Sisters - In - Law

By Asenaca Uluiviti

"...The right of a woman to be admitted (to the bar) is a misnomer... It is not a common law right. It is a privilege...which has been confined to male sex..." Burnside J in REEDITH HYNES (1) (1904) 6 WALR 209 AT 213...214.

Fiji now boasts some thirty odd women lawyers of its own, all with overseas university qualifications. In a couple of years this number will almost triple with the first law graduates from the University of the South Pacific to join the profession. There lies a mixture of advantages and some concerns both for the profession and women lawyers in general. The number to date has increased largely in recent years and the need to form ourselves into some manner of organization has come largely from recent additions of the profession for various reasons. Whereas more established women members of the profession hold major public positions and significant posts with private organizations and have made their marks in the profession, younger and newer members see the need to build network and support systems with such members and indeed look to carving themselves a place within the profession and society in general. The common theme amongst the group is "reform", social justice and responsibility, human rights, constructive and innovative changes generally.

Director of the Fiji Law Reform Commission, Florence Fenton (fourth from left) - a woman "first" in the legal profession with other guests at FWRM's book launch.

The laws as they are practiced and applied in Fiji are not women-friendly. They certainly require some innovative and creative applications and rigorous interpretation of statutes and regulations to advocate and promote women's issues and concerns. In the area of domestic violence, sexual assault on women, sexual abuse of children, maintenance and custody of children, inter alia the laws and enforcement thereof are profoundly inequitable to women given the fact that women anywhere in the world have very special needs and difficulties in the wider scheme of gender analysis both on the micro and macro levels of society.

Whereas changes do not happen overnight, it is a promising beginning at least that the profession is taking on a new gender balance. The balance is not so visible in the courtrooms. The reason being those only five women are employed in private practice. Most women lawyers were trained on scholarships are bonded for several years upon graduation either by serving government institutions, statutory bodies or private corporations until such time as when they are free to explore new grounds.

Fiji's first woman Magistrate was *Vusega Helu* of Tongan heritage but raised and educated in Fiji. Ms Helu is currently a leading member of the profession in Tonga and has certainly left her mark in Fiji for women.

Mere Pulea, the first Fijian woman to graduate with a Law degree currently holds the position of Associate Professor and Director of the Institute of Justice & Applied Legal Studies at the University of the South Pacific. She also works as a part time Commissioner for the Fiji Law Reform Commission and is a member of the Review Team to the Department of Social Welfare. Ms Pulea graduated as a Barrister from Lincolns Inn in London. She also holds a three-year appointment with the Asia Pacific Center for Environmental Law at the Faculty of Law, the National University of Singapore. She was instrumental in assisting the Department of Environment to draft the Sustainabie Development Bill on environmental laws in Fiji.

Aruna Prasad is a former Magistrate in the Suva Magistrate Court and was seen as a role model for women lawyers especially when their mothering role could accommodate a professional career.

Madhuri Sharma is a current Deputy Registrar of the High Court of Fiji in Suva. She started her career with GP Lala & Associates and then worked as a tax lawyer with the Department of Inland Revenue.

Nazhat Shameem is the Director of Public Prosecutions, a role she appears to have juggled successfully with motherhood, homemaking and with the adverse demands that are attendant on the office. Working under the DPP, senior legal officer Laisa Laveti has been in charge of the DPP's office in Labasa since January 1995.

Florence Fenton is Director of the Fiji Law Reform Commission, a position which certainly holds much promise in terms of anticipated changes in the law for gender and social equity.

Imrana Patricia Jalal was the former Public Legal Advisor with the Social Welfare Department which capacity brought many challenges and experiences of Fiji women who are predominantly served by the PLA office. She is a partner both professionally and in matrimonial terms in the law firm of Jamandas Jalal & Associates. As well as being a mother, Ms Jalal is the resource trainer in the Regional Humanitarian Rights Education Resource Team (RRRT) attached to the British Aid office in Suva with a brief, spanning the entire region on gender research.

Salote Kaimacuata was the Public Legal Advisor having also served in the DPP's office for several years. In her work as PLA Ms Kaimacuata encountered major challenges in the severe workload and heavily constrained government resources in her office. She later became a legal research officer for the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT).

Tamara Jayatilake and Vasantika Patel are both sole practitioners running their own practices in Suva and Nadi respectively providing remarkable role models for other women. As such private practice within the profession is slowly being embraced by women members and perhaps it s time has come.

Five other women are employed in private practices. This is always a promising beginning in one's professional career where one gains the full range of issues encountered in the profession. At the time of writing this article there is no woman Judge and it is imperative that the Judicial Services Commission rates the concern very highly. This is certainly a point of significance for women's lawyers' network, which can lobby for such appointments. Fiji's first indigenous woman Magistrate Makereta Waqavonovono presently practices in the firm Messrs Essesimarm & Company. This is a welcome breakthrough in the profession. It is hope that more women will aspire to the bench and magistracy in time. According to the Police Prosecutor Inspector Permal Naidu..... "it is very hard for men to put themselves in women's shoes..." in terms of accuseds' and victims experiences and how a Magistrate or Judge deals with the same. Women lawyers groups are far more structured and formalized in overseas in overseas jurisdiction. In Fiji, it is only in an embryonic stage but with long-term visions of organizations under which the bigger issues can be better challenged and pursued. Certainly we do not discount any forthcoming support from male colleagues in the profession in accepting that much benefit can ensue from such an organization and much less to lose, if any. ■

Adapted from Fiji Law Talk, May 1996.

Gender Apartheid Worsens in Afghanistan

Over a year has passed since the Taliban extremist group took over the Afghan capital of Kabul in September 1996 and made women prisoners of their own homes. Despite international outrage at the treatment of Afghan women, the situation for women worsened. Women in the southern two-thirds of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban continue to be prohibited from working, and girls from going to school. In addition, the Taliban recently decreed that women cannot be treated equally at the same hospitals as men. According to Time magazine, the only hospital available for women in Kabul is a crumbling building with no running water and no operating room. Foreign aid agencies cannot keep up with the growing need for food by women and children, because the women cannot work to support themselves.

Women re forbidden to leave their homes without being accompanied by a close male relative and even when they do leave their homes, they must be covered head-to-toe with a burqa. Women re shot, beaten and killed for disobeying these rules. At a House of Representatives briefing on the situation of women in Afghanistan, Momina Qaiyomi, an Afghan nurse who lived under nurse who lived under the Taliban rule, testified that when the Taliban took over Jalalabad where she lived, "they closed and put big locks on schools and hospitals." She saw a veiled woman and her husband being beaten with metal cables by the Taliban because a bit of the woman's feet were showing. She saw the Taliban killing women and men by slitting their throats and then laughing as they poured hot fat oil into the cuts and the bodies jumped in what they called the "dance of death."

