

Funding, Power, and Resistance: How International Aid Shapes Feminist Movements in Fiji

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Fiji endures one of the world's highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV), with two in three women experiencing physical or sexual abuse from a male intimate partner. Entrenched colonial legacies, harmful social norms, and economic inequalities fuel this crisis, normalizing the violence and silencing its survivors. Although international aid for gender-focused initiatives in Fiji surged from US\$374 million pre-pandemic to US\$1.2 billion in 2020–2021, we lack an understanding of how this influx shapes activist spaces. Guided by feminist political economy analysis and social movement theories, this study analyzes donor and feminist fund documents, interview discussions, and *talanoa* sessions—a Pacific storytelling method—among feminist and queer activists. It maps aid flows, interrogates donor metrics, and traces how competition and compliance pressures reshape activist strategies. The findings show how aid affects resource acquisition, distribution, and use, contributing to practical approaches for more equitable and sustainable movement building against GBV.

Key words: feminist movement-building; resource mobilization; gender-based violence (GBV); international aid; Pacific Islands; Fiji.

Introduction

Donor-driven funding models dictate which gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response initiatives are prioritized, how resources are allocated, and the extent to which feminist movements can remain inclusive and autonomous of the state. Although aid can enable service delivery and staffing

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increases, it also introduces significant challenges within feminist movements. Donor-driven priorities have led to nongovernmental organization (NGO) or “NGOization” of grassroots activism. Meeting the bureaucratic demands of donors has increased professionalization in feminist movements, frequently at the expense of autonomy and community-driven agendas. As Sonia Alvarez similarly observed in Latin American contexts, the “good NGOs–bad NGOs binary does not do justice to the dual or hybrid identity of feminist NGOs that are at once integral parts of feminist movements” (Alvarez 1999, 2009).

In Fiji, these dynamics are stark. Although many local NGOs are deeply embedded in community contexts, international aid priorities can disproportionately shape national development agendas (McLaughlin 2023). Registry data from the GlobalGiving Atlas, NGO Base, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggest there are approximately fifty to fifty-five government-registered local NGOs, twenty to twenty-five international and regional organizations (including UNDP and the World Bank), and forty-nine to sixty-eight international NGOs (INGOs) operating in the country.

At the same time, Fiji experiences some of the highest rates of GBV in the world, with two in three women experiencing physical or sexual abuse from a male intimate partner (FWCC 2013). Gender-diverse and queer individuals—including lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women; gay and transgender men; and gender nonconforming people—experience higher rates and more severe forms of violence from partners, family members, and communities, alongside compounded barriers to protection and justice. In response, Fiji has declared GBV a national development priority and launched a comprehensive national action plan. Yet, the 2024–2025 budget allocates only approximately 0.007 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (around US\$440,000) to domestic GBV programs (Fiji CSO SDG Taskforce 2020), reinforcing reliance on external financing. Bilateral partners, such as Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, negotiate government-to-government financing agreements that require the Fijian Ministry of Finance to convene civil society consultations on priorities, while many INGOs deliver stand-alone projects aligned with their global theories of change. Priority setting is further mediated by the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), a nationwide umbrella body with up to 150 member organizations that links municipal and village-level groups to the national policy platform, while privileging registered affiliates and sidelining unincorporated organizations, thereby perpetuating a two-tier advocacy ecosystem (Fiji Council of Social Services, Pacific Islands Association of NGOs, and Humanitarian Advisory Group 2019).

This paper examines how international aid affects the organizational structures and strategies of Fijian feminist movements addressing GBV. It asks: *how and to what extent does international aid, including feminist aid funding, shape feminist movements and their efforts to address GBV?* It explores whether increasing funding enhances the advocacy capabilities and influence of local coalitions or if it fragments them, and if so, how. These research questions are explored

through content analysis of feminist funds and donor reports, seven *talanoa* sessions (a Pacific Indigenous method of storytelling), and interview discussions with local feminist and queer activists, donors, government officials, and community leaders. The study is informed by a feminist political economy analysis, which investigates how economic structures, policies, and power relations intersect with gender dynamics (True 2012). It also draws on social movement theory, especially its focus on resource mobilization and the concept of brokerage, to understand how power imbalances in donor funding and implementation are influenced by gender inequalities and social norms. The paper assesses how financial resources are allocated, uncovering discrepancies between donor-stated commitments and actual spending.

Echoing Hau'ofa's (1993) challenge to "the myth of smallness," this paper considers a key contention that gender equality aid may enlarge national budgets while simultaneously reinforcing the very dependency logics Pacific thinkers have long critiqued (Thaman 2003). Scholars have shown how conditionalities, short project cycles, and externally imposed indicators generate upward rather than downward accountability, privileging donor reporting requirements over community-defined priorities (Eyben and Ferguson 2004). Critical analyses of NGOization further demonstrate how the "projectization" of activism can depoliticize feminist strategies, recast movements as service providers, and narrow the space for more radical or disruptive strategies, such as organizing large-scale campaigns that expose systematic failures and challenge state or corporate complicity in GBV (Alvarez 1999, 2009; Cornwall 2003, 2004, 2007). These debates are echoed in critiques of white saviorism in humanitarianism, which highlight how Western actors and institutions often retain epistemic and material authority even when speaking the language of partnership and empowerment (Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2020; Khan, Kanakulya, and Sondarjee 2023; Mohanty 2003).

This paper aims to move beyond development NGOs and civil society organizations as implementing partners within aid regimes, promoting a greater focus on understanding feminist movements as collective political actors in their own right. Feminist organizing frequently appears as a backdrop to project delivery, rather than as the central site where funding logics are negotiated, contested, or refused. There is also limited empirical attention to Pacific feminist and queer movements, despite long-standing Pacific critiques of dependency, coloniality, and development orthodoxies (Hau'ofa 1993; McLaughlin 2023; Thaman 2003). This paper addresses these gaps by examining how Fijian feminist and queer movements experience and interpret the political economy of international aid, and by foregrounding their own definitions of success, grounded in healing, solidarity, and relational accountability, which remain underexamined in existing gender and development literature (Bartlett et al. 2024; Rah 2019).

