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Framings of abortion in Pacific Island print media: qualitative analysis of articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor

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Abstract: *Abortion is significantly restricted by law in most Pacific Island countries, and this has profound implications for the lives and health of women from this region. There are limited data on how abortion is framed in the Pacific Islands: that is, interpreted, discussed, and made meaningful as an issue in public forums. How abortion is framed can have implications for how it is treated in public and political debate and policy, abortion stigmatisation, and inform advocacy strategies. We undertook a thematic analysis of 246 articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor that covered the topic of abortion in mainstream print media. We found three dominant framings. Abortion was often positioned in opposition to gender ideology and national identity, with gender and national identity constructed by many commentators according to socially conservative, Christian doctrine. Abortion was also constructed as the killing of the “unborn,” with the fetus positioned as the key social subject. Alternatively, abortion was framed as often unsafe and a response to teenage pregnancy, with various solutions suggested in this context. Few commentators constructed women who experienced unwanted pregnancies and abortions as making decisions about their pregnancies in response to complex gendered and socio-economic conditions. Dominant framings of abortion as opposed to gender ideals, nationalism, and the killing of the “unborn” complicate simplified appeals to “choice” in advocacy efforts. Focusing on health and broader injustice experienced by women offer alternative framings.* DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2023.2228113

Keywords: framing discourse, abortion, stigma, media, Pacific Islands

Introduction

Abortion is significantly restricted by law in the Pacific Island countries included in this study: Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands, and Tonga. These restrictions have profound implications for lives and health of those capable of pregnancy.^{1–3} Those seeking, providing, or assisting others in accessing abortions in these countries may be penalised, impacting the abortion seeker as well as the ability of health care providers, advocates, and other support people to provide adequate reproductive health care.^{4,5} Sanctions in these countries for providers and abortion seekers range from two years to life imprisonment, and

three to seven years of imprisonment for those who assist people to secure an abortion.^{4,5} Countries that have restrictive abortion laws have higher numbers of pregnant people accessing unsafe abortion, with risks of severe and sometimes permanent morbidity and mortality; undertaking expensive and burdensome journeys to access abortion services in more liberal jurisdictions; or illegally accessing the drug misoprostol to terminate their pregnancies, sometimes with inaccurate guidance on the safe use of the drug.^{2,3,6,7} However, for people on the isolated island groups of the Pacific, the option of travelling to adjacent countries for abortion services is often economically, practically, and geographically constrained, leaving them with even fewer choices.

In this article, we largely use the term “women” to describe people facing unwanted pregnancy because the framing discourse regarding abortion in the media texts analysed in this study is highly gendered according to cis womanhood. Women’s experiences of abortion are shaped by socio-cultural discourse related to gender and maternity, and such discourse can impact women’s perceptions and experiences of abortion stigma.^{8–10} For women in the Pacific Islands, a composite history incorporating colonial and missionary projects to shape gender roles according to Christian, domesticated, middle-class, and modest ideals, continues to be adapted into idealised expressions of femininity and the essentialising of maternity.^{11–14}

The Pacific Islands is a diverse, multilingual, and multicultural region of thousands of islands. Abortion is very restricted in the Pacific Island countries included in this study, with a total prohibition in Tonga, and most other countries only permitting abortion in cases where the mother’s life is at risk, though some jurisdictions allow abortion where the woman’s mental and/or physical health is at risk.¹ Only Fiji allows abortion for broader socio-economic reasons.¹ The treatment of abortion as a criminal offence in this region also occurs in contexts of high unmet needs for family planning, low contraceptive uptake, partner control over contraceptive access, and high rates of unplanned pregnancy and gender-based violence.^{15–19} Existing evidence suggests some Pacific women are driven to dangerous methods to end unwanted pregnancies, including self-harm, ingesting toxic substances, and accessing misoprostol away from medical supervision, and these experiences of pregnancy and abortion can occur in the context of other reproductive oppressions, including gender-based violence.^{3, 6, 11, 20–22} However, research on abortion from this region is very limited, particularly related to women’s lived experience of ending pregnancies, and, to date, there is no research on socio-cultural perceptions and framings of abortion.