The Taliban seem immune to international outrage. They arrested and detained the highest ranking European Union representative to visits Afghanistan in the past year, Emma Boniono as well as CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour, as they and other made a video in a women's hospital, despite the fact that the European Union has pledged $40 million in emergency aid to Afghanistan. Their immunity is bolstered by the fact that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, two US allies, are reportedly heavily funding and supporting them.

The US has said that it will not recognise the Taliban and the US Senate has passed a resolution condemning the Talibans discrimination against women and girls. The resolution asks President Clinton to continue monitoring human rights in Afghanistan; to call for an end to discrimination against women and girls. The resolution asks President Clinton to continue monitoring human rights in Afghanistan; to call for an end to discrimination and harassment of women and girls; to call upon Pakistan to influence the Taliban to cease human rights violations and discriminations against women and girls; and to call upon all nations to cease providing financial and military assistance to the Taliban and any other Afghan group that abuses human rights. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) has introduced a similar resolution in the US House of Representatives. ■

LAUNCH OF BOOK: LAW FOR PACIFIC WOMEN

On March 9th, 1998, the book *Law for Pacific Women: a legal rights handbook* written by Imrana Jalal and published by FWRM was launched by the Prime Minister of Fiji, Sitiveni Rabuka at the residence of the British High Commissioner in Fiji, Micheal Dibben.

Author, Imrana Jalal (middle) with Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and British High Commissioner Mike Dibben during the launch of the book.

The launch was an auspicious affair attended by over 300 people from various sectors of the community in Fiji and guests traveled from overseas countries to be at this significant occasion for the Movement and the author, Imrana Patricia Jalal.

Members of the diplomatic corps, Government officials and representatives from the private sector, civil organizations and the media came together to celebrate the event with staff and members of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.

Director of Public Prosecutions, Nazhat Shameem (middle) with former Permanent Labor Arbitrator and current Chief Magistrate Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi were amongst guests at the launch.

FWRM Coordinator Gina Houng Lee welcomed guests in a speech and she spoke about FWRM's roles and objectives and what the Movement has accomplished since its establishment. "You may have seen us marching in the streets of Suva demanding the recognition of women's rights and while this is a visible activity, this is but one strategy that we have used to work towards achieving our mandate and vision," she told guests.

She said that one particular activity that FWRM is involved in is in raising public consciousness of women's concerns. "Public opinion is indeed crucial. We have played an important role in generating public opinion which allows people to question the injustices done to women," she said. Ms Houng Lee also spoke about the initiatives that FWRM had taken in the past to address discrimination against women such as spearheading the Women's Coalition for Citizenship Rights which involved lobbying for the amendment of Citizenship Laws which discriminated against women. She spoke about FWRM's projects and the activities the Movement implements such as its education and awareness programs. She then called on the Permanent Arbitrator Jon Apted who gave a short speech about the author Ms Jalal. Mr Apted is a lifelong friend and colleague of the author.

In his speech, Fiji's Prime Minister commended Ms Jalal for her initiative in writing the book. "I see a deep personal concern for justice and I also see a personal concern for women who suffer injustice under the very instruments that are expected to protect them.

Concern for the legal rights and status of women, concern with the way women are regarded and treated in society and concern with the need to ensure that women enjoy equal opportunities both in their professional life and in contributing to the good governance of their country, are the themes that run through this pioneering work," Ms Rabuka told guests.

He said that the book also carried with it the hope that it will help to sensitize every segment of societies in the Pacific and in particular, the policy makers, legislators and guardians of the law, on particular areas where further improvements are needed to fully ensure that women's human rights are protected.

" As an advocacy tool, this handbook will assist in identifying areas for legal reforms. It will assist those advocating

CAMPAIGN FOR SACKING OF WOMAN MINISTER

By Zeynep Erdim

Ankara – "Three women don't make a man," Isilay Saygin, Minister responsible for women's affairs said these words years ago. Some women who have started a campaign to call for Saygin's resignation believe she has not changed since that time.

Halim Guner, one of the founders of the Ucan Supurge (Flying Broom) Women's Association says, many previous female politicians who achieved the same status went through a positive process and perceived women's consciousness while they were in office. "Turkan Akyol, herself stated that she learned how to see things from the women's standpoint after she became minister. Onay Alpago, who declared herself "not a feminist but a Kemalist" realized the importance of feminist movements in order to raise consciousness when she was the in the same position," said Guner.

The campaign started last week after an interview with Saygin, conducted by the daily Sabah's correspondent, Neze Duzel. Saygin's words on women and feminist issues caused a large amount of controversy and were not welcomed not only by women but also by many men.

Saygin's approval of the virginity test and her presentation of the test a "necessity", as well as her draft that requires equal prison sentences for men and women found guilty of adultery, caused tension amongst various groups. Some of Saygin's comments were as follows:

"Imprisonment will discourage adultery. They will be humiliated in public. Educating children is the duty of the mother and the father. The state is a father. Let's skip the virginity issue. It doesn't bother me. I do whatever Turkish traditions and customs request and require of a family.

Girls who have committed suicide because they were forced to take a virginity test would have committed suicide anyway. I don't think this is really important. Five or three girls, its doesn't matter. A girl should not enter into such dialogue with a man."

"I don't have a private life. I am single. Maybe I would not have been so successful if I had been married."

Saygins' latest words are the straw that broke the camel's back. Many columnists referring to Duzel's interview asked Saygin, what she understood about the terms "human rights" and "privacy of life" and the "limits of the state's protection of people."

Guner says the Ministry of Women's Affairs was a major achievement by women, which they have gained after years of struggle and hard work. "Saygin is there in vain. To be able to say 3 or 5 women might die is not something out of the blue; she was always like that," says Guner.

The campaign calling for Saygin's resignation is planned to grow, not only remaining as a petition. Through the campaign, women want to raise their voices once again and demand their natural rights, such as being the sole owner of their bodies. In the longer term, these issues – the integration of women in politics, adultery and the virginity test – are planned to be discussed on international platforms and in more public activities. The campaign is not run by specific organization but is fully supported by large groups of women from universities, women's organizations and by individuals.

FWRM Holds Strategic Planning Meeting

FWRM staff and Management Committee members will be converging at the Centra Resort in Pacific Harbour on the weekend of May 9th and 10th to discuss directions in which the Movement will move towards for future sustainability. The meeting is being held in response to FWRM's difficulty in securing funding for projects and recurrent costs such as rent and salaries. UNDP's Canada Fund NGO strengthening officer Jon Taylor will be facilitating the meeting which include the following items on the agendas: FWRM's vision, opportunities and threats and how the Movement envisages itself in the next decade. Members are invited to submit personal recommendations as to how the Movement can become more sustainable in terms of funding and how the the organization is being run. We welcome suggestions for fundraising and we urge members to please indicate your availability in assisting staff and active members in FWRM's fundraising initiatives.

