advocacy, training sessions conducted with the law and policing sector, and through more general awareness-raising campaigns. International instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and later UN declarations that recognise violence against women as a human rights violation, have provided an important lobbying platform for these advocacy efforts. They are often invoked by activists to remind Pacific governments of their obligations to uphold the security of their female citizens (George 2012). However, women's groups have also localised their approach to counter the challenge that they are working within a rights-based framework underpinned by 'heartless globalization and irreligion' that is inauthentic to local sociocultural values (Douglas 2002b:21). Reflecting the deeply held religious values that regulate life in both the Fijian and Indian communities, anti-violence activists in Fiji frequently combine references to Christian, Hindu, and Muslim teachings on the respectful and just treatment of women with appeals to the more secularised rights-based agenda prevailing within transnational advocacy communities (Douglas 2003; Jolly 1997). Local activist figures such as Shamima Ali of the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) state the central importance of studying religious texts, the Bible, the Qur'an, and Hindu writings so that activists are in a strong position to counter patriarchal interpretations of these texts that sanction violence against women (George 2012:134–5).

The FWCC also recognises the need to involve religious institutions more centrally in anti-violence work, and to counter the tendency for religious leaders to reinforce ideas about the sanctity of family and marriage in ways that encourage women's tolerance of violence. The organisation argues that for women victims of violence, places of religious worship are often the 'first point of contact' and that 'the response they receive is critical in determining the course of action they will take' (FWCC 2012b). According to Shamima Ali, 'very often women are told to forgive and forget' when they discuss family violence with religious leaders (Ali cited in FWCC 2012b). To counter these trends, in November 2012, the FWCC held a workshop in Nadi specifically designed to increase awareness of gender violence among religious leaders in the country. This meeting had an inter-faith focus and engaged 'pastors, priests, pundits and imams' from all of Fiji's major religious institutions. All 25 participants were encouraged 'to examine their own religious interpretations and see how key messages can be used in the prevention of violence against women' (FWCC 2012b).

Working from within their churches, women theologians are also thinking about how notions of Christian personhood can be developed and harnessed to this anti-violence effort. Joan Taefono, a member of the feminist theology group known as Weavers located at the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools,<sup>7</sup> explained to me the need to (re)interpret religious doctrine within Oceanic Christianities to challenge the theology of suffering – ‘Jesus Christ suffering for our sins’ – that has been widely used to encourage women’s acceptance of ‘suffering in their daily lives’. Taefono argued that efforts to resist this violence relied upon a notion of common humanity and Christians recognising they belonged to a global moral community. ‘Our commonality is our humanness,’ she stated, and something which made the passive acceptance of violence against women untenable (Taefono interview, Suva, March 2002).

Another Fijian women theologian, Ilsipeci Meo (2003), has argued that women’s efforts to proclaim their rights to violence-free lives should not be viewed as antithetical to Christian teachings. To support this claim, she cites Luke 18:1–8 and the story of a widow who is destitute, outcast, and ignored, but who chooses to speak up to her community to have needs met (Meo 2003:154). Reinforcing the idea of common humanity, she argues that ‘a woman is a child of God who has every right to be recognised as a person equal in all respects to men’ (Meo 2003:155). But Meo also acknowledges that the claim to equality requires courage and the ability to ‘take on authority’. She goes on to affirm that God’s power brings forth full humanity and empowerment to the powerless, especially in the case of women (Meo 2003:157). In her view, Christian faith should provide women with the motivation to respond to violence as agents who resist rather than victims who tolerate abuse and mistreatment.

### BRIDGING COMMUNITY DIVISIONS

The idea that faith provides a foundation for thinking about common humanity has also been used by women activists in Fiji to resist the religious normalisation of communal division. I began this research in Fiji in 2002, a period when many of my informants made reference to the civilian coup that had occurred some 18 months earlier, an event which resulted in sporadic and uncontrolled outbreaks of civilian violence, and which left a legacy of fear and distrust between Fiji’s indigenous and Indian communities (Robertson and Sutherland 2002; Trnka 2008).

Since 1987, religion has been used to fuel anti-Indian sentiment, with religious leaders likening Indian faith practices to the activity of ‘evil heathens’ (Hereniko 2003:78, cited in Tomlinson 2009:182). However, references to religion have not only been used to foster tension and suspicion between communities, but also to build peace.