Journalism in the Pacific Islands

Print media in Pacific Island countries have roots in colonial administrations which produced and financed newspapers for expatriate populations, and Christian missions which established the first printing presses in the larger Pacific region and distributed small newspapers, often in Indigenous languages, to local parishioners.²³

Journalists from this region have noted barriers to accessing capacity building and training on reporting skills, and challenges related to living in small and often tight-knit communities, including experiencing harassment, coercion, violence, and difficulties accessing community members and leaders for comment.^{23–25} Female journalists in Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea have relayed experiences of being silenced, facing backlash for reporting particular issues, and regularly facing threats of violence and suppression.^{25,26} The poor representation of female journalists in media organisations in these countries has been noted, and this lack of female representation may impact editorial decision-making, and the extent to which issues and news relating to women are covered and represented.^{25,26} Additionally, some editors and journalists in the region have been sued for their media content, and critiques of governments have resulted in threats of legislating against the media.^{23–25,27} The Pacific Media Centre and its media freedom project, Pacific Media Watch, were closed in early 2021 after facing funding constraints.²⁸ These factors are important when considering coverage of abortion in print media from Pacific Island countries, where the legal status of abortion may impact on media outlets’ decisions on whether and how to cover the topic, the extent to which journalists can successfully and freely investigate the topic, and on the content of commentary from individuals or organisations who may face backlash.

How an issue, such as abortion, is framed in media discourse can imply particular solutions, shape priorities in the public and political agenda, and may be an indicator of how it is treated in public opinion.^{29–36} In framing an issue, media commentators may also draw on, and be mediated by, shared cultural or institutional frameworks that resonate with audiences’ collective identities and shared beliefs.^{33,36,37} The framing of abortion in particular interacts with “such concepts as motherhood, human rights and who they apply to, or the relation between religion and the state [...] to create coherent ideological viewpoints” (p.106).³⁸ Thus, media framings are both produced by the socio-cultural context but also help to further shape that context, and can illustrate or avert potential status loss associated with abortion.⁸

This is the first study to examine how abortion is framed in print media in the Pacific Islands. In

Table 1. Summary of Pacific Island newspapers, location, and number of articles/editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces addressing abortion that are analysed in this article

Newspaper	Location of publication	Number of articles, opinion pieces, or letters to the editor found
Cook Islands News	Rarotonga, Cook Islands	23
Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC)	Suva, Fiji	5
Fiji Sun	Suva, Fiji	53
Fiji Times	Suva, Fiji	2
Fiji Village	Suva, Fiji	10
Island Sun	Honiara, Solomon Islands	1
Matangi Tonga	Nuku'alofa, Tonga	29
Nepituno	Nuku'alofa, Tonga	5
Post Courier	Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG)	5
Samoa Global News	Apia, Samoa	2
Samoa News	Pago Pago, American Samoa	6
Samoa Observer	Apia, Samoa	20
Solomon Star News	Honiara, Solomon Islands	5
Solomon Times	Honiara, Solomon Islands	3
The National	Port Moresby, PNG	63
Vanuatu Daily Post	Port Vila, Vanuatu	14

regions where abortion is illegal in most circumstances, and where this illegality impacts women's reproductive health and rights,² it is important to understand how abortion is framed in public forums, such as print media, as such framing could both reflect and influence how abortion is treated in political and legislative contexts, and how abortion is stigmatised.^{8,29,30,32–36} Our analysis considers the ways in which the framing of abortion in Pacific Island print media interacts with ideologies of gender and Christian nationalism,³⁸ while also paying attention to conflicting framings, predominantly regarding abortion as a health issue.

Method

This critical feminist research is informed by the reproductive justice movement, analysing the

ways in which reproductive rights are shaped by social injustices, such as gender inequity, colonialism, and poverty.^{22,39} We undertook an inductive thematic analysis using NVivo version 12⁴⁰ of coverage of abortion in newspaper articles and editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces from Pacific Island countries, reading the texts multiple times to develop concepts based on recurrent themes or ideas in the texts.^{41,42} Inductive coding of the texts comprised descriptive (e.g. "SRH knowledge") and conceptual (e.g. "Moral religious decline", and "Abortion as murder") codes.^{41,42} Codes were then re-examined and developed into the overarching themes discussed in this article.^{41,42} Our aim was to understand how abortion is framed in media discourse in these Pacific Island countries (see Table 1),^{41,43} that is, how abortion is interpreted, discussed, and

made meaningful as a social issue.^{30,44,45} We note that, while we each have personal and professional relationships with people and organisations in Pacific Island countries, and one of us is currently based in the Cook Islands, none of us identify as Indigenous to a Pacific Island country so write as cultural outsiders.

