

Advancing Pacific Regional Feminism through New Spaces for Talk & Action

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Abstract

This paper responds to the problem of shrinking spaces for feminist civil society in global decision-making and seeks to conceptualise the role of regional feminist civil society in advancing gender equality, with both regional and global impact, through stronger alliances. Pacific civil society organisations are encouraging feminist activism and participation in the areas of leadership, decision making, and recognition of feminist diversity. My fieldwork has been conducting participant observation and interviews with feminist civil society organisations that are fostering participation in women's rights activism across diverse groups of women in the Pacific and new empirical findings are summarised in the paper. My paper argues that progress on women's rights is an essential part of any discussion on a 'Pacific Century' and new initiatives such as the Pacific Feminist Forum are making inroads in generating informal spaces with a view to progressing gender equality at the regional level. These early findings have implications for feminist civil society mobilisation in the Pacific and beyond and for scholars of social movements and regionalism.

Introduction

My paper will argue that progress on women's rights is an essential part of any discussion on a 'Pacific Century'. It will outline the current situation for women's rights in the Pacific. It will then give attention to the latest developments to build alliances for progress on women's rights by feminists and the women's movement in the Pacific and argue that informal spaces for change are an important area for mobilisation, advocacy, and amplifying the local and regional voices of women to engage powerfully in global and regional discussions.

This paper responds to the problem of shrinking civil society spaces for feminist civil society in global decision-making. I propose that a focus on *regional alliances* of feminist civil society is a much neglected space for generating shared vision for action on gender equality. The establishment of strong alliances at this intermediate level may afford an increase in influence through greater numbers and greater reach.

I seek to conceptualise the role of *regional* feminist civil society in advancing gender equality, with both regional and global impact, through stronger alliances. In doing so, I explore the potential of the Pacific regional feminist civil society organisations in creating spaces of dialogue and change through a close analysis of their present new and often innovative activities.

What is the current situation for women in the Pacific?

The Pacific region's statistics paint a poor picture when it comes to gender equality. It has the lowest representation of women in parliament in any region in the world (Baker 2014). For example, in Tonga, no women were elected in the 2014 general election, despite a record number of women standing as candidates (Baker 2015). In Vanuatu, no women running in the 2016 national election were elected to Parliament (Walsh 2016). Violence against women statistics are amongst the highest in the world, with intimate partner violence reported as 60% for Kiribati, 66% in Fiji and 68% in Vanuatu (UN, 2015). It is a region where women have been culturally, traditionally and politically marginalised (Siwatibau *et al* 2005). If we heed the call of the conference for a 'Pacific Century', which ought to suggest an increased focus and resources, considerable improvements can be made for women in both formal *and* informal spaces.

With much of the focus on women's participation in the Pacific limited to the formal spaces, that is representation in parliament, Haley and Zubrinich identified that new ways of engaging and new modalities for support are needed, beyond existing initiatives focussed on political representation alone (Haley & Zubrinich, 2016, p. 2). They argue that it is important not just as a 'proving ground for women leaders' (Haley & Zubrinich, 2016, p. 2) but also as recognition of 'women's leadership and political participation broadly defined' in the informal sphere. (Haley & Zubrinich, 2016, p. 1). My empirical work focuses on the role of inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum in this context. This initiative in Fiji in November 2016 was designed with the intention to build the regional movement of Pacific feminists.

Before we move forward, there are two definitional clarifications to be made. First definitional clarification; many of the papers at this conference are focussed on *security* in this region and if we take the broadest view of security, the real and present security dangers in this region are the appalling rates of violence against women (García-Moreno et al., 2013; Taylor, 2016) and climate change (Aipira, Kidd, & Morioka, 2017) which can be, and are being, used to mobilise women in larger numbers to shine the light on gender justice and mobilising women to form alliances and

amplify their voices for change¹. Second definitional clarification; I argue that if we are talking about a 'Pacific Century', then renewed focus must turn its attention to the *whole* of this region. Too often, and even evidenced in this conference program, when we talk of the Pacific we are focussed on the Northern Pacific Rim. I want to take this opportunity to reflect on the lessons that can be taken from participatory innovation for women's rights promotion and protection in the South and Central Small Island States of the Pacific which receive less attention.

