

Current and Future Implications of the Coups for Women in Fiji

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The impact on women of the two military coups in Fiji is the focus of this paper. Essentially, the coups have simultaneously generated new problems for women while reinforcing the existing economic, ideological, and political conditions that sustained and reproduced women's unequal position in Fiji society. Undoubtedly, the coups have had profound effects on women—some blatant and obvious, others more subtle.

As a direct result of the coups, women's economic position has worsened, their political activity has suffered a major setback, and they are confronted by increased violence and additional constraints on their physical and social space. Any gains women had made in the previous decade are fast disappearing, and prospects for future advancement are severely threatened. The heightened political momentum of the women's movement immediately prior to the coup has been disrupted and is suffering from an increased workload for the leaders as well as the constraints of operating in a repressive political climate.

In this paper I explore some of the obvious and not-so-obvious ramifications of the coups for women in Fiji. To illustrate the various implications, the paper is divided into three sections: the economic impact, the social impact, and the impact on the women's movement.

Where appropriate, the different impacts on ethnic Fijian and Indo-Fijian women are highlighted, but in general my comments apply to most women in Fiji.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT ON WOMEN

In the postcoup period, Fiji suffered major economic decline as the direct result of the coups. The downturn in the economy has created immense

economic hardship for the majority of Fiji's population. Both men and women have lost jobs, suffered reductions in salaries, been forced into part-time work, and been denied access to the labor market, since it is now virtually impossible for those unemployed to secure any form of employment. Undeniably, the majority of Fiji's population are experiencing a decline in their standards of living.

But what are the specific economic effects of the coups for women? While the declining economy has adverse implications for both men and women, for women the effects are more pronounced since women already had a marginal and secondary status in the wage-labor market. Women constituted only 22 percent of those active in the money economy (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1984) and were explicitly viewed as problematic for the labor market.¹ In times of economic recession, such as the postcoup period in Fiji, the myths or ideologies of women as primarily wives, mothers, and caretakers of families are conveniently operationalized to take the pressure off the job market.

Women become the first victims of retrenchments, forced part-time work, and salary reductions because of the myth that women only work for "lipstick." In other words, women work for pocket money or to supplement their husband's incomes, or they only work until they get married. Such views assume that women do not need to work or to have an independent income since they are, and should be, economically dependent on males, and they conveniently ignore the increasing numbers of households headed by females with dependants.

In the postcoup period women, both married and unmarried, lost their jobs, were forced into part-time employment, had to accept full-time work with only part-time salary, or suffered huge salary reductions. While government employees took a 15 percent salary reduction, private sector employees endured much larger reductions, sometimes up to 40 percent. Large numbers of women work in the private sector as stenographers, typists, cashiers, clerks, shop assistants, waiters, and hotel and domestic workers. In February 1989 government employees' salaries were restored to their precoup levels, and although some maintain that salaries in the private sector have also been restored, this is difficult to verify and rather more doubtful.

In some areas of employment men have replaced women. In Suva, there is a noticeable increase in the number of ethnic Fijian males working as shop assistants in small Indian- and Chinese-owned shops where previously one encountered mainly Indo-Fijian females. Some claim this change

to be a result of the regime's directive to employers to engage in preferential employment practices in favor of ethnic Fijians, some argue it has occurred for reasons of security, and others maintain that it is sheer political expediency on the part of shop owners. The importance of this change for the purposes of this discussion lies in the seeming preference over and replacement of females by males in one of the few areas of employment traditionally reserved for women.

One of the hardest hit groups of women workers are the nonunionized, low-paid domestic workers. They have suffered salary reductions or lost their jobs altogether as a consequence of their employers migrating, suffering salary reductions or loss of employment themselves, or becoming more cautious as a result of their own precarious economic positions (Bain 1989, 28). Such women workers in the informal sector have lost any bargaining power they might have had in the past and are experiencing a worsening of their working conditions as well as lower living standards.

Any gains women had made in the preceding decade in terms of increased participation in paid employment, with consequent access to an independent income, are rapidly diminishing.² Women remain and are likely to remain marginal and secondary in the labor market and consequently economically dependent on males and subject to their control.