Our analysis included news articles, editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. News articles report facts and information on a topic and should appear unbiased and objective, presenting a range of views while not promoting any particular stances or opinions on the topic.⁴⁶ Editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor, however, build arguments and promote the opinions of an institution or media outlet (as in editorials), or of an individual (as in opinion pieces and letters to the editor) on a particular topic.^{46,47} While we expected editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor to build arguments and promote viewpoints on abortion, we have included news articles to analyse whether or how bias appears in apparently value-neutral texts on abortion in Pacific Island media outlets.

We selected the newspapers in this analysis based on the availability of online content published in English. We used the keyword search function on mainstream newspapers’ websites from Pacific Island countries to search for publications published between December 2005 and November 2021 that include the word “abortion” (see Table 1). We limited the search to editorials or news articles produced by journalists, letters to editors, and opinion pieces in English, the dominant language of media publications in these countries.⁴⁸ We only included news articles written by journalists working for the newspapers and not reprints of articles written for overseas newspapers. We analysed the different types of texts together but note the text type and other important identifying factors. For texts quoted from these newspapers, we referenced the newspaper, year the text was published, type of text/corresponding author (article/quoted sources, opinion piece/commentators, or letter to the editor/correspondents), and, where possible, the gender of commentators and correspondents. The gender of correspondents was identified by their own written self-identification or their writer profile on the newspaper website.

Results

We analysed 246 articles, opinion pieces, and letters that cover the topic of abortion, published

between December 2005 and November 2021. As depicted, coverage of abortion, either as the main subject or in relation to a larger topic, varies considerably: from one article in the Solomon Islands newspaper, *Island Sun*, to 63 articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor in Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) *The National*.

As Tables 2 depicts, most news articles with quoted sources include only those who are explicitly anti-abortion (55%); only 5% (n = 4) source differing views on abortion. Similarly, most commentators in opinion pieces and correspondents in letters to the editor are explicitly anti-abortion (64.6%) (Table 3).

We found three key ways in which abortion is framed in Pacific Island print media: abortion as symptomatic of religious, cultural, and moral degradation which has implications for national identity; as the killing of the “unborn”, with the fetus positioned as the key social subject; or as an outcome of teenage pregnancy and often unsafe, with various solutions offered to this framing, such as increased education or parental control.

Nationalism, religion, and degradation

A major theme we identified in the framing of abortion in Pacific Island print media was

Table 2. Attitudes to abortion in Pacific Island print media 2005–2021 that include quoted sources – spread of views

Political stance on abortion	Number (80)	%
Pro-choice: explicitly in support of liberalising abortion law and/or considered abortion a woman’s choice	12	15
Anti-abortion: explicitly opposed to abortion, usually on religious grounds	44	55
Balanced: quoted sources expressed differing views on abortion	4	5
Neutral: did not provide personal stance on abortion, or personal stance was unclear	20	25

NB: Some articles included sources that did not provide a clear political stance

Table 3. Gender and views on abortion among writers of opinion pieces or letters to the editor

Gender of commentators		Pro-choice	Anti-abortion	Neutral
Male	43	1 (2.3%)	33 (76.7%)	9 (20.9%)
Female	16	2 (12.5%)	5 (31.25%)	9 (56.25%)
Unspecified/ anonymous	6		4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)
Total	65	3 (4.6%)	42 (64.6%)	20 (30.8%)

abortion as symptomatic of moral degradation and a loss of Christianity. Quoted sources, commentators, and correspondents tied this to national identity and contemporary conceptualisations and debates regarding gender.^{13,49,50} Many quoted sources, commentators, and correspondents in Pacific Island newspapers referenced abortion as an example, alongside other criminal activity or perceived social ills such as homosexuality, as evidence of contemporary moral degradation, or the threat of removal of Christianity from the public sphere, such as from public school education. A male commentator in a 2014 opinion piece in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) *The National*, for instance, listed abortion alongside murder, rape, tribal war, domestic violence, and child abuse as evidence of imminent moral decline and loss of "respect for life". Similarly, Archbishop Petero Mataka, the only source quoted in *Fiji Sun*'s 2010 coverage of Corpus Christi Day, associated abortion with murder and divorce as symptoms of moral decay and the declining influence of Christian doctrine in the domestic sphere.

In their opinion pieces, some commentators also pointed to legalised abortion as an example of the inevitable deterioration of morality associated with the separation of church and state in other societies, notably New Zealand and the United States. For example, in a 2013 opinion piece in *Fiji Sun*, the male commentator used New Zealand as an example of a "de-Christianised" society, appearing to also argue that "liberal values" have a domino effect on societies: "Evil is not content with its apparent victories for contraception, abortion, and homosexuality and now even the acceptance of same-sex marriage recently [by] our next door neighbour, New Zealand".