These critiques are strongly echoed by Pacific feminist scholars and activists who have interrogated the gendered effects of aid in their own region. In *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth? Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*

(Embersson-Bain 1994), authors such as Claire Slatter (2004) and Griffen et al. (2020) show how World Bank-led market reforms and donor-driven development projects deepen economic dependency while narrowing the political space available to women's movements in Fiji and the wider Pacific. Pacific feminist political economists argue that conditionalities and structural adjustment programs constrain state policy choice and reconfigure local gender relations in ways that align with donor priorities rather than grassroots agendas.

More recent work by 'Ofa-Ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki (2020) and by the Women's Fund Fiji (Fleming et al. 2020a) similarly documents how Global North organizations enter the Pacific with preset agendas, complex reporting regimes, and short funding cycles that fragment movements, privilege a small number of "elite" NGOs, and leave grassroots feminist organizing chronically underfunded. Guttenbeil-Likiliki's (2020) Talanoa research with thirty-five Pacific women's rights actors highlights perceptions of continuing colonial practices, one-way accountability, and the undermining of autonomy. Moreover, Michelle Reddy and colleagues (Fleming et al. 2020a) show that less than 1 percent of mapped grant funding in the Pacific is directed toward Pacific women's organizations (and even less towards queer-led organizations). Building on Yvonne Underhill-Sem's (2011) analysis of how aid and global economic forces reshape the entangled formal and informal institutions that structure gendered power in the Pacific, these contributions ground wider feminist political economy critiques within Pacific women's and queer lived experiences of aid.

Building on this body of work, this article extends Pacific feminist critiques of aid beyond women's NGOs and service-delivery organizations to focus explicitly on feminist movements *as* movements. Whereas existing scholarship tends to analyze donor-NGO relations or state-civil society partnerships, this study centers on how intergenerational, queer-inclusive feminist coalitions in Fiji understand and negotiate donor logics, and how they reframe "success" in ways that are often unintelligible to results-based frameworks. It therefore speaks to a gap in the literature on feminist political economy in the Pacific, which has paid less attention to movement-level perceptions of success, failure, and risk, and to how aid architectures reshape the affective and relational infrastructures of feminist organizing. Together, these theoretical approaches and literature suggest that there is a complex interplay between international aid flows and movement strategies in the Pacific context. Focused on Fiji, this study provides a unique perspective on the impact of aid on resource acquisition, distribution, and utilization in a highly diverse setting, considering factors such as ethnicity, race, and gender. The paper informs both theoretical debates and practical strategies for more equitable and sustainable movement building against GBV in Fiji, the Pacific region, and beyond.

Theorizing the impact of international aid on feminist movements

"Feminist movement" in Fiji is not just a label, but a dynamic framework embraced by many activists, organizations, and networks to articulate their internal

identity and collective approach to addressing GBV and advancing gender justice (Bartlett et al. 2024). It reflects a shared political consciousness and a commitment to systemic change rooted in local realities and Pacific feminist praxis. There is also a significant overlap and relationship between feminist and queer movements and the issues they address. Although this relationship is complex and shaped by a deep and at times fraught history, these movements are not siloed, but interconnected in both struggle and solidarity. For these reasons, this study uses the term “feminist movement” to capture these broad and diverse activists, organizations, and networks.

Feminist political economy analysis provides a critical lens for understanding how international aid shapes feminist movements in Fiji through the intricate interplay between economic structures, political power, and local gender norms. It questions whether funding mechanisms support sustainable, locally led feminist initiatives, or inadvertently reinforce dependency and external control. This approach interrogates funding structures and power dynamics by highlighting the conditionalities and hierarchies imposed by donors that may privilege certain types of organizations, such as urban, English-speaking NGOs, with formal registration and reporting capacity, while marginalizing others, particularly those led by younger activists representing those with intersecting identities such as ethnic minorities, Indigenous populations, and queer communities (especially transgender groups) (Bartlett et al. 2024; Rah 2019). Local feminist organizers navigate complex power dynamics, particularly where legal and political institutions may be weak or complicit in perpetuating GBV. They are often compelled to engage with donor priorities that may sidestep the nuanced, grassroots strategies necessary for sustainable change. People who identify as queer, in particular, navigate multiple layers of marginalization as they confront both heteronormative biases and economic disenfranchisement (Kalra and Bhugra 2013). These vulnerabilities are often exacerbated by donor-funded programs that fail to adequately consult or center queer communities, resulting in health and GBV interventions that are misaligned with local realities and that reinforce exclusion, rather than address it.

Batliwala (2012) argues that transformative change requires participatory funding models that preserve feminist movements’ autonomy, local grounding, and community accountability. Accordingly, programs addressing GBV should integrate education, legal reform, and economic support to address the root causes of inequality, rather than mitigating the consequences, enabling feminist organizing to challenge existing power structures and reimagine solutions.

Social movement and resource mobilization theory

McCarthy and Zald (1977) suggest that an influx of resources, whether financial, organizational, or symbolic, strengthens a movement’s capacity for sustained activism, although recent research indicates this relationship is not linear (Taylor 2016). In social movement mobilization, Batliwala (2012) and Mohanty (2003) emphasize centering marginalized groups’ agency and building

solidarities across diverse identities to sustain movements while acknowledging that movements are complicated by power imbalances. In Fiji, this may include ageist, classist, and ethnic tensions.

Transnational feminist networks have also significantly contributed to global advocacy efforts to address GBV (see [Moghadam 2012, 2015](#)). However, they must be critically re-examined in settings such as Fiji, where cultural traditions, ethnic tensions, and Indigenous perspectives intersect with international norms. Resource influx does not guarantee stronger movements because the source, nature, and distribution of these resources shape movement trajectories. In Fiji, increased international funding often brings competition, donor-imposed criteria, and intergenerational tensions that constrain rather than support feminist activism. Slatter argues that “civil society groups (in Fiji) that can ‘dovetail’ their advocacy aims with broader agendas related to good governance will attract the support of foreign aid-providers engaged in the region” (Slatter, 2002 interview in [George 2012](#)).

