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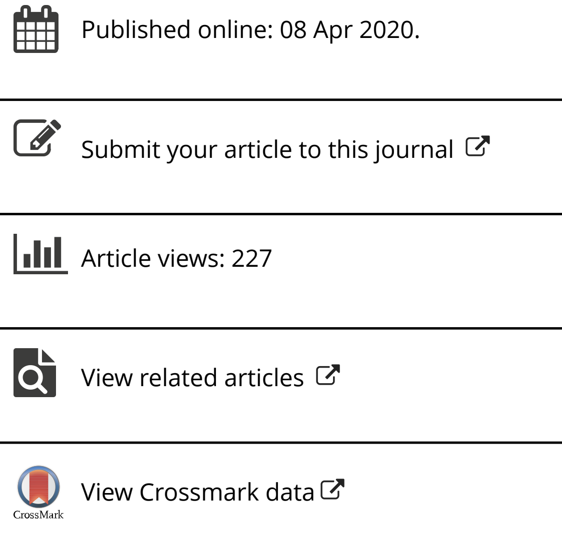

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The collective power of women's organisations in Chuuk, FSM

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ABSTRACT

Achieving gender equality is a key component for improving global health, but how to do so remains a complex undertaking. Each community's experiences with gender inequality and vision for equality are historically and culturally specific, while also fitting larger global patterns. This is the case in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, a group of islands suffering from the impacts of a long history integrating coloniser and locally formed patriarchal values. Chuukese women often see their roles as powerless and silent except when acting through women's groups. In recent decades, Chuukese women created an umbrella organisation for all women's groups, yielding more power to effect change. Derived from an ethnographic study of the Chuuk Women's Council (CWC), 1 focus group and 12 individual interviews were conducted with CWC members to explore women's experiences advancing gender equality on their terms. Findings demonstrate how the CWC lobbied for legal change, replaced inadequate health and social services, and changed community conversations about gender. The CWC received national and international resources, which became both supportive and disruptive to their efforts. Findings from this study have implications for global support of grassroots efforts to achieve gender equality, with lasting implications for gender equity in health.

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Introduction

Empowering women and achieving gender equality are now a major focus of the global health agenda, made more explicit in the 2015 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. Further, in recent years, the World Health Organization's (WHO) focus on the social determinants of health explicitly connects gender inequity in health to the larger issue of global gender inequality. Yet, efforts to reduce gender inequities in health have remained one of the enduring challenges of global health and development. Critiques for the failures of achieving gender equity in health are abundant, and difficulties remain in making significant progress. One major critique is the top-down processes of funding efforts at women's empowerment. These top-down approaches are often argued to be old forms of colonisation and capitalist expansion through new means (Ilcan & Phillips, 2010). Further, these top-down approaches focus on meeting metrics and thresholds which typically focus on individual behaviour change – a major tenant of neoliberal governance – while ignoring the structure of power in which gender inequality operates (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). When targets are used, the complexity of social phenomena is lost (Yamin & Boulanger, 2013). Additionally, achieving gender equality frequently equates to development agencies 'saving the savage women' from their 'culture' (Mukhopadhyay, 2014), ignoring the power of communities to transform their own oppressive structures. Finally, scholars have noted that empowerment in one

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area (e.g. bodily autonomy) does not necessarily mean empowerment in another, such as politics (Moonzwe Davis et al., 2014). The concept of empowerment is multifaceted and complicated, and using indicators to measure it does not capture the cultural and social context of communities (Moonzwe Davis et al., 2014). Global public health efforts have much to learn about how communities and grassroots organisations make sense of gender equality and empowerment (Mullinax et al., 2013).

Globally, women have worked to foster their own versions of empowerment and achieve gender equality through collective action at grassroots levels; particularly in women's groups. In recent decades, these groups often morphed into official non-governmental organisations (NGOs), coinciding with the growth of global gender and development initiatives. NGOs provided a space wherein groups historically marginalised from the state (e.g. women) could work on social issues (Bernal & Grewal, 2014b). Yet, the same concerns of the larger development agendas became apparent in the ways in which NGOs operated. Scholars expressed concerns over how NGOs' priorities were co-opted by powerful donor institutions, as they funded the replacement of state services, focused on individual behaviour change and were typically organised around target- and metric-based initiatives, forming a 'contemporary neoliberal aid regime' (Aksartova, 2009; Alvarez, 1999; Helms, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Schuller, 2009, p. 84; Silliman, 1999).