This interest in the establishment of a new space for feminist voices is set in a context of shrinking civil society spaces (TNI, 2017), something I experienced first-hand at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2015. In recent years, civil society face increasingly more exclusion at the *global* level and spaces for their collective action and voice are being curtailed (AWID, 2015; Cordaid, 2013; FIDH; Silliman, 1999). The Global South Solidarity Network recently acknowledged the need to address the shrinking democratic and political space for Global South feminist and women's organisations in institutions and forums to make their voices heard and promote women's leadership (IWRAW, 2016). This global background led to my decision to investigate the regional level.

Global to regional

The shrinking of civil society spaces at the global level has to date led to a retreat immediately to the identification of the appropriate space for activist activity at the local, grassroots level (Basu, 2000; Naples & Desai, 2004; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 2013) without paying sufficient attention, I argue to the potential of *regional* feminist civil society in advancing gender equality. This paper proposes shifting the focus from the global or local level to the *regional* level. To date discussions on Pacific regionalism more generally (Tarte, 2014) have been largely limited to formal institutions, made no reference to women, and informal attempts at Pacific regional networks have been largely ignored (George, 2011).

George (George, 2011, p. 4) pushes for further work to be done in providing counter narratives to dominant trends in regionalism research to include women's informal networking and my research responds to this call. She also suggests parameters of inclusion are altered at historical junctures (George, 2011, p. 5). Similarly, Haley and Zubrinich argue the right timing is what is needed, 'making the most of the political moment when the stars align'. (Haley & Zubrinich, 2016, p. 1) and one of these junctures that can be seized is the renewed energy and focus on the Pacific region's women through the *Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program*. This program has \$320 million over 10 years from the Australian government to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women (DFAT, 2012). As a result women have increased access to crisis support services, access to financial information and literacy, formal opportunities to share their ideas and learn from each other, promoting gender equality and women are being supported to take on leadership roles at the community, provincial and national-level (DFAT, 2012).

Next, I will outline the innovation or key examples of new initiatives taking place in Pacific civil society generally to set the context.

Pacific Civil society innovations

Political science research has tended to ignore the Pacific Islands due to their size (Reilly, 2002; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015). Indeed researchers have been criticised as focussed on the region as a

¹ See for example Pacific feminist involvement in the recent Pacific Partnerships to Strengthen Gender, Climate Change Response and Sustainable Development <http://www.divafiji.com/apps/blog/entries/show/42454539-new-new-pacific-partnerships-to-strengthen-gender-climate-change-response-and-sustainable-development>

‘gap’ rather than recognising the emerging innovation. One of my interviews with Pacific women suggests that to date researchers have perceived the region differently to Pacific peoples:

Coming from a global perspective of feminists, you look to the region as gap, so you have a privileged view of how to see the effectiveness of Pacific feminists while some might have the perception that it is quite an effective movement (Interview #23)

This young Pacific woman had just completed postgraduate level study in Australia and was returning home to Fiji and so had first-hand experience of both western academia and Pacific activism. In keeping with the admonishing of this interview, I argue that a spot light should be turned on this understudied region and agree that ‘small states can be used as case studies for larger questions in international politics’ (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015, p. 529). This is because innovation here occurs against a backdrop of political instability and civil society organisations are key agents in advocating greater citizen participation in the absence of stable political institutions (George, 2011). Women’s civil society organisations are a driver of change and new spaces for civil society at both local and regional levels to engage with women’s rights are emerging. (Interview # 31, December 2016). This is illustrated for instance by announcement of the Pacific Small Island Developing States Organising Partner added to the Women’s Major Group (WMG)². The WMG is a grouping of organisations working to promote human rights-based sustainable development with a focus on women’s human rights, the empowerment of women and gender equality. Pacific small island feminist and women led civil society groups now have their own organising partner in the Women’s Major Group (WMG) on Sustainable Development from 2017-2019. The importance of this development was highlighted by those who lobbied for it:

*Pacific feminist and women-led civil society groups lobbied for this change, in order to highlight, promote and strengthen distinctive voices, advocacy positions and strategies of Pacific small island civil society activists and constituencies.*³