The politics of gender that pose greater threats to women's economic position in periods of economic recession are further compounded for Indo-Fijian women by the politics of ethnicity. Discriminatory employment practices in favor of ethnic Fijians, promoted and institutionalized by the current administration, are yet another structural constraint restricting Indo-Fijian women's access to and participation in paid employment.³ Indo-Fijian women are now confronted by the twin hurdles of ethnicity and gender in their struggle to achieve economic independence and equality in the labor market.

Women in the Tourist Industry

In the postcoup period, the tourist industry suffered massive decline as a consequence of Fiji's unpopularity as a tourist destination following the military coups. Occupancy rates in the tourist hotels plummeted to an all-time low, and large numbers of workers were retrenched, were forced into part-time work, or suffered salary reductions.

The decline in the tourist industry was felt most acutely by women, since this industry is one of the major employers of women, particularly ethnic Fijian women, for whom it provided one of the major sources of

paid employment in the precoup period (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1976). All the "up front" positions such as bartenders, waiters, room cleaners, and tour guides are held by ethnic Fijian women (Bolabola and Slatter 1984). These women endured retrenchments, salary reductions, and general decline in their working conditions. Although in the latter half of 1988 and early 1989 the tourist industry has been partly resuscitated, one cannot count on the industry's generosity to restore the precoup salaries and working conditions of its women workers, particularly while the economy, and for that matter the country, remains volatile.

The steep decline in the numbers of tourists has also affected associated industries that provide women with a livelihood, such as the handicraft industry, restaurant and other entertainment industries, and retail industries. Women who work as basket weavers, handicraft workers, shop assistants, market vendors, waiters in restaurants and the like have all suffered as a consequence of the declining tourist industry. Ironically, the vast majority of these women are ethnic Fijians—the supposed beneficiaries of Rabuka's coups!

Tax Free Zones and Women

The establishment of tax free zones, or free trade zones as they are known elsewhere, was one of the strategies implemented in the postcoup period for improving the declining economy. The justification for the establishment of tax free zones, which provide a thirteen-year tax holiday for companies, cheap electricity and other services, tariff-free imported raw materials, and export of profits, has been framed around the boost that it will give to the faltering economy through increased trade and greater employment opportunities. While the setting up of such zones may provide women with greater employment opportunities, it also heralds a further deterioration in their working conditions in the manufacturing sector (see Knapman, this issue).

An alternative scenario is that tax free zones will boost the profits of manufacturers and provide them with an environment relatively free of industrial conflict, while women workers suffer further deterioration of their working conditions and the Fiji taxpayer carries a further economic burden (Prasad 1989a, 42). Workers most likely to be affected in Fiji are the already disadvantaged and highly exploited women garment workers.⁴

To date most of the companies registered under the tax-free-zone legis-

lation, and granted this status, are garment manufacturers renowned for their exploitation of female workers. In September 1988, Permanent Secretary of Trade and Commerce Navitalai Naisoro stated that more than fifty garment manufacturers were already involved in exporting to countries such as the United States and Australia (*FT*, 1988*b*).

Under the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) between Australia and the Forum island states in the Pacific, Fiji enjoys relatively free access to the Australian market for its finished garments. Similarly, Fiji has access to the North American market that to date has not been fully utilized. Primarily, it is this access to markets otherwise closed that has attracted foreign garment manufacturers to Fiji rather than the usual attraction of cheap, docile, and readily available female workers. Since Fiji wage rates, even in the garment industry, are not competitive with wage rates in the export-processing zones of Southeast Asia, foreign investors could in the future pressure the government to reduce wage rates to make them more competitive with wage structures in other export-processing zones (Prasad 1989*a*, 43). In this way the tax-free-zone legislation could result in a further deterioration of the working conditions of women garment workers.

Women garment workers in Fiji were already the lowest paid nonunionized workers, with appalling working conditions that included having to work extraordinarily long hours with the aid of stimulants or "uppers" supplied by the employers to relieve fatigue (*FT*, 1985). They earned only 50 percent of the pay of other workers in manufacturing industries (Narsey 1985*a*) and were not covered by a Wages Council Order.

Much attention had been directed to the plight of women garment workers in the precoup period. Demands for minimum wage regulation led to the setting up of a tribunal in 1986 that finally set the minimum wage at 57 cents per hour after the Fiji Manufacturers Association protested and threatened to close down following the initial award of 90 cents by the government.⁵ To date, even this minimum rate is still to be implemented, and the current political and economic climate makes it highly unlikely that it will be. Meanwhile, women garment workers continue to endure the status of being both nonunionized and the most exploited group in the formal sector.

