

Submission to JSCFADT Senate Committee by Jane Alver

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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
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I am a gender scholar at the University of Canberra. My research focuses on Pacific feminist civil society. I am addressing topics 1 and 2:

Context

Globally, feminist civil society is under threat, feminism is facing backlash and spaces for progressive civil society advocacy are closing. Yet they are crucial in advocating for gender equality where much work remains to be done. In relation to the Sustainable Development Goals for example, concern has been expressed that none of the goals will be reached without gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. However women's rights advocates are merely 'holding the line' on the goals set out for gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action (UN, 1995) and spaces for feminist civil society voices to be heard are shrinking. Conservative regional blocs are voting down progress on gender equality. Advocacy for rights of sexual orientation and gender expression is suffering setbacks with conservative blocs deleting language protecting diverse women's rights. Yet the efforts to have feminist civil society voices heard continue. Pacific feminists are responding to this backlash by focusing on the conditions under which Pacific feminists can build inclusive and impactful regional alliances to respond to sexual violence, and other human rights issues such as gender equality

Summary

My recent research focusses on the opportunities and barriers for the creation of diverse feminist civil society alliances to effect progress towards gender equality in the Pacific. Drawing on interviews with feminist civil society actors from the Pacific and other key actors working in the gender area in the Pacific, as well as through the document analysis of relevant reports from different policy actors (government, civil society organisations in Australia and the region), I identify the ways Pacific feminists build/strengthen inclusive regional alliances and respond to the problem of shrinking civil society spaces at the global level. I emphasise to the Senate Committee two recent initiatives in the Pacific: firstly the *Pacific Feminist Forum* and secondly the formation of *We Rise Coalition*.

1. *The role of civil society groups in Pacific Islands in responding practically to domestic, family and sexual violence, and other human rights issues such as gender equality*

Civil society groups in the Pacific are providing novel spaces for Pacific women to negotiate their difference, to hear and amplify the voice of Pacific women at the regional level calling for sexual and reproductive health and rights, human rights and rights for gender minorities. Feminist civil society is transparently shedding light on the negotiated nature of the Pacific feminist identity. Their actions illustrate the ways Pacific women negotiate their differences and how they combine unity with diversity and build inclusive regional feminist alliances with (significant) impact at both regional and global levels. The alliances feminist civil society actors were able to build in the Pacific in recent years show the new forms of regional solidarity, which is plural, strategic and fluid, and which emphasises the constant negotiation process involved in building feminist alliances and making them work. Through a strategically crafted solidarity drawn from diverse organisations and networks has begun to have impact for steps towards gender equality at the regional level.

The Pacific Feminist Forum and We Rise Coalition are strategic innovations for feminist civil society organisations whose advocacy is affecting progress towards gender equality by growing capacity, highlighting inequities, providing services for marginalised groups and women experiencing violence and discrimination. They are described in the next section.

These groups respond practically to human rights issues by negotiating a Pacific Feminist Charter as a common platform for advocacy, and then using these recommendations at the Civil Society Dialogue with the Pacific Islands Forum, the Triennial Meeting of Pacific Women and Pacific Women's Ministers, and the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations to hold leaders accountable and influence the outcomes and include the rights of marginalised and unrepresented voices. This is on top of their frontline service roles assisting and advocating for women in all their diversities.

An important role of the PFF was to enable the formation of regional networks. The PFF aimed to build and strengthen the regional network as the first specifically 'Pacific' specifically 'feminist' forum bringing Pacific women together, the efforts of women in the Pacific on gender equality have been present in the region. The PFF lasted for three days and covered a range of specific issues women face in national and regional spaces such as where to find funding, coalition building in the Pacific, legal gender recognition, realities of organising and building movements in the Pacific, and strategies of navigating diversity. The organisers also sought to create an empowering environment for participants where knowledge on feminist advocacy and alliance building were produced and built upon. The Pacific Feminist Forum acts as a mobilising structure, supporting existing action and prompting ideas and coalitions for further action. It showed the potential of dialogue across difference to connect.