Resource mobilization theory is not only about how much aid flows but also through whom and with what leverage. As a result, brokerage in social movement theory describes the process by which third-party actors forge links between social sites, organizations, or networks, so that resources, information, and legitimacy can circulate across them ([Diani and McAdam 2003](#); [Fernandez and McAdam 1988](#)). Brokers occupy structural holes in the movement by translating frameworks and mediating conflicts. They achieve more consequential effects than simple bridges; they effectively set the terms of exchange because they control the channels through which aid or narratives travel, and they can recalibrate power relations within and across movements ([Tarrow 2022](#)).

Within Fiji’s GBV activism, brokerage manifests in several forms, such as INGOs or regional agencies securing grants and subcontracting local NGOs to implement projects. Alternatively, the [Pacific Feminist Fund \(2021\)](#) uses community engagement for grantmaking, encouraging pooled proposals and shared learning hubs. A third mode, cultural brokerage, is performed by bilingual activists who are fluent in both donor jargon and local idioms; they translate log-frames into relational notions of success, securing resources while risking the reinscription of colonial knowledge hierarchies if they become indispensable intermediaries ([Diani and McAdam 2003](#); [Fernandez and McAdam 1988](#)). By interrogating the effects of donor funding through an intersectional lens, this paper contributes to broadening feminist political economy and resource mobilization theories, including understanding brokers to consider aid dynamics.

Feminist methodology and research design

The study adopted an ethical, reflexive feminist approach, prioritizing attentiveness to the power of epistemology, boundaries, relationships, and the situatedness of the researcher ([Lugones 2010](#)). A qualitative, multi-method design

rooted in feminist and Indigenous methodologies was employed to counter practices of research within both Western critiques of Western knowledge and global Indigenous movements (Smith 2012).

The lead author built deep relationships with activists and collaborated closely with them to co-create the methodology, including the development of research tools and guiding questions. Twenty-eight one-hour interview discussions were conducted in person in Suva, eight via Zoom, and one by telephone due to limited bandwidth. These conversations explored the evolution of feminist movements, intergenerational dynamics, and the impacts of donor funding on grassroots programming, drawing on the perspectives of local feminist and queer activists, donors, government officials, and community leaders.

Seven *talanoa* sessions were facilitated in person. These ranged from ninety minutes to two hours with seven individual young activists (less than thirty years old). *Talanoa* is known for its inclusive and nonhierarchical approach to engage, share, interrogate, and unpack (Havea 2010). It involves co-creating the space to invite research collaborators to guide the conversation, taking a more relational and reflective approach. As well as providing a deeper understanding rooted in lived experiences, the use of *talanoa* informs feminist participatory practices by enabling participants, whom we refer to in this paper as research collaborators, to contribute to the interpretation and dissemination of the findings.

All discussions and *talanoa* sessions were audio-recorded, de-identified, and transcribed. Research collaborators were assigned a pseudonym. The information and stories were analyzed through collective sense-making, including identifying themes that highlighted issues such as donor influence on local priorities, challenges in aligning international funding with grassroots needs, and the sustainability of feminist movements.

The qualitative data were further complemented by a content analysis of eleven feminist funds with a direct or indirect focus on Fiji, including Pacific Feminist Fund, South Asia Women's Fund (SAWF), Fiji Women's Fund, Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific (UAF A&P), Women's Fund Asia, Tongan Women's Fund, Mama Cash Asia and the Pacific, Global Fund for Women, Association for Women's Rights in Development's (AWID) Feminist Solidarity Fund, FRIDA, and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice. The analysis involved reviewing recent reports that provide funding in Fiji and materials on the website, including one-pagers and overview documents, to analyze their target audience, approaches, and methodology for distributing funds. Table 1 provides examples of codes used.

A "follow the money" analysis was also undertaken to track how funds move from their source, through intermediaries to their destination (see Table 2). This analysis reviewed GBV and gender equality program reports of five international donors in Fiji, including the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UN Women, and UNFPA Pacific, while also relying on AidData, Organisation for

Table 1. Content analysis codes and examples.

Code name	Code description	Content examples
Purpose and approach	The overarching mission, vision, or strategy of a fund (why it exists and <i>how</i> it carries out its work)	“Focuses on intersectional, decolonial, and grassroots principles of feminism...” —Pacific Feminist Fund
Target groups and distribution	Specifies the communities the fund prioritizes and how resources are allocated among them	“Rural/Remote Communities, Indigenous Women, Youth & Disability Groups...” —Fiji Women’s Fund
Decision-making processes	Describes who makes funding decisions, how transparent the process is, and whether it is participatory (participatory committees, open calls with clear criteria, etc.)	“Rapid Decision-Making: Streamlined grant approval process...” —UAF A&P
Language, rhetoric, and narratives	Looks at vocabulary, tone, and storytelling (rights-based language, intersectional rhetoric, Indigenous terms, etc.)	“Rights-based language focusing on empowerment and justice... intersectionality” —SAWF

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) DAC Statistics, and the International Aid Transparency Initiative to local organizations, to identify patterns of funding distribution. The analysis examined budget lines, disbursement mechanisms, and timelines to trace how funds were allocated across sectors (justice, health, gender, and environment), and their implementation by national ministries, local civil society organizations, or grassroots groups. This method allowed for qualitative interpretation of funding flows, aligned with feminist political economy frameworks.

Limitations

The exploration of feminist movements in Fiji is complex, given the challenge of representing varied experiences across a country with over three hundred islands. Navigating dynamics within Fiji’s intimate feminist spaces requires careful engagement with stakeholders to explore generational tensions and factors shaping social change. While these constraints exist, this co-designed study prioritizes Fiji’s feminist context, offering unique insights into how international resources influence feminist movement building and sustainability. The research also explores a particular point in time (pre- and post-COVID), which

Table 2. “Follow the money” report analysis.