Commentators in several opinion pieces also specifically criticised the Obama administration

in the United States and Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign, once again using abortion as both an example and a warning of social chaos: "Recognising homosexuals, allowing state-funded abortion and striving for a religion-less USA will not improve life one iota; no, it would bring abomination maybe, but for sure, not life" (Opinion piece, *Fiji Sun*, 2009, male commentator).

As well as comparisons to specific countries and their legislation, abortion was used as an example of unfettered, "ungodly" Western liberalism, which was also sometimes noted to have infiltrated the United Nations and all affiliates. Western liberalism was presented as a danger to society by inevitably causing moral decline, increased crime, societal degradation, and abandonment by God. In PNG's *The National*, a male correspondent in a 2014 letter to the editor expressing opposition to legalising homosexuality referred to the "moral decay" of Western countries which are "cursed", evidenced by the passing of laws legalising abortion. Some commentators also argued that to legalise abortion would be to bow to international pressure, particularly from "Western" countries and westernised institutions, which has implications for national identity and indigenised Christianity. Catholic Bishops from PNG published an open letter in PNG's *The National* in 2014, for example, arguing:

"Abortion, which the majority of our citizens find abhorrent, remains illegal in Papua New Guinea. However, political leaders face pressures from within and outside of PNG to take another view. Will the PNG Government one day decide that killing the unborn child is a good thing for PNG, something that will bring the blessing of God upon our people? We pray that our leaders will never bow to this temptation for political and economic gain."

This theme was also central to commentary in Tongan newspapers regarding the government's proposed ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Most correspondents in letters to the editor published in Tongan newspapers contended that the ratification of the international convention was a ploy by liberal Western institutions to legalise same-sex marriage and abortion. One male correspondent in a 2015 letter to the editor in the Tongan newspaper *Nepituno*, and another in a 2009 letter to the editor in *Matangi Tonga* described CEDAW as a “new form of” or “contemporary colonialism” where multilateral organisations and academics “seduce”, “pressure” or “force” the convention on countries to ultimately cause a breakdown in cultural and moral standards.

Framing the subject: centring the “unborn”

We found that framings of abortion in Pacific Island print media were largely fetocentric, or located the fetus as the core subject, with abortion constructed as murder, while women who had abortions were primarily constructed as immoral, criminal, and irrational. Abortion was often framed as the taking of “life”, or the murdering of “innocent children”, “the unborn”, or “babies”.^{45,51} Relative to the “unborn”, women were framed in some texts as essentially “life givers” or “life-bearers” (Opinion piece, *Cook Island News*, 2019, male commentator). A male correspondent in a letter to the editor in the *Samoa Observer*, for example, described the uterus as “a place of purity and sacredness”, a place of “worship”, and “fortress that would house and provide safety and security to its most innocence and defenseless occupancies [*sic*]”. He thus framed abortion as a woman “betraying herself” by allowing “an army of destruction with poison liquid and metallic weaponry to invade the most holy place on earth and destroyed its heritage and ruined the sanctuary of sacredness”.

Where women who had had abortions were considered, they were usually framed as criminals and unnatural in the sense of being in opposition to female norms of behaviour which centre on motherhood as inherent and always desired and safe.¹² Former Samoan Prime Minister Tiulaepa in a 2017 article in *Samoa News*, for example, labelled abortion as “murder and similar to giving our women the license to kill”. Similarly, the head of a sexual violence victim support organisation in

a 2021 article and an editorial in the *Samoa Observer* drew on the rhetoric of abortion as murder, as not something to be left to individual choice, and as generally causing “harm” to women, when framing her opposition to liberalising Samoa's abortion laws. She added that her organisation would raise children conceived from sexual abuse, with “extra care” being taken in cases of “rape and incest where families fear being stigmatised and ridiculed”. Other articles, opinion pieces, and letters similarly issued general warnings of damage to women's physical health and future fertility among those who have abortions.

In some news articles detailing abortion cases resulting in criminal investigation or the woman's death, abortion was framed as a crime and as murder. A 2009 news article in *Fiji Sun* paraphrased a statement from a police spokesperson on the investigation of a migrant woman admitted to hospital after an unsafe abortion, detailing that she “bought some pills from a private doctor in Nadi before she went to Yaladro where she committed the horrendous crime. [...] He [the police spokesperson] said abortion was illegal and the woman would be questioned”. This solution of increased police involvement in suspected abortion cases was also suggested in a 2021 article in PNG's *Post-Courier*, with a male government minister calling on people to report illegal use of the drug misoprostol for abortions “with evidence of unscrupulous deals that is criminal in nature and the culprit must be charged”.