Experience from Southeast Asian countries with repressive regimes has clearly demonstrated that the setting up of free trade zones in no way improves the standard of living or working conditions of women workers.

If anything, it results in a worsening of their working conditions, deterioration of their mental and physical health, and creation of new forms as well as intensification of traditional forms of gender subordination (Heyzer 1988; Elson and Pearson 1981). An example from Fiji of a new form of gender subordination experienced by women workers was the strip searches conducted by a male security officer under management's instructions that led to a work stoppage by women garment workers at one factory in January 1989 (*FT*, 1989*b*).

In the precoup period much concern was publicly expressed at the plight of garment workers, and some action was imminent, but in the postcoup period their plight has been relegated to the back burner. With increased demands on time and the constraints of operating under a repressive regime, both the unions and the women's movement are fully stretched. The unions are struggling to maintain the precoup conditions of unionized workers under an antilabor administration and seem to have little time to champion the cause of the unorganized women garment workers. Even in the precoup period, the male-dominated Fiji Trades Union Congress demonstrated little inclination toward either organizing or trying to improve the wages and working conditions of women garment workers.

To reiterate, the establishment of tax free zones not only shatters any hope of improvement in the wages and working conditions of women garment workers but further exacerbates and reinforces their exploitation as women workers.

Women and Poverty

The declining economy, together with the accompanying retrenchments and wage reductions, has catapulted large numbers of women into poverty. Coupled with redundancies and wage cuts have been huge increases in the price of food, medicines, and other necessities. It is estimated that up to the end of April 1988 food prices had risen by some 30 percent (Navuso 1989).

Women already constituted the bulk of the destitute population in Fiji, and with the collapse of the economy even more of them are being pushed closer or into destitution. The slightest reduction in the wages of low-paid women workers makes them easy candidates for poverty. Already many women had precarious economic positions, and the coups have exacerbated their problems.

Private welfare agencies such as Bayly Welfare and the government's Social Welfare Department are unable to cope with the increasing numbers of women seeking assistance. By early 1989 both Bayly Welfare and the Social Welfare Department were no longer taking new clients. Women and their families are being denied the government's destitute allowance and even the charity handouts of philanthropic organizations (Bain 1989, 29).

The Women's Crisis Centre in Suva, initially set up to deal with victims of domestic violence and rape, is increasingly dealing with problems of poverty and destitution. Women turning up on its doorstep have nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to for help. In some instances, husbands who have been retrenched are leaving their wives and families and abdicating their economic responsibilities. Some men have gone overseas with the promise of either cash remittances or future emigration for their families but have not been heard from since. The Women's Crisis Centre is approached for help either to locate husbands overseas or, through the various embassies in Suva, to prevent husbands leaving Fiji.

Even women still living with their husbands have the burden of stretching smaller family incomes further under the increasing pressure of rising costs. In some instances, families are no longer able to meet the costs of their children's education. It has been reported that many children are kept at home since parents can no longer afford school fees, bus fares, books, and similar charges (Bain 1989, 29).

Any gains women had made previously through increased participation in education are now severely threatened. Confronted with the harsh economic choice of educating either the male or the female child, the cultural choice is almost always in favor of the male.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT

The social implications of the coup for women in Fiji are numerous and varied. Perhaps the most serious and disconcerting is the marked increase in the incidence of rape and indecent assaults on women. It has been reported that in the first 4 months of 1988 the number of reported cases of rape (47) was equivalent to the total number for the previous year (Table 1). Similarly, the incidence of attempted rape increased by more than 150 percent in 1987, while indecent assault against women increased by 32 percent (Bain 1989, 30).

Table 1. Incidence of Reported Cases of Rape, Attempted Rape, and Indecent Assault, 1983-1988

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	To 30 April 1988
Rape	34	38	34	53	47	47
Attempted Rape	23	19	13	13	33	n.a.
Indecent Assault	73	59	44	47	62	n.a.

Source: Statistics supplied to the Fiji Women's Rights Movement by the Fiji Police Force.