Title	Donor/publisher	Year	Summary
GBV and REDD+ in Fiji: Tackling Resource Conflict and Addressing Gender-Based Risk in the Environment (Final Report)	Marstel-Day and WI-HER (USAID-funded)	2022	Details integration of GBV prevention into REDD+ programs, includes financial flows.
Frictionless Justice for GBV—Final Report	Asian Development Bank (ADB)	2022	Explores barriers to justice for GBV survivors, role of customary law, and resource allocations within the justice system.
Evaluation of the Gender Equality and Political Governance Project (GEPG)—Final Report	UN Women & AusAID	2012	Evaluates project with financial data and lessons for gender programs.
Fiji Recovery and Resilience Budget Support 2020–2023 Evaluation Final Report	Australian DFAT	2024	Evaluates gender equality and disability inclusion, includes funding disbursements and technical assistance effectiveness.
Sexual and Reproductive Health and GBV in Fiji: A Review of Policy and Legislation	UNFPA Pacific	2022	Analyzes SRHR and GBV laws and policies; outlines funding gaps and legislative reform needs.

may impede the applicability of the findings to ongoing developments within Fiji’s feminist movements and donor landscape.

Findings and discussion

Analyzing donor priorities and gender-responsive aid

Gender-responsive aid is an approach to development assistance that integrates participatory processes and explicitly seeks to address gender inequalities through aid design and outcomes (Pérez Piñán 2015). Fiji’s development financing has undergone significant shifts in recent years due to the COVID-19

pandemic, climate-related crises, and evolving geopolitical priorities. From 2008 to 2022, Fiji received US\$337 million for programs in which gender equality was the principal objective and US\$1.2 billion for programs in which gender equality was a significant, although not central, objective (Lowy Institute 2024). These figures, particularly the US\$1.2 billion, should be interpreted with caution, as large-budget programs often lack transparency, obscuring power dynamics and the extent to which funding reaches feminist or community-based efforts (Keena and Tidwell 2024; Dayant et al. 2023). During the COVID-19 period, emergency-related aid to Fiji increased sharply, rising from 2.5 to 15 percent of gross national income. Key donors collectively account for approximately 75 percent of this financing, including Australia (23%), the Asian Development Bank (18%), the World Bank (12%), Japan (11%), and China (11%) (ADB 2022; DFAT 2022; Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] 2022; Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2022; World Bank 2022).

Based on the “follow the money” analysis and the donor landscape overview, increased funding for gender equality programs enhanced infrastructure for GBV responses and expanded microfinance schemes, leadership training for women and girls, and programming for men and boys to address GBV. Moreover, this analysis reveals a shift from project-based aid to long-term, programmatic approaches post-COVID, and natural disasters such as Cyclone Winston in 2016. For example, DFAT, MFAT, and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) commissioned an evaluation of FWCC's program from 2016 to 2020, which highlighted that funding directly supported the increase in staff and thereby increased counseling and legal services for GBV survivors, and an increase in hotline calls (Fleming et al. 2020b).

International donors have increasingly embedded gender and GBV issues into their aid mandates. The largest project directly targeting gender equality in Fiji was the multi-year AU\$44 million Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program (AU\$320 million across fourteen Pacific Island countries), funded by DFAT. Despite these sizable investments, donor expectations are predominantly tied to predetermined measurable outcomes, which can distort local agendas. Lavenia, an Indo-Fijian and iTaukei (the term used to describe Indigenous Fijians) activist, who has worked across grassroots organizations, international NGOs, and the Fijian government, observed, “I feel like we are basically just driving foreign policies of these countries; none of it is really for what we need.” Her critical observation suggests that donor-imposed frameworks can override local priorities, effectively turning programmatic directions into vehicles for foreign policy agendas. As well as measurable outcomes, donor imperatives emphasize standardized reporting frameworks, and short-term projects that may clash with the movement's process-oriented and culturally contextual strategies. As expressed by Jay, a male Indigenous activist, “Success is mostly measured by the numbers we report, but like, what about the community healing and dialogue that truly change lives?”

The heavy administrative burden imposed by donors on their local partners can create inefficiency in resource distribution. Bureaucratic thresholds, particularly for financial reporting, often exclude smaller, lesser known, local organizations that are still developing the capacity to navigate complex donor processes. As a result, aid disproportionately flows to well-established, formally registered local NGOs, and especially larger INGOs, sidelining the contributions of grassroots actors who may be more attuned to local GBV dynamics. This dynamic reinforces socioeconomic inequality within the activist community and creates barriers for grassroots organizations that lack the resources to meet stringent donor requirements. As Mere, a transgender female sex worker and activist, explained:

We've always tried our very best. We are committed to making a difference ... especially when it's for the community. But sometimes, we simply don't have the resources to apply for this funding. The application process is so lengthy and burdensome, with all the required documentation, that it becomes very stressful for us. I guess it's one of the things that holds us back from accessing international funding.

Mere's statement highlights the disconnect between the perspectives of rural grassroots feminist actors on where and who should receive funding, and the requirements and application processes to access donor funding. Although most bilateral, multilateral, and foundation donors are bound by fiduciary, audit, and safeguarding obligations, this inadvertently isolates some groups from the feminist movement. However, activists respond to these challenges by forming coalitions that file joint applications or leverage existing networks to try to bypass formal gatekeeping. These tactics illustrate how marginalized actors reconvert social ties into strategic resources when formal channels prove exclusionary (see [Piven and Cloward 1992](#)). Transgender individuals participating in Fijian feminist movements also face significant discrimination based on their gender identity and their work, contributing to the challenges they face in mobilizing resources ([Kumar 2022](#)). Kiera, another trans rights activist, reflected:

We get harassment from police, no access to health, and leave our own families. It's not just transphobia—it's also whorephobia. So, you think the international community would see us when our local communities don't see us? No, [they] wouldn't.

This depicts how the lack of aid compounds the societal and local problem of acknowledging transgender people and their rights.