Alongside the framing of women who have abortions as immoral, criminal, and unnatural, in some opinion pieces, commentators framed the “pro-choice” stance on abortion, that women ought to have choice regarding their pregnancies, as irrational. A male commentator in a 2010 opinion piece in *Fiji Sun*, for example, frames the “pro-choice” argument as based on women's abilities to control their bodies “even if it means terminating the life of an unborn”. A quoted source identified as a grandfather in a 2017 article in the *Samoa Observer* argued “Abortion is not God's way, many believe that women have the freedom to choose abortion, I mean choosing death is not our role but God himself”. He then reframes the “pro-choice” argument to argue for the fetus's capacity to “choose” while “in your womb”. Another male commentator in the *Samoa Observer* implicates women's choice and “control over her body” in both the killing of the “unborn”, which the commentator further frames

as a decision based on desire and convenience; and, later, in sinning against God who “views the unborn as individuals”.

Managing teenage pregnancy and unsafe abortion

The final way in which abortion was framed in Pacific Island print media was as an unsafe outcome of teenage pregnancy, with solutions to this framing ranging from revising abortion laws (which was resisted by some sources, commentators, and correspondents), increasing sexual and reproductive health education, or surveillance and control by parents. A non-government organisation (NGO) representative, the only quoted source in a 2017 article in *Fiji Village*, for instance, argued “victims of teenage pregnancy should be given a choice of abortion so that they can have a chance to live their lives again” and engage in further education. Additionally, Tonga’s Minister for Health, commenting on a 2021 report on adolescent unplanned pregnancy in Tonga in *Nepituno*, argued the report provided evidence of a need to investigate repealing Tonga’s abortion legislation. Conversely, some commentators framed liberalising abortion laws as opening the gateway to unfettered sexual freedom and thus, more unintended pregnancies and abortions, particularly among young women. For example, two community members were invited to comment on abortion legislation in a 2017 article in the *Samoa Observer*, with one arguing that, should abortion be legalised, young women would “just go off and get pregnant”. Likewise, a nurse quoted in a 2017 opinion piece on unplanned pregnancy in *Vanuatu Daily Post* argues that, should abortion become legal, some young people would intentionally not use contraception in the knowledge that they could have an abortion.

Several news articles and letters to the editor in Vanuatu, PNG, the Cook Islands and Fiji reported on women requiring and procuring abortions despite the legal barriers and regardless of socio-cultural and religious stigma and opposition, and that these abortions were usually unsafe and could result in death, illness, or disability. Abortion was also raised by some commentators as an outcome that could be avoided through improved sexual and reproductive health education and services. A correspondent in a 2010 letter to the editor in PNG’s *The National*, for example, responded to a call to ban sex education, asking “Are we going to wait till these

teenagers become pregnant and seeking abortion [sic], [...] before we start sexual health education?”

Abortion and teenage pregnancy were also sometimes framed as an emerging phenomenon due to parents’ and community leaders’ reduced control over or guidance of young people’s conduct. A male commentator in a 2018 letter to the editor in *Fiji Sun*, for example, discusses adults’ failure to control young people’s access to “unwholesome material” including films and other media depicting abortion. In a 2019 editorial in PNG’s *The National*, teenage pregnancy and associated risks, including that some girls “opt for abortion”, are traced to a lack of parental guidance that would enable young girls to “live responsibly”.

Outliers: nuanced constructions of women

There were some texts in which women who had abortions were constructed in more nuanced ways, as responding to complex socioeconomic and gendered conditions, with abortion framed as a core reproductive right. In a few articles, medical practitioners and NGO representatives argued for a review of abortion legislation or related policies. An independent political candidate in Fiji’s 2014 General Election was featured in a 2014 news article by Fiji Broadcasting Corporation explicitly supporting legislative change regarding abortion in Fiji and this included one of the few positive references to women’s bodily autonomy across all texts analysed in this study. A letter to the editor from a correspondent with lived experience of abortion was published in 2017 in *Samoa Observer*, the only firsthand account of abortion in all the texts analysed in this study. The correspondent described in the letter her experiences of abortion as the “right choices for me at those times in my life”, rejecting the label of “murderer”, and describing herself as “a wonderful, loving, mother to my two innocent babies who are now beautiful grown men”.