This study explores the growth of local women's groups into a powerful council transforming gender roles in their image in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Their ability to achieve results in this patriarchal environment is what makes this an important case study in understanding how community narratives of gender can transform from within, using their own ideas about gender equality. Further, findings demonstrate how grassroots NGOs foster collective power and action to effect change, and how these actions are grounded in their own cultural and social context. Finally, this study demonstrates the ways in which these organisations both adopt and resist the agendas of powerful donor organisations, and considers the best ways to support local action at the global level.

Women's groups

Women's groups have a long history in Micronesia as they do elsewhere around the globe, long before the proliferation of official NGOs. Researchers have found collective power to impact women in groups in various ways; for example, as members of women's groups share and learn about other women's experiences, they begin to question why such inequalities exist and work towards societies where they can live their fullest lives without barriers (Atteraya et al., 2016; Molesworth et al., 2017; Notwell, 2014; Scheyvens, 2003). Many members learn leadership skills by holding executive positions within the group and coordinating various functions (Maisonneuve, 2006; Molesworth et al., 2017; Notwell, 2014; Scheyvens, 2003). In this setting, women are more likely to engage in what are typically masculine activities in their communities, which may include politics, leadership and public speaking.

Specifically, Pacific Islands women's groups have been a source of encouragement to break into politics (Maisonneuve, 2006). As a result of Pacific Islands women's group actions, women have been nominated and elected to broader community leadership positions, allowing them to make decisions on behalf of the community for the first time (Scheyvens, 2003). Further, even when women are not in a position to directly legislate, they can earn enough sway to influence legislation through the collective power activated through these groups (Notwell, 2014). Overall, women gain elevated control of personal and community decisions through women's groups.

This elevated control is one of the many benefits to reach the members of women's groups in Chuuk, FSM, where women took their organising to the next level, forming a collective of over 60 groups called the Chuuk Women's Council (CWC). As this study will demonstrate, the women's groups which formed into the collective CWC successfully carried out many diverse projects in the last decade. They earned the trust of international funders, replacing inefficient and unsuccessful attempts to infuse development funds through the government. Additionally, they influenced

changes in laws protecting young women and served as a replacement for missing health and social services. This article explores the ways in which women's solidarity formed through these women's groups and transformed into a broader council serving women across 23 inhabited islands, which have social and historical distance and difference, to address the needs of families of Chuuk. In doing so, this council engaged in the active work of transforming gender norms, challenging what they saw as both traditional and coloniser-imposed inequalities.

Chuuk's colonised, gendered history

Chuuk is one of four states in the FSM, a nation of islands with a long colonial history, occupied by Spain, Germany, Japan and the United States (US) over the course of the twentieth century (Hezel, 1995). The FSM officially gained their independence in 1986, when the Compact of Free Association was signed with the US, although this compact has been largely criticised for perpetuating colonial control through new creative means (Hanlon, 1998). With this agreement and their declaration of independence in the Congress of Micronesia, Chuuk became one of four newly created states of the FSM with boundaries that did not necessarily reflect community identities; it is a state that consists of 23 islands in five distinct cultural regions (Hezel, 1995). Today, Chuuk is seen as an overpopulated, poverty-stricken state suffering the effects of its long history of colonial and post-colonial oppression, with substandard education, limited opportunities for waged employment, and deteriorating public services and health care systems, leading to significant migration to other parts of the FSM and the US (Dernbach, 2005; Smith, 2016) (Figure 1).

