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# WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP FINAL REPORT

## FIJI ASSESSMENT

NOVEMBER 2024

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## ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FEO	Fijian Elections Office
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
KII	Key informant interview
MIDA	Media Industry Development Act
MOG	Multinational Observer Group
NFP	National Federation Party
OLPR	Open-list proportional representation
SODELPA	Social Democratic Liberal Party
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPPL	Women's Political Participation and Leadership

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Fiji's independence in 1970, while political leaders have debated about the country's electoral systems and fair representation, they have not made gender equality and women's political leadership a priority. Through numerous administrations, political upheaval, and four constitutions, the focus has been on promoting racial and ethnic equality instead. Moreover, while the 2022 national elections exhibited Fiji's continued movement toward democracy, that movement has not included increased women's political participation and leadership. In 2022, just 54 of the 343 candidates for parliament (15.7 percent) were women. As of July 2024, only four members of the 29-person cabinet (13.8 percent) and five members of Parliament (9.1 percent) are women.

With relative political stability in the country, the coming months and years provide a unique opportunity to promote and support women's political participation and leadership. This time between elections allows for engagement with individuals, civil society organizations (CSOs), and political parties without the pressure of a campaign. Additionally, the possibility of local government elections in mid 2025 provides the occasion to pilot new interventions. However, to succeed, it is necessary for donors, implementers, and partners to consider the complex individual, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers facing women's participation in Fiji.

Fiji's patriarchal social norms, including high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), turbulent and violent political history, and current political dynamics, impact women's political participation and leadership in two main ways. First, women's formal political leadership is not valued nor seen as a political priority by citizens or the political elite. Second, women themselves do not view political participation and leadership as realistic paths to create positive change in their lives and communities.

This report investigates the barriers and opportunities to expand women's political participation and leadership in Fiji's political landscape. It uses the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Women's Political Participation and Leadership (WPPL) Assessment Framework to document women's access and power in politics along sociocultural, institutional, and individual dimensions. The assessment process involves mapping the current state of women's political participation and leadership, analyzing the barriers to and opportunities for women's political participation and leadership, and making evidence-based recommendations. This report is intended to be used by relevant stakeholders to identify priority areas where their investments in programs to support women's political participation and leadership are likely to have the greatest and most meaningful impact.

## BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are numerous barriers to women's political participation and leadership in Fiji, including patriarchal social norms with high rates of GBV, political instability, and an unfavorable political system that combine to create a hostile environment for women who seek to meaningfully engage in the political process.

In Fiji, culture and tradition shape patriarchal social norms that impact women's economic and political participation. Men of all ethnicities are seen as the leaders and decision-makers in their homes and communities, while the traditional role of Fijian women is to reproduce and care for the family. The Pacific

region, including Fiji, has some of the highest rates of GBV in the world. Research suggests that patriarchal social norms, created through tradition, colonialism, and religion, have normalized violence against women and sustained a culture of impunity.

In addition to conservative social norms, Fiji has experienced political instability in the form of multiple coups and military mutiny since 1987. This history of violence and focus on retaining power has led to economic and political instability, the absence of consistent strategies for women's empowerment, and a lack of opportunity for women's leadership in politics.

Fiji's electoral system is also not set up to increase women's participation. The country has a single national constituency in which candidates run on an open-list proportional representation (OLPR) system. The electoral system does not include temporary special measures for women or a gender quota. Political parties are dominated by men and commonly structured along ethnic lines, using kinship and the traditional cultural system to build power bases.

Furthermore, non-political institutions have not challenged these gender barriers. Due to restrictions placed by the Bainimarama Government, neither a strong, independent media nor a politics-focused civil society have existed during the past decade. Media organizations have not been allowed to report on government policies, legislation, and the budget; to communicate women's contribution to these activities; or to hold political leaders to account. The women's movement has been sidelined. Coordination among international donors and partners regarding women's political participation and leadership is limited and inconsistent. Current or recent programming in this area has been short-term, without consideration of previous research, and focused predominantly on participants in the capital, Suva.

Across sectors, ethnicities, and regions, there is a lack of financial, social, and professional support for women who want to engage in politics. This lack of support, along with a lack of self-confidence and previously described social norms, discourages women from running for formal political positions when they believe they can make more of an impact elsewhere.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### SOCIO-CULTURAL

- Pilot a voluntary gender quota through engagement with political party leaders during the next local elections to both give women the opportunity to run and serve in formal decision-making roles and help change social norms regarding women's leadership in Fiji.
- Utilize increased foreign government funding to engage women's focused and women-led CSOs that have not previously focused on women's political participation and leadership.
- Through workshops on political skills, engage women outside of Suva who are already often leaders and organizers in their communities and encourage them to view their activities as a part of "politics," as they are already serving people in their communities.
- Engage men (from government, political parties, civil society, the media, and traditional leadership structures) through workshops so that they can better understand harmful gender norms and

barriers to women's political participation, appreciate how women's political participation can benefit everyone, and be made aware of actions they can take to become allies and increase women's participation.

- Engage traditional and religious leaders to show how Indigenous or religious views and women's political participation and leadership can and should coexist.
- Engage leaders of media organizations (companies and CSOs) and journalists to improve the quality and increase the quantity of coverage of women in public life. Coverage could highlight different kinds of leadership and political participation by, for instance, publishing profiles of women in Fiji who have previously and continue to improve the lives of others at the grassroots level.
- Expand programs with global youth movements to inform young civil society and political party leaders (men and women).
- Work with graduates and alumni of previous civil society women's leadership programs to facilitate mentoring of women interested in political leadership. Such mentoring would give leadership forum alumni practical skills and provide guidance and motivation for other women.
- Partner with CSOs to conduct research on, build a body of evidence about, and play a role in addressing violence against women in politics, including online and technology-facilitated GBV.
- Work with the government to develop civic education in the schools and public service campaigns to inform Fijians about voting and the role of government in their lives.

## INSTITUTIONAL

- Engage men and women leaders across sectors (political, social, and economic) to participate in ongoing discussions about potential changes to the electoral system, including how temporary special measures or quotas might work within the current constitution to allow for greater women's leadership.
- Work with political party leaders to meaningfully include women as party leaders and candidates with updated party constitutions, increased internal democratic processes, transparent candidate nomination procedures, and stronger structures, including regional branches and women and youth wings.
- Use the release of this report to reach out to those who took part in the research, (re-)build relationships, and start co-creation processes for long-term strategies focused on women's leadership skills.

## INDIVIDUAL

- Create distinct networks of women based on their current roles and their political aspirations: women already working informally to make change in their communities, women interested in supporting women's political participation across sectors, and women who are personally interested in formal political leadership.

- For all programs with women, take into account the socio-cultural, institutional, and individual barriers that would prohibit them from taking part and design engagement to overcome or address each.



## INTRODUCTION

Under the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance—Learning, Evaluation, and Research II Activity, USAID tasked The Cloudburst Group with implementing country-level women’s political participation and leadership assessments based on the latest iteration of the WPPL Assessment Framework. The WPPL Assessment Framework aims to identify key barriers to women’s political participation and leadership that exist at the socio-cultural, institutional, and individual levels and to recognize opportunities that will inform the USAID Mission’s program strategies, activity design, and allocation of resources. The framework, along with this report, can then aid the coordination with Fijian and international actors to further women’s political participation and leadership.

## COUNTRY BACKGROUND

The Republic of Fiji is an island group in the South Pacific Ocean, about two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand. The group consists of 332 islands, approximately 110 of which are inhabited. The capital of Fiji is Suva, which is located on the island of Viti Levu. Fiji is made up of 14 provinces and one dependency. Approximately 70 percent of the population lives on the island of Viti Levu, and roughly half of the population lives in urban areas.<sup>1</sup>

The population of Fiji is 951,611 (50.7 percent men, 49.3 percent women) (2024 est.).<sup>2</sup> Fiji has a young population, with around 62 percent of the population below the age of 34, and most of the urban population is between the ages of 15 and 44.<sup>3</sup> The population includes several ethnic groups: 56.8 percent iTaukei (predominantly Melanesian with a Polynesian admixture), 37.5 percent Indo-Fijian, 1.2 percent Rotuman, 4.5 percent other (European, part European, other Pacific Islanders, Chinese).<sup>4</sup> For almost two centuries, Fiji has been home to people from different ethnicities, and ethnicity has invariably played a crucial role in policies, politics, and education.<sup>5</sup> The two major ethnic groups in Fiji are the Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. The latter are Fijian citizens of Indian descent, most of whom are descendants of indentured laborers. Tension between ethnic groups<sup>6</sup> is embodied by the terms used to refer to them. Prior to the 2013 Constitution, only the Indigenous peoples were known as “Fijians” while “Indo-Fijians” or “Fiji-Indian” was used to refer to the descendants of indentured laborers. The current constitution established Fijian as the common name for all citizens. However, many citizens, particularly Indigenous Fijians, prefer the previous terminology.

Fiji is also characterized by religious diversity, and faith plays an important role in defining everyday practice, gender norms, and advocacy, as well as informing political decision-making. Religious values guide decision-making at the community and national levels as well. Fijians are 45 percent Protestant (34.6 percent Methodist, 5.7 percent Assembly of God, 3.9 percent Seventh Day Adventist, and 0.8 percent

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Fiji-republic-Pacific-Ocean/Economy>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Fiji Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Fiji 2017 Population and Housing Census.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Naidu, V. (2013). Fiji: the challenges and opportunities of diversity. Minority Rights Group International.

<sup>6</sup> The terms “ethnicity” and “race” are commonly intertwined and confused in Fiji with the latter often being used to describe ethnic groups.

Anglican), 27.9 percent Hindu, 10.4 percent other Christian, 9.1 percent Roman Catholic, 6.3 percent Muslim, 0.3 percent Sikh, 0.3 percent other, and 0.8 percent none.<sup>7</sup>

Fiji has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. Two out of every three women in Fiji have experienced physical or sexual violence from a man intimate partner in their lifetime.<sup>8</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, reported incidents of physical violence, verbal abuse, and marital rape increased significantly.<sup>9</sup> Fiji's toll-free national helpline recorded a 300 percent increase in domestic violence-related calls one month after curfews and lockdowns were announced.<sup>10</sup> There continues to be a pervasive culture of silence surrounding incidents of GBV, which the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and other feminist organizations have been working to break down through training, community education, and advocacy.

Similar to other Pacific Island Countries, formal politics in Fiji is considered the domain of men,<sup>11</sup> while a robust civil society movement is dominated largely by women. However, women's advocacy and social work are often overlooked by the media and general public, particularly in periods of political unrest when the focus is on men politicians and security issues.

## GENDER DATA

Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment are fundamental for the realization of human rights and key to effective and sustainable development outcomes. According to the 2023 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, Fiji ranks 121 out of 146 countries,<sup>12</sup> and the East Asia and the Pacific region scores fifth of the eight regions. Progress toward parity has been stagnating for over a decade, with Fiji, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste showing the largest declines.