Local activists also argue that foreign aid dynamics affect the scale of initiatives and structure of feminist movements in Fiji. On one hand, significant financial inflows have bolstered capacity-strengthening efforts and expanded the scope of GBV programs. On the other hand, the imposition of rigid, outcome-driven frameworks can marginalize local voices. Lavenia states, "They [donors]

define what the problem is, you know? But if we defined it the way we understood it, then we are also the best person to know the solution.” Lavenia emphasizes the need for greater community ownership over problem definition and solution design. Moreover, several other research collaborators reported that activists and organizations are increasingly resisting donor-imposed priorities, some are even refusing international funding. For instance, research collaborators highlighted the contentious Global Gag Rule (GGR), a US policy that blocks funding to foreign NGOs that provide abortion services. Losalini, an Indigenous and Indo-Fijian activist working for a rural NGO, argued, “It [GGR] undermines local autonomy and compromises efforts to advocate for comprehensive reproductive rights and gender justice.”

Several activists mentioned that INGOs are an extension of international donors with substantial resources and well-established networks, which make them “better equipped to secure funding,” as Jay mentioned, for implementing large-scale projects. INGOs frequently collaborate with government agencies and other major donors, which further “consolidates their influence while sidelining smaller, community-based organizations” (Jay). Jay continued:

INGOs are the donors too, or like have become them. We get the scraps of what is left. You know what I mean? Like you go to a Palestine protest, and none of them show up or we have local community events, they are not there, but you know, UNDP holds an event, and the white people are there. Like to them, it’s a business and to us ... it’s our home.

Consequently, while INGOs may contribute to local initiatives, their dominant position can create frustration and fragment collective feminist efforts, obscuring the unique contributions of smaller organizations striving for community-driven change.

In Fiji, the concept of brokerage is frequently asymmetric, reinforcing vertical accountability to donors rather than horizontal accountability to local citizens, thereby constraining grassroots agenda-setting even when funds increase (Tarrow 2022). The evolving landscape of foreign aid in Fiji has both enabled interventions to address GBV and created significant challenges for local movement building. These findings carry significant implications for the political economy of the feminist movement in Fiji.

These patterns resonate strongly with long-standing critiques of gender equality aid as “projectized,” metrics-driven, and oriented toward upward accountability, which can sideline grassroots priorities and depoliticize feminist agendas (Cornwall 2003, 2004, 2007; Eyben and Ferguson 2004). However, this study shows how such dynamics are experienced within a feminist movement itself, rather than only within professionalized NGOs, and how activists alternatively comply with, strategically reshape, or outright refuse donor framings. In doing so, it extends feminist political economy analyses by foregrounding activists’ own practices of negotiation and refusal as central to the political economy of aid in a Pacific Island context (Hau’ofa 1993; Thaman 2003).

Divergent discourses on success and problem framing

The “follow the money” analysis showed that donor agencies and INGOs typically adopt an outcome-oriented framework, prioritizing quantifiable measures such as “the number of beneficiaries reached” or “a reduction in GBV incidence.” Their language is steeped in technical jargon, using terms such as “targets,” “deliverables,” and “key performance indicators (KPIs).” Research collaborators, who currently or previously worked for donor organizations, similarly identified quantifiable measures. Lee, a former donor, observed, “Success is often gauged by the ability to mobilize resources efficiently and achieve scalable, replicable results.” The focus of donors on technical and measurable outcomes serves to justify funding and align their interventions with broader international agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This helps justify the continued flow of resources and attracts additional funding from stakeholders who want to see tangible returns on their investment. While it provides a clear framework for mobilizing resources, it can also reduce the complexity of local contexts to a series of targets and indicators, risking oversimplification of deeply rooted social issues.

By contrast with the bureaucratic donor expectations, local activists emphasize process-oriented and relational outcomes that focus on empowerment, community dialogue, and the qualitative aspects of change. Their discourse is imbued with culturally relevant narratives and language that speak directly to the lived experiences of community members. Ana, a young queer activist, reflected, “It’s hard to see it [success] in the numbers and all that other crap, you know ... doesn’t make sense. Success is when women feel safe to share their stories, and you know, the community collectively takes a stand against violence.” This approach reflects a broader social movement perspective, where legitimacy is rooted in grassroots mobilization and the creation of social capital, rather than solely on numerical indicators. This was also evident in our interview discussions, in which research collaborators observed what they documented as success, versus what they reported as success to a donor. Unaisi, an older Indigenous activist who runs an organization, reflected:

One of the big successes that I saw is ... a three-day workshop with all our different personalities and all our different politics. But we were still able to come together, and you know, negotiate what will be in our outcome documents, what will be, you know, the key issues from the Pacific feminist movement. ... When [we have] to report it to donors, you know, we fill out their forms and send the numbers and case studies, or whatever you know, to put on their websites.

Unaisi’s understanding of success emphasizes the importance of community dialogue and building social capital, elements that are often lost in donor reporting frameworks. This further exemplifies the disconnect between donor-driven numbers and community-defined outcomes.

Donors often rely on frameworks such as “theory of change” and “results-based management,” positioning GBV as an issue that can be systematically addressed through best practices and internationally recognized benchmarks (DFAT 2019). In contrast, local activists employ contextual language, drawing on Indigenous knowledge, storytelling, and local idioms to frame GBV in a manner that resonates with their community’s cultural values. Diya, who started as a young activist in the movement and now works for an international actor, stated:

You can have an agenda [for GBV prevention] of what you want one moment, with very strong funding, and another moment, the group gets disrupted because funding changes. The values and principles of the way we work in the Pacific take time, require trust, and it requires a level of sensitivity. We dance and sing and move too. Not just reports. But with a report! Isa [Fijian expression]! What have you done? Have you done this? That’s [a] very colonial approach to it. ... It does not match with the heart. ... We have a mission, a plan, and they have [a] mission, but then you have to align to someone else’s framing of agendas and, and it’s like selling you.