FUNDRAISING DRIVE!!

FWRM will be holding a fundraising evening at the Fiji Arts Club on Selbourne St, Suva on May 20th, 1998. The evening will feature a play called *The Anniversary Present* by leading Fiji and Pacific playwright Larry Thomas. The play looks at issues facing families in Fiji today and depicts how a mother in Fiji tries to cope with everyday challenges. Tickets are on sale at the FWRM office at $10. Wine and cheese will be served!!

Environment Health & Fiji Today

Clearly it makes more sense to prevent disease than to search for cures after people become ill. Pesticides, fungicides and herbicides remain in the soil and in vegetable material for many years after they are used and make their way into our bodies through the food chain. Once in the body, they lodge in fatty tissue such as female breast, mother's milk and the cells of the developing fetus. This is why organically grown foods are becoming increasingly popular overseas; they do not poison you.

There are also many articles appearing on organic control or pests and weeds and of the use of natural organic fertilizers. We need to develop similar processes suited to Fiji's situation.

Fiji's environment is susceptible to global warming and women will find it harder and harder to find food such as rootcrops as lands dry up. Photo by Focus, Australian Agency for International Development.

Chlorine is highly toxic material (gas) and combined with carbon creates organochlorides found in many products: cleansers, bleaches, paper, plastics. They cause hormone disruptions, infertility, birth defects, impaired development and they upset our metabolism, cause behavioral and

"Organic food are becoming increasingly popular overseas; they do not poison you."

neurological changes, immune suppression and cancer. 177 different organochlorides have been identified in human fatty tissue, blood, mother's milk, semen and even in exhaled air form humans.

This is why the incinerator at the Nadi airport is so dangerous; it burns plastics from planes dousing everyone around in lethal chlorine compounds. Radiation: the fallout from weapons tests all over the world include stongtium 90, plutonium, uranium, radium, and thorium; all substances stored in our bones. This applies even to people as tests concluded. Human eggs and sperm are universally contaminated. The results are cancer, miscarriages and infant deaths, genetic diseases, physical deformity and mental retardation.

The military is the single largest polluter and causes 10-30 per cent of all environmental degradation. The US Public Health project found a large increase of breast cancer in women living near nuclear facilities. And the USA, France and Britain, countries who have callously exposed us also live in supposedly clean and healthy island environment to radiation, for fifty years.

Air quality: Toxins and carcinogens come from motor vehicle exhausts and industrial emissions. Here is a good bumper sticker from Greenpeace.

"This car emits carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, benzene, aldehydes and methane. They cause respiratory diseases, cancer, smog and global warming. They are particularly dangerous to children."

Aren't you happy to live in Fiji? There may be fewer cars and buses than in other countries, but they are just as dirty, and no-one in authority seems to have the guts to do anything about it. The companies introduced lead free petrol, after all, not at the behest of Government. Think of how much money it would save the country if the owners were forced to clean up their act. Perhaps we can take down the number of every bus and truck spewing black smoke and publish the list in the newspapers each week - numbers and the name of company.

- By Ruth Lechte, FWRM Member & World YWCA Pacific Health Desk

"The military is the single largest polluter and causes 10-30% of all environmental degradation. The US Public Health project found a large increase of breast cancer in women living near nuclear facilities. And the USA, FRANCE and Britain, countries who have callously exposed us also live in the supposedly clean and healthy island environment to radiation, for fifty years."

for legal reforms to be able to ask pertinent questions in respect of the law and its application, he added.

He further spoke about Government's commitment to women saying that the new Constitution to be enacted in July, 1998 will effectively remove those discriminatory citizenship provisions which have long been a symbol of discrimination against women in Fiji.

FWRM Coordinator Gina Houng Lee , Dr Mridula Sainath and Viniana Seeto (FWRM Collective members) pictured here with host Mike Dibben.

"All these demonstrate our collective will in Fiji to move towards a society of the kind that I am committed to as your Prime Minister, a society which all citizens, as individuals and as communities, irrespective of gender, race , religion or economic status are equal in law and in their fundamental rights and freedoms.

In keeping in line with Government's commitments to the Plan of Action adopted at the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, the Ministry of Women has identified priority areas for follow up action by Government which will be undertaken in close coordination and collaboration with women's NGOs that are actively engaged in promoting the interests of women, children and the family," he said. He lauded women's NGOs for the good work they have done which was reflected in the book and he said that the collective efforts of civil organizations were contributing in a significant way to the increased awareness of the various areas of concern of NGOs.

He also gave acknowledgements to the early efforts of women's groups who have had to work in situations where their disadvantaged positions are usually accepted and defended as the norm because such conditions conform to the dictates of custom and tradition. "They established the Fiji National Council of Women to provide a united front in voicing women's concerns to Government." He concluded by saying that as the Prime Minister, he was committed to encouraging the integration of women in his cabinet and also in his party to stand for the forthcoming general elections. "I for one would like to see a big increase in the number of women candidates and if I am Prime Minister again, I will make sure that a reasonable number of my appointees to the Senate are women because I recognize that women make up half of the population."

FWRM collective member Viniana Seeto ended the evening with a speech thanking guests for attending the launch in particular the funders of FWRM who have made it possible for the Movement to continue its work towards improving the status of women in Fiji. ■

Arlene Griffen, USP - *I haven't actually read the book but just glancing through, it's pitched at the right level and great in the way it's laid out, the language and the scope of information provided as an excellent resource for educators and reasearchers. The launch was fine in attracting the kind of publicity and exposure for the such work.*

Tamsin Vuetilovoni, Greenpeace – *Imrana is an inspiration to us all in the NGO movement. Our struggles for the environment, for social change, for equality and justice appear more hope full with an example of hard work and dedication.* Nainasa Whippy, Greenpeace – *If I was studying law and this was my text book, I would love my studies! It is so easy to read, so logical.*

Tupo Vere, Dept of Women - *I believe the book will particularly be used by advocates as a guide for papers and efforts regarding the review of legislation, mechanisms, and procedures and guidelies to strengthen the legal position of women in Pacific countries. Vinaka vakalevu Imrana for this gift and all your work with women towards demistifying the law.*

ON THE BOOK - LAW FOR PACIFIC WOMEN

The book Law for Pacific Women: a legal rights handbook written by FWRM member Imrana Jalal and published by FWRM and launched on March 11th, 1998 is the first comprehensive book ever to be written about women and the law in the Pacific. The book covers a wide range of issues concerning women and their legal rights. Ms Jalal said that she was driven to write the book out of anger at the "injustices that is caused to women in the Pacific because they are women."

