

# Making the “Invisible” Visible: Women and the Anti-Nuclear Resistance in the Pacific Islands

Nicole George

## Introduction

In 2023, the movie *Oppenheimer* revived public interest in the story of the “father of nuclear technology”. For all the critical acclaim, this was not a movie that made much room for the presence of women nor for reflection on the gendered legacies of nuclear weapons. We should hardly be surprised. As Carol Cohn found, four decades ago, within the masculinised realm of the “defence intellectual,” calculations of strategic security advantage matter most. In these rarified spaces, debates on the human costs of nuclear weapons are invisible, sitting so far outside the scope of deliberation on defence strategy that they are considered “irrational.”<sup>1</sup>

Pacific peoples, especially women, have not had the luxury of distance from these weapons. Consequently, their calculations of rationality foreground the destructive human and environmental impacts of these technologies. Nuclear testing programs began in the Pacific in 1947 and continued in the Pacific Island territories controlled by the United States and France for the next half-century. They caused environmental degradation, displacement, illness, and mortality. As Pacific Island leaders’ demands for political self-determination increased from the 1960s, responding to a wave of decolonisation occurring globally in this period, so too did their opposition to these testing programs. Pacific women were at the forefront of campaigns to rid the Pacific of all nuclear weapons and to see the people harmed by these weapons receive justice. Their efforts “made visible” the fact that the Pacific was not an empty expanse of water but a “sea of islands”<sup>2</sup> and that the people of these islands were living with the realities of nuclear weapons’ destructive power.

## Women-led resistance against US nuclear testing in Marshall Islands

In Marshall Islands, the years immediately after the Second World War proved more destructive

---

1 Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12(4) (1987): 687-718.

2 Epeli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1) (1992): 148-6.

than the war itself.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the country was administered as a so-called “United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands” under US administration. The United States government began a program of nuclear testing in this country in 1946 and exploded 66 nuclear devices in the northern Marshall Islands until 1958. The largest thermonuclear device ever exploded by the United States, known as Bravo, was detonated on Bikini Atoll. During this and other tests, radiation spread, at high intensity, many hundreds of kilometres further than anticipated and had serious health and environmental implications for communities living on the surrounding atolls. US authorities consistently downplayed this and kept any emerging data under wraps. Their contention was that negative outcomes were temporary and justified by the longer-term benefits of nuclear tests “for the good of mankind.”<sup>4</sup>

As evidence of environmental contamination and resulting ill-health increased, Marshallese women led campaigns to challenge this narrative and to make visible the generalised and gendered harms of US nuclear testing. Darlene Keju, the first Marshallese woman to achieve an advanced degree in public health, conducted investigations on her own island, Wotje, as well as other islands exposed to blast fallout (Rongelap, Rongerik, and Utrik). She recorded extremely high rates of cancer, leukemia, and thyroid disorders as well as concerning impacts on women’s reproductive health. These included high rates of miscarriage, still births, birth defects, as well as the phenomenon of “jellyfish babies” which Keju described as bodies born with translucent skin and no bones. Later research has noted that impacted women experienced trauma and shame from these events, and often hid them, even from their families and partners, fearing they would be blamed and stigmatised for “failing” to give birth to healthy offspring.<sup>5</sup>

Keju’s findings were corroborated by another Marshallese activist, Ejong Eknilang who was a child on Rongelap at the time of the infamous Bravo detonation. Ms Eknilang described the fall out showering on her village like snow without any warning of its dangers. She attributed her long-term health challenges – the fact that she suffered seven miscarriages and was never able to have children – to her radiation exposure as a child.<sup>6</sup>

Both Keju and Eknilang played an important role in making the dangers of nuclear testing visible to a global audience. Eknilang contributed testimony to the Advisory Proceedings on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons at the International Court of Justice in 1995. She also testified before a US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, in 2005.

Keju was even more active internationally. She is best remembered for an impassioned speech she made to the 6th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983. This has been recalled as a moment that “tore up the curtain of silence” on the global stage.<sup>7</sup> Keju’s address decried the harms and gendered impacts of nuclear testing and the years of evaded responsibility. She demanded that

---

3 Stewart Firth and Karin von Strokirch, “A Nuclear Pacific,” in *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, ed. Donald Denoon with Stewart Firth, Jocelyn Linnekin, Malama Meleisea and Karen Nero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 324-358.

