INTRODUCTION

WOMEN AND WORK IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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Although 'Women and Development' is a common theme in third world studies, the actual quantity of published material on women in the Pacific is still minimal (for bibliographies see e.g., Simmons and Yee (eds.), 1982, Slatter and Moran 1984). Original research can be found in various papers and reports but it is generally scattered, lacks synthesis and is tucked away in the offices of governmental and international planning bodies. Most visibly, women's studies have not left a significant mark on the 'established' Pacific journals and there are few substantive publications on the Pacific (for an exception see O'Brien and Tiffany (eds.), 1984). This omission is even more glaring when the field of women's labour studies in the Pacific is surveyed. To date there is no general publication on women and work in the Pacific.

Such an observation is hardly a revelation when the generally under-documented state of studies on labour and specifically work is considered. Although it is refreshing to note that the lacunae in labour studies are beginning to be filled (see the collection in Howard (ed.), 1987), new studies have generally overlooked the issue of women and work in the Pacific. Pacific scholarship has not exactly nurtured labour studies (see Howard 1986) but we might perhaps be tempted to hope that greater inroads into the study of women and work will result once labour studies in the Pacific have developed. On the other hand, the current gloomy state of the organised labour movement and the reaction against it in the Pacific, most notably in Fiji, does not realistically presage a deluge of research on women and work (especially in the organised and formal labour sector) in the near future. If the current fascination with chiefly structures, as part of the wider interest in Pacific elites, continues, then the prospect for focusing attention on women is also bleak. Pacific scholarship has never been particularly enthusiastic about studying society from the 'bottom up'. While it is accepted that women are not completely precluded from being part of the elite class in the Pacific, their economic and political position has remained marginal. Pacific studies must address the study of 'ordinary people' (e.g., see Denoon 1973), the 'faceless masses', if it is going to take women seriously. The lives of

exceptional women should emerge in such an exercise but even their histories will continue to be suffocated if Pacific studies only accept knowledge derived from the dominant classes. Similarly, concentration on superpowers in the Pacific and on 'higher' political processes leaves little room for detailed attention to the activities of 'ordinary' women. Tiffany (1984:3-4) and Slatter (1984) have also drawn attention to the bias of anthropologists in the Pacific: "...assumptions based on their own narrow perceptions of the role of women in their own societies - and the predilection they demonstrated for studying the more visible political relations and institutions of men in these societies" (Slatter 1984:1). Although Pacific scholars have neglected women's labour studies, they are by no means unique. As Davin (1981) has noted the patriarchical bias of society and its scholars skews perceptions of women and labour. Specifically, such ideology has overlooked the fact that women's work constitutes real work and that even if it is performed behind kitchen doors it should be regarded as productive as that of the waged or salaried worker. Women's work also encompasses the reproduction and maintenance of a workforce, which further reduces costs for the employers. Such issues have also begun to be analysed within the Pacific context, as in the papers by Shameem and Lateef in this volume.

Davin, in her analysis of women and labour history, has also suggested that labour researchers have neglected studies of women in the labour process, perhaps because labour studies, like most branches of academia, have been dominated by men. This has resulted in a concentration on the organised labour movement, and particularly trade unions. While such a pattern has tended to be replicated in the Pacific, labour researchers can hardly be cast as the guilty oppressors of women's labour studies, when the general disregard for any form of workers' histories has been the norm. Labour research in the Pacific has also begun to delve into organised forms of industrial action, including some work on trade unions and strikes. Although vitally important, such an emphasis does tend to by-pass more covert forms of organisation and resistance by women workers (see Pollert 1981:129-158 for a study of this among female factory workers in England). Since there has been only a handful of studies of forms of covert resistance in the South Pacific (and primarily on sugar plantation workers, e.g., see Lal 1986, Saunders 1979), it is not surprising that evidence of spontaneous actions of resistance, sit-ins, go-slows, workplace language and jokes, sickness or absenteeism among women workers remains hidden. Research into 'passive' forms of industrial action is far more relevant to the bulk of female waged and casual workers in the Pacific who do not have any formal industrial organisation to express their grievances overtly (as noted by Slatter in this volume. See also the documents on domestic and garment workers).

