

Negotiating sisterhood in the Pacific region; the encouraging impact of diverse regional feminist alliances in the age of Beijing Declaration inertia

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Introduction

In 1995 at the 4th World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action¹ was negotiated. This set out 12 Critical Areas for attainment of women's rights and firmly stated that Women's Rights are Human Rights. This has formed an important set of objectives and UN Member states report against their progress each year at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York at the UN. Every 5 years there is a review of progress.

In 2015 I attended the Beijing +20 Review at CSW in New York as a civil society delegate. We stood on the steps with our mouths taped shut as the Political Declaration was passed without civil society participation or debate and marched with placards reading “ *Feminist are here and we will be heard*’.

In 2020 at the Beijing +25 Review, we saw the postponement of the CSW due to COVID, but once again excluding civil society voices as parallel sessions were cancelled and the Political Declaration once again passed in a forum, which was reduced to one day, without debate. The postponed version announced as a high-level forum as part of the UN General Assembly². Only 1 selected representative from civil society and 1 young woman leader were invited to take part³. Watching via webcast limited ability to influence, have a voice, or react. The alternative Feminist Declaration drafted by feminist civil society uniting in coalition across the world through the Women's Rights Caucus in protest was circulated to amplify their disquiet (McEvoy & Patel).

With shortfalls in the formal institutional Beijing Declaration Reviews and implementation and fears a 5th World Conference on Women cannot be held due to risks of unravelling the rights

¹ Beijing Platform for Action <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/declar.htm> accessed 18/9/20

² Gender and Development Network - Beijing + 25 - <https://gadnetwork.org/beijing25> accessed 23/10/20

³ Arrangements for the high-level meetings and the general debate of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly United Nations Headquarters, 21 September to 2 October 2020 Information note for delegations - <https://undocs.org/en/A/INF/75/4> accessed 18/9/2020

reached in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, then what are we to do? Are we as feminist activists and academics ever to make any impact? How can we make any progress? Where can we find examples of mobilising grassroots, building strong women leaders, giving voice to those whose perspectives are underrepresented and marginalised including women with disabilities and LGTBT, and creating space for civil society dialogue?

The problem

We seem stuck in inertia and backsliding. We never seem closer to reaching the goals. In recent years spaces for feminist civil society to air these concerns have been shrinking at the global level (UNECE 2020, Listo 2019) and facing hostility and backlash⁴. As Khosla et al summed up ‘the realisation of the commitments made in Beijing has been ad hoc at best, with continued and increasingly fundamental gaps to the realisation of girls and women’s rights and gender equality around the world.’ The UN has acknowledged in a press release dated September 2020 that ‘the anniversary and the lack of progress is a ‘wake-up call’ and a source of mobilisation and civil society activism⁵. The 2020 report of the UN Secretary-General on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, with inputs from 173 countries, flagged that commitments have not been matched by action, investments or accountability and that an approach of addressing symptoms rather than causes has led to a state of perpetual crisis⁶.

The UN in arranging the CSO Beijing +25 Regional Forum⁷ noted the objectives of creating a space, facilitating dialogue, strengthening cross movement solidarity between diverse constituencies and strategising together on what want to advance regionally and globally. Civil society responding to the regional civil society Review for Beijing +25 found gaps in the

⁴ How Holy See Took on the Feminist Agenda

https://www.ad2000.com.au/beijing_un_conference_on_women_how_holy_see_took_on_the_feminist_agenda_december_1995.html accessed 18/09/20

⁵ UN Women - On the 25th anniversary of landmark Beijing Declaration on women’s rights, UN Women calls for accelerating its unfinished business <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/press-release-25th-anniversary-of-the-beijing-declaration-on-womens-rights> accessed 18/9/2020

⁶ Press release: At UN high-level meeting, world leaders reignite the vision of the Beijing Platform for Action, the most transformative agenda for advancing gender equality

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/10/press-release-leaders-reignite-the-vision-of-the-beijing-platform-for-action> accessed 20/10/20

⁷ UN Women Call to Engage in the Asia-Pacific Beijing+25 Regional CSO Forum

<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/events/2019/11/beijing-25-regional-cso-forum>

implementation of the Declaration. For example, regional civil society reports demanded greater participation and inclusion for women with disabilities (Canada); and increased support for most marginalised groups of women (Africa Civil Society Organisations Forum). UNECE identified rise of anti-women's groups and shrinking space for civil society as the most critical issues (Europe). There were calls for more intersectional and disaggregated data (Australia). Violation of women's rights continues to be grave concern as reported by Benin . Concern was expressed for the gap between commitments towards gender equality and its implementation. Severe infringements on freedom and safety stemming from negative social norms and gender stereotypes was flagged (Georgia, Venezuela). The specific needs and rights of LBT women as a vulnerable group are still underrepresented (Canada, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Korea). Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights continue to lag (Senegal). Others saw as crucial empowering and mobilising grassroots movements for transformative change and building strong women leaders (Israel).