Women’s organisations in Fiji especially play a pivotal role in generating and coordinating regional spaces⁴. For example the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement aims at strengthening participation and inclusion in Fiji’s ongoing democratic transition. A recent funded project aims ‘to encourage active citizenship and to advocate for participatory and representative democracy...facilitating dialogue between civil society and the government on civil and political rights’ (CCF 2016). Increasingly, Pacific civil society organisations are reaching out to regional and global networks (UNDP, 2016) and the ability to connect with regional and global peers provides an opportunity for meaningful participation that is not possible within the current cultural and institutional constraints of the formal sphere.

To explore the potential of regional feminist civil society to the generation and coordination of new spaces, I draw on the insights suggested by social movements (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2010; Della Porta & Diani, 2015), alliance building (Beamish & Luebbbers, 2009) but also deliberative democracy (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013; Hendriks, 2006). Deliberative democrats suggest ‘citizens ought to be engaged in decisions that affect them’, and that ‘new participatory spaces are required and the design of these spaces matter’. (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013, p. 422). I am interested in this particular gathering of feminist civil society organising to ‘support identities, expand participatory possibilities

² <http://www.womenmajorgroup.org/> accessed 31/5/17: ‘The Women’s Major Group (WMG) is an official participant in the United Nations processes on Sustainable Development and has the responsibility to facilitate women’s civil society active participation, information sharing and input into the policy space provided by the United Nations including participation, speaking, submission of proposals, and access to documents.’

³ DIVA for Equality Political Adviser, Noelene Nabulivou quoted at <https://www.facebook.com/DIVAFiji/posts/728471020650181.0> accessed 31/5/17

⁴ See for example DIVA for Equality <http://www.divafiji.com/> and Fiji Women’s Rights Movement <http://www.fwrm.org.fj/>

and create networks of solidarity' (Hendriks, 2006, p. 489 citing Young). In this paper I am interested in looking at forums and their capacity to deliberate, shape opinion, communicate information (Hendriks, 2006, p. 489) in order to generate understanding across difference and develop a shared vision however strategic this might be. My particular case study – the Pacific Feminist Forum is illustrative of the activism by Pacific women for greater participation of women in all their diversity and I will use the next section to give some insights into this recent event.

Spotlight on the feminist civil society activities in the Pacific Island states: My latest research

Against this backdrop, my research investigates the role of Pacific feminist civil society organisations, their engagement with each other towards change for gender equality in the Pacific region. The empirical insights are informed by the close analysis of 33 of semi-structured interviews conducted with existing and young emerging women activists from the Pacific at the Inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum held in Fiji in November 2016. I also conducted participatory observation of this new Forum to examine the extent to which it established dialogue and solidarity across difference and facilitated the development of regional alliances and networks.

The Forum brought together over 100 feminists from 13 countries. Its stated aim was to share stories, map journeys and build the feminist movement in the Pacific (Pacific Feminist Forum Program, 2016). The Forum was designed as a civil society space of collaboration, respect, diversity, intersectionality, intergenerational leadership and activism (Pacific Feminist Forum Program, 2016). The topics covered at the Forum ranged from funding, climate change, leadership, young feminists, coalition building, third gender recognition, Pacific feminist civil society led research, women and constitution building, access to education, gender in humanitarian action, trade agreements undermining women's rights, realities of organising, building movements, navigating diversity and a consultation by the Pacific Community (SPC) on the draft of the new Pacific Platform for Action. (Pacific Feminist Forum Program, 2016). One striking element of the Pacific Feminist Forum is to do with how to use dialogue across difference to connect. I will now provide some observations about this process and its outcome.

Developing a Feminist Charter for the Pacific Region

The public facing outcome of the Forum was the Pacific Feminist Charter which sought to provide a roadmap for future action locally, regionally and globally, setting out what change Pacific feminists want to see. The Charter made clear that *'the leadership of women's organisations and networks in our region should be led by and managed by Pacific women from small island states'*. (Pacific Feminist Forum Charter, 2016). The language of the Pacific Feminist Charter reflected a commitment to respect for a multiplicity of approaches and positions;

'recognition that our strength lies in our diversity, we respect our differences, Our journeys as Pacific feminists are diverse, solidarity based on mutual respect and open discussion of differences.' It aims to *'have spaces of power shared across diversities, escalate and support innovative feminist social organising efforts by all Pacific women.'* (Pacific Feminist Forum Charter, 2016).

