

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre: three decades of Australian support



By Stephen Howes

This is the story of one of Australia's most successful aid projects in the Pacific. It's 27 years old, and counting.

Early days

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, or FWCC, is housed in a prominent downtown Suva building, its logo and messages blazoned over its fence and walls.

In equal parts service provider, sector trainer and public advocate, the FWCC has been a trailblazer not only in Fiji, but in the broader Pacific region since its establishment in 1984.

The Centre was started by a group of women concerned with the number of sexual attacks on women in and around the capital, Suva, and with the lack of support from government. In time-honoured feminist tradition, they formed a collective. Shamima Ali joined the Centre a year after its establishment. She soon became the Centre's Coordinator, a position she holds to this day.

From the start, the Centre's central function was to provide a support service to survivors of gender-based violence. Counsellors were provided basic training from

a qualified counsellor. They offered psychological and emotional support, and also provided survivors with information about their rights, accompanied them through police and court procedures, and assisted them to locate emergency accommodation.

But, from the start, the Centre also had an emphasis on violence awareness and prevention. It conducted classes and seminars, and wrote pamphlets and articles in the media.



Shamima Ali, outside the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre in Suva. Photo: DFAT Australian Aid Flickr

Money, money, money

Initially, the FWCC eked out a tenuous existence, living off small community donations and relying largely on volunteer labour. In those “hard years of the eighties,” as Ali puts it, the United Nations agreed to fund the Centre, but the Fijian government refused to provide the required official endorsement of the project proposal. It was feared that the project would contradict Fiji's international image as an island in paradise. The government suggested to the

Centre that it remove the word “crisis” from its name.

Rather than buckle to government dictat, the FWCC turned instead to Australia. At first, Australian aid officials were sceptical. FWCC had to make the case that their work was developmental, at a time when domestic violence wasn't on the development agenda at all.

But 1990 saw a breakthrough, with funding being provided for the first time to FWCC from the Australian aid program, initially through an Australian NGO (then Freedom From Hunger, now part of Oxfam Australia).

In 1994, the Australian government started funding FWCC directly, and it has continued providing financial support to FWCC to this day – for a period now of almost 30 years, through several projects each of four to six years in length. Funding has covered not only recurrent, but also capital, costs. Australian aid paid for FWCC's high-profile building – and the land on which it sits. Australia has also bought three buildings for FWCC to house other crisis centres around the country, and three emergency shelters as well.

It hasn't always been a smooth relationship. Three decades of negotiations will have its moments. FWCC lobbied for a decade to get the funding for a new building, taking advantage of a Parliamentary Secretary visit to finally get a yes. Ali says she learnt early on “to ask for everything and never to short change ourselves.” She is irritated by what she sees as the more intrusive approach now being taken by the Australian aid program. That said, she and her Centre appreciate Australia's support, not just the amount but the duration and the flexibility with which it has – at least until recently – been provided. The FWCC website states:

The work of FWCC has progressed and developed over the years largely because of the relationship shared with AusAID. While FWCC has been accountable in terms of reporting to AusAID and delivery of services, AusAID has been a supportive and understanding donor.

The references to AusAID (abolished in 2013) might be outdated, but the paucity of kangaroos on the FWCC website is testament to Australia's willingness to stay in the background.

While Australia remains the major supporter, other donors have also supported FWCC – Canada, NZ, the UN. The Centre also receives some charitable donations. But the Fijian government is still to come to the party. Just last year, the FWCC was awarded a government contract to run Fiji's first National Domestic Violence Helpline. The Fijian government has also supported some of the Centre's research initiatives. But what it has not done, after more than 30 years, is provide core funding.

Australia's annual support is relatively modest – about \$1 to \$1.5 million a year. That's about 0.03 per cent of Australia's total aid. But there are very few projects with this longevity in the Australian aid program, and even fewer with such high returns.

Achievements

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre is now run by a Management Committee and employs 40 staff across Fiji. Its growing number of branch offices around the country have helped it see more clients over time, as the graph below shows.

FWCC has also become a pivotal regional player. It has been provided with Australian aid resources to auspice similar organisations in Tonga and Vanuatu (the first, and perhaps the only, Pacific NGO Australia has used to channel funds to other Pacific NGOs). In 1992, FWCC helped found the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women. It continues to act as the Secretariat for this Network, and organises its four-yearly conferences.

The Centre undertakes training both across the region and within Fiji. One floor of its expansive office is reserved for training. Since 1995, the Centre has offered a four-week regional training twice a year on gender-based violence awareness, prevention and response strategies. This program has trained over 1,000 participants from 15 countries. FWCC also runs specialised training programs. It began police training in 1995, and now trains police not only from Fiji but from other Pacific countries. It trains public servants, and Fiji's army.

It runs community education courses and fora, and estimates that it reaches about 10-15,000 women, men and children a year through these. Since 2000,

there has also been a focus on male advocacy.