Two NGO representatives quoted in a 2015 feature article and a 2017 opinion piece in *Vanuatu Daily Post* called for abortion legislation in Vanuatu to be revisited and pointed out that most abortions in Vanuatu are unsafe, which contributes to maternal morbidity and mortality. The female commentator in this 2017 opinion piece argued that political engagement in changing abortion legislation is constrained by deeply entrenched Christianity and *kastom* (loosely,

“tradition” or a particular selection of ancestral practices).⁴⁹ However, she concluded her piece by questioning the injustice of this and suggesting other policy changes to improve women’s situation related to their sexual and reproductive health and rights:

“If it is illegal for a woman to have an abortion, then shouldn’t it also be illegal for a man to opt out of a pregnancy too? Why should the responsibility of the child’s upbringing fall solely on a woman when it took two people to create its life? It is essential that the father is also held legally responsible and that the law strictly enforces child maintenance. [...] At the moment, a woman who is seeking support from her child’s father can request up to 1000vt [US \$8.89] a week per child. What a joke. At the very least, the government needs to provide services to accommodate these unwanted pregnancies to ensure the child’s quality of life after it is born. That requires strengthening existing services and supporting social welfare, health, education and shelter.”

The inclusion of these texts is important to recognise alternative views on abortion and the legislation that confines it. However, the framing of abortion as murder, congruent with its positioning as a threat to Christian and national identity, and as irrational and dangerous for women who are constructed as essentially maternal, was dominant across opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and in articles which often included sources that reinforced these ideals with no reference to alternative views (see Table 2).

Discussion

We analysed the ways in which abortion was framed in newspaper articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor in Pacific Island countries where abortion remains highly restricted, impacting the lives and health of those requiring abortion services who may be forced to undertake dangerous means of ending pregnancies, particularly if they are poor, isolated, and face other forms of discrimination.³⁰ Such restrictions - which in the Solomon Islands include penalties related to disseminating information regarding abortion, amongst other challenges faced by Pacific Island journalists - may impact the way and extent to which abortion is covered.⁴ We found that most opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and news articles including quoted sources presented an anti-abortion stance. A key way in

which abortion was framed was as a threat to Christian and national identity, as well as gender ideology that positions women as essentially maternal.¹² Abortion was often opposed in a general way, frequently alongside other “liberal” values such as same-sex marriage, as symptomatic of the degradation of the “traditional” religious family and state.^{30,52} Additionally, many commentators called for protection against the economic and cultural forces of liberal Western countries and institutions that separate church and state, with a religious programme of nationalism assumed and posited as the ideal.^{30,53} Congruent with existing research on abortion in the Pacific and from other restrictive jurisdictions, CEDAW has accurately highlighted in their reports the ways in which the significantly limited grounds for abortion and inadequate post-abortion care in the Cook Islands, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Fiji undermine women’s rights to life, health and safety.^{3,5,11,20,21} However, the ratification of CEDAW was opposed in most commentary published in Tongan newspapers, with writers constructing it as a gateway to the neo-colonial imposition of more liberal abortion laws rather than as vital for the lives and health of women. National identity was tied by these commentators to an idealised image of sex and reproduction occurring only within a marriage where Christian doctrine was followed and taught to offspring, who were closely supervised and kept from corrupt outside influences.^{30,54} Early written observations of Pacific Island communities noted evidence of women terminating their pregnancies, usually by external force or ingesting plant-based substances.⁵⁵ However, abortion was constructed in many of the texts analysed in this study as an issue related to modernisation associated with increased exposure to Western liberal ideals and socio-political structures. These, in turn, represented a fundamental threat to national (Christian) identity and the structure of the family.¹¹

We also found that framings of abortion in media texts were often fetocentric, with the fetus constructed as “life”, and highly emotive language, such as “unborn babies” and “destroying life”, was employed by many commentators, identifying the fetus as the human subject and citizen, and not the woman.^{30,35,45,52} Using terms such as “unborn baby/child” may impact public perceptions of abortion procedures,³⁴ and impose the identity of “mother” on the woman

in relation to the “unborn baby”, “along with all the accompanying culturally constructed responsibilities, including protection of the young”(p.746).⁵⁶ Women who had abortions were often constructed as irrational, irresponsible, criminal, sinners, unnatural in their rejection of maternity, and, in this rejection, a corrupt influence on national identity and nation-building.^{45,57} Resisting this framing, in the 2017 letter in the *Samoa Observer* the writer rejects the label of “murderer” for having experienced abortions, and draws on familiar rhetoric of maternal love and fetal innocence in deflecting abortion stigma.⁸

