

Feminist innovations in the Pacific: the inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum



by Jane Alver

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The feminist movement has been influential in effecting change for gender equality in national and global contexts. Yet in recent years we observe increasingly [exclusion of feminist voices](#) from decision-making bodies, [especially at the global level](#). This goes hand in hand with [shrinking spaces for civil society](#) more generally. Faced with an [experience](#) of such [exclusion](#) as a representative of feminist civil society at the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) at the United Nations last year, I have been undertaking research to see how feminist civil society activists might respond to the problem of shrinking opportunities for effective, change-making input at the global level. My research reveals that there is a tendency to talk only of 'local' or 'global', and that regional spaces, the almost forgotten spaces of talk and action, are where innovation is taking place.

If feminist civil society is not finding adequate opportunities for voice and inclusion at the global level, and powerful blocs are the ones exercising power, what are the alternative routes for them to claim voice and space in advancing gender equality? Are there regional alliances that could be strengthened and resourced? Are there opportunities for developing a regional strategy for expressing concerns on gender equality?

A close look at the feminist activities at the regional level in the Pacific region show that there are various feminist initiatives seeking to develop a shared vision and voice for gender equality in the region and beyond. 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 presents an additional challenge for the regional feminist movement to take into consideration. This challenge is not unique to the Pacific region but was also discussed in the recent [AWID conference coverage](#). The challenge here is to recognise both the regional diversity 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.

The Inaugural [Pacific Feminist Forum](#) presents one of the newest examples of building regional networks and alliances in order to strengthen the feminist movement in the Pacific, and is a mechanism through which progressive regional voice is organised and amplified. The Forum was held in Suva from 28-30 November 2016. It brought together over 100 feminists from 13 countries to share stories, map journeys and build the feminist movement. The Forum was a civil society space of collaboration, respect, diversity, intersectionality, intergenerational leadership and activism. The topics covered at the Forum ranged from feminist resource and finding, climate change, leadership, young feminists, coalition building, the role of communications, legal 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](#).

Participants at the Forum commented:

'This space is an important space. It's bringing women from across the region. At least they can raise their voice at this forum.'
(Interview 1 Nov 2016)

'I think it's an amazing opportunity, and I commend Fiji Women's Rights Movement to having create this platform for not all but some women's organizations within the region to come together.'
(Interview 5 Nov 2016)

'Here to share experiences, stories, women with disability, women's journey, experience and learn and form coalitions, to influence ideas, projects and programs, meet, see what works, learn what has been successful.' (Interview 8 Nov 2016)

The Forum concluded with the signing of the [Feminist Charter](#), a document to act as a platform of action for change for Pacific feminists. Feminist activist [reaction](#) to the process and conclusion of the Charter covered the importance of including diverse voices and its benefit in providing a way forward for young feminists. Activists from around the Pacific had input into the Charter including those representing the [Fiji](#)

Women's Rights Movement, Haus of Khameleon, Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality, and Pacific Young Women Leadership Alliance.

The prospects for a regional sisterhood are vibrant and strong, and mobilisation across difference and across the seas is growing, with a view to amplifying the Pacific feminist voice in the region and at the global level, as Pacific feminists prepare for the next round of global fora including the **Commission on the Status of Women** at the United Nations in March 2017 and the Triennial Conference of Pacific Women in late 2017.

This innovative forum is just one illustration of the alternative routes for feminist civil society organisations to progress gender equality. By shifting the focus from global to regional, it acts to counteract the situation of shrinking civil society spaces for feminist civil society organisations and provides new spaces to hear new voices. The practical challenge of achieving a united Pacific feminist vision across diversity drives innovative and creative practice and propels further action and activism. This Forum is evidence of the current wave of new thinking on **forming coalitions across diversity** for the change Pacific feminists want to see locally, regionally and globally. I look forward to it becoming an annual event for strategising, renewing and regenerating.

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