

Chapter 6. NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS FOR WOMEN

Women's organizations in Tonga have always been community-oriented with their primary concern being to serve the needs of family and community as opposed to advancing the status of women as a group. Women's needs and concerns have therefore been very much moulded by a wider social and community-driven agenda. They have also been fairly conservatively defined, tending to reinforce traditional, domesticated roles (of dutiful wife and mother) and traditional skills (weaving, *tapa* making etc.).

In all these respects, two social forces have had a major influence: the Christian church and the ideology of the *fahu* - a cultural belief system that portrays women as enjoying superior status within Tongan society by virtue of their rights and privileges as sisters within the extended family system. Today, the church continues to play a prominent role in many women's organizations, both directly and indirectly. The ideology of the *fahu* also retains its influence, underpinning the acceptance by many women of the existing social order (notably the superior political status of men and their privileged land rights) and generally discouraging advocacy on women's rights.

It would probably be fair to say that women's organizations can still be broadly classified into those which are church-based or linked, and which have a purely religious agenda, and those which are associated with one or other of the Christian churches but which do not necessarily come under church leadership or sponsorship. The second category of organization also emphasizes familial values and the importance of women's traditional responsibilities for family/community welfare, domestic work and child rearing.

However, the character and style of the women's movement are beginning to show signs of adjustment. Tonga is undergoing immense social and economic change and this is contributing to increasing dislocation within the family and wider community. Domestic violence, sexual assault, teenage pregnancies, and alcohol/drug abuse are widespread problems. So are material hardship and poverty. While not all new, these problems form part of a much harsher and more turbulent social landscape today: one that is inevitably demanding fresh (and to some extent less traditional) responses from women's organizations.

One important point of departure already evident can be seen in the emerging challenge to some of the more discriminatory and/or abusive features of the dominant patriarchal culture. The successful work of the Catholic Women's League in promoting women's legal rights is the best example of this 'new wave'. Other initiatives may follow in the future although this may take some time given the sensitivity of the issues and the reluctance of many women to challenge entrenched cultural norms.

The following profiles on a selected number of women's organizations give an indication of the range of activities being undertaken. The selection does not include either the Catholic Women's League or the Ha'apai Women in Development, both of which are discussed in relation to specific projects in section C (1 and 2) above.

1. *Tonga Trust*

The Tonga Trust is a well-established NGO committed to promoting self-reliant and technologically appropriate development with particular attention to the needs of the poor and people living in the rural and outer island areas. Established in 1984, the organization has a membership of some 2,600. While the Trust's Board of Directors includes representation from the two main church communities (Wesleyan and Catholic), the organization engages purely in secular development activities.

In seeking to promote sustainable grassroots development, the Tonga Trust gives priority to village-based projects in four main areas: women in development; water supply and health; environment and natural resources; and training and institutional development. The Village Women's Development Program (VWD) is the longest serving project and works with about 270 women's groups in 60 outer island villages. Membership for Ha'apai, Vava'u and 'Eua is estimated to comprise some 2,000 families.

Home improvement (including kitchens, toilets, gardens and water supplies) is the foundation of the program and a primary goal is to empower women to be able to meet their needs and the needs of their families, thereby improving the quality of their lives.

2. *Diocese Village Women Development*

Established in 1975 by Catholic sisters, the Diocese Village Women Development was originally established to cater mainly for the needs of Catholic women. However, it soon became closely associated with the work of the Village Women's Development program of the former FSP organization (which today operates under the Tonga Trust).

The Diocese has a membership of approximately 3,000 and is involved in a wide range of activities aimed at promoting family values, strengthening traditional craft skills of women, and raising the standard of living through home improvements, in particular the construction of houses, kitchens, toilets, fencing and cement water tanks. Although not part of the core program, the broader social issues of domestic violence and the regional anti-nuclear struggle have featured on its agenda at different times.

3. *Ala'ua Ma'atonga Association*

This non-denominational organization is a local branch of the London-based Associated Country Women of the World. Established in Tonga in 1995 with just 100 members, it now has around 800 members. The basic aim of the Association is to work with grassroots women to improve the quality of their lives.

The Association has undertaken some important work with marginal women and their communities, especially families living in poorer low lying/squatter settlements on reclaimed mangrove swamp land on the periphery of Nuku'alofa. In the settlement of Popua, the Association has provided assistance to many families (some of whom are female-headed households) in the form of land preparation and building materials (soil/gravel mix, fencing etc.). Other support activities relate to improving water supplies, kitchen construction and income generating projects.

4. *Fefine'i Fonua 'O Tonga*

The *Fefine'i Fonua 'O Tonga* was established in 1973 and its main objectives are to improve the status of women, empower women, and improve the quality of their lives. Its membership is estimated to be around 1,500 and its activities include a village development program and training in leadership skills and small business management.

5. *Pan-Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association of Tonga (PPSEAWA)*

As indicated in its name, the PPSEAWA is part of a wider regional (Pacific and South East Asian) network. It has approximately 100 financial members, over 60 of whom are active.

Amongst the Association's goals is the desire to strengthen the bonds of peace, friendship and mutual support amongst women, to assist local charities and to improve the status of Tongan women in all areas. Its activities include weaving, handicrafts, cooking and vegetable farming.

6. *World Federation of Methodist Women (WFMW), Tonga Unit*

This is one of Tonga's oldest women's groups and represents the largest single church-based NGO with a membership of more than 3,000. As the name implies, the organization is the Tongan branch of a global network of Methodist Women (WFMW) and as such it receives financial support from sister affiliates.

The group's declared aims reflect a fairly focused spiritual and evangelical agenda: to 'assist in establishing Christ's Kingdom among all peoples and in all areas of life. To share the abundant life of Christ through evangelism, healing ministries, education and social services. To assist in the promotion of the missionary spirit throughout the world and to share fellowship and offer help in the building of a Christian community'.

7. *Women's Department, Free Wesleyan Church*

This is another church NGO with a strong Christian mission: 'to know Christ and to make him known'. However, group activities do not only include Bible study groups and prayer meetings. Volunteer work and choir competitions are amongst other, more socially oriented, activities.

8. *Women's Federation for World Peace*

A relatively new organization, the Women's Federation for World Peace has a very small membership (12 in 1996) and its main objective is 'to enhance the image of women and promote sound values among youth, families and in society.' Moral education is a core activity.

9. *Seventh Day Adventist Women's Ministry*

The program of this Nuku'alofa-based organization is not confined to religious activities but includes health awareness, cooking classes and marriage counseling.