Further, if the subject of women and work in the informal sector, the home and the family, is under-researched then evidence of their resistance as 'unseen' workers will also tend to remain hidden. This has been reinforced by a 'Pacific' ideology which stresses consensus and the denial of conflict within Pacific societies. Increasingly, however, studies of Pacific women by women are recognising intersex conflict over property and power and efforts by women to organise themselves (e.g., Sexton 1984). Gailey's (1980) research on Tongan women has highlighted not only the division of labour and power between the sexes but also between chiefly and non-chiefly women.

Davin (1981:179) has also drawn attention to the dualism prevalent in both feminist and labour studies, particularly in history, which has depicted women as either examples of inspirational trailblazers or as helpless victims. She suggests that regardless of the political persuasiveness of such a dichotomy, it has led to a neglect of the enduring qualities of ordinary women's working lives. While the papers in this volume do highlight the oppressive nature of sectors of women's work in the Pacific, they also stress that these women are above all concerned with survival within repressive economic and ideological conditions of existence.

Problems in documenting women's activities, especially in the past, have also been used to explain the lack of research and publications in this field. Women have tended to leave fewer documentary records behind them. Initially this might be considered especially true of the Pacific where written material by Pacific Islanders has often been non-existent, scattered or incomplete. However, women obviously do communicate and if the researcher is sensitive to the medium, whether chants, songs, art, oral accounts or more structured interviews, then there is no reason why women's lives should remain a mystery or continue to be undocumented. Lal (1983: 112-4) analysed folksongs in addition to quantitative data to place on record the background and feelings of some Girmitiya women. Moore (1985) used oral and other documentary evidence to delve into the history of female Melanesian migrants in Queensland. Indeed, many years ago Thompson (1968) demonstrated that material often did exist on social groups or movements which had been previously considered undocumentable. Finding relevant material depended on the questions asked and on the perceptions of the researcher. Women's labour studies have more obstacles to confront, including the ideology of gender and class. Shameem tackles this in her reinterpretation of existing accounts of Girmitiya women. Knapman's research on white women in Fiji (reviewed in this volume by Leckie) has drawn together new evidence derived from the memories of some of these women. She critiques established gender-based stereotypes about colonial women, racism and empire.

Nevertheless, problems in documenting women and work persist and official statistical data cannot necessarily be relied upon to depict women's activities accurately. Drawing on the criticisms of Baster (1981) and Ware (1981), Slatter (1984:24-5) notes that census enumerators and other researchers tend to draw stereotypical or arbitrary demarcations and definitions to categorise work as housework or agricultural 'productive' work. This has consistently led to an underestimation of women's participation in the workforce. Cameron makes a similar point in his article and attempts to adjust official data to present a more realistic picture of women's work. The problem lies not only in locating and interpreting source material but also in encountering contemporary assumptions about gender and dealing with a political climate which may view with suspicion any research relating to the current conditions of female workers. This volume contains submissions by the Fiji Women's Rights Movement to the Garment Industry Tribunal held during 1986. Most of these garment workers have been too afraid to 'speak for themselves' for fear of victimisation or having their jobs terminated.

One of the stereotypes thrown up by the employers and some trade unionists during the Garment Industry Tribunal (and also implied in the Fiji Employment and Development Mission Report 1984) was the notion that women's work was really for 'pin money', and in areas marginal to the 'real work' of the breadwinner (see Joekes 1985 for a study of similar assumptions in Morocco). Quite the opposite is argued in these papers but the assumption that 'women do not really work' has been a major obstacle to studies of women and labour in pre-capitalist and capitalist societies in the Pacific. For example Schoeffel and Kikau (1981: 25-6) were told during a survey in Tailevu that ethnic Fijian women only did washing and cooking. In fact, their labour was central to subsistence activities such as fishing and horticulture (see also Slatter 1984:20). Faletau (1981) surveyed 19 villages in Tonga and found, contrary to prevailing stereotypes, that women were heavily involved in agricultural production in addition to domestic duties and handicraft production. Fahey's study (1984) of women in Madang, Papua New Guinea, highlights the sexual division of labour and the associated unequal access to power which was already ingrained in precapitalist society. Female labour was essential to food production but generally men controlled gardening, landholding, and the distribution and consumption of foodstuffs, including meat. "Although women were major contributors to subsistence production men were the managers and women were the managed" (Fahey 1984:7). Feminist interpretations have documented the unequal access of women and men to political and economic resources but also argue that this inequality should not necessarily lead to the conclusion, prevalent in male dominated discourse, that women's activities were peripheral to Pacific societies or that all Pacific

women were passive drudges (see Tiffany 1984:3). Here we can also note the need for more careful analysis of inequality and class divisions among women from the same cultural group, as discussed in Gailey's (1980) study.