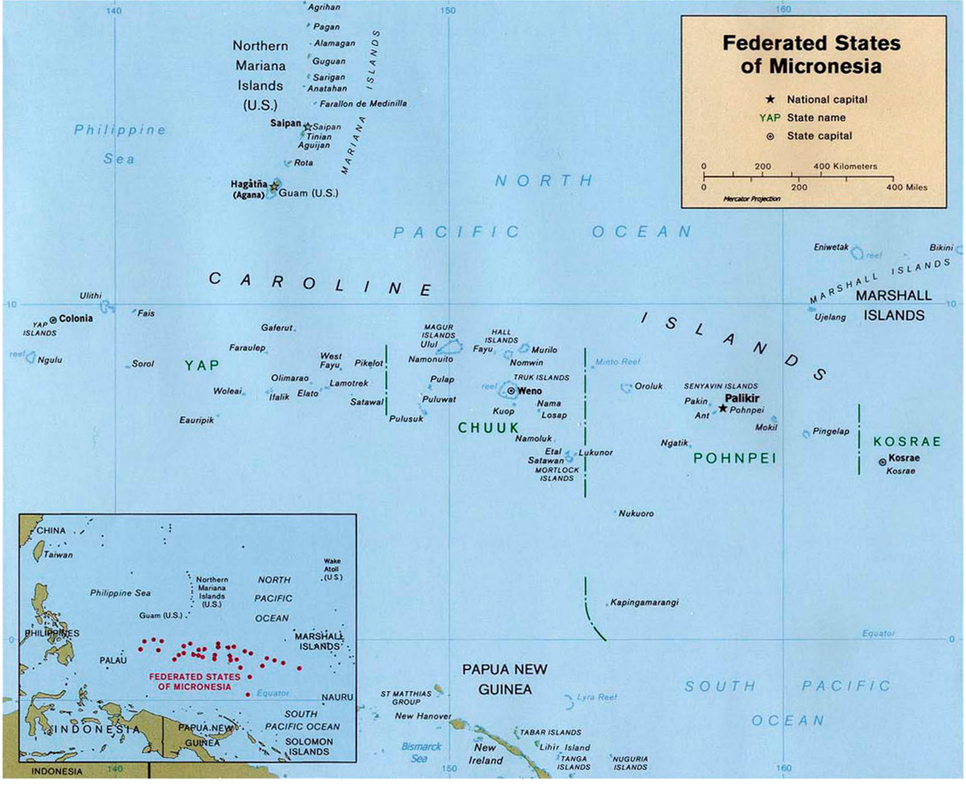

Figure 1. Map of the Federated States of Micronesia (US Central Intelligence Agency Federated States of Micronesia Political Map, 1999).

The history of colonisation reshaped Chuuk in several significant ways beyond debilitating its infrastructure. Several scholars examined the impact of colonisation on gender roles in the Pacific, particularly the decline of women's status with colonising forces (Scheyvens, 2003). Chuuk is a matrilineal society; women's power is thus connected to their ability to reproduce to create the next generation and inherit the family's land (Dernbach, 2005; Moral, 1998; Smith, 2016). The Christian missions that accompanied colonisers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries facilitated the growth of male-headed nuclear families, which diminished the importance of the female-headed clan and land, an area in which women had power prior to missionisation (Leon & Mori, 2014; Moral, 1998).

It was not just the introduction of Christianity that reinforced women's roles in the domestic sphere. The economic shift initiated by colonisers substituted viable income-generating activities such as handicrafts and crops – traditionally female activities – with imported goods, further damaging women's statuses (Dernbach, 2005). Additionally, the US-political structure implemented in Micronesia requires public speaking and action that directly contradicts the ways in which women traditionally effected change (Marshall & Marshall, 1990). Women are expected to humbly show respect to all the male figures in their lives through silence; not speaking unless spoken to, not expressing opinions, keeping her head down in public spaces (Dernbach, 2005). This new public political structure thus interfered with women's abilities to participate in politics, and to date, no woman has been elected to the Chuuk legislature. Women do still hold some power given Chuuk's matrilineal society, but it is silent and out of public view (Dernbach, 2005; Moral, 1998; Smith, 2016). While women are clearly not in charge of the formal political domain, older women (particularly the *finnii-chi,* the first-born, eldest female), are considered experts on a number of issues like kinship and land histories, and chiefly women have an obligation to speak on behalf of others; Flinn (2010) called older women 'lobbyists.' These women hold a particular form of power, yet this power continues to operate in the context of their subordinate positions (Dernbach, 1998).

While outside influences undoubtedly transformed Chuuk's gender roles, anthropologists have long demonstrated that indigenous groups adapt outside institutions for local purposes; they are not merely passive pawns at the mercy of outside forces (Sahlins, 1999). Dernbach (1998) demonstrates a syncretism of Christian and indigenous religious and cultural ideologies that shape gender roles in Chuuk. Women were already considered the stable, land-owning members of the clan, and this domestic element was simply further reinforced by Christian and colonial ideologies (Dernbach, 1998; Marshall & Marshall, 1990).

Adapting to Christian ideologies in a way that complemented their roles, Chuukese women engaged in forming Christian women's groups. Women's church groups were created with the support of Christian missions throughout the Pacific to encourage wifely duties and religious instruction, but they also created a space to mobilise and assert power (Maisonneuve, 2006). In the context of Chuuk specifically, they reflected similar structures to the traditional social organisations of women (Marshall & Marshall, 1990).