The book covers diverse areas of the law such as issues of the law and women's lives – what is the law, its contents and structures and feminism. It also looks at constitutional status, citizenship and the often conflicting relationship between customary law and formal law. Land ownership rights and access is also looked at and indigenous women's rights to land ownership.

The book then looks at sexual offenses against women and children covering areas like rape myths and the history of the law of rape, sexual offenses against women and its legal definitions and legislation, incidence, reporting and sentencing, sexual offenses against children and court powers and practices, consent, corroboration and credibility and civil actions for sexual assault.

Criminal assault against women in the home is also covered in the book by looking at domestic violence and how widespread it is, myths and legislation, court and police powers and practices, sentencing and civil actions.

A chapter on women as criminal defendants is also covered in the book by looking at abortion, infanticide and prostitution.

Women of the Pacific. Samoa's Mrs Ruby Va'a, Elizabeth Reade Fong of Fiji, USP Lecturer Professor Konai Helu Thaman of Tonga , Mrs Hazelman of Samoa and Samoan lawyer Ms Kota Peteru were also at the launch.

Marriage and separation, divorce, custody, access and guardianship of children, maintenance for married women and legitimate children, matrimonial property, de facto relationships, affiliation and natural children, women and work, women lawyers and legal aid for women and strategies for change are issues that the book also covers.

In his foreword of the book, Chief Magistrate of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi said that crucial to the objective of the principals of fairness and equity is the role of the law which defines the rights of women but seldom assures them full and equal benefits with men. "All the countries in this book have instruments of governance that make high-minded pledges about securing rights of individuals (i.e. children, men and women). The reality as this work demonstrates is somewhat different. Whether it is the law relating to corroboration in rape cases or evidentiary rules in matrimonial disputes, or the entrenched and often discriminatory attitudes from the bench, or the application of customary law and practices of howsoever, they all serve to underscore the inferior status of women. A shared common law heritage and the largely patriarchal nature of Pacific societies have also played their part."

Mr Madraiwiwi said that women in the Pacific will welcome the book as the subject will allow and relates their own experiences. "And should only one woman becomes empowered by this book, it will have fulfilled the promise. it holds out, as well as the hopes of all those who seek the improvement of women' legal status as part of the continuing search for complete and meaningful gender equality. A "must read" publication for those interested in women studies and the law in the Pacific as this book embraces the laws of Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa. ■

FWRM Holds Budget Talks

FWRM convened a meeting to discuss Government's 1999 Budget at the FWRM office on Tuesday, May 5th in which representatives from Women's Action for Change (Peni Moore), the National Council of Women (Titilia Naitini and Litea Bale) and the Department of Women (Seini) attended. According to Coordinator Gina, women's NGOs were interested in learning about the budget process. The forum was a follow-up to a meeting convened by the Fiji Council of Churches to dicuss ways in which NGOs are able to influence the Budget Process. "From this meeting, we endorsed that a draft paper be presented to the next FCC meeting to highlight women's concerns which largely involves the review of current policies on women and identify common problems that women face, allocation of resources in line with Government's commitment at Beijing - to meet the needs of women, the issue of unpaid work to be costed and included in the budget as part of the GDP Product, formulation of policies to redressing gender disparity, access to bilateral funding and ways in which the Deaprtment of Women can actively support our individual organizations' work.

New Rape Law Sides with Victims - Philipines

No longer will a rape victim be blamed for being the wrong place at the wrong time. A new anti-rape law signed by President Fidel V Ramos last 30 September 1997 makes rapes a public crime instead of simply a private one. This means that other than the victim, authorities can now press charges. Moreover, "the law is victim – conscious," says lawyer Zenida Reyes, "The victim does not have to be subjected to humiliation anymore."

In the past rape was defined as a violation of a woman's chastity - a holdover from the Spanish penal code of the 18th century. If a woman was considered promiscuous, it was easy to convince a court that she had consented to having sex. If she was a prostitute, she might as well forget about pressing charges. Moreover, an accused can still beat the charges if he weds the victim. "The present law is saying rape is not about reputation or sexual history. It is a violation of a person," says Lawyer Evelyn Ursua of the Women's Legal Bureau.

Under the new law, a wife can charge her husband with rape. It also widens the definition of the crime to include penetration with foreign object as well as non-consensual anal and oral sex, although the corresponding punishment is lesser than regular penetration. "Insertion of metal or anything should be grave or worse, especially if leads to death," lawyer Ursula lamented. The new law will presumably give pause to pedophiles. Sex with a child seven years or younger, whatever the circumstances, carries the death penalty. Rape of minors by their carer carries the death as well.

In addition, rape under the following circumstances carries the death penalty:

- If the victim contracts the HIV virus
- If the rape results in permanent mutilation
- If the victim was in police or military custody, and
- If relatives are forced to watch

In all such cases, the accused cannot seek bail. Philippine Senate's "honorary woman," Senator Raul Roco, who first proposed a new rape bill in the House of Representatives in 1988, considered the law "the first of its kind in Southeast Asia." The Senate version was authored by Senator Leticia Ramos-Shahani and took nine years to clear Congress.

Not everyone is jubilant: Liza Maza, chief of the women's coalition General Assembly Binding Women for Reform, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action (GABRIELA), seriously doubts is the new law will make a difference. She notes that most rape victims are poor and that the system has been "proven to be partial to the wealthy and powerful."

In 1997, a total of 794 cases were recorded in the first quarter, up 385 over the same period in 1996. In Manila, a rape happens every day. Half the inmates on death row are rapists.

look at the family system as a whole. Article 6 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires that state parties ensure to the maximum possible extent the survival and development of the child. Article 19 of CRC deals with the protection of children from abuse and neglect. State parties are to take appropriate legislative, administrative and social, educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, mal-treatment or exploitation including sexual abuse while in the care of parents, legal guidance or any other person who has the care of the child.

Article 3 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) requires that state parties take all the appropriate measures to ensure the full development and enhancement of women for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedom on the basis of equality with them.

The Hague Convention

Child abduction and particularly abduction across borders have been raised as an issue of concern and there have been examples of such cases occurring in Fiji. The Hague Convention on international child abduction adopted in 1980 has a two-fold objective. Firstly to secure the prompt return of wrongfully removed or retained children to the country of their natural habitual residence and secondly, to ensure that access rights are respected between contracting parties. The basic approach of the Convention is however to require the promote return of the child under 16 years and essentially restore the status quo before wrongful removal or retention occurred.