As news of the 2000 coup broke, women from faith communities almost immediately came together to stage a prayer vigil at Suva’s Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral. This event was coordinated by the Fiji National Council of Women, a peak body representing many smaller secular and religious women’s groups. Dressed in black, women attending the vigil mourned the ‘threat of violence’ that hung over the nation and expressed the hope that a ‘peaceful resolution’ might be negotiated (*Fiji Times* 22 May, 28 May 2000). The church vigil became a site for women’s resistance to the coup and the violence it had unleashed (George 2012). But this was not simply a site for Christian resistance. The coordinator of the Fiji Muslim Women’s League, Nisha Buksh, also a member of Fiji’s National Council of Women, described to me the personal importance of this event for her in a period when her fellow Muslim community felt particularly fearful. She stated,

At this time everybody was in chaos, . . . there was the military everywhere and so many guns on the street. People had the feeling that their homes could be raided at

any time. The prayer allowed women to meet in one place, to come together and pray for peace. It was about prayer and networking and creating a movement (Nisha Buksh, interview Suva, April 2002).

The women's peace vigil was held on a monthly basis for some years afterwards and became an important site for future civil society activity advocating a return to democracy (George 2012:169).

When I talked to Nisha Buksh about communalism, perceptions of security, and women's place within Fiji's Islamic community, I found that her words echoed the ideas that feminist Christian theologians had raised about faith providing the basis of a common human experience that could be drawn upon to build security.<sup>8</sup> Nisha identified common traditions between Islam and Christianity, the practice of wearing a veil, for example, which she stated had also been a part of Christian tradition in earlier times. She reflected on this some more when she remarked,

You know it's funny but often I am driving through a village and the kids will call out 'hey Sister' because they think I'm a nun. They can't see the difference (Nisha Buksh, interview, Suva, April 2002).

During our discussions, Nisha was also keen to challenge popular ideas about the gender discriminatory aspects of Islam. She stated that 'Muslim laws talk about equality between men and women all the time' and also remarked that 'God had chosen women and men to be in partnership'. 'The Qur'an says a lot about men and women, not just men', she stated. Nisha had been educated in a Methodist School where she had read the Bible. She said she felt that the story of Mary was far more comprehensively treated in the Qur'an than the Bible, something that she said 'always made her laugh', perhaps because it once again challenged conventional understandings of Islam as discriminatory towards women.

Some months after I interviewed Nisha, Fiji's Minister for Women, Asenca Caucau, betrayed her own ethnonationalist sympathies when she stood in the national Parliament and described Indo-Fijians as 'noxious weeds' in the community (*Pacific Islands Report/PINA Nius*, online, 4 August 2002). I thought back to Nisha's reflections and her observations of faith as it is practised in Fiji. Nisha seemed keen to make the point that there was far more commonality between Islam and Christianity than was reflected in this type of racialised rhetoric. She was deeply troubled by the attacks on places of worship that her community had suffered and the ease with which political leaders ruthlessly exploited religious and ethnic divisions for their own political gain. Even so, Nisha's interfaith sensibilities and her efforts to define a common humanity across difference also allowed her to challenge this communal politics with a humour that, despite the seriousness of the times, was highly endearing. This sympathetic outlook certainly explains why the multi-faith focus of the peace vigil programme was able to continue in Fiji for many months after the 2000 coup and provide the foundations for a more secularised women, peace, and security advocacy agenda in the following years (George 2012:153, 207).

#### FAITH, GENDER, AND REGIONAL SECURITY

Ideas about faith and common humanity have also underpinned the work that Fiji's women's activists have undertaken to challenge regional insecurities. This work has focused on the impact of regional nuclear weapons testing programmes and, in later periods, the regional appropriateness of neoliberal development orthodoxies.