Western feminists have had a difficult time seeing church-based women's organisations as feminist and empowering, but as with all cultural milieus, these adaptations are not straight-forward, but contradictory and conflicting (Dernbach, 1998). Some feminist scholars critiqued the domestication and subordination encouraged through women's groups' teaching of skills such as cooking and sewing (Slatter, 1983); others celebrated the ways in which these skills translated into wage-earning work (Schoeffel, 1983).

Dernbach (1998) explored the ways in which women's groups in Chuuk allowed women to participate in their traditional roles of being good, Christian mothers while also practicing subversive goals of learning leadership skills and empowering women. Noting the literature describing Pacific women's groups as possible vehicles for feminist consciousness, Dernbach (1998) argued that women use these groups to both reinforce and resist their place in Chuukese communities, but did not label these actions as feminist. This ethnographic study explores that reinforcement and resistance to gender roles, two decades after Dernbach (1998), as a feminist response to the

inequalities they faced. This study describes the ways in which women grew these roles into a collective umbrella organisation, and effected change through collective action in the context of neocolonial exploitation and international development.

Materials and methods

Teaiwa argues that 'Feminist-informed analyses and feminist histories of activism offer ways to reclaim a 'Pacific' Oceania' (2008, p. 332). This exploration of the CWC is a feminist-informed analysis of their short but powerful history effecting change in Chuuk. This ethnographic project included participant observation and purposive semi-structured interviews in individual and focus group formats. The first author worked with the CWC during several visits over a period of four years (2013–2016). In true participatory form, this work included assisting the CWC with whatever they requested, including drafting grant applications, completing reports, and various educational activities. After several years of participant observation, interviews were conducted to investigate women's constructs of gender and power in Chuuk, their goals and activities in their local women's groups, and their perceptions of the collective power of the CWC in Chuuk. Ethics review was approved by the University of Guam Institutional Review Board and informed consent was obtained from each participant throughout the study. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

The focus group was conducted in Chuukese with translation assistance (the first author is conversational, but not fluent), then recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with ($n = 12$) additional CWC members throughout the summer of 2015. All interviews were also recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts and field notes were uploaded into a qualitative software program (MaxQDA+©) for analysis. In using the systematic analysis outlined by grounded theory, the authors identified concepts that emerged from the data, decided on themes as a team, and coded the text accordingly.

Demographics

The mean age of ($n = 20$) participants was 52, ranging from 33 to 68 years old. Thirty percent ($n = 6$) of participants were Catholic; 70 percent ($n = 14$) were Protestant. Three women did not complete high school, ten women (50%) had a high school degree, and the other seven women had an Associate ($n = 4$) or Bachelor's ($n = 3$) college degree. Women were from all five regions of Chuuk State.

Results

Women described their experiences with women's groups in general, the activities leading to the formation and growth of the CWC, and what they thought the CWC accomplished for the community. Four themes shaped their responses: how the CWC contributed to (1) increasing women's comfort with taboo topics; (2) changing laws to protect women and girls; (3) serving as a resource for the community; and through this work, (4) transforming gender roles in Chuuk. Their experiences provide insight into the power of grassroots collective action to transform the construction of gender and improve women's lives, and the ways in which international development agencies both helped and hurt these efforts.

From small women's groups to a collective council

In Chuukese women's memories, women's groups began in the mid-twentieth century, as the US infrastructure allowed for more missionisation and Churches encouraged these formations. Religion was a central organising force for women's groups, and empowerment was another explicitly valued goal. For example, Debbie said the goals of her group were to 'worship together' and 'encourage each other, build each other up … ' Education and advising were also major themes for women's group

goals; leaders were focused on passing down indigenous knowledge; this included, for example, gender roles, food practices, and indigenous medical treatments. Community also played a central role, which was reflected in their regular activities. Debbie explained several activities her group organises:

> Oh, plenty, plenty things. We try to beautify the place, bring peace in the family, you know … Not only that but, try to live healthy. We encourage … Food, diet and, you know, physical exercise … to do our home gardening … walkathon … and you know, clean up every month.