Given the high incidence of nonreporting of such crimes, there is a high probability these figures are understated since they are reported cases only. In a society such as Fiji there would be a high percentage of unreported cases because of the "cultural constraints on going public" (Bain 1989, 30).

Besides the increase in rapes and indecent assaults, women's groups in Fiji claim an increasing incidence of domestic violence.⁶ Economic hardship, uncertainty, tension, and anxiety in the postcoup period have contributed to domestic tensions and the accompanying violence against women (Mitchell 1989, 77).

The streets were never particularly safe for women and in the postcoup period have become even less safe, resulting in greater spatial confinement of women. The articulation of ethnic politics that has created uncertainty, suspicion, and fear between races has led to families imposing more constraints on women's freedom of movement. Indo-Fijian families, fearing for the safety of their wives and daughters in a political climate that generates, and to some extent condones, ethnic violence and hatred, are being particularly cautious. The fear of ethnic Fijian males sexually attacking Indo-Fijian females has led to greater restrictions on these women.

For Indo-Fijian women, the cultural constraints of an ideology of purdah,⁷ the essential elements of which are the segregation of the sexes, the sexual protection of women, and the maintenance of family (male) honor (*izzat*), already restricted their social and spatial movements. The new threats and pressures of an ethnically hostile environment strengthened

and reinforced these cultural constraints. Any gains these women had made in acquiring greater freedoms as a consequence of their increased participation in education and paid employment are now threatened. For Indo-Fijian women the coups represent a retrogressive step in their struggle for greater freedom.

Yet another social implication for Indo-Fijian women is the greater pressure placed on them by their families to marry foreigners through the "mail-order" system as an avenue for migration. The desperate desire of many Indo-Fijians to migrate, exacerbated by the coups, has resulted in an escalation in the numbers of Indo-Fijian women registering for marriage to foreigners. A recent report suggested that the marriage agency in Suva now receives six or seven inquiries per day, compared with six or seven per week in the precoup period (*Age*, Feb 1989). Australian immigration officials in Suva claim that in the last six months of 1988 they processed some fifty applications per month for visas for spouses, and in February 1989 virtually all the seventy-five applications pending were for visas for spouses in arranged marriages (*Age*, Feb 1989).

In a study of Indo-Fijian women conducted prior to the coup, I found that the women themselves desired marriage to foreigners and were the major initiators of such marriages, although parental consent quickly followed once parents realized the potential for chain migration (Lateef, 1987*b*). In the postcoup period, it seems parents are giving more encouragement to and sometimes even becoming the major initiators of such marriages.

Marriages to foreigners through the "mail order" system are problematic in that they are inherently exploitive. Western males, armed with the spoils of Western industrial society, and in search of exotic, submissive wives, are able to entice poor Third World women to marry them. Understandably attracted by these bounties, the women frequently find that their new situations represent only marginal improvements. The potential problems associated with such marriages, and the future welfare of the women in an alien environment, are given little consideration by either the women themselves, their families, or the men they marry.⁸ That as a result of the coups more women are opting for such marriages as an escape from Fiji, or are being pressured into them for the benefit of their families, is a matter of grave concern.

For ethnic Fijian women, the social ramifications of the coups pose problems of a slightly different nature. Heightened nationalism and the

politics of ethnic supremacy that have led to a new insistence on Fijian traditionalism have in the long run weakened their position in their struggle for equality, although in the short term greater employment opportunities may be opened to some of them. By promoting a return to the traditional Fijian way of life the current administration, one assumes, is promoting a return to rule and control by chiefs and village elders—in other words, males. In turn, this implies an insistence on the traditional patriarchal family that promotes and sustains the asymmetrical relations between males and females in the domestic sphere.

The ideology of the “Pacific Way” so often used to justify and legitimize structured inequalities had already been adopted and extended in the pre-coup period to legitimize gender inequalities through the ideology of the “Pacific Woman.”⁹ Often, when women in Fiji struggled for or demanded greater opportunities and equality, the ideology of the Pacific woman was invoked to delay or deny them such opportunities. That ideology promotes and insists on the view that Pacific women are essentially different from Western women and therefore have no need for feminism, which is after all a foreign Western concept. In the postcoup period, the inherently reactionary ideology of the Pacific woman is potentially strengthened and intensified by the new insistence on traditionalism.