'Respecting differences' at the Forum for instance included differences of sexual orientation, geography, disability, city or rural, age, and experience. For example Tonga has not signed onto The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Lesbian and trans-women organisations are more active in Fiji and Tonga, with third gender recognition movement and support networks. Given the diversity in the way feminism or gender equality is understood and experienced in different contexts and countries, it is not easy to establish 'one' shared vision. This adds an additional challenge for the regional feminist movement to take into

consideration. The challenge is to recognise the regional diversity on the one hand, and the specific challenges each country faces when it comes to realising gender equality and finding a 'unified' voice, a common message that can have an influence and affect change at both national and global levels.

In order to come to a common platform for action, contestations had to be worked through. Contentious issues were abortion decriminalisation and decriminalisation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) sexual orientations as the particular wording was around the recognition of the third gender. Abortion was contentious as one country said it was strongly opposed due to concerns about women's safety. Agreement on the Charter wording was able to be reached after calls for drafting assistance and suggestions, debate and deliberation which is an example of being able to agree to a specific platform of action across diversity of geography, sexual orientation, ability or disability, ethnicity and experience. This moment was celebrated with applause and hand shaking, song and music and protest and action songs.

Perspectives of forum participants on regional feminism

I conducted interviews in the margins of this Forum to shed light on the views of women on the benefits of regional forums, where change is occurring in the Pacific and what innovative design can open up new spaces to hear new voices. Interviews also shed light on the barriers and contestations around women's rights at global, regional and national levels. The preliminary findings suggest that regional workshops organised by feminist civil society actors enable women in the Pacific region to identify a commonality of issues and approaches across the Pacific region, share ideas, and develop a supportive cohort to address the deficit at the global level. They are seen as spaces for change and action. For example one woman interviewed said that women who feel unable to get traction from their national governments can use the benefit of regional level dialogue to find partners, raise concerns and have regional institutions place pressure on their governments to implement change:

We were reacting to a closed space. We felt restricted, we felt unsafe, but we also felt the need to talk and discuss. It is not like we weren't having those discussions, but we wanted to have it in other spaces too. We were just, well, let's have another space. (Interview #23)

It is important that I define what is meant by language used in my interviews and interactions with Pacific feminists and young feminists— my feminism and their feminism are not necessarily the same thing. As part of my interviews I was careful not to assume we had a common understanding of words. The women I interviewed are not merely importing a western-style feminism but rather creating their own identity as Pacific feminists. This was borne out in interviews where I asked 'are you a feminist?' and 'what does it mean?'. Several did not engage with that word but worked for women's empowerment or gender equality. The young women in the focus group did not embrace this term readily and said the grassroots do not understand feminism (Focus group #1, Suva, Nov 2016). They explained they were not feminist but believe in gender equality:

'We are Christian women and embrace our role as women of God, we submit to our husband. We are not radical feminists but we do advocate for gender equality' [Focus group #1, Suva, Nov 2016].

Focussing next on the plausibility of a shared vision, and uniting across differences, I asked young women in a focus group in Fiji what 'sisterhood' meant to test this language and meaning. They replied that

'Sisterhood means being able to come to safe spaces and discuss issues affecting us and to be comfortable with that group. We can share secrets and have bonding in that space with the group. Accept whatever background (religious) or life or disability, and be able to share

problems and help how we can – we can give positive ideas to help.’ (Focus group #1, Suva, November 2016).