In an atmosphere of feeling like feminists are merely 'holding the line' on the Beijing Declaration (Sharland 2020, Listo 2019), and a sense that feminist advocacy is not having an impact, and not being any closer to the goals powerfully set out in 1995, this paper focuses on several initiatives to have feminist civil society voices heard.

What or who are the Pacific Feminist Forum and We Rise Coalition?

Fed up with shrinking spaces and lack of progress at a national, regional and global level, Pacific feminist civil society actors are building alliances across difference, to amplify their voices regionally and globally. In this paper, in order to provide some provocations as to the way forward, I identify the impact these initiatives have in the region, building and strengthening inclusive regional alliances in response to the problem of shrinking civil society spaces at the global level. The paper particularly focuses on two recent initiatives in the Pacific: the *Pacific Feminist Forum* and the *We Rise Coalition*. Both initiatives seek to provide spaces to hear new voices and amplify them at the regional level; the former in the form of a structured forum, and the latter as a broader coordinating organisation, providing leadership.

These alternative initiatives will interest others who throw their hands up in despair. Impact is being demonstrated, right now, rather than awaiting another 5-year review milestone to come and once again deliver only disappointment. This is in line with the call for new approaches:

We agree with those who highlight the real threat of losing ground on women's rights. But let us think beyond the usual approach to these global inter-governmental meetings. The time has come to try a different format. We do not have a blueprint to hand, but there are options worth exploring (Goetz and Sandler 2015).

To understand some of these different formats and initiatives beyond the usual approach referred to in this quote, I drew on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the Pacific feminist civil society actors, and the key representatives of Pacific regional institutions.

Pacific Feminist Forum

The first case study, the Inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum was held at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji in November 2016 over three days. It brought together feminists, activists and women human rights defenders from around the Pacific to strategise, build networks and negotiate a Charter of Feminist Principles from which a coordinated platform of advocacy could arise.

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 (PFF Program). This was underpinned by the idea of 'transformative feminist change' facilitated by diverse women's organisations, with a forum established to identify common issues of concern and a collective way forward in addressing those issues (Pacific Feminist Forum Program, 2016). 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 and 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. A second Pacific Feminist Forum was held in 2019.

We Rise Coalition

The second case study, the We Rise Coalition, is made up of the following:

- i. Diverse Voices in Action (DIVA) for Equality is a lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's (LBT) collective, based in Fiji;

- ii. FemLink Pacific - a women's community media organisation with focus on women, peace, security, based in Fiji but with a regional focus;
- iii. Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) - a women's rights organisation, based in Fiji; and
- iv. International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) - a women's rights organisation working with partners in Asia and the Pacific, based in Melbourne, Australia.

These four partners serving different constituencies use a commitment to intersectionality to connect the struggles and to create a strong partnership. As its MOU states, 'Sustainable change can only be achieved by mobilising the collective power of women to lead and act towards a shared vision. Building movements of women, with a strong consciousness of the roots of inequality, social and gender power structures, are needed to achieve a wider, deeper and more sustainable transformation' (We Rise Coalition, 2016).

The impact are they both having can potentially offer a lift to other civil society mobilisation in an age of frustration at 25 years of Beijing Declaration inertia.

Understanding 'impact'; its use in social movement literature

A criticism made of the Beijing +25 Review was that 'we still have work to do to translate Beijing's commitments into widespread systematic, structural and transformative change (Khosla et al 2020). In what follows I will provide a short overview of the literature on impact and where literature has focussed on impact as a result of social movement mobilisation. Scholars approach the question of impact and how to assess it differently. This ranges from a focus on policy impact to a pathway that seeks to broaden out the concept and the way it is measured.