Fiji has a relatively strong education foundation for boys and girls. School completion rates are 100 percent at the primary level, with boys and girls advancing in near equal numbers. At the secondary level, completion rates are 86 percent with continued gender parity. At the university level, women often outnumber men as students and graduates.<sup>13</sup> Educational attainment, however, has not translated into formal economic participation. In 2019, 46 percent of Fijian women between 15–64 years old were economically active compared with 83 percent of their peers who are men.<sup>14</sup> Women cited unpaid care work and GBV as the principal reasons why they do not enter the workforce. Moreover, gender discrimination affects the types of jobs women can find, how much they are paid, and whether they are

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<sup>7</sup> CIA. (2024). The World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/fiji/#people-and-society>.

<sup>8</sup> Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. (2013). 'Somebody's life, Everybody's business! National Research on Women's Health and Life Experiences in Fiji'. Available at: <http://www.fijiwomen.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-Survey-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> COVID-19 and the increase in domestic violence - Fiji Women's Crisis Centre submission to the UN special rapporteur on violence against women.

<sup>10</sup> Aljazeera. (2021, February). 'Crisis within a crisis': Violence against women surges in Fiji, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/24/crisis-within-a-crisis-violence-against-women-surges-in-fiji>.

<sup>11</sup> George, N. (2015). "Starting with a Prayer": Women, Faith, and Security in Fiji. *Oceania*, 85(1), 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oc.5078>.

<sup>12</sup> 2023 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> PSDI. (2024). UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: A Gender Inclusive Private Sector Framework For The Pacific Fiji Country Assessment. <https://pacificpsdi.org/assets/Unlocking-Potential-GIPS-framework-Fiji-assessment.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

promoted.<sup>15</sup> There is a notable correlation between the subjects women study at university, such as education, tourism, health, and social sciences, and the sectors in which they predominantly work. Sectors with significant women representation include tourism and hospitality, nursing, and teaching.<sup>16</sup> This alignment suggests that the education system in Fiji supports and encourages women's entry into fields that are crucial to the country's economy and social fabric. However, disparities still exist in professional and leadership roles across these sectors. The agriculture sector provides income-generating opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, and their involvement in the sector has been increasing. Still, their representation is low; only 14 percent of professional farmers are women.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing the need to empower women in agriculture, the Fijian Government has put in place various supportive measures, including the Gender in Agriculture Policy, and allocated additional funding to the Women in Agriculture capital budget.<sup>18</sup> Even when they are employed in the formal sector, gender norms impact their lives. A report by the Fiji Women's Rights Movement highlighted that women comprise 34 percent of the labor force but do 73 percent of unpaid housework. Women in Fiji have a lower labor-force participation rate and estimated earned income compared to men.<sup>19</sup> There are more than 24,000 micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises in Fiji, and half are owned by women. Those women-owned enterprises are diverse but tend to be concentrated in crowded, low-productivity sectors in the informal economy.<sup>20</sup> Women have traditionally engaged in subsistence farming and fishing to meet household needs; however, they are also increasingly producing goods for sale.

Women's political leadership, much like their economic activity, is less visible than that of men. As of July 2024, only four members of the 29-person cabinet (13.8 percent) and five members of Parliament (9.1 percent) are women. Fiji currently ranks 164 in the world (out of 181 included countries) in the percentage of women in national parliaments.<sup>21</sup> Globally, as of April 1, 2024, women hold 27 percent of the seats in national Parliaments and 19.2 percent of the seats across the Pacific region but just 6.9 percent of the seats within the Pacific Islands.

## POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Fiji's formal politics and leadership positions have been dominated by men who have exploited ethnic and racial representation to maintain hierarchy and power, which has largely left women sidelined in political life. Models of democratic governance have been co-constructed by Fijian elite men and colonial settlers for over a century. In 1871, a leading chief, Ratu Seru Cakobau, and a group of influential European settlers established an all-men Westminster-style legislative assembly in Levuka. The ill-fated government did not last due to the accumulation of debt and political uncertainty, but it laid the foundation for colonial control

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Fiji Government Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan. <https://www.mwccsp.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Women-in-Key-Sectors-Consultation-Paper-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Fiji Agriculture Census 2020. <https://www.agriculture.gov.fj/censusrep.php>.

<sup>18</sup> Policy for Gender in Agriculture in Fiji (2022-2027) : Addressing Gender Gap for Agriculture in Fiji. <https://www.agriculture.gov.fj/documents/policies/Gender%20Booklet%202022%20Final.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> 2023 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> IPU. [https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date\\_year=2024&date\\_month=04](https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_year=2024&date_month=04).

and domination by men.<sup>22</sup> In 1874, British colonizers declared Fiji part of its empire and installed a governor through the Legislative Council to administer Fiji. The British colonial government solidified grounds for ethnic tensions by preventing the transfer of ownership of native lands across ethnic or racial groups.

The country's progress to independence started in 1964 with elections for Members of the Legislative Council. While great attention was paid to achieving representation from all ethnic population groups, the representation of women was not discussed. A ministerial system of government was introduced in Fiji in 1967 after the first national elections in 1966. After the second constitutional conference was held in April and May 1970 in London, the representatives of the two major Fijian political parties agreed on an acceptable formula for ethnic representation, and Fiji's independence was granted on October 10, 1970. Fiji's post-independence political landscape has been marked by attempts to establish democratic institutions through constitutional reforms and elections, followed by four military-led coups and more than 300 decrees resulting in a turbulent political culture driven by ethnic and racial divisions. At the national level, mending racial divides, returning to democracy, and maintaining political stability have often taken priority over focusing on women's rights and equality.

Women were granted the right to vote on April 17, 1963, prior to independence, under British administration. This right was confirmed at independence.<sup>23</sup> Fiji's first post-independence general election was held in April 1972. In the early years, women managed only nominal representation in elected office, winning two Parliamentary seats in the 1972 elections, one seat in the 1977 elections, and zero seats in the 1987 elections.<sup>24</sup>

Generally, there is a lack of literature and data regarding women's political participation throughout Fiji's history. While Fiji's initial report to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) committee in 2000 mentions women's rights to join a political party, register to vote, and run for political office, no information is presented regarding party membership or voter registration and turnout. All of the data included in the report focuses on the number of elected women serving in Parliament or in local government.<sup>25</sup>

The political coups between 1987 and 2006 impacted women's rights, safety, and livelihoods.<sup>26</sup> Job losses were common, particularly for women in the tourism sector, which suffered a decline following each coup. The momentum of women's movements was also disrupted,<sup>27</sup> and incidents of rape increased following the 1987 and 2000 coups.<sup>28</sup> Women's access to justice also decreased with the uncertain legal

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<sup>22</sup> Fiji government website: History of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (<https://www.parliament.gov.fj/our-story/>).

<sup>23</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. Historical data on women. IPU Parline: global data on national parliaments. <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/FJ/FJ-LC01/elections/historical-data-on-women/>.

<sup>24</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. About Parliament. <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/FJ/FJ-LC01/>.

<sup>25</sup> Fiji Initial CEDAW Report. [tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FFJI%2FI&Lang=en](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FFJI%2FI&Lang=en).

<sup>26</sup> Lateef, S. (1990). Current and Future Implications of the Coups for Women in Fiji. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 2(1), 113–130.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Violence against women in Melanesia and East Timor, Fiji country supplement, [https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/vaw\\_cs\\_fiji.pdf](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/vaw_cs_fiji.pdf)

environment and shrinking space for women’s rights CSOs.<sup>29</sup> Indo-Fijian women, in particular, faced dual discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity and gender and were targets of ethnic violence.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, progress made in women’s rights was hindered after the abrogation of each constitution.

The 1997 constitution was the first instance where women and equality principles were elaborated, noting “affirmative action and social justice programs to secure effective equality of access to opportunities, amenities or services” for women, men, and “all disadvantaged citizens or groups.”<sup>31</sup> From 1994 to 2006, women held three to eight seats (6–16 percent) in Parliament. Also during this time, Fijian women attended and made commitments at the 1995 Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing, the government ratified CEDAW in 1995, and a Ministry of Women and Culture was established in 1998. However, in Fiji’s first CEDAW report in 2000, there is an acknowledgment of patriarchal values and ongoing inequality in politics. The government’s fifth periodic report to the CEDAW Committee, submitted in 2016, states, “Fiji’s new Constitution prohibits any form of discrimination against women and girls on the grounds of sex, race, ethnicity, religion or belief system, health status, disability, age and so forth” and “addresses gender stereotypes that perpetuate the traditional perceptions of the roles of men and women that are based on unequal power relationships and lie at the core of gender inequality and gender-based violence.” However, it also acknowledges that, “very often, the written laws do not always translate into substantive equality and justice for many women.”<sup>32</sup> It also describes the connections between Fiji’s turbulent political history and women’s political participation, stating, “As long as an ‘authoritarian military presence’ remains, women’s political rights and participation, both at the local and national level, will continually be constrained.”<sup>33</sup>

Within the current constitution, adopted in 2013, gender equality and non-discrimination are guaranteed: “Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, all Fijians have equal status and identity, which means that they are equally—entitled to all the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship; and subject to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship.” With regard to political rights, the constitution states, “Every citizen has the freedom to make political choices, and the right to—form or join a political party; participate in the activities of, or recruit members for, a political party; and campaign for a political party, candidate or cause.”

Overall, throughout its decades of independence and during the multiple coup periods, the government of Fiji has had opportunities to address marginalized populations, including women, yet Fijian civil society

<sup>29</sup> The Fiji Women’s Rights Movement input into the discussion on: “How to create and maintain civil society space? What works?” [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/ReportHC/12\\_TheFijiWomen%E2%80%99sRightsMovement\\_for\\_website.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/ReportHC/12_TheFijiWomen%E2%80%99sRightsMovement_for_website.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> 1997 Constitution of Fiji. [https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/1997\\_constitution.pdf](https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/1997_constitution.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> CEDAW Committee Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Fiji. [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FFJI%2FFCO%2F5&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FFJI%2FFCO%2F5&Lang=en).

<sup>33</sup> 2016 Fiji NGO Coalition on CEDAW Parallel Report, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEDAW%2FNGO%2FFJI%2F27677&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEDAW%2FNGO%2FFJI%2F27677&Lang=en).

leaders contend that the government of Fiji has “made no attempt” to redress past human rights violations, include special measures, or offer specific protections to women as defined by CEDAW.<sup>34</sup>

## **GENDER FRAMEWORK**

A legal framework around gender equality and women’s empowerment has existed for decades and remains robust on paper. Time and again, similar issues—economic empowerment, representation in political and government decision-making, and a decrease in GBV—are addressed repeatedly in government laws and plans. However, limited political will and traditional socio-cultural values have not allowed for the implementation of the proposed measures and continue to obstruct women’s political leadership, economic empowerment, and the meaningful enforcement of punitive measures for violence against women.