These women's groups were formed within an island and village, were church- or occasionally, career-specific (e.g. nurses' association) and historically did not have connections to each other. As a state created by colonisation, Chuuk was made up of five distinct island regions; women did not automatically feel connected to women's groups across all of Chuuk. However, as the island Wééné became an increasingly centralised hub for commerce and government, women leaders from several islands began meeting to discuss community issues in this space. One particularly important historical event that influenced their decision to organise into a larger collective was when several groups came together and marched through the streets to ban alcohol. Marshall and Marshall (1990) described the ways in which Chuukese women were excluded from political power and public life but still found collective power through the Church to organise around this goal, like the way in which prohibition was achieved in the US. What would emerge from this successful collective action to ban alcohol was The Chuuk Women's Advisory Council, created by leading women who saw the disparate groups all over islands, neighbourhoods and churches as more powerful forces if they joined together. One of the present leaders explained:

> At that time, you know, [we had] small groups and they said we – in the early 80s, [address] more of the woman issues and you know organise, and they said we should be organised under an umbrella and [pause] be more effective than working isolated in their own community groups. So that's how it was created.

This collective council officially registered as an NGO for Chuuk in 1993 (http://www.cwcfiinchuuk.org/index.php/about/history). Now, the (renamed) CWC serves as an umbrella for over 64 organisations in Chuuk serving over 1,000 women. One of the leaders of the original formation was the late Shinobu M. Poll, who donated her familial land to build a space to house the CWC (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Shinobu M. Poll Memorial Center, Chuuk, FSM (Photo Credit: First Author).

CWC goals and activities

The CWC mirrors smaller women's groups' goals and activities throughout Chuuk; they are also focused on religion, empowerment and community, but on a bigger scale. CWC activities reflect these goals, and their elevated capacity to achieve them. Gigi explained her perspective on the CWC's goals:

> Oh, we're trying to help the women … to be able to [pause] provide for their family, do things on their own, and help the community in a way … we try to help them to learn how to do handicrafts or sew so they can sell and then have at least some income for their families …

Nora focused on empowerment and healthy families:

> We're hoping to see more of the healthy family, you know. And like more of women to come out and speak, instead of just being silent about their problems that they face at home … to have courage and to have strength …

While CWC members participate in typical women's group activities, the CWC also holds educational workshops on computer skills, parenting strategies, HIV and diabetes prevention, reproductive health, reaching at-risk youth, and more. They also assist outside mission and volunteer organisations navigate Chuuk's bureaucracy to provide medical services or donate supplies and materials. These new activities connect to their primary goals of improving the lives of women and families of Chuuk, but at a much larger level than traditional women's groups.

Women are mobilised through regular CWC meetings. Once per month, leaders of women's groups throughout Chuuk descend on the island of Wééné on a Friday to attend the CWC monthly meeting and hear updates about all current and future CWC projects, listen to speakers requesting their audience, and often, participate in workshops funded and initiated by international donors. These women return to their islands and hold local meetings to provide the rest of their group with updates, and when applicable, recruit members for donor-funded projects. Those who want to sell handicrafts to help fund their boat trip to Wééné sell them to the CWC gift shop. In the absence of the internet or regular phones for most islands, this is a successful method of communication, networking, and travel support.

In addition to mobilising women, the leaders and volunteers of the CWC gained skills to succeed on a host of funded projects. Over time, several women were trained in research methods and grant-writing, carrying out projects proposed and funded by major national and international organisations (e.g. UNFPA, Secretariat of the Pacific, FSM national government, Japan National Government, CDC, WHO). This included writing grants to fund the now two-story CWC centre; the centre includes exam rooms to host local and visiting health care practitioners, a library, playroom, and classroom space to facilitate an adopt-a-school program and a small apartment to host long-term volunteers (e.g. Peace Corps, Jesuit missionaries). They are often approached by funding organisations to submit grants for specific projects, such as a survey of family violence or sex workers, which typically last 1–2 years and covers travel expenses to Chuuk's islands for workshops or data collection, training and conferences for the leadership, and some (often insufficient) reimbursement for labour costs. They are often structured in a way in which funding agencies get cheap labour to meet mandatory outcomes, exploiting the very people they are meant to serve. Additionally, the CWC has an MOU with Chuuk Public Health to assist with immunisations, reproductive health and STI testing and treatment. On any given day at the CWC, there may be a consultant from WHO assessing their capacity for funding, a public Zumba class, a mother-daughter reproductive health workshop, and a sewing class. It is a busy, lively environment built by this collective force.

Action through collective power

When women explained what the CWC did for women and the community, their answers focused on their power to effect change for the good of the family and community. Four common themes

related to the transformation of Chuuk included: success increasing the comfort with which women could talk about taboo topics openly, such as sexual health and domestic violence; changing laws, particularly the age of consent for sexual relations in Chuuk; serving as a resource for social and health services unavailable through the government; and through all of this, transforming the status of women.