The young Fijian women in the focus group wanted to start some gender equality programming for other young women in Suva (Focus group #1 Suva Nov 2016). They acknowledged problems with elder respect customs and older women not making space for younger women to lead. They believed young women had shared issues, and the topics that affect them can be shared however they cautioned that:

‘ a common vision within the Pacific is possible but there are different cultures, need to scope before can say there is one Pacific program.’ (Focus group #1 Suva 2016)

The language of the Pacific Feminist Charter makes it clear that there are specific Pacific feminisms (plural) to suit their issues, problems, and culture and I agree with Sadli that this is the ‘better project’ rather than a wholesale adoption of a western feminism. (Sadli & Porter, 1999, p. 442). A workshop at the Pacific Feminist Forum noted the importance of feminists and civil society learning to generate their own research and this can be a way forward to escape the colonising of western funded projects. My empirical work has led me to believe in agreement with Sadli that each group of feminists has the responsibility to create its own feminisms appropriate to its own needs (Sadli & Porter, 1999, p. 442). For example, spirituality was referenced as part of the Charter with one interviewee noting this was central to a Pacific feminism:

feminists developed thinking and approaches around feminism and religion. So still honouring faith and inclusion. That is much more pronounced in the Pacific, much stronger (Interview #28).

One benefit of being present with the Pacific feminists at the Forum was observing how dialogue connects people and issues across cultural divides. All present were people from different countries, disabilities, transwomen, religious sisters, old, young, indigenous, ethnically diverse. All brought their own agenda but could work across difference to map new journeys and new paths. My preliminary findings suggest that feminist civil society regional workshops enable women in the Pacific to identify commonality of issues and approaches across the region strategically, share ideas, and develop a supportive cohort to address the deficit of spaces for feminist voices at the regional and global level.

The various effects that the Forum has have been raised in interviews including information transmission- *"We need spaces where we can sit together and discuss and get to learn about each other, and know this is how we develop those partnerships* (interview #16) and collective identity formation - *"developing partnerships, intersectional identification, open up binaries"* (interview #18). Pacific spaces for feminism are spaces for action, sharing experience to influence ideas, projects and programs (interview #25). Activists can create new spaces hospitable for views that have been suppressed by the state (interview #23). Regional spaces are robust arenas to diversify feminism (interview #18).

It is important to Pacific feminism that this new space has been created as existing spaces are not as diverse as this one, national governments are not making progress on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights language at CSW (ISHR, 2016), the rates of women’s political participation in Small Island Developing States is very low (IPU, 2017), some states have not signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). One interview commented on the differences between this forum and others she had witnessed:

There's a big difference between the two forum because with the triennial, it's a ministerial forum, where it's a high level meeting, where the Women's Minister's, Women'

Ministry's ministers and also other women's missionaries, NGOs, they also participating in that forum. It's a high level meeting, but the Feminist Forum, it's only comprised of feminists around the Pacific Islands. I don't see any high level people or officials in that meeting last month when I attended. (interview # 31)

In terms of specific kinds of learning and support would be lost if this Forum did not exist, interviewees suggested movement building, sustainability, self-care support and solidarity, being exposed to diversity (interview #28 &31). Digital spaces will serve as a useful follow up but face to face forums such as the Pacific Feminist Forum are importance as physical meetings builds the relationship and the trust initially. The absence of the Forum may have diminished the impacts that the movement is having as there are some very active Pacific women but they need to ensure the younger Pacific women are active now and also have their capacity built to sustain the action into the future. A small group of women cannot cover all the forums worldwide that need the input of Pacific feminist civil society. This work is often tiring, emotional, dangerous and this sentiment opened the forum with a recognition that it was being held on Human Rights Defenders Day and remembering people who had lost their lives (Pacific Feminist Forum Program, 2016).

The challenge of sustaining feminist agenda: From regional back to local

Part of the next stage of my research will be a follow up to see what change has occurred at national levels following the agreement to the Charter and assessing the list of who has signed on to it when this is released (due shortly; personal correspondence with author June 2017). I will also ask the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) what impact and changes have been seen at Posts throughout the Pacific. This will further assist an assessment of what difference the forums are making. Some interviewees did identify changes in political practices and tactics that have emerged as a result of attendance at the Pacific Feminist Forum including one woman who spoke of taking the learnings and the Charter back to the islands and her new confidence and direction to assist the civil society women's organisation (interview # 31). My next step in my empirical investigation will trace the diffusion of these practices and tactics across the region, to investigate if this diffusion process is explained (at least in part) by the Forum. I am also interested to see what encouragement exists for those falling behind and see if the alliances and networks built results in pairing countries together to encourage and share.