At the global level, Fiji ratified CEDAW in 1995.<sup>35</sup> In 1999, the National Women's Congress was organized by the Ministry of Women and Culture and adopted the first Fiji Women Plan of Action (1999–2008) in order to advance the economic, legal, and political status of women in Fiji. It was a follow-up to commitments made at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It focused on five areas: mainstreaming women’s and gender concerns in the planning process and all policy areas; reviewing laws that are disadvantageous to women; allocating additional resources to women’s economic empowerment; working toward gender balance at all levels of decision-making; and promoting an environment that is free of violence.<sup>36</sup> Fiji’s second Women’s Plan of Action (2010–2019) was adopted to enhance and facilitate the implementation of changes and improvements to the lives of women and families in Fiji. It outlined five priorities for the promotion of women’s rights: formal sector employment and livelihood; equal participation in decision-making; the elimination of violence against women and children; access to basic services; and women and the law. With regard to decision-making, the strategic objective was “Free and fair general elections and appropriate representation in Parliament and Cabinet.”<sup>37</sup> Despite these plans of action, there is little evidence that laws were implemented, resources were allocated, or levels of violence were reduced.

As previously indicated, Fiji’s current constitution states that gender equality and non-discrimination are guaranteed. To that end, Fiji adopted a National Gender Policy in 2014. Specific goals with regard to politics included in the policy are to: “1) Demonstrate commitment to promoting greater levels of gender balance in power and decision-making positions at all levels and sectors, including governmental bodies, the judiciary, trade unions, the private sector, political parties, employer’s organizations, research and academic institutions, and national corporations, to enhance women’s increased participation in leadership and the efficacy of governance in the nation; 2) Implement gender mainstreaming and the leadership of women and young women in conflict prevention and management, in political decision-making, in peace building and in peacekeeping; and 3) Review the electoral laws through the Electoral Commission to

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> UN website: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=60&Lang=EN](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=60&Lang=EN)

<sup>36</sup> Asian Development Bank, Fiji Islands: Country Gender Assessment. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32240/cga-fiji.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Plan of Action. <https://leap.unep.org/en/countries/fj/national-legislation/women-s-plan-action-2010-2019>.

ensure that women have equal access to political leadership, and the identification of cultural, economic and institutional barriers to the political leadership of women in Fiji.”<sup>38</sup>

The National Gender Policy is currently under review by the Fijian Government, and an implementation report and an updated version are due to be released by the end of 2024. Although referenced by the Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Protection in an interview for this report, others in civil society and politics did not refer to the policy as a framework for their efforts in combating GBV or increasing women’s economic and political empowerment.

Fiji’s 20-Year Development Plan (2017–2036) is a detailed action agenda with specific targets and policies that reflect the aspirations of the Fijian people and the government’s commitment to deliver on these goals.<sup>39</sup> It also includes goals for “Women in Development.”<sup>40</sup> Within the plan, there is a paragraph on “Gender Equality,” but, once again, it does not provide specific actions for the government to take and does not specifically address women’s political participation or access to leadership.

The Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls (2023–2028) is the first of two five-year plans intended to advance the Government of Fiji’s long-term commitment to prevent violence against all women and girls. The five key strategies to address violence include 1) Transformative public education and social norm change; 2) Strengthening of equal and respectful relationships; 3) Survivor-centered services for survivors of violence; 4) Coordinated legal protection for survivors of violence; and 5) Fostering a gender equal society.

The government of Fiji, specifically the Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Protection, continues to create plans to address women’s economic empowerment, GBV, and, to a lesser extent, political representation. To that end, the Ministry is currently working on a national action plan for women’s economic empowerment, scheduled to be launched in March 2025.

While equity has been achieved in education and the more informal parts of the economy, and a policy framework exists on paper, most women continue to be shut out from economic and political positions that have real power. Women’s participation is encouraged or at least tolerated at the grassroots level and within specific, more traditional contexts (chief’s wife or the education field), but women’s leadership in politics receives no real policy or institutional support, as it challenges deeply embedded traditional values.

<sup>38</sup> Fiji National Gender Policy. <https://wrd.unwomen.org/practice/resources/fiji-national-gender-policy>.

<sup>39</sup> Fiji’s 20-Year Development Plan. <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/getattachment/15b0ba03-825e-47f7-bf69-094ad33004dd/5-Year---20-Year-NATIONAL-DEVELOPMENT-PLAN.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the assessment is to understand the current state of women's political participation and leadership and pinpoint challenges and opportunities for advancing it in Fiji. The assessment seeks to answer the following four questions:

1. Are women politically engaged as citizens in any of a wide range of possible political roles?
2. Do women exercise political agency and influence as citizens?
3. Do women serve as political leaders, whether in elected or non-elected roles?
4. Do women exercise political agency and influence as political leaders?

While global indicators of women's political participation and leadership largely focus on the numbers of women in elected and appointed political positions, this assessment methodology expands the definition of women's political participation and leadership in two key ways. First, it divides this concept into two interrelated, yet distinct, components: political participation, referring to activities women can engage in as citizens, and political leadership, referring to activities women can engage in as elected and non-elected political representatives. Second, it recognizes that simply being granted political rights is not the same as exercising those rights to the fullest extent. A complete assessment of women's political participation and leadership must look at both access, or women's ability to take part in the political process, and power, or women's voice and agency as political actors.

Three interacting sets of factors shape opportunities for women to participate substantively in every aspect of political life. Socio-cultural factors involve assumptions about appropriate norms and practices, shaping social expectations as well as personal attitudes and behaviors. They include gender stereotypes, prevailing views on gender roles, and cultural ideas about gender equality. Institutional factors structure the political environment, establishing the formal and informal rules and systems in which political actors operate. They include the electoral system, the political party system, and the broader political and legal context. Individual factors refer to considerations shaping individual women's decisions and abilities to participate in politics. These include levels of political ambition, as well as resources and support for their political engagement.

Understanding these factors as an "ecosystem" emphasizes how they work together and inform one another to create environments supporting or undermining women's political participation and leadership. Focusing only on one set of factors to the exclusion of the others is likely to lead to misinterpretations of the current situation and, in turn, to the adoption of only partially effective solutions to expand women's political participation and leadership. In contrast, an ecosystem approach suggests the need to consider more holistic strategies, combining a focus on norm change, institutional reforms, and individual shifts in thinking. Because GBV and violence against women in politics cut across all these factors, findings about violence are integrated throughout these sections.

The WPPL Assessment Framework has three parts: Part 1 involves mapping the current state of women's political participation and leadership. Part 2 entails analyzing barriers to and opportunities for women's



political participation and leadership. Part 3 involves transitioning from the research to the writing of the final report and making evidence-based recommendations. The assessment employs three tools: a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). These tools provide qualitative sources of evidence to better understand the current situation as well as barriers to and opportunities for advancing women's political participation and leadership, engaging a wide range of stakeholders and diverse groups of women.

The Cloudburst Group hired an assessment team in May 2024 to conduct a women's political participation and leadership assessment in Fiji. The team consisted of a team lead, a local expert, a local logistician, and a note-taker. The assessment team had a kick-off call with USAID staff in mid-May and finalized a strategy report and data collection plan in mid-June. The strategy report describes the desk review key findings and the Fiji assessment team's strategy and data collection plan for in-country work.

The assessment team spent two weeks in Fiji, from June 24–July 5, conducting KIIs and FGDs. In total, the team held 30+ interviews and eight focus groups in Suva, Sigatoka, Lautoka, and Nadi (see Annexes). The interviews covered a range of issues, and most lasted about an hour. The assessment team conducted a majority of the interviews in person and in venues that were convenient, safe, and apolitical for participants. In several cases, multiple people took part in one interview. All of the interviews were conducted in English.

The FGDs included representatives from political parties, specific demographic groups (young people, social influencers, and the LGBTQI+ community), and activists outside of Suva. As with the interviews, the assessment team conducted the discussions in person and in venues that were convenient, safe, and apolitical for participants. All of the discussions were primarily conducted in English, although one outside of Sigatoka included some conversation in Fiji Hindi.

This assessment report includes an analysis of the literature and information collected during the in-country work to identify challenges and prioritize opportunities for advancing women's political participation and leadership in Fiji through programming, diplomatic engagement, and advocacy.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The assessment team had some limitations in putting together a representative sample of stakeholders for the interviews and focus groups. First, the two-week period and available resources for in-country work allowed the team to collect data in only four cities and towns, all located on one island, Viti Levu. Next, during the time of the in-country work, there was a large amount of political instability as Fiji's former Prime Minister was sentenced to jail, his party, FijiFirst, went through the de-registration process with the Fijian Elections Office (FEO), and the annual budget was released by Parliament. In addition, multiple leaders from large women's CSOs and civil society networks would not engage with the assessment team due to the U.S. Government's funding of the project, citing their opposition to aspects of U.S. foreign policy.

Although the limitations listed here pertain to the implementation of the assessment, they should also be taken into account as program planning occurs. Resources, both time and money, are necessary for travel

and activities outside of Suva. The political operating environment will remain in flux and will be challenging in the foreseeable future. Also, although it did not impact the assessment, several of those interviewed mentioned the issue of immigration. Due to political tension, economic pressure, and overseas opportunities, students and skilled personnel are leaving the country. This could impact program implementation and partnerships for the U.S. Government and implementing partner organizations.

## **CURRENT STATE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC LIFE**

The full participation of people of all genders is critical both to the functioning of democratic governments and to the success of democratic movements across the globe. Countries that provide a safe and enabling environment for women to participate equitably in politics and public life produce more inclusive and effective policy outcomes, are more peaceful, have higher economic growth, and are more stable as societies.<sup>41</sup> Despite the intrinsic importance and benefits of women's participation in politics and public life, women do not enjoy full and equal access to political life around the world, nor does their mere entry guarantee that they will be able to exercise political agency and influence.

### **WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Political participation refers to activities women can engage in as citizens, including as voters, activists, members of civil society and political parties, and government staff. In Fiji, while women are present and represented in equitable numbers as voters, in election administration, and in civil society, women's leadership in political parties and government is limited.