The Hague Convention provides for the return whether or not there is a custody order in favor of the parent or the parent left behind from whose care the child has been kidnapped. The return remedy that the Convention provides is additional to any other means or remedies to seek the child's return such as, enforcing a foreign custody order or by other international or regional agreements or by statutory means. Fiji is currently not party to the Hague Convention and it is hoped that this reference may stimulate interest in this Convention. The problem of custody related abduction and retention of children across borders are addressed by the Convention and therefore would go a long way to provide guidance for children, parents, judges, lawyers and welfare professional and all those involved in such cases. ■

US AIDS Research in Poor Nations Raises Outcry

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg

Washington – For the past two years, the United States has been conducting experiments on pregnant women infected with HIV in Africa, Thailand and the Dominican Republic in which women are given drugs that can prevent transmission of the deadly AIDS virus to their babies and some receive only dummy pills.

The studies are so controversial that even some government's own scientists have questioned whether they are ethical. Now one of the nation's most prestigious medical journal has thrown a harsh spotlight on the research, with an editorial that likens it to the notorious Tuskegee experiment, in which poor black men suffering from syphilis were left untreated.

The AIDS studies which involve 12,211 women in seven countries and are paid for by the National Institute of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention aim to help the developing world find a cheap, effective method of preventing transmission of HIV to babies. The research is based on one of the most dramatic discoveries of the AIDS epidemic: that women who take the drug AZT during pregnancy can cut the risk of transmission by two-thirds.

But the drug regimen, as used in the United States, costs about $1,000 per mother, so public health officials want to know if there are less expensive ways of use AZT to achieve the same benefit. Half the foreign women in the experiments receive AZT, at varying levels that differ from the amounts used in the US. The other half gets the dummy, or placebo pills.

As a result, critics say more than 1,000 infants will contract the AIDS virus, infections that the studies detractors say could be prevented. "We have turned our backs on these mothers and their babies," complained Dr Peter Lurie of Public Citizen, an advocacy group that has condemned the research.

Federal officials counter that the use of dummy pills is the only way to get a quick, reliable result and that it is not depriving women of therapy they would have otherwise received, since the AZT is not affordable in the Third World. But some critics suggest that this argument is reminiscent of defenses offered by the Tuskegee experiment, in which researchers watched the ravages of syphilis while saying that the subjects of their study, poor black men from rural Alabama would not have been treated in any case.

"Some of the same arguments that were made in favor of the Tuskegee study many years ago are emerging in a new form in the AZT studies in the third world, Dr Marcia Angell, the executive editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, said in an interview this week. ■

Domestic Violence, Child Abuse & Child Abduction

By Mere Pulea

The level of violence in society and domestic violence are public issues. Current trends of violence have been given focus by the media. The Fiji Women's Crisis Center and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement have been instrumental in highlighting the problems of domestic violence and particularly, violence against women. Child mal-treatment and abuse have also been given attention but the issues of violence against women and child abuse are reflected as separate issues.

There are some forms of violence that occur in the family that go unnoticed and unrestrained because of social, religious and cultural values. Perhaps this may be one of the reasons why domestic violence and child abuse are not readily linked. Despite the lack of and benefit of research into this matter, there are however, some awareness amongst welfare professionals that a critical look should be taken at the relationship between violence against women and child abuse. Certain assumptions can be made that child abuse may not occur in isolation from other family problems and that links may be made between domestic violence and child abuse.

Based on the above assumptions, the following issues can be raised:

The first issue is where a woman is battered by her adult male partner, there is a likelihood that the adult partner may also be physically abusive towards children. This is common in cases where a child or children intervenes to protect the mother from male partners but the extent to which this occurs requires independent research.

The second issue is where a battered woman is unable to or unwilling to shield children from the batterer's violence. In such situation, a woman is the victim of the assault but both parents could also find themselves subject to care proceedings under the Juvenile's Act for neglect and mal treatment.

The third issue is that unfortunately some parents who are victims of violence may also be perpetrators of the abuse towards children. The abusive parent in this scenario can face criminal charges while at the same time trying to protect them from domestic violence through the Court.

The fourth issue is where children as merely observers or merely witnessing repeated domestic violence in their home. Such exposure to a violent environment may itself be an act of emotional abuse, which could justify the intervention of Social Welfare professionals.

Where there are complaints of domestic violence of child abuse, it is necessary to

International Women's Day Activities Update

March was a very busy month for FWRM staff and members. Being the month in which the internationally acclaimed International Women's Day fell, FWRM stepped up on its lobbying and advocacy activities in the hope of creating more public awareness on issues concerning women and work in Fiji under the WEER project. FWRM's activities centered on the theme ***Girls Can Do Anything*** as mentioned in the last issue. FWRM participated in activities organized by other women's groups such as the National Council of Women, Fiji YWCA and the Fiji Women's Crisis Center.

WEER project officer Reijieli (nearest to the camera) was invited by the Fiji Institute of Technology staff to discuss the setting up of a creche for staff and students. The project was funded by the NZODA and opened by the NZ High Commissioner Susan Blumdhart who she made a reference to FWRM's campaign Girls Can Do Anything in her speech.

NCW in conjunction with the Pacific Concerns Resource Center organized a panel discussion on *Women in the Colonies*. Ema and Reijieli (LRTO and WEER officers respectively) participated in a half-day IWD celebrations which included panel discussions and displays. FWRM took part along with PCRC and other NGOs. FWRM displays were set up at the YWCA Center in downtown Suva for women to view the work that the Movement was doing in Fiji.

Media & Campaign Activities

Five women employed in male dominated professions were interviewed and their stories appeared in the last issue of *Balance* as well as the local newspaper, *Fiji Times*. We thank Suzie Yee Shaw, Solei Fong, Urmila Karan, Asenaca Nawaqalevu and Fulori for their contributions to the *Girls Can Do Anything* campaign.

Ema appeared on *Talanoa*, a popular locally produced TV program on on which she spoke about IWD and FWRM's campaign and activities for the month of March. *Girls Can Do Anything* articles were published in the Fiji Times to encourage young women making career choices to enter male dominated professions. The articles were about the opportunities and constraints women aspiring to enter male dominated professions face in Fiji. A *Girls Can Do Anything* advertisement produced in conjunction with Monsoon Films was televised for two weeks drawing encouraging comments from members of the public. FWRM Coordinator, Gina Houng Lee also appeared on television speaking about FWRM as an organization on *Fiji 5.30* a newly produced TV segment. *Girls Can Do Anything* stickers were produced and distributed. To top it off, radio advertisements on the theme were produced by FWRM in conjunction with FM96 and aired for 2 weeks towards the end of March.