This divergence in language affects communication and how problems are conceptualized and addressed. Donors mostly frame GBV through human rights and development lenses, focusing on its implications for “socio-economic progress and legal reforms” (DFAT 2019), and viewing GBV as a universal challenge requiring structured policy-driven interventions. By contrast, local activists often perceive GBV as a deeply rooted issue that “disrupts community cohesion and cultural integrity.” For example, a report by the ADB (2023) states that “violence against women and girls is prevalent in the Pacific region, causing significant harm, and high business costs. Businesses and women’s business networks often play a key role in awareness and support to address violence against women and girls in the Pacific region.” Research collaborators agreed with the importance of intersections of GBV and other issues, such as climate and economic empowerment, and the need for documentation and data. However, many stressed the importance of relational healing and community-based solutions, viewing the problem as one that requires “restorative approaches rather than top-down fixes” (Unaisi).

As shown in figure 1, when responding to the question of “*How do you define success in GBV violence programming?*” the most frequent words used by donors are “scalability” and “targets,” versus activists, who used “community engagement” and “healing.” From the perspective of social movement theory, these divergent discourses reflect differing strategies in resource mobilization and collective action. Donors and INGOs, with their emphasis on measurable outputs, are well equipped to secure and justify foreign funding by demonstrating clear, quantifiable impacts. This is shown in the donor reports, where a



Figure 1. Word cloud of donor reports (top box) and activists (bottom box).

common pattern was language and reference to “effectiveness,” “efficiency,” “impact,” and “sustainability” as measurement tools (see, for example, [ADB 2023](#); [DFAT 2019, 2022](#)). However, this focus risks sidelining the more nuanced, processual dimensions of social change that local activists value, which may result in making accessing funds more challenging. The difference between these approaches can lead to potential misalignments in program design and implementation, where programs that prioritize technical outcomes may not fully capture or address the local needs of specific groups, such as youth and transgender and queer communities, while community-led initiatives—despite their qualitative successes—might be undervalued in donor assessments. This dynamic illustrates the ongoing challenge in resource mobilization: balancing the need for scalable, measurable interventions with the equally important, yet harder-to-measure, processes of empowerment and social transformation.

The colonial history of regions such as Fiji complicates these local-donor dynamics. Historical policies, such as the introduction of indentured laborers from India (1879–1916) and the resulting segregation in land ownership and economic opportunities, have left enduring structural inequalities (Chand 2014). This colonial legacy continues to influence the socioeconomic, cultural, and political fabric, particularly the relationship between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians, and shapes how both donors and local activists understand and address GBV. Tulsi, a queer activist, also had strong perspectives on this issue:

Because they [local organizations] see like if I go in this direction, if I frame my proposal or grant proposal in this direction in this manner, then I'll be able to get the funds. And it just makes um yeah, it just makes you sell out because, you know, you just, you just being colonized again.

The divergent discourses on success and problem framing have significant practical implications. Misalignments in defining success can lead to technically sound programs, yet lack local resonance. From a strategic mobilization perspective, this tension reflects the trade-off between instrumental resource pursuit (meeting donor KPIs) and expressive movement goals (deep cultural transformation). Movements that resolve this by reframing qualitative processes as indispensable “strategic assets” are better positioned to negotiate flexible funding without sacrificing their emancipatory vision (Benford and Snow 1988; Ganz 2000). As Tevita, an iTaukei activist, observed:

They're [local feminists and groups] trying to fit themselves into a box that they cannot fit into. ... We're trying to invest in art ... in ways that people can talk [within] communities and movements led by women and non-binary people in that region can talk about these issues around decolonization, around feminism, decolonizing feminism in the Pacific. Like what does that mean?

Moreover, the language gap between technical jargon and culturally nuanced narratives can hinder effective collaboration, making it crucial for intermediaries such as feminist funds to bridge these differences. Initiatives that fail to integrate local perspectives risk losing community ownership once donor funding ceases, highlighting the necessity for approaches that blend outcome-oriented and process-oriented strategies. This study builds on the work of Pacific scholars on how activists' alternative framings of success complicate simple narratives of “effectiveness.” These relational and process-oriented understandings of success remain underexamined in feminist political economy, yet they are central to how movements in Fiji assess whether aid advances or undermines their struggles.

The role of feminist funds

Feminist funds in Fiji and the Pacific Islands play a crucial role in bridging the resource gap for grassroots feminist movements, even as they face

significant challenges. By channeling funds into projects focused on GBV prevention, climate justice, economic empowerment, and political participation, initiatives such as the Pacific Feminist Fund support marginalized groups and facilitate intergenerational collaboration. This is a key element of resource mobilization theory that leverages the diverse strengths of both experienced and emerging activists. Tulsi expressed a strong belief in the work of feminist funds, stating:

Thanks again to the feminist movement who's organized, who has been watching, you know, the warning signs around that [foreign donors]. So now they've organized, you know, like the feminist funds ... they're pushing back. ... So it would make me feel better if I access some fund from a feminist fund because ... you know, they are very much aware of the issues on the ground and they are, they have the international connections, they're talking to all the international funding partners, the major donors or whatever and they're able to, you know, get in those spaces, push our agenda and which is the right agenda and then, get resources for the important work that front line grassroots activists are doing in the Pacific.

Many research collaborators also highlighted how resource mobilization through feminist funds enhanced both agency and collective identity. This further illustrates how feminist funds can have context-specific responses that resonate with locals.

The content analysis of eleven feminist funds found that two focused on crisis response, while seven were focused on long-term goals, and two addressed both. This breakdown highlights that while most funds are structured to support long-term feminist organizing, a smaller number are specifically designed to provide rapid, crisis-driven assistance or a blend of both approaches. Seini, a trans female sex worker and activist, reflected on this:

The funding that we get are mostly project-based. So, whenever the projects finishes that we, that's where the funding ends and that's why we try [to have] the passion to continue. ... We have always our communities, like a first priority, no matter if we are funded or not, we will still do this for our members of our community. We [Fiji] have like 56 organizations and we're all competing for the same funds, which can be very competitive. We have got local feminist fund. ... They support us.