#### **WOMEN AS VOTERS**

Since independence, women in Fiji have had the opportunity to participate in politics as voters and have voted in similar numbers as men in national elections. Although not intended to target women, a recent piece of legislation very nearly made it more difficult for many women to participate as voters. In 2021, Parliament passed the Electoral Registration of Voters Amendment Bill, which required applications for voter registration to state the person's full name as specified on their birth certificate and also present the birth certificate for verification.<sup>42</sup> The government stated that this would help the FEO clear voter rolls of deceased voters and verify a person's citizenship when registering to vote. However, the legislation was controversial. Although the government stated that it was not intended, women's rights advocates raised concerns that the new requirements would disenfranchise married women, who would have to change their birth certificates to match their married name in order to register to vote. The government said that voters could also re-register with their birth certificate name, but this created a stressful environment for women in advance of the 2022 elections and diverted considerable resources as the FEO and others scrambled to educate voters and facilitate registration updates. This law had the most impact

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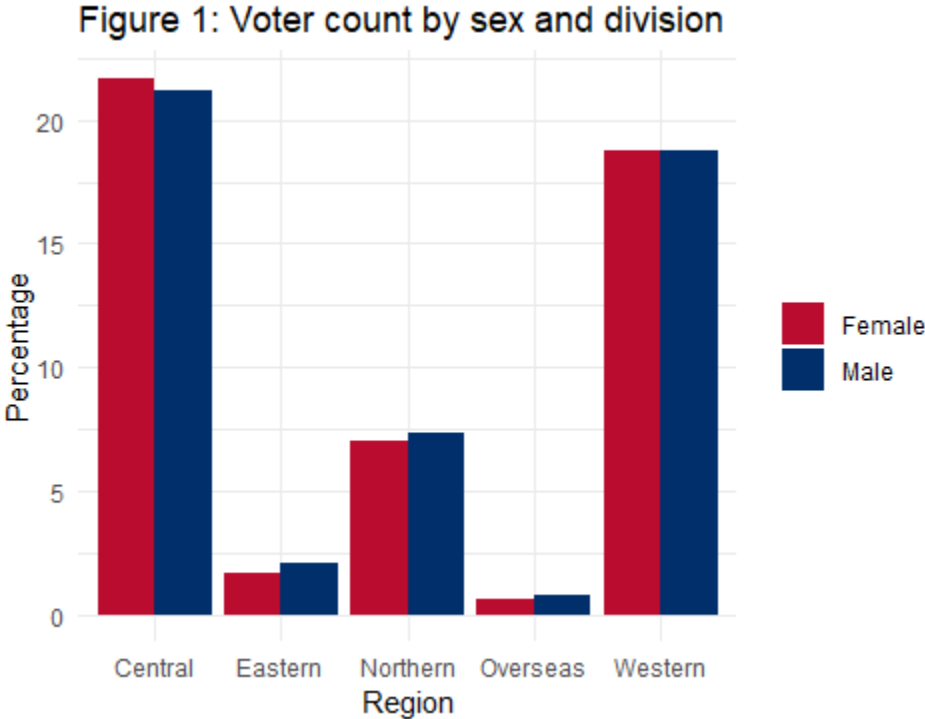
<sup>41</sup> U.S. National Strategy on Equity and Equality. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/National-Strategy-on-Gender-Equity-and-Equality.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Fijivillage. (2021, September 22). Parliament passes proposed electoral law requiring people to use their birth certificate name to be registered as a voter. <https://www.fijivillage.com/news/Parliament-passes-proposed-electoral-law-requiring-people-to-use-their-birth-certificate-name-to-be-registered-as-a-voter-f4r5x8/>.

on married women, older women, women with disabilities, and gender non-conforming individuals. While the law was changed in 2023, this incident demonstrated a lack of consideration for women’s rights.

In 2022, women comprised 49.8 percent of registered voters.<sup>43</sup> While sex-disaggregated voter turnout data is not yet available, the 2022 General Election recorded the largest number of women voters registered in Fiji to date.<sup>44</sup> The following diagram shows voter registration by region.

**Figure 1: Voter count by sex and division**



### WOMEN IN CIVIL SOCIETY

There is a long history of women’s participation and leadership in Fijian civil society. Two prominent women’s groups in Fiji are the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre and the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, which were both founded in the 1980s. These and other women’s organizations work to widen the scope of women’s participation in public life, change attitudes toward women’s status in Fiji society, and increase women’s leadership through empowerment programs and forums in Suva. The Fiji Women’s Rights Movement runs several leadership programs for young women and girls. Graduates from these programs commonly pursue advocacy work, and some have gone on to form their own advocacy groups such as Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni and the Young Feminists Network. Advocacy work and civil society have allowed women’s voices and issues to be empowered and addressed, and many young women gravitate

<sup>43</sup> 2022 General Election Joint Report. <https://www.feo.org.fj/> (accessed July 2024).

<sup>44</sup> Multinational Observer Group. (2023, March). 2022 Fiji Election Final Report.

toward activism to effect change. Structural and societal factors often lead to women’s greater visibility and participation in civil society. Many women find CSOs offer platforms for advocacy and community service, allowing them to address social issues directly and effect change without the complexities of political processes. Political structures can be intimidating or inaccessible for women, with fewer opportunities for mentorship, funding, and support compared to CSOs. The underrepresentation of women in politics can create a cycle where fewer women see political participation as a viable path, reinforcing their involvement in civil society instead.

There have been limited efforts by the Fiji Women's Rights Movement and newer organizations, such as Women’s Action for Democracy and femLINKpacific, to specifically increase women’s political participation and leadership. For the 2022 elections, the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement distributed a “My Guide to Voting Booklet,” which targeted women’s networks from across Fiji as well as specific communities such as trans women, young women with disabilities, and religious and non-religious young women.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, much of the progress made by civil society regarding women’s rights has been hampered by restrictive legislation (described later in this report) and has repeatedly regressed during times of political instability.

## WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES

Women’s roles in political parties are not well-documented. Information on the number of women who are leaders and members of the existing political parties is difficult to obtain, even from political party leaders. At least one of those interviewed indicated that the parties are hesitant to collect the names and contact information of members because that information has been previously used to identify targets of political violence. Based on how both men and women in political parties described party activities in recent years, it is clear from interviews and FGDs that women’s participation in political party activities is generally only valued at the grassroots level and during the election period. Otherwise, women’s wings (or “movements”), even if they exist in the party constitution, are dormant or non-existent. Experts in women’s political participation whom the team interviewed suggested that before the multiple coups in the 1980s and 1990s, there was more space for women’s political participation and leadership in political parties. Following the upheavals, however, men leaders of all ethnicities were more focused on protecting their own power.

## WOMEN IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Similar to the equity in the number of women registering to vote, the most recent elections involved high numbers of women working in the administration of the voting process. The Multinational Observer Group (MOG), an international election observation effort co-led by Australia, India, and Indonesia, noted the high number of women working on the 2022 elections: “Of the polling stations visited by observers, during Pre-Polling and Election Day, the MOG observed that 73.79 percent of Electoral Officers were women, and 67.54 percent of Presiding Officers were women.”<sup>46</sup> It could be the temporary nature of these positions that draws more women to electoral administration. Additionally, these activities align

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

with acceptable gender roles and expectations in local communities and in political parties where women often do more logistical work and interact with people on the ground. In relation to women's leadership in administering the 2022 electoral process, the MOG also noted that four of the six members of the Electoral Commission were women.<sup>47</sup> As an example of this leadership, Ana Mataiciwa has served in various roles within the FEO, including acting deputy supervisor of elections, manager legal, and legal and compliance coordinator. Appointed in May 2024, she now serves as the supervisor of elections in Fiji.

## WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

With regard to unelected positions in the government of Fiji, women are well-represented, as they make up more than 59 percent of the employees in the civil service. However, the numbers decrease in leadership as there are 120 senior civil servant positions, with only 43 held by women (35.8 percent).<sup>48</sup> Fiji has seen some progress in recent years in the proportion of women appointed to senior management roles in government ministries. Women currently serve as permanent secretaries in six Ministries (29 percent): Education; Fisheries and Forestry; Lands and Mineral Resources; Local Government; Tourism and Civil Aviation; and Women, Children, and Social Protection.<sup>49</sup>

The number of women serving in the government, while significant on its own with regard to citizen representation and economic participation, has not yet led to an increase in the number of women in political leadership. Women's presence in these roles, however, will hopefully, in time, help change Fijians' attitudes about the capacity of women to serve in decision-making positions.

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Political leadership refers to activities women can engage in as elected and unelected political representatives to influence political decision-making and hold government officials and institutions accountable. In Fiji, women continue to experience extensive barriers to seeking political office and political decision-making, which are explored below.

## WOMEN CANDIDATES

The number of women candidates listed on the political party lists in Fiji continues to be low. The percentage in 2022, 15.7 percent, was lower than the one in 2018, which was 23.8 percent.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Fiji Times. (2024, February 27). "Women in Fiji's civil service; steps taken to improve service delivery." <https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/women-in-fijis-civil-service-steps-taken-to-improve-service-delivery/>.

<sup>49</sup> Digital Fiji. Directory. <https://directory.digital.gov.fj/> (accessed July 2024).

**Table 1: Candidates by party**

<b>PARTY NAME</b>	<b>NO. OF MEN</b>	<b>NO. OF WOMEN</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN</b>	<b>NO. OF ELECTED WOMEN</b>
<b>All People's Party</b>	13	1	7%	0
<b>Fiji Labour Party</b>	39	6	13%	0
<b>FijiFirst</b>	46	9	16%	2
<b>National Federation Party (NFP)</b>	46	8	15%	2
<b>New Generation Party</b>	3	2	40%	0
<b>Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA)</b>	43	11	20%	0
<b>The People's Alliance</b>	46	9	16%	2
<b>Unity Fiji</b>	33	6	15%	0
<b>We Unite Fiji Party</b>	18	2	10%	0
<b>Independent Candidates</b>	2	0	0%	0
<b>Total</b>	289	54	15.7%	6

## WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

In the 2022 elections, six women were elected to serve in the Fijian Parliament:

- Alitia Bainivalu, People’s Alliance Party
- Sashi Kiran, National Federation Party
- Premila Kumar, FijiFirst
- Lenora Qereqeretabua, National Federation Party
- Lynda Tabuya, People’s Alliance Party
- Rosy Sofia Akbar, FijiFirst. She has since resigned from Parliament.

Following the 2022 elections, the four elected women members of parliament in the governing coalition received ministerial positions, but three were appointed to assistant minister posts and the fourth was appointed Minister of Women, a post that has been held by a woman since 1987. Since that time, one woman assistant minister was appointed to a ministerial position (Minister for Fisheries and Oceans). There are a total of 28 Ministers or Assistant Ministers in the Fiji cabinet and four are women<sup>50</sup>:

- Lynda Tabuya, Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection
- Alitia Bainivalu, Minister for Fisheries and Forests
- Sashi Kiran, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
- Lenora Qereqeretabua, Deputy Speaker and Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

## BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Research on women’s political participation and leadership highlights three interacting sets of factors shaping opportunities for women to participate substantively in every aspect of political life, whether this entails advocating on matters of policy, running for office, getting elected, or governing effectively. These factors include 1) socio-cultural factors, 2) institutional factors, and 3) individual factors.

There are a myriad of historical factors—such as Indigenous culture, colonialism, religion, and high levels of GBV—that work together to create the realities of women’s ability to participate and lead in Fiji’s politics and public life. These factors come together to form a structure of patriarchy that cuts across racial and ethnic lines and is hard to disrupt with the physical isolation of the country and recent political upheaval.

## SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

Socio-cultural factors embody assumptions about appropriate norms and practices, shaping social expectations as well as personal attitudes and behaviors. In the case of women’s political participation and leadership, these factors reinforce an association between political power and men and masculinity, making

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<sup>50</sup> Fiji Parliament website: <https://www.parliament.gov.fj/members-of-parliament/> (accessed July 2024)

it difficult for men and women to accept women as legitimate political actors. Socio-cultural norms are rooted in what gender scholars call the “public/private divide.” Across many different contexts, including Fiji’s, men tend to be associated with the public sphere of politics and the economy, while women tend to be assigned to the private sphere of the home and the family. This divide gives rise to ideas about how women and men should act. According to social role theory, men are framed as “agentic” and as assertive, controlling, and confident. In contrast, women are portrayed as “communal” and as primarily concerned with the welfare of others, as well as gentle, nurturing, and kind. Because leadership is seen to require agentic qualities, women leaders often face a perceived conflict between the qualities connected to being a “good woman” and those connected to being a “good leader.” In comparison, no such conflict exists for men, as gender stereotypes and qualities associated with leadership coincide.