Marchers take to the streets on the evening of the* Reclaim the Night *street procession to celebrate International Women's Day.

Reijieli co-hosted a radio program with Helen Chandra on Island Network previously FBC in which she spoke about the campaign . She also spoke on the Women's Employment & Economic Rights project, employment legislation and its effect on women workers in the formal sector in Fiji. Zarina participated in a Hindi radio program in which she discussed issues relating to the campaign and FWRM's work specifically family law. As a result of the media programs, FWRM has been deluged with clients coming in to seek assistance on employment and family related grievances. FWRM has been fully utilising the services offered by the Fiji Young Lawyers Association (YLA) by referring clients to the Association who comprise young qualified lawyers volunteering their time to offer free legal advice. The YLA are currently operating from the

FWRM Office every Monday evenings.

Reclaim the Night

On March 7th, FWCC in conjunction with the NGO Coalition on Human Rights organized a Reclaim the Night sreet march with a difference as the procession followed a new route compared to other recent processions. According to Edwina from FWCC, the new route was mapped out taking into account the more unsafe streets or the Red Light Zone in Suva where women have been reported to be under more physical threat. There has been many reported attacks on women in some particular areas of Suva such as Mark Street and Waimanu Rd. A special thank you to those brave women, (Bernadette Ganilau and Maca Tora) who walked up to total strangers in the streets to disseminate stickers and other information materials. Special thanks goes to friends and family members of FWRM staff who turned up in support of the march. We also thank the men that turned out to join women and children in the march.

Panel Discussion on Human Rights

Rosemary attended a panel discussion convened by FWCC in which notable speakers like Professor Asesela Ravuvu, Professor Vijay Naidu of the University of the South Pacific, Fiji Law Reform Commission's Asenaca Uluiviti, UNDP"s Isabel Waterscott, FTUC's Attar Singh, PCRC's Losena Salabula and FWCC's Anita Singh spoke on human rights issues of their special interest. An invigorating approach to theissue by Professor Ravuvu generated discussion. In his presentation, he was critical on human rights as a western concept.

A female member of the audience was critical of the work (or the lack of it) that women's organizations were carrying out in Fiji challenging them to be more grassroots proactive. The outburst by this sister was taken with good humor by women's groups and if anything made us reflective of the relationships we shared and the scope of the work that we are currently doing.

Communication Officer, Rosemary Naivalurua talking to St Josephs Secondary School students during one of FWRM's school visits.

Women in Business Seminar

On March 17th, the New Zealand High Commission convened a women in Business seminar in which close to forty women attended. Interested and notable women's speakers such as Sereima Lomaloma, Director of the Department of Women, the Pacific Community's Pacific Women's Resource Bureau Director Emele Duituturaga and representatives of UNDP, Forum Secretariat, FTIB and the NZ High Commission made presentations. They spoke to women about the availability of grant assistance to women venturing into business in Fiji. Businesswomen such as Mere Samisoni, Ofa Duncan and Eileen Burness also spoke about their experiences as women conducting business in Fiji. The session was lauded as very successful with many women returning home more enriched about information concerning women in business.

Members of FWRM and staff taking sales of the book, **Law for Pacific Women** *at the launch. Former FWRM Coordinator, Praveen Sharma displays a copy for the cameras.*

UNESCAP Workshop

On March 10th and 11th Gina attended a UNESCAP workshop held in conjunction with the British Aid's RRRT in which issues concerning NGO networking on how to promote CEDAW were addressed.

Seminar on Family Law

On March 18th and 19th Ema attended a seminar on family law convened by British Aid RRRT in conjunction with the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS). The seminar involved the participation of representatives from other sectors to discuss reforms to the Family Law Legislation.

School Visit

On Friday, March 27th, Reijieli and

beliefs and values well suited for a past, devoid of the Christian doctrine of equality, fairness and justice, should not be entertained today.

FWRM: Are human rights for all a realistic concept or is it just an illusion?

Yes, indeed. It is an ideal to aspire to and it can become a reality when achieved.

FWRM: In your studies in the Pacific, can you give some examples of how women's basic human rights have been applied and evident in the Polynesian and Melanesian cultures? Perhaps you can elaborate on the Fijian culture as according to some, women were the downtrodden gender in the traditional Fijian culture e.g. when wives of men killed at times of war gave up their lives, when rape and pillage was the order of the day in times of war.

It is important not to confuse the present with the past, but it is important to know the past in order to understand better the present if we were to have vision for the future. Women's basic rights were not at all an issue in the past, because women's position in society was determined by traditional and cultural practices defined and supported by the people's belief and value systems and sanctioned by their social and political systems. Such beliefs and practices were acceptable in that cultural and physical context with a different philosophy of life.

The spread of Christianity from Europe to most part of the world including the Pacific islands brought with it a new philosophy of life supported by Christian belief and values which emphasized the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God and whereby fairness and justice should reign. Unfortunately habits are hard to change and many continue to abide by such old habits even though Christianity has been in the Pacific for over a century. It is difficult to change them because those who had acquired power over others by traditional means are not interested to lose such domination over others and using cultural reasoning to perpetuate their positions. People's traditional cultural outlook must change to suit the present condition and philosophy of life embodied in the Christian principals for living and sanctioned by international laws and covenants on human rights.

FWRM: How do you think the concept of human rights for all can be applied to the Fiji situation? (I especially noted what you said about how the colonizers who are the promoters of human rights are the very ones who were the abusers).

There are a number of dimensions on human rights. For example, there is the international Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These rights however, derive from the inherent dignity of the human being as mentioned earlier on.

In the Fijian situation, the ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his or her economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his civil and political rights. Our Government has the obligation to promote the respect for and the observance of the rights recognized in the various international Covenants on Human Rights.

Institutional and structural framework created for administrative control and resource exploitations by the Colonial Government need be reviewed and changed if the universal respect for and observance of human rights become a reality here in Fiji. Cultural legacies of the colonial days are still prevalent that continue to grind against the ideals in the International Covenants on Human Rights.

FWRM: How do you feel about thesituation in the colonized countries of the Pacific e.g. the French territories, Bougainville (where people do not have the right to self-determination)?

These situations are not in accord with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Part 1, Article 1 which said that all people should have the right self-determination by virtue of their political and economic, social and cultural development. The problem is that those who have benefited through the still existing colonial structures and other remaining shackles of colonial mercantilism find it difficult to accept change leading to their erosion of their power and position.

"Those who have benefitted through the existing colonial structures and other remaining shackles of colonial mercentalism find it difficult to accept change leading to their erosion of their power and position."