One of the Forum organising committee members has been taking the Charter to various international forums including the CSW (personal correspondence with author June 2017) and I will be seeing what Pacific feminist civil society activity happens in the lead up to and during the upcoming Triennial meeting of Pacific Women and Women's Ministers in Fiji in October. I will also be assessing what has been happening online to maintain the relationships formed as online is an important space for Pacific women leaders to engage across distance (Brimacombe, 2017) reflected in my interviews:

we've been able to create that space online for political discussion for feminist, women's discussions online, which has been really good in terms of counteracting Fiji's media restrictions or the intimidation of the media and so forth (interview #23)

Conclusion

Enabling and enhancing the role of Pacific regional civil society in achieving gender equality ought to be a fundamental focus of a 'Pacific Century' and relevant to all our discussions this week at this conference. My new research expands the scope of this conference's "Pacific Century" focus to include the broader Pacific women's movement. Pacific feminism mobilisation is increasing and space is being claimed at a regional and global level by Pacific feminists. Perhaps we might best describe the focus and momentum as part of "the Pacific Women's Century", with the Pacific

Feminist Forum and other mobilising structures showing the potential for new spaces of talk and action. My case study is illustrative of one way feminist civil society organisations and women's rights movements experience and deal with their exclusion at a global level by bolstering regional numbers and voice.

Participatory innovation in Pacific small island states as evidenced in my case study of the Pacific Feminist Forum, is being driven by feminist civil society organisations. In the face of national political instabilities, regional spaces are being created for a more diverse range of voices to be heard, to strengthen existing movements and map journeys forward. As nations in the Pacific start to be open to increasing women's participation in decision making, civil society organisations and alliances play a crucial role in advocating for greater inclusion of a *diversity* of women in formal and informal spaces. Connections to regional and global networks enable Pacific women to participate in policy issues worldwide, particularly around climate change and feminism. This trend demonstrates the agility of civil society in the Pacific – without meaningful channels for political participation in national politics, and shrinking spaces at the global level, women are increasingly interacting with regional peers and Pacific feminists are at the forefront of leading change locally, regionally and globally.

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Interviews and Focus Groups

	Location & Date	Nationality	CSO/Govt?
1.	Myanmar June 2016	India	CSO
2.	Myanmar June 2016	Solomon Is (SI)	CSO
3.	Myanmar June 2016	SI	CSO
4.	Myanmar June 2016	Samoa	CSO
5.	Myanmar June 2016	Bangladesh	CSO
6.	Myanmar June 2016	Thailand	CSO
7.	Myanmar June 2016	Myanmar	CSO
8.	Myanmar June 2016	Myanmar	CSO
9.	Myanmar June 2016	India	CSO
10.	Myanmar June 2016	Sri Lanka	CSO
11.	Myanmar June 2016	PNG	CSO
12.	Myanmar June 2016	PNG	CSO
13.	Myanmar June 2016	Nepal	CSO
14.	Thailand, July 2016	Australia	APWLD
15.	Fiji, November 2016	PNG	CSO
16.	Fiji, November 2016	Canada	SPC
17.	Fiji, November 2016	Fiji	PIFS

18.	Fiji, November 2016	Fiji	CSO
19.	Fiji, November 2016	SI	CSO
20.	Fiji, November 2016	PNG	CSO
21.	Fiji, November 2016	SI	CSO
22.	Fiji, November 2016	Fiji	CSO
23.	Fiji, November 2016	Fiji	CSO
24.	Fiji, November 2016	Vanuatu	CSO
25.	Fiji, November 2016	SI	Advisory group
26.	Australia March 2017	Australia (AUS)	CSO
27.	Australia, March 2017	Aus	JERA
28.	Australia March 2017	Aus	IWDA
29.	Australia May 2017	Aus	CSO
30.	Australia May 2017	Aus	CSO
31.	Australia December 2016	Kiribati	student
32.	Australia June 2017	Aus	CSO
33.	Australia 2016	Aus	govt

FOCUS GROUPS

1. Fiji young women YWCA of Fiji, Suva, November 2017