4 Darleene Keju-Johnson, “For the good of mankind” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 2 (1) (2003): 309-314. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol2/iss1/59>

5 Michelle Keown, “Give Birth to Nightmares’: The Marshallese Nuclear Legacy and Women’s Health in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s ‘Monster’”, *Moving Worlds*, 19(2) (2019): 141-155.

6 “Nuclear Zero Profiles: Lijon Eknilang,” Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (NAPH), January 29, 2015, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.wagingpeace.org/lijon-eknilang/>

7 Linda Pentz Gunter, “The Women Who Tore Up the Curtain of Silence,” *Beyond Nuclear International*, September 2, 2018, <https://beyondnuclearinternational.org/2018/09/02/the-woman-who-tore-up-the-curtain-of-silence>

the world confront the emptiness of rhetoric which justified US security operations in the Pacific as a necessary form of protection. “From whom are we protected?” she asked, as she recounted the unabated suffering of people caused by US nuclear weapons testing.<sup>8</sup>

It was 2005 before a full and independent study, known as the BEIR VII report, was made of the impacts of nuclear contamination in Marshall Islands. The report found that while cancer rates were high across all sectors of the population, the mortality risk for Marshallese women exposed to radiation was 37.5 percent higher than for men if they developed lung, breast, or thyroid cancers.<sup>9</sup> Sadly, Darlene Keju succumbed to breast cancer herself in 1995 at the age of just 45.

## Women’s resistance against France’s Pacific nuclear testing program

Under the control of the French government, a similarly destructive program of nuclear testing was conducted on Mururoa Atoll, French Polynesia, in the eastern Pacific from 1966 to 1996. 42 atmospheric tests were conducted until 1974 and roughly 150 nuclear devices exploded underground until the program was halted; this was the equivalent of one device exploded every week for 14 years.<sup>10</sup>

As in Marshall Islands, the welfare of Indigenous people on surrounding islands was not prioritised and the dangers of nuclear testing were actively downplayed. Later research found that poor modelling of nuclear fallout and divergent wind patterns at the time of some tests exposed the whole of Tahiti and the Polynesian Leeward islands (roughly 110,000 people) to dangerous radiation levels. Like the US, the French government too blocked scientific study of the health impacts of its testing program. Later, independent analysis found that the population faced increased and cross-generational vulnerability to tumours, thyroid cancers, and leukemia. In 2023, women from French Polynesia mobilised just after International Women’s Day to demand greater recognition of the gendered legacies of the nuclear testing program. They described women’s experiences of cancer, miscarriage, and caring responsibilities for children with chronic health conditions. They defined these as rights violations that were caused by exposure to unsafe levels of nuclear radiation that were consistently denied by authorities.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most prominent women involved in anti-nuclear activism in French Polynesia was Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, a French-born anthropologist, who had lived in the French protectorate for a large period of her life. She was a tireless researcher of the political, economic, social, and health impacts of nuclear testing, publishing important reports on these themes with her Swedish born husband Bengt Danielsson, including *Poisoned Reign, a study of French Nuclear colonialism*.<sup>12</sup> She was also politically active internationally and locally. As the President of Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in French Polynesia, she travelled to Moscow at the invitation of

8 “Darlene Keju Speech to World Council of Churches, Vancouver 1983,” YouTube video, 12:01, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hxCGIA5oJQ>

9 “Nuclear Testing program in Marshall Islands: Hearing Before the Committee of Energy and Natural Resources,” United States Senate, July 19, 2005, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109shrg24536/html/CHRG-109shrg24536.htm>

10 Bobby Macumber, Dan Smith and Alice Matthews, “France Detonated Nearly 200 Nuclear ‘Tests’ in French Polynesia – Now this Activist is Calling for Accountability,” ABC Pacific, July 15, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/nuclear-testing-french-polynesia-hina-cross/102585930>

11 Suliene Favennec, « Les Femmes Victimes Du Nucléaire se Lève Pour Leurs Droits » La 1 Franceinfo, March 12, 2023, <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/polynesie/tahiti/polynesie-francaise/les-femmes-victimes-du-nucleaire-se-levent-pour-leurs-droits-1374606.html>

12 Bengt Danielsson and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Poisoned Reign: French Nuclear Colonialism in the Pacific*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986).

Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as to China, Timor Leste, Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Europe. Her addresses helped to draw global attention to the costs of nuclear testing in her adopted home.<sup>13</sup> In later years, Ms Danielsson was a key supporter of other civil society organisations advocating for nuclear justice. These included Mururoa e Tatou, a group demanding compensation to Tahitian workers on the nuclear test sites, and Hiti Tau, an organisation committed to increasing the economic sovereignty of French Polynesia and reducing its dependency on France.

## Women's Solidarity Across the Pacific

Beyond the immediate test site countries, women in other parts of the Pacific were becoming increasingly politically active during the nuclear testing period and also led influential anti-nuclear campaigns.<sup>14</sup> In Fiji, members of the Fiji Young Women's Christian Association collaborated with the Student Christian Association operating at the University of the South Pacific campus in Suva, to build increased awareness of the dangers of nuclear testing. Amelia Rokotuivuna, Taufa Vakatale and Suliana Siwatibau were notable leaders in this campaign. Their advocacy yoked the dangers of nuclear testing to the ongoing presence of colonial powers in the region. As a wave of decolonisation swept the Pacific from 1970 onwards, these arguments became more pointed and sought to increase social and political awareness of the need for the Pacific to be "independent and nuclear free."

In 1971, Fiji YWCA members won support from the World YWCA to urge national associations around the globe to lobby their governments to oppose nuclear testing in the Pacific. Closer to home, Fiji YWCA members were also part of the ATOM (Against Testing on Mururoa) Committee which urged regional leaders to establish a treaty to make the Southern Pacific region a nuclear-free zone.

Women also worked effectively with religious leaders to promote the nuclear-free ambition. In 1982, Suliana Siwatibau published an "anti-nuclear primer for Pacific peoples" with David Williams titled, *A Call to a New Exodus*. While this book was designed to educate readers about the dangers of nuclear testing in the Pacific, it also developed theological arguments to protest nuclear weapons, describing them as a destructive force that challenges "peace, justice and right relationships" between people, God, and the earth.<sup>15</sup> Across the Pacific, where religious values are strongly held, these arguments were politically influential.

Driven by the energies of women, these regional advocacy efforts culminated in the establishment of the Treaty of Rarotonga or South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty which was negotiated through the Pacific Islands Forum and entered into force in 1986. This treaty covered all Independent South Pacific Island states and the waters between, including Australia and New Zealand. It prohibited states from manufacturing or controlling nuclear explosive devices and declared that the region should be free from environmental pollution from radioactive wastes and other matter. While the treaty has enormous symbolic importance and is hailed as a key moment of regional cooperation spearheaded by women,<sup>16</sup> France, the US, and the Micronesian "trust territory" states at the time

---

13 Bruno Barrillot, « Bengt et Marie-Thérèse Danielsson. Assemblée de la Polynésie Française, » Arapo, Accessed February 11, 2024, <http://www.arapo.org/pf/pdf/Barillot.pdf>

14 Nicole George, *Situating Women: Gender Politics and Circumstance in Fiji* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012).

15 Suliana Siwatibau and B. David Williams, *A Call to a New Exodus: An Anti-Nuclear Primer for Pacific People* (Suva: Pacific Council of Churches, 1982), 71.

16 Nicole George, "Pacific Women Building Peace: A Regional Perspective," *The Contemporary Pacific* 23(1) (2012): 37-71.

of the treaty establishment - Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau – were not signatory parties. It was only in 1996, at the conclusion of their Pacific nuclear program that France signed and ratified the treaty. In the same year the US also signed the treaty but has not yet ratified it despite requests from President Obama in 2007 that the US Senate begin that process. Marshall Islands, FSM and Palau moved to a “compact of free association” status with the US in 1976 but they have not yet become treaty signatories. This seems to be explained by US political pressure and a desire to ensure local public opinion is not galvanised against the ongoing presence of US defence assets in these territories.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, Pacific Island women made critical contributions to the Nobel Prize winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons (ICAN) which culminated in the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons which entered into force on 22 January 2021. Vanessa Griffen, a longtime activist and women’s leader from Fiji, gave an address to the treaty conference in 2017. Her speech called attention to health impacts of weapons testing for women and reiterated the call for nuclear justice, demanding commitments from the US and France that the radiation from test sites would be stringently monitored and cause no further harms to Pacific peoples and their environment.<sup>18</sup>

## Resistance in Literary and Academic Writing

Other Pacific women have turned to more creative modes of communication to express their opposition to nuclear testing and to expose its gendered impacts. One example of this literary activism is found in Teresia Teaiwa’s widely cited essay, “bikinis and other s/pacific notions”.<sup>19</sup> This piece of writing discussed how the first nuclear tests undertaken on Bikini Atoll (Marshall Islands) in 1946 provided the inspiration for the name that French designer Louis Réard decided upon for his revolutionary 2-piece female swimsuit. While the term became equated with the “atomic” and explosive sexuality of bikini-clad women, this association trivialised the violence done to Bikini Atoll and its displaced people.