Sensitive topics

During a trip to the 2012 FSM National Women's Conference in Chuuk, a Guam delegate shared her concerns: 'I hope this goes ok. Last time I was here and talked about sexual health, women just left or stared at me. It was not ok for me to talk about those things.' As we arrived and received the conference agenda, we learned how much changed. Several panels by Chuukese and other FSM women were focused specifically on HIV, STIs, human trafficking and other topics related to sex and bodily autonomy. It was clear that sensitive, or taboo, topics in Chuuk opened quite a bit in recent years due to the CWC's efforts. Leaders like Nora described experiencing this transformation:

> Yes, like when we talk about sex, forced sex, some of them kind of hesitate but then when they saw other women speak … they also talk … the most difficult part is to say that I am an abused woman.

Clara also described watching the transformation:

> Before the first time we do education for sexual health, it's kind of, you know, we can see them uncomfortable. But when we continue doing that, they openly talk … not like before, very shy to ask questions, and they cannot even talk … sex in our culture [is taboo] … Now they can.

This increased comfort discussing taboo topics also translated into lobbying for change around taboo issues, like the age of consent for sexual relations.

Lobbying for legal change

Women also saw the CWC as a powerful force to make legal changes in Chuuk. All participants credited their organising with at least one change of law. Previously, Chuuk state law allowed sexual consent at 13 years old; the CWC, including women leaders throughout Chuuk, lobbied to change the age to 18, and were met with resistance at first. They lobbied at home and in public. Sasha explained how this occurred:

> We were able to have the [pause] law introduced … but they [the legislature] didn't have time … so we continue and then in our woman conference, we invited them to attend so it was our opportunity to speak … But in the meantime, you know [pause] women that were really passionate about the law, they're [the legislators'] mothers and you know, they're women leaders in their own right, start talking to the people they can influence.

With this lobbying force, in addition to a CWC-member physician testimony and data from a UNFPA-CWC survey of young girls who were forced into sexual relations, they were able to earn the support to get this passed. Nora described in detail what this meant:

> We – the way I look at it, our CWC is very powerful in advocating for policy to be passed. Like for example, the age of consent. It [was] tabled for a long time until we were really organised. And then we can push, and through … doing a community survey, we find lots of issues. So that's what makes us more powerful.

Maria interpreted this win to mean that they now have a voice:

> Previously we don't have any voice but now we can speak to even the higher people in government offices and we can approach them and … we can influence them about changing policy. You know the one that CWC help [change] from 13 years old to 18 … They were there in front of all the men in the Senate and stand in front of them and say the reason we want to change, and they change right away … So, I believe … we can make changes.

This legal influence did not only change the way women saw themselves, but the community took more notice of their power and their resources to effect change.

Filling gaps in health and social services

Increasingly, the international, national and local service communities took more notice of the CWC's power and their leveraging of resources, and they gained a reputation for transparent and effective work. As a result, some organisations went as far as to stop funding government entities and only fund projects through the CWC. This excess in funding provided much-needed resources, but also caught the CWC in the webs of development. As with many NGOs, they became increasingly focused on applying for grants to fund their projects; then were forced to change those projects to accommodate funding agency-requirements. CWC staff members were often busy chasing funding or completing long reports to continue bringing in small buckets of money. However, these funded projects always lasted long beyond funding mechanisms, as women were dedicated to improving Chuuk. That meant women with limited income were volunteering most of their work, continuing to suffer the effects of poverty in this now capitalist economy.

Additionally, the CWC's attention to domestic violence and family molestation in the legislature led a judge to use them to fill another gap and 'place' a child with the CWC, much in the way a child would be placed with a children's services government entity if it existed in Chuuk. While this new trend of treating the CWC as a social services organisation was not funded by the state government, members saw it as a win. They connected the very existence of a court case about family molestation to their workshops helping women and children share experiences with abuse, and their ability to find safe extended family homes for the children. Clara thought this first case would influence more people to seek help: 'That one … make the women's eyes open 'Ok that's where I can go."' Nora argued that much more work was to be done. She saw their mission as assisting in coordination between agencies.

> I'm trying to improve our communication effort from agency to agency … [we can work toward] that kind of system where we can … concentrate on the safety of the poor child … And the CWC can provide the safety of the children from being abused …

These gaps were filled by the CWC despite limited – or often, such as in the case of the child placement – no funding.