Scholars with a direct focus on the Pacific civil society, such as Nicole George (George, 2010) define impact in terms of successful resistance to women's cultural and political status. She emphasises the ways Pacific women situate themselves in relation to international feminisms. In her study on how feminism and maternity are articulated in the Pacific, and the challenges to women's role and place in society, one aspect of impact is successfully setting up a Pacific-specific feminism, that is a contextual relevant feminism. Similarly, writing about regionalism and Pacific island political solidarity, Slatter and Underhill-Sem suggest regional solidarity of social movements in the region have 'exerted pressure on independent Pacific island governments to support their various struggles in defence of Pacific interests'. They also note

impact in the areas of effectiveness of organising Pacific Island states to collectively resist powerful outside interests that pose threats to Pacific island interests (Slatter and Underhill-Sem, 2009). Mcleod notes that in the Pacific, where formal institutions are weak and the state has limited legitimacy, civil society organisations provide women with real opportunities to influence the delivery of services and advocate for government attention to issues of concern to them. (Mcleod, 2015, p 16).

In social movements studies beyond the Pacific, scholars have been searching for a variety of ways to grapple with the understanding of social movement impact from a focus on responsiveness, to political opportunities, to policy, structural, or cultural impact. For example, Naples and Desai argue that impact occurs when social movements move beyond narrow solidarities and particular affinities (Naples and Desai, 2002). Weldon saw social movements as the best possible avenue for women to make policy change (Weldon, 2011). She argues this is due to their directly addressing the structural nature of political marginalisation (p 28). Notwithstanding this, Hopewell looks at persistent barriers to civil society impact. She argues that civil society actors seeking to impact decision-making within a global governance institution are forced to negotiate and respond to the opportunities and constraints that arise from the configuration of the field in which that institution is embedded, its power relations, institutional dynamics, and dominant ideology and modes of operating. She notes that for advocacy organisations, access to policymakers and the potential to influence global governance are tied to their ability to marshal the types of capital, or power resources, valued in these fields. This creates considerable pressure on global civil society to adapt (Hopewell, 2015). Alvarez argued Latin American feminist NGOs ‘played a critical role in advocating feminism by advancing a progressive policy agenda while simultaneously articulating vital linkages among larger women’s movement and civil society constituencies’. However, the paper also noted developments potentially undermining NGOs’ ability to promote feminist-inspired policies and social change (Alvarez 1999).

Schumaker (Schumaker, 1975) defines social movement outcomes in terms of the responsiveness of the political system, and distinguishes five criteria of responsiveness: access, agenda, policy, output, and impact responsiveness. Kitschelt describes the importance of opportunities to articulate new demands finding their way into processes of firming policy compromises and consensus. He emphasises the importance of openness and procedures to aggregate demands and build effective policy coalitions (Kitschelt, 1986 (p63)). Related to

this sense of grasping opportunities as they open, Giugni argues that protest can produce political changes (or impact) in three ways: by altering the power relations between challengers and authorities; by forcing policy change; and by provoking broader and usually more durable systemic changes, both on the structural and cultural levels. (Giugni et al., 1999 p 13) .

What this highlights is the importance of capturing the diverse aspects of impact, a process which is far from straightforward. One of the key challenges here has been identified as the difficulty of empirically studying the consequences of social movements (Giugni et al., 1999). In their study of how social movements matter they looked at success, failure meanings, disruption, causality and the direction of change, they particularly looked at the US civil rights movement's March on Washington. Part of the difficulty pointed out is actually working out what does the notion of success mean when it comes to collective action. They noted scholars have mostly been interested in relating observed changes to movement demands. Whether social movements succeed or fail with respect to their stated goals is certainly a legitimate way to approach the subject matter but has the problem that success is often not assessed in a single manner by everyone. Movement participants and external observers may have different perceptions of the success of a given action. Moreover, the same action may be perceived as successful by some participants but judged as a failure by others.

More broadly, Giugni et al pointed out the difficulty of empirically studying certain types of effects of social movements, which has led scholars to focus on policy outcomes as the most clear manifestation of impact. They noted that 'in effect, policy changes are easier to measure than changes in social and cultural arenas. Therefore, much research has focused on the policy impact of movements by relating their action to changes in legislation or in some other indicator of policy change'(Giugni et al., 1999).