Several researchers have drawn attention to how the penetration of a cash economy and wage labour further added to the sexual division of labour in pre-capitalist Pacific societies (see Slatter 1984 for a survey of this). Fahey (1984) found that under colonialism new employment opportunities led to a separation between production for consumption, dominated by women, and production for exchange, dominated by men. While it could be argued that the demands on women's labour have increased in villages (especially in more recent years with greater male migration), there also remains throughout the Pacific the residue of Christian and Victorian middle class values which attempted to define parameters for 'women's work' (e.g., Gailey 1980: 314, Schoeffel and Kikau 1980: 22-4, Slatter 1984: 6-7). This has meant that training and development projects have tended to concentrate on promoting 'appropriate' activities for women, such as cooking, sewing, club management, or pre-school education, while the bulk of funding has been directed for training men in agricultural projects. Women's labour may be fundamental to rural development but men continue to control the administration, training and access to funds in these programmes (Slatter surveys material on this, 1984: 26-30; 34; 43-44. For a general discussion of women and development projects in the third world see e.g., Afshar (ed.), 1985, Boserup 1970, Rogers 1980).

Although men's labour was expropriated, integrated into the cash economy and labelled 'productive work', papers in this volume demonstrate that women participated fully in work outside the 'domestic sphere'. Pollard identifies that the path from village to housegirl to hotel housemaid and eventually marriage has been a means of economic and social mobility, especially for less educated ethnic Fijian women. The present deterioration of Fiji's economy in the wake of two military coups will undoubtedly block the sort of mobility Pollard describes. The demand for domestic workers has fallen dramatically with a dwindling expatriate population and unstable tourist industry. In another study, Lateef notes that although many female Indo-Fijians have become wage earners, this has not necessarily led to a challenging of women's subordination. Their subordinate status has been perpetuated by the institution of marriage which Lateef claims is sustained in its turn by the ideological framework and material conditions which have reinforced women's dependency on men. Shameem's paper addresses this issue from a radically different angle. She argues that when faced by severe economic hardships, some Indian women took up indenture to support themselves and their children and also to escape the repressive institutions of family and marriage. The latter are analysed as

reinforcing women's subordination through the control of their sexuality and their labour power. "The asymmetrical social power of men and women has enabled men to control women's sexuality and harness their labour and that of the children, as well as their ability to nurse and nurture. The family, marriage and male control of households ideologically define women as depenendent and inferior bearers of labour" (Afshar 1985: xiv).

Shameem's discussion also draws links between the sexual division of labour and the international division of labour in a historical setting where women from the third world provided cheap bonded labour and reproduced the colonial proletariat. Slatter's paper refers to the contemporary exploitation of female labour internationally and in Fiji. Widespread unemployment and the closure of several businesses in Fiji have already resulted in dramatically reduced hours and wages for those still employed. All of this, together with the uneasy relationship between the military regime and the union movement serves to negate attempts made during the past year to organise and represent female workers (see documents in this volume). Export-oriented industries continue to be promoted as part of the solution to Fiji's economic crisis. The recent devaluations of the Fiji dollar may encourage export investment as may wages reduced to levels below those which horrified the critics of the garment industry. It is little wonder that emigration is seen as an escape route but for some women the only way of taking advantage of this is to enter into an arranged marriage with men living abroad. Ironically, emigrant women from the South Pacific continue to fill part of the international 'reserve of labour' for the demanding but low-paid, casual jobs which are available in the places they emigrate to.

This volume represents a small and geographically selective contribution to fill the tremendous gap in the study of women and labour in the Pacific. It does not purport to be an overall survey and the final version has been considerably shaped by the efforts of a group of women scholars in the Pacific currently undertaking original research on aspects of women and work. For some of these writers (and those who could not but did try to contribute papers), their commitment to feminist labour studies is strong and cannot be separated from their academic writing. It also needs to be stated that critical and committed scholarship in the Pacific is currently in a state of crisis. Most clearly this applies to Fiji, where local academics have faced severe pressures during a year which has seen two military coups. Scholarship in other parts of the Pacific also lacks support, particularly when it is critical of the status quo or when it focuses on the less 'prominent' members of society who invariably include the majority of women. Hopefully, future research will shed more light on the lives of Pacific women and of the labouring classes to which most of them belong, than was possible in this small volume.

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