2. The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls' in the Pacific context

Pacific Feminist Forum

The Inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum was held at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji in November 2016. The 2nd Pacific Feminist Forum was held in Fiji in 2019. Both brought together feminists, activists and women human rights defenders from around the Pacific to strategize, build networks and negotiate and affirm a Charter of Pacific Feminist Principles from which a coordinated platform of advocacy could arise. This descriptive section covers the organisers, participants, objectives, program and key design features of the Pacific Feminist Forum (PFF).

The Pacific Feminist Forum was pulled together by a diverse range of women's organisations who stated their common aspiration was convening a forum for celebrating Pacific feminism and strengthening the regional networks for a stronger voice on gender related issues. This was underpinned by the idea of 'transformative feminist change' facilitated by diverse women's organisations, with a forum established to identify a common issues of concern and a collective way forward in addressing those issues. The transformative expectation associated with the PFF was that it sought to offer a space for participants composed of feminists, women human rights defenders and advocates to regroup, learn, share challenges, forge new relationships among activists. and strengthen existing ones. They hoped that joining forces with all diversities including age, sexuality, and geography could create new and transformative alliances.

The organisers of the PFF reflected organisational and personal diversity; Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Haus of Khameleon, a youth led trans group, Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance and Bold Alliance.

The Inaugural PFF brought together participants from 13 countries - Fiji, New Caledonia, Marshall Islands, Samoa, PNG, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Bougainville, Vanuatu, Kiribati, New Zealand, and Australia.

The purpose of the PFF, as stated in the Program was to 'share stories, map journeys and build the feminist movement in the Pacific. It was initiated and managed by a diverse steering committee and described in the Program as a 'civil society space of collaboration', focusing on 'respect', 'diversity', 'intersectionality' and, 'intergenerational leadership and activism'. The PFF had two main features, an emphasis on Pacific feminism, and a focus on network building. Overall, the PFF aimed to convene a diverse and influential network of Pacific feminists, reflect on key issues paramount to gender equality and women's rights, and collaborate to enable a new wave of feminism to flourish.

At the Pacific Feminist Forum there was Haus of Khameleon which is a youth and transgender feminist led feminist movement, plus DIVA, which is a lesbian and trans support organisation who could work across difference with other women's organisations to map new journeys and new paths for an inclusive feminism for the Pacific. They worked side by side with more traditional women's organisations. Part of this push for new paths included moving to a whole-of-Pacific diverse intersectional involvement. Another active member was the Tongan Leitis Association, who advocate for the inclusion of Fakaleitis in Tonga and for legal recognition of the third gender.

We Rise Coalition

The We Rise Coalition is a cross movement coalition bringing together the sexual orientation/gender identity movement and the feminist movement combined into a coalition to amplify their voices and pool their resources. Cross movement groups can have different causes but shared goals seeking to engage in joint planning. must reconcile distinctive sometimes competing agendas. The We Rise Coalition makes transparent the importance of process and dialogue to sustain the coalition

The aims of the *We Rise Coalition* are to enhance and exchange feminist perspectives, influence donor through modelling a partnership and coalition approach, support renewal of feminist movements and organisations, by empowering next generation of actors and leaders, creating spaces for new, experienced and wise. This coalition connects skills across a diverse set and gives visibility to marginalised, stigmatised and socially excluded women including women with disabilities, widows, rural women, young women and women or lesbian or transgender women.

This Coalition consists of independent autonomous and feminist organisations based in or working in the Pacific on women's human rights and gender equality. It was first established in 2016 for the purpose of Building and sustaining women's movement through collective power and to demonstrate role and impact of coalitions. The members share a belief that strategic resistance through common agenda of change not as easily suppressed as individual actions might be.

Diverse Voices and Action for Equality (DIVA for Equality or DIVA), FemLink Pacific, Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) and International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) develop, demonstrate and strengthen feminist coalitions and partnerships in order to grow and uphold inclusive governance, equality, diversity, justice and women's human rights.

The activities are focussed at local, national (Fiji), regional (the Pacific) and global levels. The groups are all different, with different agendas yet have been able to come together. For examples Diverse Voices in Action (DIVA) for Equality: is an LBT collective, based in Fiji. FemLink Pacific: is a women's community media organisation with focus on women, peace, security, based in Fiji but will a regional focus . Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM): women's rights organisation, based in Fiji International Women's Development Agency (IWDA): women's rights organisation working with partners in Asia and the Pacific, based in Melbourne Australia.

I can be contacted for further information.

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