Similarly, the emergence, imposition of, and insistence on Christian fundamentalism have potentially adverse implications for women in Fiji (see Garrett in this issue), although it is obviously too early to be making categorical statements on their precise nature. What can be said is that the imposition of religious fundamentalism everywhere else in the world has been a retrogressive step for women’s movements and for women’s progress in general. The tendency of religious fundamentalism has been to reinforce and demand women’s return to their traditional roles as wives, nurturers, and caretakers of families; women are denied the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the public world of economics and politics (see, eg, Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987).

Other social implications for women relate to the decline in the systems of health care and education since the coups. The mass exodus of skilled personnel from Fiji has caused a chronic shortage of both teachers and doctors (Baba 1989; Mitchell 1989). It is estimated that one hundred doctors left Fiji during 1987 compared with sixty-seven in the previous five years (Mitchell 1989, 77). Immediately following the coups, no practicing gynecologists were left in Fiji. Other medical support staff and a large number of nurses also left, seriously impairing the delivery of health care.

A similar shortage in the number of teachers has adverse implications for women's access to high quality education. Approximately five hundred primary schoolteachers either left or retired after the coup, when normally only one hundred fifty leave each year for various reasons (Baba 1989, 13). In late January 1989, seven hundred teaching positions still had to be filled (*FT*, 1989a). The already disadvantaged rural students are worst hit, since the shortage of teachers is particularly acute in rural secondary schools. Some two hundred secondary schoolteachers left Fiji in 1987, and most of them were specialist teachers in science, mathematics, and commerce (Baba 1989, 13).

Women's increased participation in education and consequent access to employment and economic independence in the previous decade are threatened by the shortage of teachers and the associated decline of the education system. Without adequately trained, high quality teachers, both women's and men's education will suffer. For women, however, such a situation is more detrimental since education provides one of the few avenues through which they can achieve economic independence and equality. Without access to education women will find their progress seriously hampered.

THE IMPACT ON THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The women's movement suffered dramatically as a consequence of the two military coups. At the time of the first coup, the women's movement was at the height of its political activities and momentum and was spearheading important changes for the women of Fiji. The coups served to remove the proposed changes from the political agenda and to severely disrupt the momentum of the movement. Essentially, women's issues were relegated to virtual oblivion in the face of more pressing issues confronting Fiji in the immediate postcoup period.

Before discussing in detail the ramifications of the coups, I shall highlight some of the activities of the women's movement immediately prior to the coups so that the extent of the impact may be gauged. Some twelve months prior to the May 1987 coup, women's politics saw the emergence of an organization called the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM). Its aims were to lobby government for legislative change, mainly in the areas of family and rape laws, citizenship laws, and employment legislation; to address questions of women's inequality in both the workplace and the home; and to campaign against violence in the family and the community.

One of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement's first major activities was a submission to the Garment Industry Tribunal set up by the government with Fiji Trades Union Congress support to reexamine the demand for a minimum wage for garment workers after the manufacturers association protested and threatened closure at the initial award of 70 cents to 90 cents per hour set by a Wages Council Order. In their submission, the movement detailed the plight of nonunionized women garment workers and demanded minimum wages and improved working conditions for them. Another activity was a petition against rape, when they obtained five thousand signatures protesting the leniency of the courts toward those convicted of rape as well as the harsh and unfair treatment of female victims. The petition was delivered to the attorney general following a movement-organized demonstration and march through the streets of Suva in February 1987.

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement also undertook fund-raising activities for the Women's Crisis Centre that had been set up a few years earlier, since it received no government funding and the Fiji government had failed to secure any bilateral aid funding for it. Despite an offer from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) of approximately F\$90,000 through the bilateral aid program, the Fiji government refused to prioritize the Women's Crisis Centre, thus making it ineligible for the funds.

Although this was not one of the movement's activities, some members of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, with some help from the Fiji Labour Party, attempted to organize domestic workers. A Domestic Workers' Association was formed in order to struggle for and secure a minimum wage, membership in the Fiji National Provident Fund, and better working conditions.

Immediately prior to the 1987 general election, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement administered questionnaires to all candidates regarding their attitudes to and policies on women's issues. Through this and other activities around election time, the movement, for the first time in Fiji, successfully placed women's concerns on the political agenda. Both political parties were forced to formulate concrete policies directly relevant to women and to seriously address the problem of women's inequality.