Thus they divide the people and continue to support their colonial counterparts from whom their sources of power depend. Those who are against the status quo are labeled as rebels or activists for a better word. Generally colonialists are usually reluctant to let go their colonies if they found it is still economically and politically beneficial to their motherlands.

FWRM: How do you justify the view that it is a poor man's basic human right to steal from the rich to feed his starving family?

I do not support such as view. Such view I think only come about when people are so much concerned about their own rights without recognizing the rights of others to live and accepting that rights have their obligations too if we were to live as a social and human community. The poor man has no basic right to steal from others, even the rich. I am sure the poor could request to be assisted and be developed to help him or her to live a better life than thieving.

but because they fear for loss of jobs, they are unable to do so. They are the ones who will be most affected by the Wage Order. The intention by Government was clearly not thought through well enough because of the absence of a consultative process with those who would be affected" Gina told protesters.

She also told them that Government's intention to impose the wage guideline was uncalled for particularly at a time when people in Fiji were still reeling from the increase in cost of living and basic items as a result of the recent devaluation. "It is the common worker who will suffer most. Fiji already has a high rate of poverty with an estimated 40% of people living beneath the official poverty line and with redundancy and devaluation, this will mean more people will join that number. Unions definitely have to push for more suitable redundancy packages because current employment laws do not adequately protect workers who are made redundant. Women are the faces of poverty and there are more and more women coming to FWRM to seek assistance in addressing worker's grievances ranging from unfair dismissal to sexual harassment and poor working conditions. "

WEER Project Officer, Reijieli Nicole said that when talking with women during the protest, "I was overwhelmed with the support and the number of people who turned up to the protest and my observation was that when workers are being pushed into a corner, they are become more assertive and strive to know their rights. Bank workers I spoke to found Gina's presentation enlightening and said that they were ignorant of most of the issues Gina spoke about at the protest venue."

In a recent newspaper interview, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka said that Government's intention to impose the guideline was to mitigate gains from the devaluation and "was done for national interest. The proposed guideline was not to deny workers' rights but protect the national economy. It is a pity because in protecting the national economy, the central concern is the security of employment of workers." Meanwhile, the FTUC is planning to hold another national strike on May 21st if Government does not agree with terms set forth during the negotiations. The strike is estaimated to have cost the nation over F$2 million in lost earnings.

Professor Asesela Ravuvu, (fifth from left) speaking at the FWCC convened panel on "What is Human Rights."

Human Rights For all Attainable

FWRM Communication Officer Rosemary Naivalurua interviewed University of the South Pacific Professor Asesela Ravuvu. Professor Ravuvu, the Director of the Institute of Pacific Studies is vocal on issues concerning human rights, particularly its meaning within the context of the Pacific culture. His presentation at the Fiji Women's Crisis Center convened Panel Discussion on "Women's Human Rights" to celebrate International Women's Day last month was a "show stealer" generating earnest discussions amongst those who were present. At the panel discussion, Professor Ravuvu discussed human rights and its context in the Pacific culture. These are excerpts from the interview with FWRM.

FWRM:What are your views on human rights and how is it applicable in the indigenous context (if it can be applied that is)?

Human rights are concerned with the right of human beings to live, the right to enjoy freedom without fear of being harassed, assaulted or persecuted and the right to prosper through one's own earnest and honest effort. These are parts of the natural rights imbued by our Creator in all human beings recognizing the inherent dignity and equality.

There is no good reason why such a concept cannot be applied in the indigenous context where the value of all human beings was once strongly emphasized and whereby leaders cared much for their followers to whom they were accountable. Even in such traditional indigenous contexts, there was no reason (except cultural) at all why the concept of just practice and fairness cannot be applied. The problem is that some people whenever they abused their position or power, resorted to tradition and other customary practices as a justification or scapegoat for all their mal-practices. Such traditional practices based on old

Rosemary visited Mahatma Ghandi High School to speak to over 200 students of forms five, six and seven about FWRM and the *Girls Can Do Anything* campaign. Students were given time to discuss and note down their responses to such issues as: what were the constraints to girls entering male dominated professions? This created lively debate amongst students and it was evident that the campaign was quite popular amongst high school students. Reijilei also visited Bhawani Dayal High School, an Indo-Fijian school at which boys inquired as to why despite opportunities available to them, very few female students were studying science subjects. Reijilei replied that gender conditioning could be attributed to being the reason why female students were reluctant to take science classes because it was seen as more of a male area of education and parents and students needed to be educated in this area.

Collective members of FWRM meet every fortnight to discuss issues on women and make decision on matters relating to the Movement. From left: Ema (obscured) Vani, Mridula, Praveen, Vika, Zarina, Jane, Pushpa and Gina during one of the meetings.

Panel Discussion–Women's Human Rights

On March 25th, Reijieli was invited by FWCC to be part of a panel of speakers on the topic of women's human rights. She spoke to the audience on issues concerning WEER in relation to women and work. Reijieli took a micro economic approach to the issues of women and work focussing on three areas that FWRM is working towards with the WEER Project which were: equal pay for work of equal value, maternity leave protection and workers with family reponsibilities. Her presentation included drawing on the areas where Fiji was lacking in adhering to ILO standards of work conditions.

She spoke to the audience of the need for more crèches and child minding facilities to cater for women with young children to ensure that they are given the opportunities to find work. A member of the audience highlighted the need for workers to initiate community child-minding facilities thus taking the burden away from employers whose main objective is gaining profit and who are reluctant to initiate such services because of additional costs.

Reijieli also highlighted the need for flexible maternity leave and how women's roles in the home are extended into the formal working sector as nurturers and caregivers. The discussion showed that there was a need for women organizations to work in concert and there were concerns that women's organizations were not empowering those they represented. There was also suggestions that more information in vernacular version be made available to members of the public and women. Also discussed was the need for NGOs to tap into the school curriculum and cultivate a culture of human rights amongst students. Her presentation was extensively covered in the media by both radio and local newspapers.

Fiji Association of Women Graduates

On March 31st, Reijieli presented to members of FAWG on issues of domestic workers and the Fiji National Provident Fund scheme. Reijilei said that there was a need for extensive market research to be done in this area to gauge the needs and the feasibility of such scheme. The FNPF domestic worker scheme is a voluntary scheme that largely depends on the relationship of the employer and employee and the employer is not obligated to pay money on behalf of the employee.

Rotary Meeting

Reijilei made a presentation to the Suva Rotary Club where she spoke to members about the WEER project and FWRM's submission to the legislative reform of the Employment Act. Reijieli had this to say about the session, "it was one of the most difficult talks I have had to make as most members of Rotary were business people who were very critical of the work that FWRM was committed to through WEER. Again they were pushing from the profit making side which they felt contradicted with the WEER mandate." Reijilei recommended that FWRM initiated talks with the employers through the Fiji Employers Federation to discuss FWRM's submissions to the reforms in Employment Act and to "address their perspectives and fears."