Beyond policy impact, beyond Beijing Review sessions

Going beyond understanding impact as limited to achieving policy change captures more of the feminist civil society mobilisation's impact in areas beyond policy alone to capture structural and procedural. impacts In this vein, I sought to access a framework through which to structure my findings. Critically, premised on the broader notions of impact, I set out to extend the commonly used conceptualisations of the sites where impact occurs, focusing particularly on ways of understanding social movement impacts beyond policy change in the area they contest.

One particularly useful, broader understanding of impact is suggested by Kitschelt. In his work he stressed three spheres of impact - procedural, substantial, and structural when writing about the impacts of social movements (Kitschelt, 1986). His comparative work across countries on mobilisation impact, albeit in relation to nuclear protests and not focussed on the Pacific, provides a promising framework. Here I am using his framework as way of structuring the impact of Pacific feminist alliances at regional and global levels. Kitschelt is beneficial to developing our understanding of the breadth of areas of impact of feminist civil society due to his drawing important distinctions between the gains of movements in the various modes. We have much to gain from a broader perspective that focuses on the processes through which outcomes are produced. My findings support the argument that impacts can go beyond policy, and fall into multiple areas. In the next section, I identify supporting evidence of impact in Pacific feminist civil society alliance initiatives for each of these three modes, prompting us to look through multiple lenses.

(i) Procedural Impact

The first type of impact is procedural. Procedural impact comes from having set up a system or framework by which to draw together diverse voices. Procedural impact is demonstrated by having procedures in place for influencing government stakeholders at CSW. It successfully had agreed language from the 2017 Triennial meeting of Pacific Women to be included in Pacific states input to global forums, and saw greater engagement with Pacific duty bearers (i.e. those making the decisions) attending the UN CSW meeting as to how they could input, enabling greater coordination and ability to influence CSW outcomes (Keren Winterford and Ana Laqeretabua, 2019). This procedure included a series of statements from the actors involved in the feminist alliance built in the Pacific. These included:

‘Keeping the Beijing Platform for Action alive for women in the Pacific region and ensuring accountability to women’s human rights is the mission of the group of four diverse and dynamic feminist organisations working together at the We Rise Coalition. (Sharon Bhagwan Rolls, We Rise Coalition partner; 61st session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61) New York, 2017).

These are significant because this is evidence of not only of a determined procedure to get their demands out widely and to make a statement at the CSW and use the procedures of that

forum to have impact, it is also a commitment to transparency and communicating to all Pacific feminist civil society beyond those in attendance.

(ii) Substantive Impact

The second type of impact is substantive impact, which refers to demonstrated impact such as language/text adoption or amendment. Firstly, at the regional level a clear manifestation of substantial impact is when Pacific feminists language suggestions and recommendations are taken up in formal institutional settings. As an example, the Triennial meeting of Pacific Women and Pacific Women's Ministers' Outcome statement of 2017 directly reflected the recommendations of the Pacific feminists. These were taken from the Pacific Feminist Charter (Pacific Feminist Forum Charter, 2016). Substantive impact comes through the changes being adopted. The Annual Report of one of the We Rise partners commented on the substantive policy impact:

This proved to be highly effective as 14 proposed changes being adopted in the final outcomes document during the negotiations. Overall, FWRM's involved in the 13th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and 6th Meeting of Pacific Ministers for Women contributed significantly in both broadening its policy reform mandate as well as intergenerational leadership and movement building at a regional level (FWRM 2018a).

This demonstrates that substantive impact can be both through policy impact and movement building. The preparation had been done in advance by the We Rise to connect to their pre-existing networks and alliances and use the Charter of Feminist Principles for Pacific Feminists they had adopted by consensus at the Pacific Feminist Forum in 2016 (Charter 2016). This meant a quick agreement to recommendations using the Charter as its basis granted a seat at the decision-making table at the 2017 Triennial (interview #38 & #41 2017). Substantive impact has been demonstrated through influencing the text of outcomes documents and take up of written proposals:

FWRM as part of the We Rise Coalition in collaboration with Pacific CSO representatives was successful in influencing PSIDS (Pacific Small Island Developing States) duty bearers to include feminist gender sensitive measures within the outcomes document (FWRM, 2018a).

This demonstrates the impact they had on influencing the agenda as language on the diversity of women as including sexual diversity was discussed. This led to wording on lesbian rights as women's rights 'being included in the outcome statement for the first time', a result of Pacific feminist lobbying and preparation by the We Rise Coalition. (interview # 38 & #41, 2017). However, those present noted they were unsuccessful in the inclusion of transgender people as they were 'blocked by opposition' (interview #38 and #41, 2017).