In the late 1960s, Fiji's Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), working alongside the Student Christian Movement (SCM) (established at the newly founded University of the South Pacific), led campaigns designed to raise national awareness of the detrimental impacts of regional nuclear weapons testing programmes (George 2012:49–52; Siwatibau and Williams 1982:68). These were begun on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands by the USA in 1946 and continued in the French Pacific Island territories until 1996 (MacLellan 2005). These programmes caused the displacement of some island populations, particularly in US-controlled Micronesian territories. Communities who remained in the vicinity of test sites have suffered ongoing health effects following widespread water and land-based radiation contamination in test site regions (Aguon 2008; MacLellan 2005).<sup>9</sup>

References to Christian faith played an important part in these campaigns. By the mid-1970s, women activists associated with the Fiji YWCA described their organisation as one committed to the promotion of 'peace and a just world order' assisted by the Christian values of 'obedience' to Jesus and 'love' of 'fellowmen' (YWCA 3rd National Convention Report, 10–13 September 1976, reproduced in George 2012:56). Faith-based commitments to peacebuilding underpinned the organisation's efforts to inform Pacific Island communities about the dangers of nuclear testing and to build support for the anti-nuclear agenda through public meetings, rallies, and community theatre performances. The YWCA and SCM also worked to build support from within mainline church congregations, Catholic and Methodist, on this question. By 1974, the momentum for critical debate on this issue within the churches was such that the Pacific Council of Churches (PCC) passed a series of resolutions at its annual conference, which 'opposed nuclear testing' and advocated the importance of creating a 'nuclear free zone in the Pacific' (Siwatibau and Williams 1982:68). The early determination shown by the YWCA to yoke their concerns about regional security with faith-based notions of justice and peace played an important role in winning broader Methodist and Catholic Church support for the anti-nuclear agenda (George 2012:49–52).

In later years, the theological dimensions of the nuclear issue were further explored in a book entitled *A Call to a New Exodus* (Siwatibau and Williams 1982). Here, Fijian anti-nuclear activist and Fiji YWCA member, Suliania Siwatibau, teamed with co-author David Williams to argue that the divine and 'intimate integral relationship' between God, humanity, and nature was being irrevocably damaged by nuclear testing in the Pacific (Siwatibau and Williams 1982:70).<sup>10</sup>

In this publication, the anti-nuclear cause was framed as a peacemaking mission and Pacific Islanders were encouraged to see themselves as its leaders, ordained to resist the injustice of nuclear weapons testing. Church acceptance of the nuclear issue was decried as a 'terrible silence and accommodation' (Siwatibau and Williams 1982:73). It was argued that

if Christians have lost their role as peacemakers, it is because they have forgotten who they are and because they themselves have fallen victims to the lies and the fears perpetuated by the 'powers' acting as 'false gods' (Siwatibau and Williams 1982:73).

In this way, anti-nuclear campaigners emphasised Christian notions of personhood where commitments to environmental stewardship, peacemaking, and justice were seen to underpin Oceanic security.

In more contemporary periods, this commitment to regional security built around Christian principles of environmental stewardship has found its analogue in the Pacific Conference of Churches' critical scrutiny of global development policy. In recent years, the PCC has critically appraised pervasive notions of neoliberal personhood, which define the individual as a 'maximiser of material goods and the sum total of all his or her wants' (PCC 2010:3). These

ideas are seen to be ‘grossly inadequate to achieving the kind of peace and security that Pacific People know and wish for’ (PCC 2010:3). As the region becomes more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, environmental activists are also increasingly recognising the importance of faith as providing ‘the glue’ that will be vital in holding vulnerable communities together when they are faced with environmental resources depletion or resettlement (Tagivuni 2013).

### CONTINGENT POSSIBILITIES?

As I have shown, women activists in Fiji have proven adept at articulating peace ambitions that are firmly rooted in religious discourse. But these possibilities are not open-ended. For many women in the region, Vanessa Griffen’s observation that ‘Pacific women may sweep the church but they almost never speak from the pulpit’ (Griffen 2010) succinctly illustrates the gendered structures and expectations that shape life within faith communities.