Workshop with Garment Manufacturers Association

Reijieli accompanied by Gina and Rosemary held two afternoon workshops at the Garment Training Center organized by the Garment Manufacturing Association. Although none of the participants were garment manufacturers who were the initial target group, supervisors and teachers attended. They were educated on sexual harassment in the workplace, how to identify and combat it. It is hoped that these instructors will educate students on the practice of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Cut Flower Industry Flourishes Along with Women in Business

Eileen Burness spoke to women at a Women in Business seminar on the invitation of the New Zealand High Commission last month. At the seminar women discussed ways of accessing loans, grants and training. In 1994, Ms Burness, famous for her orchid garden tours for tourists in the western division involved other women to start up their own cut flower businesses through funding from the Fiji Development Bank and below are excerpts from her presentation to participants:

"We are all locals and when we tried to get loans, it was very difficult. After we started, to supplement our income we have what we call a home and garden tours. We got a feasibility study done and when we went to the bank they all said you have to get your husbands approval. I found out about the New Zealand Loan Scheme at the Fiji Development Bank with a minimum of a $1000 and maximum of $10,000. The women needed $10,000 to grow orchids in their back yard. I also had to work on training so that the women learn how to conduct their business and grow orchids properly. The NZ Embassy helped me and funded the workshops and we had up to 45 women at the workshop. I now have twenty women growing 2,000 – 3,000 orchids growing in their backyards.

By this time, the husbands were also into the picture as well and they are the orchid growers. By this time, there was a lot of advertising on the newspapers and television about the New Zealand Business Council and I was inundated with telephone calls from women in the Suva area also wanting to orchids (Suva is not very good for orchids because it's too wet) and we decided on anthuriums. The Fiji Trades & Investment Board helped me to bring in a disease-free plant material and the Fiji Association of Women Graduates helped send me to go and find and source the material for us to start the enthurium project. The second workshop also funded by the NZ Embassy was on how to grow orchids and a consultant also taught women on growing anthuriums.

The Department of Agriculture finally approved that my first shipment of anthuriums be brought in from Holland. I now have around fifty women from Nadi to Nausori wanting to do anthuriums but it is lot of hard work and again the NZ Aid Scheme has come to our aid and women are able to tap into this small business loan scheme at FDB and since the FDB staff are helpful now. As long as the repayment is done, it's good because it gives us a good name and the other women coming up are able to get a loan without any problems. We have to do away with the island mentality of handout. Aid should be given only to get women started but also women have to learn to pay their loans back. We hope to hold another workshop this year with consultants of anthuriums from Hawaii and teaching women how to do accounting and manage small business. ■

FWRM Staff Appointed to Labor Advisory Board

A staff member of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) has been appointed an independent member of the Labor Advisory Board. FWRM's Legal Rights Training Officer (LRTO), Ema Tagicakibau was appointed by the Minister for Labor and Industrial Relations. Her term is effective from 1st of April, 1998 to 31st of December, 1998.

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement has been a leading advocate for women workers' rights and the appointment is in recognition of FWRM's role in gender advocacy in the area of women's employment in the formal and informal sectors.

Coordinator Gina Houng Lee said that she was very confident of Ms Tagicakibau's capabilities as a member of the Advisory Board. "Ms Tagicakibau's appointment means that the concerns and issues facing women workers will be articulated to the Board. We congratulate the Minister for this appointment and hope that more women are appointed to other Boards," Ms Houng Lee said. Ms Tagicakibau has a strong background in community development and holds a Masters Degree in Women's Studies from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. She has previously worked as a secondary school teacher in various schools around Fiji.

FROM THE DESK: We hope you enjoyed this issue of *Balance* and we are again seeking your response to some of the issues covered so far. Please forward letters, contributions to *Balance* and member subscriptions to the Coordinator, FWRM, P O Box 14194, Suva, Fiji.We can be contacted on telephone (679) 313156 or Fax: (679) 313466. Subscription rates: Fiji - F$5, South Pacific Member Countries - F$10, Australia & New Zealand F$15, Asean & America F$20, Europe & Sub-Sahara - F$25

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FWRM

"Balancing the Scales"

Balance

Newsletter of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement

March- April 1998 Issue

GOVT v UNION IMPASSSE THREATENS NATIONAL STABILITY

The Fiji Trades Union Congress organized a national one-day protest on April 23rd against Government's intention to impose a three per cent ceiling on the Wage Order. The intention was announced in the midst of heated debate and outcry against Government's recent decision to devaluate the Fiji dollar and the announcement that it will be charging 35 per cent tax on bank savings. Close to 10,000 union members of various unions affiliated to the FTUC reported to have stayed away from work bringing some services to a temporary standstill. However, essential services remained uninterrupted and in most parts of the country, business went on as usual.

Protestors sit down at the recent national strike in which 10,000 union workers around the country took part. Photo: Courtesy of the Fiji Times.

Government mobilized its security forces (both the Police and Military to be on standby) in case they were needed to assist in the running of essential services such as water, electricity, hospital and airports. On the eve of the national strike, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka went on air "setting the record straight" and blaming the FTUC for distorting information and facts to its members.

After failed attempts to come to an agreement, Government decided to refer negotiations to the Tripartite Forum consisting of Government, FTUC and Fiji Employers Federation representatives. The forum converged in a meeting in an attempt to dialogue amicably on the issues at hand. FEF blamed the FTUC for coming to the negotiation table with demands placing the dialogue "under duress" because FTUC had included two additional items to the agenda (two of which Government was aware of but the FEF were not) – the check off system and the issue of redundancy. The FTUC had demanded that employers recognize the check off system (direct deduction of union fees from source without the threat of disciplinary actions) and that redundancy be an exercise of the last resort and only if an organization is not profitable.

FWRM went to visit the protestors at the FTUC complex and according to WEER Project Officer Reijieli Nicole and Coordinator Gina Houng Lee, the feeling was one of togetherness and solidarity "and it was contagious." Gina spoke to protestors about FWRM's role and activities particularly pointing out the plight of garment workers. She said that FWRM was representing women workers who were unable to participate in the protest because of job insecurity. " They would love to be here

what's in this issue:

*National Strike * Are Human Rights Attainable in the Pacific? * Child Abuse & the Hague Convention * Women & Environment * FWRM's IWD Activities * Sack Ms Minister! * Women & Hiv/AIDS * FGM Issues *FWRM Launches Book