The bureaucratic complexities associated with detailed grant applications and reporting requirements often alienate rural, Indigenous organizations that are not formally registered. This is where feminist funds play a role in supporting movement building, being flexible, nimble, and responsive for activists, such as some funds having the option to apply via phone.

Although feminist funds meet a critical need, we found they had several limitations. Some research collaborators perceived a cultural disconnect between international feminist funds and the local contexts they aim to serve. Dev, an activist and consultant, argues that “the frameworks and priorities set by funders based in the Global North don’t always align with us, like the cultural realities and needs of our communities they are funding.” Another issue was the language and concepts used by international feminist funds, such as intersectionality or bodily autonomy, which may not always be understood or accepted in local communities. As a result, those applying would have to frame their ideas to fit the language. While many of these funds typically use English for applications, some regionally focused funds offer support or accept applications in additional languages to better serve local communities. However, the content analysis revealed that Indigenous or rural languages or dialects are rarely an option, missing critical communities.

Additionally, the use of bureaucratic frameworks, such as the theory of change, logic models, rights-based approaches, gender mainstreaming, empowerment framing, and results-based or qualitative metrics, can hinder effective resource allocation and lead to gatekeeping intergenerationally and across race, class, and gender. Dev said, “Sometimes it’s this specialized philanthropic vocabulary. It’s like, I know the funds are feminist, but it can be very academia [*sic*].” By emphasizing Western identity labels, some of the Fund’s materials may inadvertently privilege frameworks that are more recognizable to US-focused or Euro-focused donors and academics, rather than frontline collectives in diverse local contexts. Funds navigate the tension between working in feminist ways, adapting to traditional donor modalities, and maintaining local priorities.

While Western funding has enabled significant advancements in feminist activism, this financial structure also introduces the inherent power dynamics that underscore the need for continued exploration of more equitable and locally grounded funding models. This challenge is compounded by centralized decision-making structures, where even in participatory models, final funding decisions rest with international board members or foreign actors. The content analysis demonstrated a lack of transparency regarding most funds on how funding decisions are truly made.

Overall, resource mobilization theory reveals both the strengths and structural challenges of feminist funds in Fiji. By strategically mobilizing resources, fostering intergenerational partnerships, and influencing donor policies, these funds are advancing social change. However, to fully bridge the resource gap, there is a pressing need to simplify bureaucratic procedures, decentralize decision-making, extend funding cycles, and broaden the inclusivity of funding priorities to more decolonial frameworks.

Impact on feminist movements

In many donor-supported feminist movements, success is articulated in contrasting ways (Chugh and Gaiind 2023). On one hand, the data reveal that

funding can function as a critical enabler for feminist movements when it aligns with local priorities. Several research collaborators highlighted how sustained financial support has allowed organizations to build capacity and nurture long-term programs. The content analysis also revealed how support has allowed organizations to invest in training, mentorship, and community-based initiatives, thereby enhancing collective agency and capacity strengthening. For example, the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Australian Aid-funded program invested AU\$320 million over ten years (2012–2022), which significantly expanded support services for GBV survivors.

However, these positive outcomes coexist with challenges that complicate the notion that more funding equals a stronger movement. Although resource mobilization theory suggests that increased access to resources should strengthen social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977), we also found that the influx of donor funding with local input can constrain community agency and foster competition. Several research collaborators noted that donor-imposed priorities force organizations to compete for resources, creating a scarcity mindset. Diya explained,

You have to play the game; comply with those standards, and certain organizations can do that. If they are not able to do that because of a capacity issue, it creates a different kind of hierarchy and who gets the resources and who doesn't it. So, there's internal competition, and creates a lack of trust or to coordinate together and work on things. ... And then you have a few dominant voices that go to different spaces and can advocate and more, because one, they have the access ... two, because they have the knowledge and experience, because they have the right to be able to articulate things in the way that the global platforms will listen.

This dynamic can fragment rather than fortify feminist movements. Strategic mobilization theory shows that competition for scarce resources often shifts movements from coalitional to positional strategies, privileging short-term survival over collective power-building. Recognizing this, activists' emerging calls for pooled funding and joint negotiation arenas signal an intentional pivot toward "resource-sharing coalitions" that recenter solidarity as a strategic choice rather than an ethical ideal (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

The colonial legacy further shapes Fiji's funding landscape. Some research collaborators explained that donor relationships are imbued with neocolonial attitudes: "External funders [are] coming in and dictating development strategies without truly engaging local communities" (Neel, an Indo-Fijian activist who left the movement). The feminist movement in Fiji is also caught in a geopolitical tug-of-war, with funding influenced by interests from Australia, New Zealand, and, increasingly, China (Yusuf 2024). Tulsi emphasizes how movements risk "co-optation":

I see a new form of colonialism, like within the development space ... because international development partners are usually funded by the government and the governments have their own agenda in terms of the Indo-Pacific like push back against the influence of China in the Pacific. So yeah, pretty much like corporatization and co-opting of human rights issues in the Pacific ... very much in relation to like women's rights, LGBT rights and now climate justice as well.

Traditional narratives, often championed by long-established organizations (and sometimes older activists), tend to emphasize legacy benchmarks such as policy wins, institutional change, and long-term sustainability, while emerging voices, including younger activists and newer networks, contend that success should be measured by the capacity to challenge entrenched power structures, disrupt normative practices, and address intersectional concerns that remain marginalized by conventional frameworks.

The contestation extends into problem framing, where traditional approaches define issues in terms of institutional inadequacies and policy deficits, while more radical framings, common among younger activists and some older activists, present challenges as manifestations of deep-rooted structural inequalities that demand solutions beyond conventional policy reform. Feminist political analysis underscores that definitions of the problem are never neutral; they are shaped by power relations, historical legacies, and the need for legitimacy in a donor-driven environment. Tevita explained, "The way we define our struggles often reflects whose voices are heard. When funding agencies push for measurable outcomes, we risk sidelining the more qualitative, transformative aspects of our work." Social mobilization theory underscores that diagnostic and prognostic framings are themselves key resources. When donors impose narrowly technical frames, they restrict the strategic repertoire available to movements.