In Fiji, the socio-cultural factors that impact women’s political participation and leadership include patriarchal social norms, high levels of GBV, and an underlying current of political instability.

## CULTURE AND TRADITION SHAPE GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS

Culture and tradition shape patriarchal social norms that impact women’s economic and political participation in Fiji. The two largest racial and ethnic groups, the Indigenous iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities, while culturally distinct, are both patriarchal with deeply held gendered norms and values. Men of all ethnicities are seen as the “breadwinners”—the leaders and decision-makers in their homes and communities—while the traditional role of Fijian women is to reproduce and care for the family. A 2011 report focused on Pacific Island countries from UN Women states that women and girls “are socialized to have a sense of inferiority, not to have a choice or opinion and not to question male authority,” and that “the major religions in the region—Christianity and Hinduism—support the belief that the husband is the head of the family.”<sup>51</sup> During the interviews for this report, the assessment team found that patriarchal social norms impact the way men and women think about women’s roles in politics and public life, the way women participate as voters and activists, and women’s ability to serve in formal leadership roles.

Regarding voting, women have the freedom and opportunity to vote and have historically turned out to vote in numbers equal to men; however, they are encouraged publicly and privately to vote for the political party historically supported by their family or vanua (traditional geopolitical boundary where a high chief rules). There is no “family voting”<sup>52</sup> as in other parts of the world, but men in rural communities have a strong influence on what political parties and politicians will be supported in each village. When the vote counts from each location are made public, the numbers are so small that it is clear if someone did not vote the “right” way. This is less often the case in more urban areas.

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<sup>51</sup> UN Women. (2011, July). Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.

<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2011/Ending%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20and%20Girls.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> “Family voting” refers to the situation where men literally cast votes “on behalf of” the family, ACE Project. Gender and elections: Family and proxy voting. <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ge/ge5/ge55/family-and-proxy-voting>.



**“Voting is still based on popularity, relationships, and traditional ties.”**

*—Woman political party leader, Suva*

Activists and CSOs in Fiji have generally limited their activities with regard to electoral politics and changing social norms around women’s political participation and leadership. Rather, women leaders and women’s rights groups have focused on GBV and ending more general discrimination against women. Some organizations, such as the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, engage in raising voter literacy and awareness broadly. This lack of engagement by CSOs is rooted in the need for them to remain politically neutral because of restrictive laws. Specifically, the Media Industry Development Act (MIDA) of 2014 (since repealed), the Electoral Act of 2014, and provisions in the Crimes Act have limited the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. While in effect, these laws restricted election-related activities by civil society, including candidate development and support activities. This is a situation where the formal law has reinforced social norms. Civil society has been the main avenue for women to lead in public life, but these restrictive laws hampered their participation in politics. The MOG final report on the 2022 Fiji elections observed that CSOs are restricted in election-related activities and recommended a review of these laws to increase women’s political participation.<sup>53</sup>

**“Male leadership is highly visible.”**

*—Woman politician, Suva*

When it comes to leadership specifically, social norms and attitudes have a significant impact on how women view themselves and other women. Cultural practices demand deference to elders and men leaders and adherence to gender norms. There is general skepticism about and reservation toward women political leaders. In rural communities, neither men nor women associate leadership with women, and both indicate a preference for men leaders.

**“Women are not deprived of leadership.”**

*—Woman political party member, Nadi*

For iTaukei women in village settings, there are limited opportunities for formal leadership and decision-making roles, and these are often only available for older women and linked to the leadership of men, such as the wife of the chief. There is also some resistance to the connotation that “political leadership” only comes from running for office and serving in an elected position. Some women interviewed see their roles of providing support to others in their community as a form of leadership within the traditional scope.

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<sup>53</sup> Multinational Observer Group. (2023, March). 2022 Fiji Election Final Report.

**“Women’s work does not have a political role.”**

*—Woman political party member, Nadi*

The existing social norms have created a dichotomy in how the work and contributions of men and women are perceived. Women’s work is usually at the grassroots level and is perceived as meaningful but not associated with leadership or politics. Most women interviewed had active roles in organizing, engaging, and assisting people in their communities. They were also often called upon by leaders and politicians who are men to provide support during campaigns and community engagements. However, they did not see their roles as relevant to politics. Many women interviewed stated that they were satisfied serving at the community level where they could make a difference and did not feel they had the skills necessary to participate in politics. They recognized that men at the community level take the lead in more formal discussions and decision-making activities.

**“Women are quiet and comfortable at the level they are at. They face restrictions from husbands and family from leaving the house to attend workshops and forums to gain skills.”**

*—Woman civil society volunteer, Lautoka*

Assessments of the women currently serving in office also reflected cultural ideas about how and where women can be leaders. Many participants in this research referred to previous and current women politicians as not having “achieved improvements for people.” There was a tendency to be critical of women’s contribution to the political sphere and little recognition of their achievements. Women who joined politics after being a part of civil society were viewed as having made more positive contributions previously, thus cementing the belief that work at the grassroots level is more effective. If an accomplishment was acknowledged, the political parties and leaders, rather than women politicians, were given credit.

**“Women in the past weren’t doing what they were supposed to be doing. They weren’t there for all women.”**

*—Woman in civil society, Suva*

## **HIGH LEVELS OF GBV**

The Pacific region has some of the highest rates of GBV in the world. In Fiji, 64 percent of women report experiencing GBV.<sup>54</sup> Research suggests that the rate is so high because colonial concepts of power relations and patriarchy have dictated gender relations and normalized violence against women. Even today, tribal and religious leaders across ethnicities encourage a “high tolerance of gendered violence by

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<sup>54</sup> World Economic Forum. (2023). Global Gender Gap Report. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf).

urging women to endure this phenomenon rather than resist it.”<sup>55</sup> There is a cultural norm that encourages women to “forgive and forget” when they discuss issues of family violence, especially in rural communities, which is often reinforced by conservative religious teachings. Domestic and family violence are deemed private issues, and silence around them makes it difficult to report violence or seek support. Moreover, there is a lack of trust in police and in accountability mechanisms to address GBV.<sup>56</sup>

With regard to politics, an increase in violence, job losses, economic decline, violence against women, and threats to children’s safety and security have followed each political coup. After the first coup, the Fiji Women’s Crisis Center reported an increase in domestic violence, rape, and child abuse cases. Following the 1987 and 2000 coups, some women, particularly Indo-Fijian women, were victims of targeted rape, gang rapes, abduction, and other forms of sexual violence at an increased rate than in years prior to the coup.<sup>57</sup> While data pertaining to the duration of the violence in the aftermath of coups is unavailable, once the government is reestablished, there is typically more sense of security. For instance, following the May 2000 coup, a new government was recognized in July and the security situation had stabilized by August.<sup>58</sup>

The widespread prevalence of GBV in Fiji impacts women’s political participation and leadership. It compounds pressures to vote in line with the preferences of local men in leadership.<sup>59</sup> There have also been reported instances where community leaders who are men or family members discourage voters from attending certain political rallies, which creates a sense of fear among voters, especially women. Violence against women in elections includes intimidation and harassment tied to social norms. Women candidates are questioned about their ability to perform political duties while fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. They risk their personal safety and security while campaigning in villages, especially at night.<sup>60</sup> Some participants spoke of being subject to rumors of affairs or character assassination as they traveled and campaigned with political party members who are men. Most of those interviewed by the assessment team (men and women) did not want to discuss in detail their experience with personal or political violence against themselves.

Violence against women in politics also takes place online, and social media is a potent political tool in Fiji. According to DataReportal, there were 800,000 internet users (85.2 percent of the population) and 544,000 active social media users in Fiji as of January 2024. Facebook continues to be the most popular social media platform, with 78.2 percent of social media users. A 2022 International IDEA study of Fiji monitored and analyzed 2,603 posts and 99,000 comments on Facebook to evaluate the treatment of women politicians. Almost 11 percent of the posts were found to be “problematic,” and of this content, almost 50 percent included abusive or threatening comments targeting political beliefs, ideology, or affiliation. The study found that the vast majority of the problematic comments directed at women

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<sup>55</sup> George, N. (2016). *Lost in Translation: Gender Violence, Human Rights and Women’s Capabilities in Fiji*.

<sup>56</sup> IFES. (2022). *Violence Against Women in Elections in Fiji: An IFES Assessment*. Not public.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Trnka, S. (2008). *State of suffering: Political violence and community survival in Fiji*. Cornell University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

politicians were sexist. The research also found that members of the public made the majority of problematic comments, but 35 of them were found on men politicians' pages.<sup>61</sup>

Men and women acknowledged that the treatment of women politicians online is “savage” and “brutal,” although most of those interviewed did not refer to it as “violence against women online.”

**“Social media abuse, including fake accounts and edited photos, is common. Social media is both a tool and a challenge, with fake accounts and edited photos discrediting politicians.”**

*—Man politician, Suva*

One case study on this issue that was referenced by several research participants involves Lenore Qereqeretabua, who is a member of Parliament. She won a seat in the 2018 elections as a member of the NFP. During the campaign, she advocated for women’s rights and more women in Parliament. She won 1,811 votes, winning her party's third seat in Parliament. In 2020, a teacher, Kishore Kumar, accused Qereqeretabua of participating in a pornographic video, claiming he had evidence (which he never presented). Qereqeretabua filed a report against him with the police, the Ministry of Education, and the Online Safety Commission.<sup>62</sup> The case has not yet been resolved. Other women politicians told similar stories, and most received little to no support or action in dealing with online abuse. There was the general sentiment that such incidents are just a part of politics and women need to be prepared.

**“Everyone says women need to know what they are up against, instead of zero tolerance, changing the environment, and not accepting abuse and disrespect.”**

*—Man international implementing partner, Suva*

At the suggestion of research participants, the assessment team interviewed staff from the Online Safety Commission for this report. The Commission in Fiji works to promote online safety by increasing digital literacy and empowering Fijians to use the internet and online platforms safely and responsibly. Its work focuses on community awareness programs, secondary school and university online safety sessions, and collaborating with stakeholders.<sup>63</sup> During the interview, the Online Safety Commission staff said they do not monitor the internet for problematic posts or prosecute bad actors, but they can “receive complaints and conduct research.” They directed candidates who are victims of online harassment or violence to the cybercrime unit of the police. When asked about the plight of women in politics, Commission staff said

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<sup>61</sup> International IDEA. (2022). How Women Politicians of Fiji are Treated on Facebook. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/how-women-politicians-fiji-are-treated-facebook>.

<sup>62</sup> NDI, FemLinkPacific, & USAID. (2021). #NotTheCost Qualitative Research Report on Violence Against Women In Politics in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands.