In response to the women's movement, the Fiji Labour Party promised a Department of Women's Affairs, an anti-sex discrimination bill, equal pay legislation, minimum wage regulation for domestic and garment workers, and guaranteed funding for the Women's Crisis Centre. But

Labour's reign was short-lived and the promises were never put to the test.

So, what are the implications of the coups for the women's movement? For the first time, Fiji has a minister of women's affairs, although she also holds the portfolio for social welfare. To date her achievements for the advancement of women have been to declare publicly that she will not push the cause of women at the expense of the national interest—as if the two are mutually exclusive; to recruit women into the officer corps of the Royal Fiji Military Forces when a number of women have repeatedly protested against the increased militarization of Fiji and successfully organized peace marches (Bain 1989, 32); to silently accept the introduction of the tax free zone legislation that is so potentially detrimental to the interests of women workers; to deny women the meager destitute allowance; and to fail to attend the opening of the International Women's Day activities in 1988 to which she had been invited.

The Women's Crisis Centre has still not secured any government or bilateral aid funding even though, since the coups, more women than ever are seeking its assistance. There are no signs of bills to prohibit sex discrimination or provide equal pay and both seem unlikely in light of the current economic and political climate.

In the immediate postcoup period, the momentum of the women's movement was severely disrupted. Postcoup shock and restrictions on political activities imposed by the military regime led to a slowing of activities, declining active membership, and general disillusionment. Hopes for a brighter future for women were shattered and replaced by disappointment, frustration, and dejection.

With the articulation and reinforcement of ethnic politics in the postcoup period, the women's movement suffered a major setback, particularly in its attempts to mobilize and unite women on the basis of gender irrespective of race. The coups and the attempts to incite ethnic polarization have important implications and ramifications for women, particularly in terms of the mobilization and actions they mount as women. Essentially, despite their common gender, ethnic Fijian and ethnic Indian women are divided, or at least have the potential to be divided, on the basis of ethnicity.

Some reports have suggested that ethnic Fijian women in some women's organizations are being asked to spy and report on other women's activities, contacts, attitudes, and friends. In one instance, the women who were approached were strong enough to resist and had stronger loyalties to their "sisters" than to the regime, even though kinship networks were

used. The capacity of women's organizations to mobilize women as a gender becomes greatly reduced in the current political climate of Fiji insofar as such a climate promotes ethnic division and generates fear, suspicion, mistrust, and uncertainty between ethnic groups rather than promoting their unity as women.

Since the engineers of the coup aim to achieve political dominance, economic advancement, and general improvement in the standards of living for indigenous Fijians, will they single out indigenous Fijian women for progress along with their male counterparts? Or, is the term *indigenous Fijians* a synonym for *indigenous Fijian males*? If, under affirmative action policies, ethnic Fijian women make greater gains than all other women and are given different incentives, the result may be permanent divisions among women that could well lead to the weakening of women's organizations such as the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. More important, there are adverse implications for women's solidarity as women and for their capacity to work for women's equality.

Another ramification of the coups for the women's movement has been the virtual collapse of the educational awareness campaign that was conducted prior to the coup, particularly in relation to rape. The movement's concerted campaign for tougher penalties for rape had met with some success prior to the coup. They had convinced the judiciary of the seriousness of rape as a crime; tougher sentences were being imposed—five years instead of suspended sentences, public statements by magistrates and judges regarding the seriousness of the crime, and women's prior sexual behavior no longer perceived as a mitigating factor in sentencing. This educational awareness campaign was all but forgotten in the new political climate.

During the early months of 1988, in the instance of two cases of rape that came to court, suspended sentences were again handed down. In July 1988, a newly recruited expatriate judge outraged women and prompted them to action when in an appeal judgment he increased the initial eighteen-month sentence by a mere six months, for a man convicted of brutal rape and rape with a foreign object. The women were outraged not only at the lenient sentence but also at the judge's comment that the rape was understandable since the accused's wife was living away from him! The judge apparently could not comprehend the additional charge of rape with a foreign object (*FT*, 1988a).

The educational awareness campaign had to begin all over again. Dur-

ing a period when so much else needed to be done, having to constantly cover the same ground represents wasted energy, time, and resources—all of which are in short supply in postcoup Fiji.