For example, Eta Varani Norton has shown that women have minimal representation within the authority structures of Pacific mainline churches. Women may be recognised as the ‘backbone of the church’ in many Pacific contexts (Varani-Norton 2005:223), she writes, but the expectation of their church duties, involving participation in fundraising activities and practical support for church meetings and social occasions, ‘generally results in increased demands made upon women’s time, energy and material wealth’ and little else (Varani-Norton 2005:240). Emphasising the emancipatory aspects of Christian faith in the Pacific also downplays the historical influence of the Christian missions which, in combination with colonial influences, frequently deprived Pacific Island women of their customary and traditional status (Douglas 2002a; Jolly and Macintyre 1989). Through their participation in mission church groups, women were often encouraged to take up domestic activities considered to be more feminine and therefore ‘appropriate’ for women (Douglas 1999). The combined legacies of colonial and missionary influences have helped to devalue women’s household and agricultural work in the present as ‘subsistence’ rather than economically ‘productive’, and by contrast, celebrated the ‘productiveness’ of men’s public economic and political capacities.<sup>11</sup>

These observations invite the development of a more circumspect perspective on the relationship between gender activism and faith in the Pacific Islands. While religion can inspire activists to challenge the gendered, national, and regional norms that fuel insecurity for Pacific Islanders, and provide a broad sociocultural legitimacy for this activity, religion also shapes the public space available to women activists in ways that are frequently politically constraining. Certainly, the strategies I describe in this article can be viewed as ‘creative’ (Jolly 2005:154) forms of advocacy that draw upon local cultural and religious values as ‘resources’, which motivate and legitimate resistant political activity. Yet it also needs to be recognised that this form of advocacy references social norms and values that can be restrictive for women (see Stivens 2000:22).<sup>12</sup> As I have shown in the first section of this paper, faith can be invoked in Fiji in ways that amplify insecurity at a range of levels. Does this undermine, then, the broader transformational potential of peace advocacy that is inspired by faith-based ideals? This is a question Sally Engle Merry poses in her writing about human rights translation (Merry 2009), and it was a question that gender activists I have interviewed in Fiji also asked themselves regularly.

Fiji’s post-independence political leaders have frequently made reference to customary and religious values in ways that aim to restrict women or sabotage the political ambitions of those committed to gender equality. While Fijian nationalists’ demands that Fiji declare itself a Christian state have reinforced the close links between church and state, they have also

privileged indigenous systems of patriarchal authority (Emberson-Bain 1992). This rhetoric has been much more muted under the current military regime, which has sought to restrict the public profile of the Methodist Church, although this hardly represents a gain for women who in Fiji are now living within a highly militarised and authoritarian political structure.<sup>13</sup>

When appraised in this light, it can therefore be seen that women activists' references to systems of religious belief or customary value may signify a certain political resourcefulness, yet these strategies may also reflect the underlying currents that shape, and to some extent, restrict how Fiji's civil society organisations behave. Activists recognise the importance of references to faith as part of their peace or gender advocacy but they also fear that perhaps they are conceding too much ground to parochial political influences, describing this as being 'boxed in' by culture (George 2012:135). Such views have important implications for how we understand notions of faith, security, and personhood in Fiji's troubled independence era, and particularly the ways in which faith and political agency intersect. In the final section of this paper, I therefore revisit the theme of 'active personhood', which has been touched on throughout this article, reflecting on the central place that this concept occupies in discussion on faith, gender, and security.

#### ACTIVE PERSONHOOD

In their text resisting nuclear testing in the region, Siwatibau and Williams use the term 'faith in action' to describe the obligation that Christians be peacemakers. Invoking a faith-based notion of 'active' personhood, they state:

Peacemaking is not an 'optional' role for Christians. It is a central, integral part of Christian discipleship. Peacemaking is not a passive role. It is no longer enough simply to refrain from violence. We must find active, practical ways of playing this role (Siwatibau and Williams 1982:72).

Nisha Buksh's reflections on the value of the women's peace vigil focused similarly on the idea of active personhood, linking the importance of prayers for peace with the vigil 'building a movement' for peace. Her reflections on the volatile and uncertain post-coup period indicate that she saw the vigil as not simply a passive form for protest against the communal violence that was plaguing the country in mid-2000, but an active form of resistance that had 'movement-orientation' aiming to encourage peaceful political change. Ilisipeci Meo's invocation of the widow's parable in Luke 18:1–8 focuses similarly on the extent to which faith empowers women to 'take on authority' and challenge injustice. These examples indicate how principles of faith provide women with a motivation to challenge the regional sociocultural norms that often prevent women from developing a public political profile. Further, they demonstrate how individual acts of resistance are understood to contribute to a broader sense of communal well-being. Here, faith contributes to a sense of personhood where individual and communal motivations are finely balanced; political agency is exercised individually perhaps, but in the pursuit of peaceable communal rather than personal ambitions.