Secondly, a global illustration is the engagement of We Rise Coalition with global formal institutions and the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as an example of sustained efforts. Nailini Singh from FWRM suggested, making statements at CSW kept governments in the Pacific accountable:

We want to hold our governments accountable to the highest standards in terms of promoting women's rights so that the local lived realities of women are put at centre stage in front of our decision makers to ensure...there is no roll back (Loop, 2017).

Increasing visibility and joining together strategies are required rather than an ad hoc business as usual approach in order to achieve change by coalitions. It is important to acknowledge that impact can be incremental and needs to look beyond immediate policy impact.

The global influence of the Pacific feminists uses this model, that is when they cannot make headway at a national level they attend the CSW and make statements and interact with other member states in order to influence the outcome statement. This places pressure on their own countries as the countries must report annually at the UN about their gender equality progress against the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action (UN Women).

Pacific feminist civil society actors from the PFF and the Coalition are sharing its lessons with other Small Island States globally, for example the Caribbean. (UN Women, 2019). They are sharing lessons on advocating for climate justice at global forums (FWRM, 2018a) (Network, 2019) mobilising on the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and Beijing Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goals, as part of the Asia Pacific Caucus (Beijing +25).(Sian Rolls, 2019).

(iii) Structural Impact

Finally, the third type of impact is structural impact. It refers to influencing who has access, who is part of the arrangement. This is seen mainly in getting a seat at the decision-making table when previously there was no space, or overcoming other structural barriers. Active

presence and coordination of Pacific feminists resulted in a major breakthrough for CSO women at the Triennial meeting of Pacific Women and Women's Ministers in 2017. The structure of the delegation was amended when Vanuatu approved two representatives of CSOs to sit at the negotiating table with country heads of delegation (Ashna Kumar Lami, 2017). The FWRM Annual Report indicated the importance of this collaborative space as *important for holding informal meetings and dialogues that helped to strengthen relationships amongst the CSO and women's human rights groups from the Pacific region (FWRM, 2018a)*. It noted the regional impact the coalition was having in formal spaces also. This is a development from years of lobbying by Pacific feminists to have greater impact on regional dialogue. Until this change, Pacific invited spaces for diverse feminist civil society were very limited, and until recently interviews confirmed that there were few signs of any real governmental interest in encouraging input from civil society organisations (interview # 17 2016). Nevertheless, Pacific women use groups formed outside official structures as the case studies reveal to similarly enter and influence (interview #23 and #33, 2016).

There is evidence of structural impact at the global level too. To maximise its activities building intersectional solidarity and a coordinated voice, Pacific feminist civil society pushed for a structural change to better use any emerging spaces globally to insert a Pacific feminist perspective. Advocacy to disaggregate Pacific from Asia Pacific as a regional grouping at the UN resulted in the announcement of the Pacific Small Island Developing States Organising Partner added to the Women's Major Group (WMG)(UN, undated).

Conclusion

The impetus for my getting involved in this research was from witnessing first-hand the barriers to impact at the global level at the Beijing +20 Review and I see no change this year at Beijing +25 Review. Before we lose hope at the sense of standing still, feminist Pacific regional alliances are demonstrating impact, broadly defined, at regional and global levels.

Continued marginalisation has led scholars to allege 'small-scale changes with policies or projects futile in the absence of more fundamental institutional change' (Goetz, 1997, p 248). My aim in this paper was to counter any assertions of futility and rebut presumptions that these small instances of alliances have no impact. I conclude that despite being small these initiatives are important sites of feminist innovation on alliance building with considerable impact, when one takes a broad view of where impact is occurring.

Despite a persistent sense that feminist civil society is merely ‘holding the line’ of Beijing and turning up every 5 years for a Beijing Review underscores the lack of progress, the formation and strengthening of diverse regional civil society blocs amplifies a feminist progressive voice regionally and globally, and serves as potential models for others. Frustration at Beijing Declaration implementation’s slow progress globally and regionally can provide impetus to coordinate and amplify voices for change. Mobilisation not only may result in impact through strengthening of internal solidarity and identities and shifting attitudes; but a growing recognition of the Pacific-specific regional progressive voice at a regional and global level as an organised, coordinated, representative, strong voice for gender equality.

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