<sup>63</sup> Online Safety Commission: <https://osc.com.fj/>.

that they cannot take action unless women lodge a report and that they have to balance this work with all citizens' complaints.

All of those interviewed for this report engaged regularly on social media and were aware of the abuse and character assassination women face. One interviewee said that the Fijian way of using social media is “vulgar and personal.” Most respondents offered that women politicians are subject to more personal attacks on their appearance, character, and sexuality, noted a lack of measures to address online attacks, and suggested that the government needs to create enforcement mechanisms to create consequences for online abuse.

## UNDERLYING CURRENT OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Fiji has experienced political instability in the form of coups and military mutiny since 1987. This history of violence and focus on retaining power has led to economic and political instability, the absence of consistent strategies for women's empowerment, and limited opportunities for women's leadership in politics. Specifically, a report from UN Women stated that “The four coups in Fiji's recent history have had a chilling effect on women's rights advocacy and programmes.”<sup>64</sup>

While interviewees did not directly refer to political violence or instability as a deterrent to participating in political life, there were aspects of Fiji's political dynamics that were clearly impacted by this history. The lack of political party membership lists and the desire for Fijians to migrate for stability and “greener pastures” are a few examples. Moreover, the political turmoil and multiple constitutions have eroded the public's knowledge about how the electoral process and government should work and the public's trust in the democratic process. Citizens do not understand the link between who they vote for, who serves in government, and how the government's actions impact their lives.

Fijians across sectors and demographics felt relieved after the successful 2022 elections and the peaceful transfer of power. However, there was an undercurrent of tension around the time of the data collection due to the de-registration of the FijiFirst political party, which impacted the affiliation of 17 members of Parliament and could impact the coalition of parties leading the government. Conflict in government or Parliament was triggering fears of instability among citizens because of their past experiences. Non-Fijians working for implementing partner organizations and donor government representatives, however, were more optimistic about democratic politics and governance moving forward.

**“Democracy has established roots in Fiji.”**

*—International implementing partner*

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<sup>64</sup> UN Women. (2011, July). Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEA/Docs/Publications/2011/Ending%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20and%20Girls.pdf>.

## INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Institutional factors structure the political environment, establishing the rules and systems in which political actors operate and the formal and informal dynamics of political life. These factors interact with socio-cultural norms and individual-level characteristics and decisions to shape opportunities for women and men to become politically engaged and exercise political influence. Institutional factors shaping women's political participation and leadership include features of the electoral system, the political party system, and the broader political and legal context. Elite behaviors in the face of these opportunities and constraints can also be considered institutional factors, with elites serving as gatekeepers to women's entry to, and exclusion from, political institutions and political voice.

In Fiji, the institutional factors that impact women's political participation and leadership include: the electoral system; political parties; the media; and the international community, donors, and implementing partners.

## ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Since Fiji's independence in 1970, political leaders have debated the country's electoral systems and fair representation; however, the focus has been on race and ethnicity rather than gender equality and women's political leadership. Before independence, Fiji used different majoritarian systems, whether first past the post or alternative vote. A major characteristic of both systems was the use of reserved seats for ethnic or communal groups within various constituencies. Since independence, Fiji has had four separate constitutions and a different electoral system under each one.<sup>65</sup>

The current electoral system was established unilaterally by the FijiFirst government, and there is still a need for more awareness and familiarity with its process. In 2009, then interim prime minister Frank Bainimarama announced that a new constitution would be introduced by 2013. While interventions were accepted by members of the public, there were several non-negotiable principles, including 1) legal immunity for the government, civil servants, and security forces; 2) one person, one vote; and 3) the removal of guidelines for ethnic representation in Parliament.<sup>66</sup> A Constitutional Commission was established to keep Fijian citizens aware of the process and receive submissions for the constitution. CSOs raised concerns at the time that the timeline for the consultation process was too short for the general public to fully understand and participate in the process,<sup>67</sup> and subsequent interviews with citizens confirmed this.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, many members of the public and civil society, such as the Fiji Women's Rights Movement and the Fiji Women's Forum, participated in the submission process with the intention of increasing women's participation in elections.<sup>69</sup> Almost one-third of the submissions were provided by

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<sup>65</sup> International IDEA. (2022). Political Finance Assessment of Fiji Report.

<sup>66</sup> Saati, A. (2020). Participatory constitution-building in Fiji: A comparison of the 1993–1997 and the 2012–2013 processes, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Volume 18, Issue 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Kant, Romitesh, & Rakuira. (2014). Eroni, Public Participation & Constitution-Making in Fiji: A Critique of the 2012 Constitution-Making Process. *State, Society, and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper No. 2014/6*.

<sup>69</sup> Buadromo, V. The constitutional process: a view from the Fiji Women's Rights Movement [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/accord25\\_fiji.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/accord25_fiji.pdf).

women.<sup>70</sup> Whether or not public submissions were included in the draft constitution remains unclear, as the Commission's version was discarded after disagreements arose between the prime minister and the chair of the Constitutional Commission. The president then instructed the prime minister to prepare a new draft, which included provisions to increase women's participation by requiring a fixed number of women candidates per political party. When the new version was revealed to the public when it was promulgated in September 2013,<sup>71</sup> the provisions on women candidates were removed. Bainimarama defended the removal of the provisions, citing principles of "equality."<sup>72</sup> Policies, laws, and measures to increase women's participation are often opposed in Fijian politics, citing unfairness or bias or arguing against a need for such measures. A report on the elections by International IDEA and Dialogue Fiji highlighted that, at the time, there was a lack of understanding of the new system among candidates and election officials regarding elements of the process such as ballot design, allocation of seats, and the election threshold. Voter education workshops were conducted by civil society groups such as Dialogue Fiji to address the gaps in knowledge of the electoral process. Any confusion or misunderstanding relating to the changes in the electoral process was not reflected in voter turnout for the 2014 elections, which was recorded at 84.6 percent.

The current electoral system has a single national constituency in place of the local and multiple ethnically based constituencies. The new Parliament is unicameral and there were 55 elected members of Parliament for the 2022 general elections. Parliamentarians are elected for a four-year term, and candidates run on an OLPR system. Political parties present lists of candidates, which cannot exceed the total number of members of Parliament to be elected. Independent candidates nominate individually. Voters elect candidates, and a vote for the candidate is also a vote for the party of that candidate. Parties rank their candidates in order of preference at the time of nomination; however, the final order of the party candidates is determined by the total number of votes they received.<sup>73</sup> The open list system results in the popular vote determining the final order of the party list. A high personal vote is therefore essential. There are no party labels, photos, or names to prompt the voter to make a choice on a ballot, which can have hundreds of three-digit numbers.<sup>74</sup> There is a five percent electoral threshold for political parties.

The OLPR has been criticized because it allows candidates to be elected with fewer votes than other candidates, yet the proportionality of the system refers to parties and not candidates. The party vote decides the number of seats the party is assigned in Parliament. Voters choose their preferred candidates, and parties receive seats based on the total number of votes received by all their candidates. The number of seats for each party is determined only after the vote, as is which of a party's candidates gets elected. The system has been criticized as it slightly favors parties with strong known personalities and a more established base, which places a disadvantage on new and smaller parties and independent candidates.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> RNZ. (2013, March). Fiji's PM defends removal of provisions for women in draft constitution. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/211057/fiji-s-pm-defends-removal-of-provisions-for-women-in-draft-constitution>.

<sup>73</sup> Issuu. (2022). Fiji's Electoral System, [https://issuu.com/fijianelectionsoffice/docs/media\\_handbook\\_2022\\_1\\_/s/16082233](https://issuu.com/fijianelectionsoffice/docs/media_handbook_2022_1_/s/16082233).

<sup>74</sup> ASPI. (2022, December). Fiji's open-list electoral system paves way for more diversity in representation. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/fijis-open-list-electoral-system-paves-way-for-more-diversity-in-representation/>.

The fact that the whole nation constitutes a single, national constituency has also been criticized, with critics arguing that the magnitude of such a large district discourages connections between voters and representatives. Defenders of the system argue that the nation was chosen as a single constituency in order, among other aspects, to resolve any contentious issues with the delimitation of constituencies and to encourage multi-ethnic voting.<sup>75</sup>

As it currently stands, Fiji’s electoral system is not designed to increase women’s political participation. Neither Fiji’s constitution nor the current electoral law include temporary special measures or quotas. Although, Article 26 (the right to equality and freedom from discrimination) provides for affirmative actions in case “Treating one person differently from another on any of the grounds prescribed under subsection (3) is discrimination, unless it can be established that the difference in treatment is not unfair in the circumstances.”<sup>76</sup> Participants in the research process for this report did not offer recommended changes to the electoral system as a solution to women’s participation, multi-ethnic voting, the cost of campaigns, or any other political issue.

**“There is a lack of political will within the government and political parties to change the electoral process.”**

*—International implementing partner*

With regard to gender quotas, many interviewees, including those in government, parroted the remark from the MOG report that Fiji’s constitution “does not allow for temporary special measures or quotas for women candidates” (although that is not the case). Others identified quotas as a “Band-Aid solution” or asserted that a place on a party candidate list should be based on merit rather than gender. Some referenced the previous attempts at introducing quotas that were not successful. On the other hand, in conducting this research, the assessment team did find marginal support for piloting the use of quotas in the next local elections, as there may still be room for changes to the envisioned electoral system.

**“Politics has become a battleground.”**

*—Woman politician, Suva*

## POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are essential institutions of democracy. They are the entities that organize citizens around ideas in order to contest elections and govern. Moreover, political parties are key to women’s participation in politics, as it is political parties that often recruit and select candidates for elections and determine a country’s policy agenda. In Fiji, the political parties are largely led by men and structured along ethnic lines, with men politicians utilizing their kinship and traditional cultural system to build power bases

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<sup>75</sup> Multinational Observer Group. (2023, March). 2022 Fiji Election Final Report.

<sup>76</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Fiji. <https://www.laws.gov.fj/Home/information/constitutionoftherepublicoffiji>.



and win elections playing on ethnic insecurity.<sup>77</sup> Within Fiji’s political parties, women tend to be overrepresented at the grassroots level or in supporting roles and underrepresented in positions of power.

The Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Act 2013 set out a process for the registration and operations of political parties in Fiji. All political parties had to register (or re-register) following the 2013 Act. Although fairly recent, the Act does not include any reference to the participation or leadership of women in parties’ governing documents or internal processes.

As of June 2024, eight political parties were registered through the FEO. The following is a brief overview of the current political parties’ approaches to women’s political participation and leadership as described in their constitutions<sup>78</sup> and Parliamentary election results from 2022. As detailed below, the assessment team found through KIs and FGDs that, regardless of their constitution, the election activities of political parties in Fiji did not match the ambitions of the principles and structures laid out in their registration documents.

**The All Peoples Party** organizational structure includes a Women’s Movement Network. No other details about the network are included in the constitution.

**The FijiFirst Party** constitution states that it is a “national movement devoted to the service of our nation and to the advancement of the well-being of our people.”<sup>79</sup> Diversity is listed as one of its core values. It does not include a women’s wing in its constitution. FijiFirst won 26 Parliamentary seats in 2022, including two with women candidates. FijiFirst was deregistered by the Registrar of Political Parties in July 2024.