Finally, abortion was also framed as an often-unsafe outcome of teenage pregnancy, a consequence of inadequate coverage of sexual and reproductive health education and contraceptive services. In some instances, teenage pregnancy was noted as a negative and evolving social issue related to modernisation, and of rupture from past parenting practices that offered greater surveillance and moral guidance to prevent such poor outcomes.⁴⁵ However, other writers or quoted sources framed access to sexual and reproductive health services and education as central to reducing unwanted pregnancies and abortion.⁵⁷ Furthermore, some writers and quoted sources advocated for legislative change related to abortion or other policies affecting maternal health and women’s ability to parent safely and sustainably.²²

Christian nationalism was a strong theme across media texts analysed in this study. Christianity is embedded into many Pacific Island countries’ national identities.^{50,52} There is a relationship between Christian missionaries in the Pacific and the creation of national identity through transliterating local languages, delivery of formal education and literacy (including the education of young women on their domestic, maternal role),¹³ health care, and the creation of locally produced and printed media.^{23,50,53} Religion is also intertwined with nationalism in many Pacific Island countries through many nations’ constitutions and mottos,^{50,53} such as the country motto of Vanuatu, “Long God Yumi Stanap” (“In God We Stand”),⁵⁸ Samoa’s 2017 amendment to its constitution to declare itself a Christian state, and all states except Fiji include references to Christianity or God in the preamble of their constitutions.⁵⁹

In many Pacific Island countries, femininity has been tied to motherhood in complex ways that

incorporate a lengthy history of missionary and colonial efforts to promote gender ideals of the modest, Christian, domesticated wife and mother, and adapted in varying ways into notions of gender and gendered labour.^{12–14,60,61} This ideal frames sex as primarily related to reproduction without any positive notion of women’s sexuality. Nor does it allow consideration that women’s sexual and reproductive lives and experiences are shaped by multiple factors, including coercive control by partners or family, barriers to contraceptive uptake, intolerable side-effects from hormonal contraceptives, and stigma attached to female sexuality.^{15,17,18} Additionally, in relation to this gender ideal and how it may be enforced, Pacific women who had abortions were “othered” by many correspondents, commentators, and quoted sources in print media from these countries, and their ability to make choices about their bodies and pregnancies was sometimes called into question.⁵⁷ Various correspondents, commentators, and quoted sources constructed women’s choice to have abortions as based on ignorance of its harmful impacts (decontextualised from the circumstances of the abortion), and/or as unconscionable, premeditated murder. Furthermore, decisions related to pregnancy were framed by some writers and quoted sources as being in the domain of God, and not of women and their families. According to this construction, the notion of women having “choice” regarding their pregnancies is unconscionable as the “choice” to have an abortion is always either based on ignorance or evil intention and anti-Christian sentiment. On the other hand, one quoted source positioned the fetus as the key and independent agent that ought to have “choice” regarding the pregnancy.

The framing of abortion as an issue related to teenage pregnancy, with some writers offering solutions of increasing access to health services and education, and, for a few commentators, as an issue related to women’s experiences of gender, social and reproductive injustice,²² represents an important alternative in terms of perceptions, treatment and outcomes for Pacific women who need or have had abortions, as well as policy implications.³² Yet, public and political opinion is both reflected in, and may be shaped by the themes of Christian nationalism, the fetus as “life”, and abortion-seeking women as ignorant or murderous criminals, informing the particular function and construction of abortion stigma for

Pacific women.^{8,32,34,38,52} The findings of this study also suggest limitations with pursuing arguments about abortion that rely on generalised appeals to “choice” and “rights”, which are easily co-opted into dominant ideological viewpoints situating the “unborn” as the key social subject and connecting abortion to crime, murder, irrationality, and corruption.^{38,52} This analysis suggests that this line of argumentation typical of pro-choice movements may have limited success in Pacific Island contexts, where individualised conceptions of “choice” and “rights” hold little ontological relevance, and fail to adequately address abortion stigma and the multiple injustices that constrain individuals’ capacity to choose.^{11,22,39,62}

Limitations

The media texts analysed in this study are not representative of the full scope of views regarding abortion and abortion legislation in Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region more broadly, including those most affected by this legislation. Further qualitative studies to explore socio-political and cultural perceptions of abortion from diverse Pacific Island communities, including advocates working in the area, would add significantly to the analysis in this study.