Transforming gender roles

Women overwhelmingly described motherhood, education of the family, and community support as the tenets of womanhood; these were reflected in their inspiration to join women's groups and the CWC. Motherhood has long been described as the cornerstone of Chuukese women's power; a status that is not earned until they reproduce. While all women agreed on this, some also emphasised what was described as their 'lower' status in the community. Women noted that they do all the work and yet they are still not allowed in politics, for example. They pointed out that this legacy was not cultural, but colonial. One woman, speaking publicly at a women's conference, opened with: 'Welcome to Chuuk where traditional women had greater roles, but in the constitution of the 80s men took over.' Cathy explained her feelings about this constraint on women's participation:

> I heard from men they like everything the CWC is doing, except one. They [women] want to be in politics, like they want to have a seat among the men. [Men] said 'but you're not supposed to cause you're below [men].' Outside [to the men] I said ok, but inside I say no … the men got a BA degree, and I got a BA degree, so what's the difference? And another thing, this politics is not our culture. So why do we have to respect it? It's not ours …

Women saw this status as changing, however, because of the CWC's actions. Maria explained:

> … we ladies are just like slaves cause of our customs. You have to put yourself down when you don't, even though you know you're right, but men have the power. But now we know that we can – they can even get advice from us [laughs].

One participant explained how important it was to think of CWC as showing women's power to the larger community: ' … CWC will help. We will step up, and we will help Chuuk … We want to look

out and see the importance and worth of women to our own country.' The CWC did help and continues to do so, elevating the capacity for women to affect change in powerful ways.

Discussion

Collective action strengthens women's abilities to effect change in a multitude of ways, and the CWC is a valuable example of this feminist solidarity in action. Traversing long-held divisions between clans, island groups, and religious affiliations, this larger council succeeded in unifying the women of Chuuk. Their work began as they organised to ban alcohol, and more recently, as they successfully pushed to increase the age of consent for sexual activity, transgressing gender norms and testifying in front of the legislature. They further improved community conversations about taboo topics and earned a reputation as a group that can fulfil needed and missing services in Chuuk.

Scheyvens (2003) discusses the difficulty with which perceptibly 'political' women's groups were able to succeed in drawing participants and gaining power. Much like her example in the Solomon Islands, Chuukese women sought to improve their community's well-being through invoking their obligations to community; often circumventing the American political structure. The CWC effectively challenged norms while also supporting more traditional women's activities and doing so in a way that is typically gender-appropriate.

Scheyvens (2003) distinguished between different women's groups who take the welfare approach (e.g. focusing on domesticity) vs. those who take the more feminist-oriented empowerment approach (e.g. challenging the status quo). She concludes, however, that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. While women's groups in her study were more connected to the welfare approach, she argued that they could still be empowering. This was the case for the CWC as well. In their activities, they continued to reinforce traditional women's group's roles: visiting the sick, educating women, and worshipping together; but they also resisted women's traditional roles through lobbying for legislation, encouraging women to report family violence, and replacing state-service provision. While they continue to encourage women to be 'good wives' who take care of their families first, women's empowerment is the guiding principle for the everyday work of group leaders. Their agenda challenges the notion that women's groups either reinforce or resist traditional gender roles; these groups are as fluid as all communities, and they engage in both simultaneously. An important challenge of feminist-informed ethnography is to allow communities to assert their goals and needs without critiquing their version of feminism. This case study demonstrates a clear example of the power of organisations when they work toward their own visions of change. Yet, the CWC also endured challenges as they grew into a powerful and internationally recognised NGO.

Early in this growth of women's NGOs, feminist scholars lauded them as places for grassroots organisations to voice concerns collectively, empower women, and build social capital (Bernal & Grewal, 2014b); each of these experiences reflects what happened at the CWC. Yet, NGOs soon became the subject of intense criticism for several key reasons. First, the funding typically comes from the global north (e.g. European and US Aid organisations), and the recipients are often from the global south; scholars noted these unequal power dynamics create new modes of old colonial arrangements (Aksartova, 2009; Ilcan & Phillips, 2010; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). It also means recipients' priorities are often co-opted by these powerful donors or institutions (Aksartova, 2009; Silliman, 1999). These priorities are usually set forth in grants in which donor-initiated interventions or goals need to be met (Helms, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). In meeting donor targets, many NGOs also become service providers instead of advocates for structural change in their communities (Alvarez, 1999); as part of this shift, many begin focusing on individual behaviour change (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Sabine Lang (1997) referred to this imposition of neoliberal values and co-opting of agendas 'the NGOization of feminism.'