Donor reports also revealed that they often channel funds toward similar or overlapping development projects. This pattern inadvertently fragments activities among local organizations. Many research collaborators described how local organizations have essentially divided the work based on their focus areas. Jone, a young queer activist, reflected, "You see organizations and organizations and individuals and then they have carved up in, you know, you do climate, you're doing political participation and you're doing gender and, and, and that's how it is." Jone highlights that within the movement, different groups take ownership of specific issue areas, which can sometimes lead to tensions if one group feels another is overstepping its domain. Resource mobilization theory explains this finding by illustrating how competition for limited funds leads organizations to prioritize donor-friendly projects over grassroots innovation, intensifying internal divisions and creating a stratified ecosystem in which established organizations often hold an advantage over emerging networks.

The interplay among duplicated projects, divergent discourses on success and problem framing, and intergenerational tensions displays the impact of aid on

movement dynamics. Organizations striving to align with donor expectations may become less inclined to collaborate with networks that challenge prevailing metrics, fostering a competitive, zero-sum environment. According to Iliesa, a mid-career activist in the movement, “The pressure to produce quick, quantifiable results often forces us to compete against each other, rather than work together towards shared, systemic change.” Her perspective illustrates how donor requirements can inadvertently undermine collective potential. Moreover, while funding can be transformative when it supports locally driven, context-specific initiatives and facilitates capacity strengthening and innovation, the data challenge the assumption that simply increasing resources automatically strengthens social movements. The transformative potential of feminist activism hinges on autonomous agenda-setting, collective accountability, equitable leadership transitions, and the capacity to resist external impositions.

Implications

This study extends Pacific critiques of gender-equality aid by shifting the analytical gaze from development NGOs to feminist movements, revealing how donor logics shape not only programs but the internal dynamics of activism in Fiji, its strategic horizons, and relational practices (Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2020; McLaughlin 2023). By foregrounding the voices of intergenerational, queer-inclusive feminist and queer activists, it shows that movements experience, negotiate, and contest aid in ways that echo earlier critiques. Yet, the study also brings new insights around relational accountability, refusal, and alternative understandings of success dimensions, which have been largely overlooked in gender-and-development scholarship.

Drawing on resource mobilization theory and feminist political economy, this study finds that resource acquisition, allocation, and management are shaped more by structural constraints, donor priorities, and geopolitical pressures, than by funding volume. Resources enable collective action, yet the conditions under which they are delivered, short project cycles, externally set metrics, and embedded power asymmetries, can blunt the potential of feminist movements. International aid has undeniably supported advances against GBV, but misaligned donor timetables and reporting demands compel activists to retrofit strategies to fit funding windows, disrupting long-term movement building.

Our findings, therefore, refine resource-mobilization theory: what matters is less the stock of money than the flow, how deftly coalitions reconfigure multiple resource types over time. Fiji’s activists strategically pivot frames, rebundle funds, and forge unlikely alliances to preserve ideological autonomy even under geopolitical constraint. Relational capital, trust, solidarity networks, and survivors’ sense of safety emerge as a nonmaterial yet indispensable resource that movements accumulate and deploy alongside cash (Bebbington et al. 2008). In feminist political economy terms, it underscores that power is exercised not

only through the allocation of aid but also through the conditions under which movements translate aid into political leverage.

Funding models aimed at ending GBV must privilege long-term, community-led initiatives that resonate culturally and allow movements to define success on their own terms (AWID 2018; Fleming et al. 2020a). Donors should balance quantitative indicators with qualitative measures of healing and community-led change and resist one-size-fits-all log-frames in favor of flexible arrangements rooted in Pacific relational ethics (Cornwall and Eade 2010). Feminist funds' experiments with alternative circuits of value show that plural economies, one governed by donor metrics, another by reciprocal obligations, can coexist and reduce dependency.

Ultimately, lasting systemic change depends on recognizing and addressing the internal movement dynamics and structural power relations that shape feminist mobilization, including the role of international aid. Reassessing how success is defined, bridging generational divides, and valuing both quantitative outcomes and qualitative transformations are all essential if feminist movements are to sustain their struggle to end GBV. Finally, this study contributes an intersectional perspective to social movements, highlighting the dual nature of international funding, its potential to both support and fragment local feminist initiatives, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of resource dynamics in developing country contexts.

Conclusion

International aid has profoundly reshaped the structure, priorities, and strategies of feminist movements addressing GBV in Fiji. The dramatic increase in aid reinforced by donor-driven priorities has reoriented local activism toward measurable, project-based interventions. Donor criteria and accountability frameworks require success to be measured in quantifiable terms, such as reductions in GBV incidence and/or the number of service providers trained. This focus on short-term, results-driven outcomes produces competitive dynamics among organizations, resulting in the fragmentation of grassroots movements and marginalization of emerging voices. Many groups feel compelled to conform to these externally defined metrics rather than set their own agendas.

The study highlights how reliance on aid influences internal power structures, reinforcing hierarchies in which established organizations and older leaders dominate the funding landscape, and younger and more radical activists struggle to assert their agendas. This local-global dynamic is complicated by divergent discourses on success: while donors emphasize measurable impacts, local activists stress the importance of relational healing, community dialogue, and empowerment. The misalignment between these perspectives contributes to intergenerational tensions and divisions. The emergence of feminist funds adds another layer of complexity to an already complex aid environment. Although

these funds have been instrumental in bridging resource gaps and fostering intergenerational collaboration, their bureaucratic procedures and reliance on Western-centric frameworks tend to exclude smaller, rural, and Indigenous organizations. Thus, while increased international aid has provided critical resources for combating GBV in Fiji, it has also reinforced colonial legacies and external power structures, contributing to the fragmentation of the local feminist movement.

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Data availability

Our ethical approval does not permit the qualitative data to be shared beyond the research team.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was received from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee, Project Number 42635.

Informed consent

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating for the study and for the findings of the study to be published.

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