Conclusion

We analysed articles, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor in Pacific Island print media to understand how abortion is framed as an issue. There were three main framings: one that blames abortion on modernisation and positions it as a threat

to Christian nationalism; one that “others” women requiring abortion services as ignorant, evil, or murderous; and one that positions unsafe abortion as an outcome of teenage pregnancy related to poor access to contraceptive services, including education, or decreased parental control. Framings of abortion as a threat to Christian nationalism, as the killing of the “unborn” or “life”, and women who have abortions as “others”, may shape abortion stigma, and public and political engagement with the subject of abortion in these Pacific Island countries. Generalised appeals to “choice” and “rights”, as argued, may also be co-opted into these dominant ideological viewpoints, suggesting the limits of relying on this traditional pro-choice rhetoric in the fight for reproductive rights in Pacific Island countries. Relying on the notion of “choice” also fails to adequately analyse the reproductive experiences of Pacific Island women as shaped by their position within their families, communities, and the state, as well as men’s role in conception.

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Résumé

Dans la plupart des pays insulaires du Pacifique, l’avortement est considérablement restreint par la loi, ce qui a de profondes répercussions sur la vie et la santé des femmes de cette région. On dispose de peu de données sur la façon dont l’avortement est encadré dans les îles du Pacifique: c’est-à-dire interprété, discuté et rendu significatif en tant que problème dans les forums publics. La manière dont l’avortement est encadré peut avoir des conséquences sur son traitement dans les débats et les orientations publiques et politiques, sur la stigmatisation de l’avortement et sur les stratégies de plaidoyer. Nous avons entrepris une analyse thématique de 246 articles, tribunes et lettres à la rédaction qui couvraient le sujet de l’avortement dans la presse écrite grand public. Nous avons trouvé trois cadrages dominants. L’avortement était souvent positionné en opposition à l’idéologie de genre et à l’identité nationale, le genre et l’identité nationale étant construits par de nombreux commentateurs selon une doctrine chrétienne socialement conservatrice. L’avortement a également été construit comme le meurtre de « l’enfant à naître », le fœtus étant positionné comme le principal sujet social. Dans d’autres cas, l’avortement était présenté comme souvent dangereux et une réponse à la grossesse chez les adolescentes, avec plusieurs solutions proposées dans ce contexte. Peu de commentateurs ont dépeint les femmes qui ont vécu des grossesses non désirées et des avortements comme prenant des décisions concernant leur grossesse en réponse à des conditions socio-économiques et de genre complexes. Les cadrages dominants de l’avortement par opposition aux idéaux de genre, au nationalisme et au meurtre de « l’enfant à naître » compliquent les appels simplifiés au « choix » dans les activités de plaidoyer. En se concentrant sur la santé et l’injustice plus large vécue par les femmes, il est possible de disposer d’autres cadrages envisageables.

Resumen

En la mayoría de los países insulares del Pacífico, el aborto es restringido por la ley; esto tiene profundas implicaciones para la vida y la salud de las mujeres de esta región. Existen datos limitados sobre cómo se plantea el tema del aborto en las islas del Pacífico, es decir, cómo se interpreta y aborda y cómo se le da significancia como tema en los foros públicos. La manera en que se plantea el tema del aborto puede tener implicaciones en cómo se trata en políticas y debates públicos y políticos, y en la estigmatización del aborto, e influir en las estrategias de incidencia política. Realizamos un análisis temático de 246 artículos, artículos de opinión y cartas al editor que trataban el tema del aborto en los principales medios impresos de comunicación. Encontramos tres marcos dominantes. A menudo se plantea el tema del aborto en oposición a la ideología de género y la identidad nacional, con la identidad de género y la identidad nacional construidas por muchos comentaristas según la doctrina cristiana conservadora socialmente. Además, el aborto se construye como la matanza del “nonato”, con el feto posicionado como el principal sujeto social. Por otro lado, el tema del aborto es planteado como inseguro generalmente y como respuesta al embarazo en la adolescencia, con diversas soluciones sugeridas en este contexto. Pocos comentaristas representaron a las mujeres que tuvieron embarazos no deseados y abortos como tomadoras de decisiones sobre su embarazo en respuesta a condiciones de género complejas y socioeconómicas. Los marcos dominantes del aborto a diferencia de los ideales de género, nacionalismo y la matanza del “nonato” complican las apelaciones simplificadas a la “elección” en los esfuerzos de incidencia política. El enfoque en la salud y en la injusticia general sufrida por las mujeres ofrece marcos alternativos.