Additional critiques include that donor funding tends to be piecemeal, paying for short-term interventions, which means NGOs are constantly searching for new funding. While learning the

business of grant-writing and international conferencing helps women in leadership positions gain new skills, scholars also note that these experiences often lead to NGO leaders losing touch with the communities they were meant to support (Alvarez, 1999; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Further, short-term, piecemeal funding means jobs are typically temporary, drying up when a grant does (Bernal & Grewal, 2014b). With these short-term funding mechanisms, women's labour continues to be un- or underpaid, and projects are often left unfinished as funds disappear. Another inevitable result of the development engine is the ways in which cultural scripts for gender and development are adopted and incorporated into women's NGOs (Hodžić, 2014). Last-minute workshops become normative, delivering technical skills via a series of buzz words (Hodžić, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). These buzz words are then used – often incorrectly – by the NGOs serving the community (Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Smith, 2016).

The CWC was affected by many of the deleterious outcomes of the NGOization of women's activism. First, donors began to circumvent the state altogether, funding the CWC instead. In the absence of effective services provided by the state government, they became service providers; both through the provision of public health preventative care and acting as a child services agency with limited or no funding. In the short term, this is a solution to a failing system and a boost to the community's trust of the CWC. In the long term, however, this practice further weakens the state's capacity to service its citizens and further reinforces the neoliberal model of privatisation of services.

The CWC also became focused on chasing funding at times, writing grants for small, siloed projects (e.g. HIV, diabetes prevention), without a larger operating budget to support their staff and design their own projects. Following the development models' and donors' requirements, they were often funded to lead workshops on various self-help topics using donor language (i.e. buzz words). Due to funding constraints, the CWC also suffered the effects of NGOization in terms of the unequal pay structures. Historically, members joined on a volunteer-basis, but as they started to get international funding, grants would pay for particular tasks. These stipends were never enough, always short-term and caused tension between those who were paid and those who volunteered. Much of this work continued past the grants, as the power of collective action transcends budgets; but in doing so, it exploits women's roles by expecting more un- and underpaid work. This method of funding perpetuates the very problems NGOs often seek to address (e.g. poverty, gender inequality). Despite these challenges, the CWC also grew in many ways through this outside support, and negotiated the ways in which donor and CWC priorities were met.

Scholars who previously launched many critiques of NGOs began to see that, like the CWC, most do not operate as either neoliberal agents of larger forces or feminist activists fighting for structural change in their communities; they can be both. Newman (2013) argued that in the earlier critiques, neoliberalism was perceived as a top-down, one-direction process which leaves little room for women's agency. While NGOs may be stuck meeting the goals of donor sponsors, they are often simultaneously developing strategies for maintaining independence (Bernal & Grewal, 2014a), and challenging the messages they receive from 'above' (Hemment, 2014).

The CWC is an example of this more complex story. While some projects were imposed by funders and reluctantly carried out by the CWC at first (e.g. sexual health projects); they often led to reconsidering the topics' importance and growth of new priorities within the organisation. Further, they kept true to their own goals and agenda for the CWC, and negotiated with various organisations to do projects they felt important: getting funding to build the centre, gardening projects, working to improve education, and helping people navigate family relationships and family violence. Despite the negative effects of getting caught up in the webs of development, they leveraged their newfound resources to learn new skills and meet their goals, having a profound impact in Chuuk. Not only did they negotiate the role of development; they also negotiated women's roles in Chuuk through this work.

Participants believed the CWC harnessed collective power to make meaningful change for the good of the family, community and government and worked to do so. Their path led them to address gender equality more broadly and gender inequities in health specifically through policy change,

community programs, and individual care-work. Their goals were accomplished with inconsistent international development budgets for various projects that paid small stipends for significant work; and – when that was missing – volunteer work.

The implications for these findings are valuable for understanding the power of collective action at the community level, and for assessing the power of global funds that support public health and development. These findings point to ways in which these organisations can lead their own agendas and benefit from the support that is shaped to reflect their needs. To assist grassroots organisations to achieve their goals, larger operating budgets without complicated reporting features that enhance their work could contribute more time and equitable distribution of paid work for women in these groups. This case study demonstrates the CWC had clear goals and used whatever resources they had to achieve them. Global public health and development mechanisms often expect organisations to adapt to their funding agendas and mechanisms; but the opposite is what is needed: these agencies must adapt to community organisations to truly allow for community-driven solutions to achieve gender equality and thus, gender equity in health.

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