**The Fiji Labour Party** supports principles, including the “redistribution of political and economic power so that all members of society have the opportunity to participate in the shaping and control of the institutions and relationships which determine their lives.”<sup>80</sup> There is a Women’s Wing, which is one of the party’s permanent bodies, and its role includes formulating and implementing policies specifically on women.

**The NFP** has a Working Committee of the Party that must include two nominees of the National Women’s Movement (the name of its women’s wing). The NFP won five Parliamentary seats in 2022, including two with women candidates.

**The SODELPA** has a Management Board that includes three Women’s Forum representatives. The Women’s Forum is made up of all eligible women party members and is responsible for “formulating and

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<sup>77</sup> Fraenkel, J. (2016). “Ethnic Politics and Strongman Loyalties in Fiji’s 2018 Election.”

<sup>78</sup> All information about the parties described here can be found in their constitutions available on the FEO website: <https://www.feo.org.fj/political-parties-register/>.

<sup>79</sup> Fiji Elections Office website: <https://www.feo.org.fj/political-parties-register/>

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

implementing policies specifically on the promotion, protection and the advancement of women.”<sup>81</sup> SODELPA won three Parliamentary seats in 2022.

**The People’s Alliance Party** has principles that include recognizing the role of women and young people, with the Party proactively promoting “at least 33 percent representation of women and youths in its party machinery.”<sup>82</sup> The party includes a Women’s Alliance Committee in its organizational structure. The People’s Alliance Party won 21 Parliamentary seats in 2022, including two with women candidates.

**Unity Fiji** has a constitution that states, “In pursuing its Purpose and in all its activities, the Party must promote the equal participation of men and women at all levels of the Party.” One of its guiding statements is that “The Party will uphold and respect human rights, including the right to health, the rights of all communities, migrants, children and people with disabilities, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.”<sup>83</sup>

**The We Unite Fiji Party** constitution states that “anyone can be an office bearer, and Office bearers per branch, sector or cognate body should have equal representation by race, age, sex, and faith.”<sup>84</sup>

Although the **New Generation Party** contested in the 2022 elections, it was deregistered as a political party in August 2023.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Fiji One News. (2023, August 1). New Generation Party de-registered.

*See Table 1 for a full list of party candidates by gender.*

The six women elected to the Fiji Parliament in 2022:

- Alitia Bainivalu, People’s Alliance Party
- Sashi Kiran, NFP
- Premila Kumar, FijiFirst
- Lenora Qereqeretabua, NFP
- Lynda Tabuya, People’s Alliance Party
- Rosy Sofia Akbar, FijiFirst, subsequently resigned from Parliament

Through KIs and FGDs, the assessment team found that, regardless of their constitution, the political parties in Fiji generally do not have women serving in leadership positions; do not engage in internal or external activities to increase women’s political participation as party members, leaders, or candidates; and do not have active women’s branches between elections. During election time, women are not widely recruited to be on candidate lists or influence the party’s platform. Rather, women’s participation as party members is limited to the grassroots level or supporting logistical roles. There is little training and mentoring of women and youth party members. Individual women interviewed from FijiFirst and the All Peoples Party continue outreach to communities, sharing information about government services or providing food, but do so informally and by their own choice.

**“How do you make them listen to you?”  
—Woman political party member, Lautoka**

When those interviewed said that their political party had a women’s wing, its role was not clearly defined and its members were usually relegated to administrative tasks or campaigning and arranging logistics for candidates. Women’s wings, whether they were referenced in the party’s constitution or not, were not active between elections.

**“Before 2006, like-minded political parties from the region engaged  
for training of emerging leaders.”  
—Man politician, Suva**

When it comes to messaging, those taking part in the research thought that it was not advantageous for the political parties to campaign on issues that disproportionately impact women and girls or include them in the party’s platform as it may be seen as controversial. Not only do men not speak about women’s issues and gender equality, but women in politics and government are also generally silent on these issues. While they may personally support gender equality, decision-makers are not willing to take the political risk to speak out publicly for fear of backlash by the public and men political leaders. Issues relevant to

women and gender have rarely been used as political tools during election periods, but even when they are, officials do not prioritize them in the post-election period.<sup>86</sup>

**“Political parties only visit communities during campaigning for elections.”**

—*Woman farmer, Sigatoka*

According to a report by International IDEA on political finance in Fiji, campaigning has become more expensive since the adoption of a nationwide constituency. The Political Parties Act of 2013 is the first legislation in Fiji to address the issue of political finance. It includes provisions on the disclosure of financial accounts and funding sources by political parties. Political parties and election candidates in Fiji can only be funded by private sources.<sup>87</sup> Overseas funding and individual contributions are significant. The campaign costs disproportionately impact smaller political parties and independent candidates. Larger parties with more financial resources can spend more on their election campaigns, especially on advertising, and this leads to an uneven electoral playing field.<sup>88</sup> The cost of campaigning also impacts women and others without personal or family wealth. Many of the women who have run for office, have access to individual or family financial resources. Most of the political parties who participated in the assessment required potential candidates to pay the candidate registration fee (1,000 FJD)<sup>89</sup> plus an additional amount (that varied) to their political party to be used for campaign activities. Several of those interviewed indicated that political party funds are often misused or disproportionately allocated to just a few candidates and that the overwhelming majority of the campaign communications focused on the party leader.

**“Party politics are hard, especially for a woman.”**

—*Woman politician, Suva*

Without support from their parties, the aggressive political environment and nature of public discourse act as a deterrent for women thinking about running for office: “Just look at the language used around politics,” one former male candidate said. Political parties offer little support to candidates even when they are faced with verbal harassment and online character assassination. In interviews conducted by the assessment team, it was found that many of the women who have been listed as candidates in Fiji are often already well-known due to their work in other fields and have a base of political support. They rarely receive campaign materials from their political parties as party resources are focused on the men party heads. Political parties promote and encourage people to vote for the party leader during elections. Women and younger candidates suffer as a result.

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<sup>86</sup> IFES. (2022). Violence Against Women in Elections in Fiji: An IFES Assessment. Not public.

<sup>87</sup> International IDEA. (2022). Political Finance Assessment of Fiji.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> The average salary in Fiji in 2024 is \$4,460 FJD.

## MEDIA

Under the FijiFirst government, the role and freedom of media were diminished and heavily regulated. The constitution provides for freedom of expression, but it allows the government to restrict these rights. The 2010 MIDA regulated the ownership, registration, and content of media organizations in Fiji and included powers of search and seizure, forcing journalists to reveal their sources.<sup>90</sup> While the government rarely pursued prosecutions under this law, it was used as a tool to intimidate and harass the media and those who published views perceived as critical to the government. In early 2016, Professor Biman Prasad, leader of the NFP, spoke to this ongoing issue: “Media organizations operate under the threat of their editors being hauled before the Media Tribunal and subjected to huge fines and other punishments. The lack of access to a free and independent media has been the single most frustrating obstacle for the opposition parties when they try to make the government publicly accountable on various national issues.”<sup>91</sup> The MIDA was repealed by the government in 2023.

“Having said that, I will defend local media, especially because they've had a very restrictive style of government for the better part of two decades. There are at least two generations of journalists within Fijian newsrooms now who know nothing else but that. Who, as a result of that kind of leadership, don't think for themselves, or at least they don't act on the reluctance and the hesitation that a journalist is meant to feel when you see something and it doesn't make sense to you.”

—*Woman journalist, Suva*

Due to the restrictions placed by the previous government and lack of freedom in reporting, media organizations and journalists have lost their institutional knowledge about how to report on candidates and public officials and hold the government accountable to citizens. Limited training and capacity-building are provided to journalists, which is a shift from previous rigorous standards and procedures that encouraged fact-checking and critical thinking. As a result, women have been marginalized in the media. Men get more coverage, and when women are covered, the story is often about their clothes, physical appearance, or personal life.

“The most visible female [member of Parliament] here is visible more for what she looks like, what she's wearing, who she's sleeping with or not.”

—*Woman journalist, Suva*

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<sup>90</sup> Civicus. (2023). Fiji: Repeal Of Restrictive Media Law, Reverse Of Travel Bans And Other Reform Commitments A Positive Signal For Civic Freedoms. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/fiji-repeal-of-restrictive-media-law-reverse-of-travel-bans-and-other-reform-commitments-a-positive-signal-for-civic-freedoms/>.

<sup>91</sup> Durutalo, A, (2018). Fiji. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 30(2).

Broadly, the role of the traditional media is changing, and its role in contributing to democracy in Fiji needs to be reevaluated, understood, and upheld by the general population and those in the industry.

“When I was growing up in my career, there were lots more checks and balances. When you were a cadet, you could not write a story by yourself for at least the first six months of your cadetship. So the training that used to be available to us back then isn't there now. And I don't think it's from a lack of availability or access. I think it's from a lack of will.”

—*Woman journalist, Suva*

Many of the research participants, both from civil society and media organizations, spoke of the value of including both traditional and online media outlets as potential allies to improve the quality and increase the quantity of coverage of women in public life.

“The media needs to be part of any strategy for female empowerment in any area of society and life.”

—*Man academic, Suva*

## INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, DONORS, OR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

There are many international non-governmental organizations and government entities conducting programming in Fiji. While the U.S. Government has recently re-established the Pacific Islands Mission in Fiji, other governments, such as Australia and New Zealand and, to a much smaller extent, Japan and South Korea, have funded work around women's participation and leadership. UN entities, including the United Nations Development Programme and UN Women, democracy and elections organizations, such as the Asia Foundation, International IDEA, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute, are engaged.

Recent programming by many of these groups has included a focus on women's political participation and leadership. Respondents, both activity organizers and participants, indicated that there have been many events—workshops, leadership programs, and forums—and distribution of awareness materials. However, most of these took place in Suva with the same groups of women. The programs are not synchronized, the topics covered overlap, and there are also gaps, specifically around political processes and institutional change. Numerous consultations akin to this assessment have occurred in the past, where participants remain unaware of the subsequent outcomes of the information they contributed.

“There's so many different organizations doing all kinds of things, I don't know whether, if it's possible or not, for them to maybe work together and in a more coherent manner, so there's no duplication in that sort of thing.”

**But this is an old problem. I'm not sure if it can ever be addressed.”**

*—Man academic, Suva*

With regard to programming, there is limited monitoring or evaluation of impacts. There is limited room for local CSOs and activists to co-create and implement programs with the international community and donor agencies. People working at the grassroots level and rural communities are not included. Women farmers, community workers, and housewives in Sigatoka, Lautoka, and Nadi have immense knowledge about the challenges facing their communities, including other women, but they lack opportunities for active engagement and are usually not involved in decision-making. CSOs rarely collaborate or share information with each other regarding current or upcoming projects. Research assessments are not consistently disseminated to the public or with implementing partners and donor agencies, resulting in instances of duplication.