Another powerful example is History Project by Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil Kijiner. This poem expresses disgust at how US authorities justified their nuclear tests as advancing the “good of mankind,” while treating Marshallese people as expendable and unworthy of care. She followed this poem with another in 2017 entitled, Monster to support the ICAN treaty negotiations and filmed her performance of it in Hiroshima.<sup>20</sup> This was more directly focussed on the health conditions endured by women as a result of nuclear testing and particularly the phenomena of women giving birth to jellyfish babies. It offered an extended account of the trauma and stigma that results from these births. These contemporary creative pursuits have ensured that the gendered impacts of nuclear testing remain visible and that the demands for justice from impacted Pacific communities remain audible to a contemporary audience.

---

17 Nic Maclellan. Delaying the nuclear-free zone in the Pacific. Inside Story. August 27, 2013. Accessed February 11, 2023, <https://insidestory.org.au/delaying-the-nuclear-free-zone-in-the-pacific/>

18 Vanessa Griffen, Address to the UN Conference to ban nuclear weapons. UN General Assembly. July 6, 2017. Accessed February 11, 2024. <https://icanw.org.au/resources/films/>

19 Teresia K. Teaiwa, “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6, no. 1 (1994): 87-109.

20 Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, “Monster,” July 4, 2017, Vimeo video, 5:37, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/224211868>



## Conclusion

Pacific Islands women made the destructive force of nuclear weapons visible to those who would prefer it remained invisible. They worked consistently to expose the enduring injustices of Pacific nuclear programs devised by foreign powers. Their motivations may have been deeply personal but they also drew from their experiences to galvanise international support for their demands for nuclear justice. Their advocacy and determination was evident on national, regional and international stages and their influence was profound. The women I have cited above, and many others who worked alongside them, laid the foundations for the multilateral solidarity that Pacific Island states show in resistance to Nuclear weapons today. Indeed, their energies help to explain why many Pacific states were among the first to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) when it opened for signature in 2017. ICAN leaders were quick to celebrate the important show of support that Pacific political leaders demonstrated for the treaty and its provisions. The decades of influential anti-nuclear campaigning led so consistently, eloquently, and creatively by Pacific women since the 1960s also deserves attention. They have been critical to the achievements of the global anti-nuclear movement.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nicole George** is an Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies in the School of Political Science and International Studies at The University of Queensland, Australia. She researches the gendered impacts of conflict, peace settlements, peacebuilding and women's resistance to militarism, gendered violence, and other forms of insecurity in the Pacific Islands. In addition to her academic research, she works regularly with government and multilateral agencies, and non-government organisations to support gender programming delivered across the Pacific and in Southeast Asia. Her publications span a range of outputs including two monographs, one on the history of women's gender advocacy in Fiji (ANU Press 2012) and another (forthcoming with Oxford University Press) examining women's experiences of gender violence regulation in Fiji, Bougainville, and New Caledonia. For a full list of her published work, see

<https://researchers.uq.edu.au/researcher/2176>

**Cover image:** Darlene Keju in a 1995 photo leads Youth to Youth in Health members in a lively song as part of a community health outreach program in Majuro. **Photo by** Giff Johnson.

*Disclaimer: This essay is published under APLN's project on 'Nuclear Disarmament and the Anthropocene: Voices from Pacific Island Countries,' sponsored by the Ploughshares Fund, through its diversity and equity initiative, Equity Rises. The views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of affiliated institution(s), nor that of APLN, its staff, board, or funders.*



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK  
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT



[aplن.network](https://aplن.network)



[@APLNofficial](https://www.facebook.com/APLNofficial)



[@APLNofficial](https://twitter.com/APLNofficial)



[@APLNofficial](https://www.linkedin.com/company/APLNofficial)