So much energy now has to be diverted to struggling against increased militarization, violations of human rights, racial discrimination, and a repressive regime. Where previously their energy might have gone to organizing women domestic workers and garment workers or struggling for equal pay legislation, women's movement leaders must now divert their efforts. Issues relating specifically to women take second place.

Considering the large numbers of people who have migrated since the coups, especially skilled people, the problem is further compounded. The Fiji Women's Rights Movement needs the active support of as many women as possible, yet is now confronted with reduced numbers and a declining number of active members—in short, fewer women to undertake the additional workload.

However, in the postcoup period, despite the initial lost momentum and setbacks, women have continued to work courageously for their rights and have mounted numerous struggles against the regime, the violation of human rights, and related problems. These actions have led to women being arrested, prosecuted, harassed, threatened, followed, and refused permission to leave the country. In 1988, seven women were arrested for demonstrating, to borrow 'Atu Bain's words, at "Rabuka's Hollywood debut"—the premier of his movie "Rabuka—No Other Way" (1989, 32). On the first anniversary of the coup, 14 May, nine women who were amongst those "participating in a peaceful anniversary lament" were arrested and prosecuted for "unlawful assembly" (Bain 1989, 32-33). Even as recently as December 1988, one of the women arrested on 14 May was detained at the airport and denied exit (*FT*, 1988c).

Despite the harassment, setbacks, and arrests, the women continue to struggle. The Fiji Women's Rights Movement recently launched a new antiviolence campaign and is showing signs of reviving its lost momentum and coming back with a vengeance.

CONCLUSION

The two military coups in Fiji have resulted in the deterioration of women's economic, political, and social status as well as threatening their potential to achieve equality with men. The hard-won gains women had

achieved in the previous decade have been eroded or threatened in the current economic and political climate, as has women's future capacity to mount struggles on the basis of gender.

The declining Fiji economy, the articulation of ethnic politics, and a repressive political environment have all contributed to a worsening of women's position. Some of the adverse ramifications are currently being experienced by women, while others have detrimental implications for their future development and progress. Whatever happens in the future, the coups have been a retrogressive step for most women of Fiji and their struggle for equality.

MUCH GRATITUDE is owed to *'Atu Bain*. Many of the ideas in this paper were generated in the course of numerous conversations with her on this subject.

Notes

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1 The Fiji Employment and Development Mission report (FEDM 1984) explicitly viewed women as problematic for the wage labor market and questioned whether "the net social and economic effects of the greater involvement of women in the labour market would be 'positive' " (Narsey 1985*b*, 16).

2 Between 1966 and 1976, women's participation in paid employment increased markedly by 214 percent (Agar et al 1984, 24). According to FEDM (1984), women secured some 48 percent of all new jobs created between 1975 and 1980.

3 See Lateef 1987*b* for an elaboration of the structural constraints on Indo-Fijian women's access to and participation in paid employment.

4 Even the rather conservative FEDM report acknowledged the low or below subsistence rates of pay in this industry, although it argued that a minimum wage was not the solution (FEDM 1984, 157).

5 For further information, see Slatter 1987.

6 Discussions with the Women's Crisis Centre revealed an increase in the number of victims of domestic violence seeking assistance following the coups.

7 *Purdah* literally means "curtain" although in common usage it refers to the various modes of secluding women—either by confining them to an enclosed space or by veiling them—the strict segregation of the sexes, the "symbolic sheltering" of women, and a moral code of conduct. The ideology of *purdah* and the

concrete manifestations of purdah practices contribute significantly to the construction, experience, and reproduction of gender identity and Indo-Fijian women's subordination.

The ideology of purdah can be viewed as the major organizing principle for the controls on women's sexuality, spatial movements, social interactions, behavior, demeanor, and the sexual division of labor. The need for the strict segregation of the sexes and the numerous constraints on women are justified around the twin concerns of women's sexual vulnerability and the maintenance of family honor. Essentially, the ideology of purdah is an important mechanism by which males maintain, legitimate, and reproduce their powerful and privileged position (See Lateef 1989.)

8 For more details see Lateef 1987b.

9 Although the "ideology of the Pacific woman" is referred to and her "special" needs discussed at women's conferences in Fiji and elsewhere in the Pacific, little has yet been written about her.

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