It is therefore productive to think about women's agency as 'encompassed' by faith rather than either wholly enabled or wholly restricted by it (Jolly 1994). As I have demonstrated in the preceding pages, faith provides women with the language *and* motivation for talking about security. Often, the very act of speaking publicly on these questions requires women peacebuilders to challenge long-standing gendered restrictions of faith practice. That they have dared to do so suggests that it is not antithetical to describe a transformative gender

politics that embraces principles of faith, even though such conclusions might easily be drawn from recent influential contributions to the women, peace, and security debate. We need, rather, to be attentive to the nuances in the way the relationship between gender, faith, and security is configured. Religion has certainly been invoked in ways that normalise insecurities experienced at the personal, communal, and regional level in Oceania, but faith has also paved the way for women to challenge these things. The possibility for a faith-based transformative politics lies in the fact that religious teachings can impel women to critical action while they also ordain the rightfulness of women's efforts to challenge violence, insecurity, and injustice.

## NOTES

1. See also John Taylor (this volume) on the church as a site of positive collective agency and Benedicta Rousseau (this volume) on autonomy emerging from relationality.
2. Throughout this article, I use the terms faith and religion because this discussion aims to extend upon the more common focus on Christianity in Oceania to also consider how discourses of faith and security are articulated by Fiji's Islamic and Hindu populations.
3. Galtung describes cultural violence as 'any aspect of culture that can legitimate violence in direct or structural form' (Galtung 1990:291). He goes on to explain the impact of cultural violence as 'changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least yellow/acceptable' (Galtung 1990:292). Interestingly, Galtung observes the problems of stereotyping entire cultures as violent. He argues, instead, it is more appropriate and sensible to describe 'aspect A or culture C is an example of culture violence' rather than '... culture C is violent' (Galtung 1990:291). This nuanced application of the cultural violence concept is not evident in the work of the sex and world peace theorists who seem much more strongly inclined to brand entire cultures as contributing to a 'gender gap' when it is observed.
4. Further, they contend that this variable provides a more reliable measure of state peacefulness than indicators of democratic stability (Hudson 2012).
5. Often, these leaders have benefited profoundly from the support of these same women during their rise to power and as they struggled to achieve political predominance. This support has not been repaid with recognition of women's claims for more just treatment however.
6. Valerie Hudson's recent article in *Foreign Policy* (April 2012) entitled 'What sex means for world peace?' includes an image of a woman wearing an Islamic Hijab and many written examples of the mistreatment of women in Islamic societies. Hudson's readers are encouraged, albeit implicitly, to draw negative conclusions about the dangers Islam poses both to the well-being of women and to world security.
7. See Matt Tomlinson (this volume) for another perspective on women's involvement in the Weavers group.
8. See Rachel Morgain (this volume) for a similar discussion of faith-based efforts to bridge communal difference. A Methodist Church preacher here made mention of the Hindu Diwali festival and the common significance of 'light' for Christian and Hindu worshippers.
9. For a compelling account of this issue, see Julian Aguon, *What We Bury at Night: Disposable Humanity*, Blue Island Press, 2008.
10. See also Tomlinson (this volume) for a discussion of how women theologians from the Weavers group developed the relationship between faith and environmental stewardship.
11. Latu Latai (this volume) notes that European missionary wives were locally also viewed as examples of 'professional' women that Pacific Islanders might emulate.
12. See also Tomlinson (this volume) for Tima's reflections on the restrictions placed upon women in Fiji's Methodist communities.
13. Although the military government has committed to improving the status of women through economic empowerment initiatives and improved policing commitments to confront pervasive levels of gender violence, the implementation of these policies has had unintended negative consequences. The government's economic support programmes have tended to encourage a ghettoisation of women's economic activity in low-income areas such as small-scale garment production. Likewise, the zero tolerance on violence against women initiative has tended to focus on familial reconciliation and discouraged victims from reporting violence for fear that a strongly punitive response will be directed towards whole villages who fail to comply (FWCC 2013).

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