The FWCC has conducted critical and pioneering research. In 2013, it released its national prevalence study on intimate partner violence in Fiji. This showed that 61% of Fijian women experience physical assault from their intimate partners in their lifetime. It revealed the tragic shadow of violence across all socio-economic, age and ethnic groups.

The organisation has also implemented a relentless media campaign. Edwina Kotoisuva worked for FWCC for 18 years. She told me that early on FWCC staff were “trained in writing press releases. Our turnaround time for press releases was really fast.” That gave the organisation a “high profile” and got going a “public discourse about rights and feminism.”

Impact

It is impossible to accurately assess the impact of something like the Fiji Womens Crisis Centre, but it would be bizarre to argue that it has been anything but profound.

Apart from the thousands of clients helped, the FWCC has been a catalyst for broader attitudinal change. In the words of Shamima Ali, the Centre’s founding Co-ordinator:

“When we started no-one wanted to talk about violence against women. It was a private affair. No one wanted to talk about sexual abuse of children. Women were blamed for rape. Now, everyone is talking about it. People are taking ownership of the issues. There are so many changes throughout the system. Faith-based organisations are taking up the issue. Men are coming on board. Look at all the changes that have come about, in legislation and policies.”

The 2013 prevalence study found some evidence of declining rates of violence against women, and strong evidence among women of a much lower acceptability of violence. A recent assessment of the Fiji Womens Crisis Centre by Di Kilsby and Juliet Hunt highlights “32 positive legislative and policy changes in Fiji and the region between 2009 and 2015.” It also claims that FWCC has exercised “considerable positive influence over other service providers in Fiji,” noting that there has been a “reduction in the number of complaints made by women about police and the courts”, and tougher sentences for sexual crimes against children.

Ali says that in particular “the police have stepped up, making their conviction rates public.” Dedicated sexual offence squads have been created within the force. That said, Ali admits that “access to justice is an issue” and that “getting a case through the courts remains a challenge.”

The changes have gone beyond Fiji. In 1992, when the Pacific Women’s Network was created, there were only two centres addressing violence against women: FWCC in Fiji and Punanga Tauturu in Cook Islands. Now the Network brings together organisations from 13 Pacific countries.

“Violence against women is not going to go away overnight. But we are seeing the changes, we are seeing men’s behavioural change. We are seeing the churches coming on board. These are the things that we have to celebrate, and then strategise for the struggle ahead,” Ali says.



Koro villagers attending a Fiji Women's Crisis Centre workshop on Gender Based Violence. Photo: FWCC Facebook





Former NRL star Petero Civoniceva with Shamima Ali at Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. Photo: FWCC Facebook



Twenty senior youth officers doing Gender, Violence against Women and Human Rights training, facilitated by FWCC staff. Photo: FWCC Facebook



Members of three villages in Tikina Yale attend a three day FWCC gender, domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment workshop. Photo: FWCC Facebook

Australian women

It's not only Australian aid that has been critical to FWCC's success. Australian women have played a important role, both inside and outside of the official aid program. Ali credits Carole Carter, Elizabeth Cox and Juliet Hunt as three "whose strategising and encouragement ... have been invaluable to the development of the Centre."

I spoke to Juliet Hunt, who co-authored the assessment quoted earlier. Since 1995 she has acted as a strategic adviser on contract to FWCC, assisting with planning, reporting, research, and monitoring and evaluation. She describes her role as one of facilitator and trusted friend. And she downplays her own contribution. She credits FWCC's success to its "top-level strategic analysis" and its ability to secure funding over the last three decades:

"The fact that FWCC has had its core funding for so long has meant that it hasn't been looking around all the time for funding. It's been able to focus on its strategy, and develop its strategy."

Clearly, one of the secrets to the Centre's success has been its charismatic leader, Shamima Ali, who has over the decades become a leading spokeswoman in Fiji not only for womens' rights but for human rights in general, and who has been an

outspoken opponent of Fiji's coups. Hunt has no doubt that FWCC will survive the inevitable transition to a second generation of leadership.

"The organisation is far, far more than Shamima. There's been an investment in empowering and mentoring staff. And the organisation is valued by many, many people now. I really don't have any doubts that it will survive beyond the charismatic leader."

Shamima Ali speaking on FWCC, donors, and preventing gender violence at State of the Pacific 2015

http://devpolicy.org/aidprofiles/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ShamimaAli_2015SOTP.mp3

Breaching aid orthodoxy

Australia's support to FWCC must be one of our most successful "aid projects" ever, perhaps the most successful in the Pacific. (A challenge to anyone to come up with a more successful one.)

And yet, apart from the fact that it involved the backing of a local champion, Australia's support for FWCC breaches aid orthodoxy. Aid is meant to get things going. It is to invest in change, not to cover recurrent costs, and certainly not to fund the same project for three decades.

If the success flies in the face of orthodoxy, let's rethink orthodoxy. Here are some lessons I draw from the FWCC story.

One, use the flexibility of Australian aid to provide more funding to civil society. Rather than relying entirely on supply-side measures, use NGOs to put pressure on and work with government to improve performance. Annual funding to FWCC is no more than the cost of a couple of expat advisers.

Two, provide more funding to local civil society. Most of the hundreds of millions of Australian aid provided to NGOs goes to Australian NGOs. Those Australian NGOs often work with local NGOs, but very few of the latter graduate, as they should, to receive government funding directly. FWCC is a role model in this

regard.

Three, don't fetishise government ownership as the Paris Declaration did. The Fijian government has never owned the FWCC, and at times has been hostile to it. It is often said that Australian aid projects can only be implemented with partner government permission. And yet Australia succeeded where the UN failed in getting funding to the Crisis Centre by using non-government intermediaries, and then its regional program (which until very recently has been the source of Australian FWCC funding).

Four, provide long-term recurrent funding. The secret of good aid is to find out what works, and stick with it. Think of aid in terms of decades rather than years. Perhaps three decades should be thought of as a standard time for a successful aid project, rather than three years.

The FWCC doesn't only challenge orthodoxy. It also challenges current Australian aid rhetoric, which calls for a new paradigm, with more focus on innovation, and a move away from service delivery. In fact, the best projects often combine service delivery and advocacy; indeed this combination might be said to be the secret of FWCC's success. As for innovation, this has always been a feature of aid, but there is a risk, as Kilsby and Hunt put it, "of conflating 'innovative' with 'new'" and biasing support to newcomers away from successful innovations.

Finally, the FWCC challenges the way in which the aid program is now being managed. Juliet Hunt says of the FWCC-Australian aid relationship: "It's been a really positive partnership of sharing and mutual respect. When you look at it since the early 1990s, that this is the main story. But the more recent story is rather difficult and turbulent, and sad actually."

One problem is the shift to large facilities through which smaller projects and entities, such as FWCC, are now managed. This lends itself to micromanagement, since in practice project implementers find themselves reporting to two entities: the facility manager, and DFAT itself. There is also the increasing role of the aid specialist. Hunt notes: "One gets mixed messages about the requirements of design, monitoring and evaluation from DFAT staff, facility managers and specialist advisers, within and across country programs. This was rare in the past, but seems to be on the rise."



FWCC and other Fijian NGOs marching through Suva to mark World Human Rights Day. Photo: FWCC Facebook



Pro-feminist marchers on the streets in Suva on World Human Rights Day. Photo: FWCC Facebook



FWCC participating in a World Human Rights

Day march in Suva. Photo: FWCC Facebook



Women calling for an end to gender-based violence on World Human Rights Day. Photo: FWCC Facebook



Activists marching through Suva to mark World Human Rights Day, and to call for gender equality. Photo: FWCC Facebook

27 years

It's not hard to walk away from an aid project that only runs for a couple of years. Perhaps you've achieved what you set out to - build something, train someone. In any case, sustainability is a problem for the host government.

But walking away from a 27-year funded aid project is quite another thing altogether. What should the Australian government do? Threaten to walk away to force the Fijian government to come to the table? Or fund the Centre for another 27 years?

If I was running the Australian aid program, I would certainly put pressure on the Centre to diversify its funding. I would also ask the Fijian government why it doesn't provide more funding. And, more importantly, get Fijians to ask that question of their government.

Yet I would also be patient. It's a small amount of money doing a huge amount of good. And a historical perspective is needed. In countries like Australia and the US, women's and rape crisis centres were, as in Fiji, started by collectives. The first few started in the early 70s, without government funding. Yet, remarkably, as early as the mid-70s, they were already starting to rely on government support. Why has it taken the Fijian government not three but thirty-three (and counting) years to fund its country's only crisis centre?

Probably because the West experienced a cultural, including a feminist, revolution in the 1960s and 1970s which almost completely bypassed developing countries such as Fiji. It is clearly going to take longer, much longer, to get the government on board.

Juliet Hunt cautions:

"You've got to understand the context. When you've got a country that has 60 per cent lifetime experience by women of violence, then you're going to have, roughly, 60 per cent of the military, of parliamentarians, of civil servants, even of NGOs, implicated. The argument that they should be self-sustaining is premature, is generationally premature."

In the meantime, advocacy is needed. And that requires independence. Edwina Kotoisuva puts it this way:

"The advocacy role is really important. Most of the time, people that you're wanting to target are government agents. And when you're demanding accountability from those agencies within, then it just won't work being within government."

From this perspective, aid is not a stop-gap measure, it's a requirement for success.

There is of course a long way to go, but FWCC and Australian aid, working

together, have fundamentally changed the way in which violence against women is responded to and regarded in Fiji and the broader Pacific. Aid doesn't get more transformative than this. Take a bow.

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