**“CSOs are leaving their core work to chase funding.”**

*—Man from an international implementing partner organization, Suva*

Several respondents raised concerns regarding the impact of increased donor funding on CSOs, specifically highlighting issues of competition and fragmentation. They noted that some groups are expanding into areas beyond their original scope, which has led to a perceived loss of focus and a challenge in achieving tangible results commensurate with the effort invested. These observations reflect a common dilemma within civil society, where organizations often face pressures to broaden their activities to attract funding or respond to evolving needs. However, such diversification can potentially lead to inefficiencies and reduced impact if not managed judiciously.

**”A lot of funding is coming into Fiji and the Pacific Islands. It's immense, but I feel like there's also a lack of work, evaluation, and monitoring of where the money is going and if it's really achieving the goals. Reports are produced monthly, weekly, and most of it just lies there. That's why there is also fatigue. When you try and involve stakeholders, there's fatigue because everyone has talked to them about these issues. But the results, like tangible results, in terms of programming or even numbers, it's just not there. So where the money is going, where it's being put into, where these reports are, are they making a difference?”**

*—Woman academic, Suva*

## INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

The third component of the political ecosystem focuses on decisions made at the individual level by women, which block or support women's access and voice as a group in political spaces. Informed by socio-cultural norms and political institutions, these individual decisions fundamentally shape who participates and has a voice in politics and thus affect overall levels of women's political participation and leadership. Individual-level factors shape the supply of potential candidates to political office and, more broadly, the share of women willing to be active in other political roles like voting and activism. However, the supply of potential candidates is not limited to ambition. Resources like time, money, and political experience also shape the calculations of aspirants, determining their views on whether or not they feel they are equipped to run for office. In Fiji, the individual factors that impact women's political participation and leadership include the lack of a support network and women's self-confidence.

## NETWORK OF SUPPORT

Women activists, political party members, and candidates who participated in this assessment all asked for more "support." The support ranged from emotional or moral support to "hard" skills such as public speaking, education, and economic empowerment. Many of the women interviewed for this report are already leaders and organizers within their own communities but often did not consider this work to be "political." When the idea of entering formal politics was introduced, they did not think it was worth the effort because either they felt that they could not have the same impact through the electoral process or that it was too risky personally and professionally.

Women, especially outside of Suva, indicated that they would like more cross-party or non-political leadership training opportunities outside of the elections process and calendar. Women respondents generally supported the prospect of more women in political leadership, but most did not understand the process or know how they could get involved, especially outside of Suva.

Many of those interviewed thought that any support they received would be from their families rather than from other women. They stated that joining politics is not an individual decision and that it requires support from their husband and families. Women considering political leadership thought their best chance of securing a seat through elections was by joining a political party but were discouraged because the opportunity to get a place on the candidate list is controlled by men party leaders. The stereotype that was invoked was that women who are involved in politics or public life are older, free from childcare responsibilities, have financial security, and are well-known amongst the population. Those interviewed thought these women were more likely to be approached and supported by political parties because they have a better chance of winning with minimal effort from the party.

**“Women’s journeys do not start or end in politics.”**  
—*Staff from an international implementing partner*

As previously described, candidates often have to give money to their political parties to register and get on the candidate list (registration fee plus funds for party activities). For many women who had previously



run or might think about it, they indicated that it is “hard” to finance a campaign. Beyond the actual amount of money needed, there was no political party support in return. Moreover, women were asked or forced to leave a job to run for office because the organization or company did not want to be associated with a political party. In several cases, the jobs women left to run for office were unavailable to them after the elections were over.

**“It is expensive to run as a candidate; the cost can be up to \$10,000 per candidate and if you lose, that money is gone.”**

*—Woman politician, Suva organization, Suva*

Both women who were thinking about politics and those who were already serving were looking for ways to be connected and support each other. For women already in office, there was an openness to a cross-party women’s caucus in Parliament. An additional suggestion was that women, both in government and civil society, could organize around an issue, such as climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals, or sexual and reproductive health care and rights. This would build relationships based on policy and increase their skills. Moreover, it would give potential women leaders an issue or platform from which they could earn recognition and build a base for a political career.

**“There's an advantage, a unique advantage, to bringing women's perspective into politics, which is what the men need.”**

*—Woman politician, Suva*

## CONFIDENCE

The rigid hierarchies of power in Fijian culture, which dictate youth, passivity, and respect for traditional chiefs, elders, culture, and traditions, have enculturated women and young people to occupy a subordinated position and arrested transformative ideas.<sup>92</sup> The gendered social norms in Fiji that have previously been described also affect women’s confidence. In addition, the limited number of role models for women in politics does not make political leadership seem possible.

**“Sometimes you can do more outside of politics.”**

*—Youth focus group participant, Suva*

In urban areas, women were unsure of their own abilities but also expressed low confidence that other women would support their candidacies. Raised with the same patriarchal social norms, women doubted the idea of women’s political leadership. Outside of Suva, women felt handicapped by their lack of access

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<sup>92</sup> Mati, J. M. (2024, February 15). Civil Society, Volunteerism, and Youth Citizenship in Fiji. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-024-00633-y>.

to education and training programs. They felt that they would have more ability and confidence to participate in formal politics if they had higher educational qualifications.

**“Women do want to speak out their opinions, but they have a lack of confidence.”**

—*Woman farmer, Sigatoka*

At some point, it is hard to disentangle the social norms and violence from the patriarchal institutions and lack of confidence. All of these aspects of the “ecosystem” work together and inform one another to create an environment in Fiji that undermines women’s political participation and leadership.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### SOCIO-CULTURAL

- Pilot a voluntary gender quota through engagement with political party leaders during the next local elections to both give women the opportunity to run and serve in formal decision-making roles and help change social norms regarding women’s leadership in Fiji. Research has shown that having women in leadership positions (economic or political) reduces gendered stereotypes.<sup>93</sup>
- Utilize increased foreign government funding to engage women-focused and women-led CSOs that have not previously focused on women’s political participation and leadership. Civic education programs could educate women about their political rights, and leadership programs could build on existing skills and experiences.
- Through workshops outside of Suva, engage women who are already often leaders and organizers in their communities and encourage them to view their activities as a part of “politics,” as they are already serving people. This is especially important in advance of the next local elections. Work on leadership outside of campaign times. Introduce the idea of leadership as a gender-neutral concept and relate it to the work women already do in their communities.
- Engage men (from government, political parties, civil society, the media, and traditional leadership structures) through workshops so that they can better understand harmful gender norms, become allies by unpacking how patriarchal norms harm all members of society, comprehend the role men play in perpetuating these harms, and demonstrate why women’s political participation can benefit everyone.
- Engage traditional and religious leaders to show how Indigenous or religious views and women’s political participation and leadership can and should coexist. Find common issues to address, such as GBV, to build working relationships at the community and national levels.
- Work with the media as well as private companies, civil society organizations, and academic researchers to improve the quality and increase the amount of coverage of women in public life.

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<sup>93</sup> McFee, K. (2024, March). More Women In Leadership: The Means And The End To Closing The Gender Gap.

Coverage could highlight how women serve as political leaders even in traditional and religiously conservative contexts. More importantly, messaging could highlight different kinds of leadership and political participation by publicizing women in Fiji who have contributed and continue to contribute at the grassroots level.

- Expand programs with global youth movements to inform young civil society and political party leaders (men and women) as they seek to address the intersectionality of ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, and disability in politics in Fiji.
- Build a body of evidence on women’s political participation and leadership to reframe and restart the conversation with all stakeholders regarding violence against women in politics, including online and technology-facilitated GBV. Data from this assessment and other sources can be incorporated into ongoing efforts to counter information manipulation and provide a foundation for gender-sensitive mitigation measures.
- Partner with CSOs to play a role in addressing violence against women in politics, including technology-facilitated GBV, by providing support to survivors, promoting women’s solidarity against it, working with the political parties to develop strategies to combat it and establish safe and effective reporting mechanisms, and educating the public about “digital literacy” and what people’s rights and responsibilities on social media are.
- Work with the government to develop civic education in schools (including mock elections) and public service campaigns directed toward adults to inform Fijians about voting and the role of government in their lives. These materials would address why women and youth should participate in politics, including the positive benefits for all citizens. Participants outside Suva suggested using vernacular languages for different ethnic groups and providing the information orally or in ways that do not require a high level of literacy.

## **INSTITUTIONAL**

- Engage men and women leaders across sectors (political, social, and economic) to participate in an ongoing discussion about potential changes to the electoral system to allow for greater women’s leadership, including how temporary special measures or quotas might work within the current constitution. The information shared should include case studies from similar country contexts.
- Work with political party leaders to meaningfully include women as party leaders and candidates, with updated party constitutions, increased internal democratic processes, transparent candidate nomination procedures, and stronger structures, including the re-establishment of regional branches and youth and women’s wings with defined roles and mentoring opportunities. Note: Political parties could implement gender quotas on their candidate lists outside of reform to the electoral system. For example, financial support from the government to political parties could be predicated on the parties including women as 30 percent of the candidates on their list.
- Support exchange programs for men and women with political parties with strong women’s political participation and leadership from other countries. The focus of discussions could include

internal democratic processes, increasing women's leadership, and integrating gender into party platforms.

- Engage media organizations and journalists to improve the quality and increase the quantity of coverage for women in public life. Provide gender-sensitive political reporting training. Build a network of those in the media (traditional and social) to work together against information manipulation.
- Utilize the release of this report to build relationships with those who took part in this research and start a co-creation process for a long-term strategy with Fijian citizens, activists, party members, politicians, and future politicians and organizations. The strategy could be implemented outside of the electoral calendar and focus on women's leadership skills.
- Establish regular coordination mechanisms among donors and implementing partners to build on previous research and programs, share information on existing messaging and programming, and strategize about how to maximize future opportunities with diverse groups of women from all regions in the country.

## INDIVIDUAL

- Create a network of women already working to make changes in their communities so they can share information with each other. Equip them to take part in community decisions and hold officials accountable. At the same time, the organization implementing the network can re-frame the idea of “leadership” and share stories about women's previous and current contributions so that they can see themselves as leaders.
- Create a network of women interested in supporting women's political participation across sectors—politicians, business women, farmers, entrepreneurs, civil society leaders, and academics—to advocate for women's economic, social, and political rights; champion key issues; and raise awareness about democracy.
- Create a network of women who are personally interested in formal political leadership to take part in skill-building activities such as media training, public speaking, campaign financing, and strategy and mentorship programs. Besides having more women who are better prepared to run, one goal would be to continue this network to support women who did not win—perhaps with professional advice or training.
- For all of the programs with women, plan for times and venues that are convenient and safe for participants. Ensure that child care is available. Plan for communications that might need to be conducted in languages besides English. Think about offline communications with participants.
- For women interested in political leadership, make plans in advance with them regarding online and offline personal safety. Provide psycho-social support to address political harassment and violence.

## ANNEX I: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	NO. OF KIIs (WOMEN)	NO. OF KIIs (MEN)
Women's political participation and leadership experts	8	2
Politicians	6	1
Donors or implementing partners	4	2
Election officials	1	1
Political party leaders	3	1
Media	3	1

## ANNEX 2: FOCUS GROUPS

GROUP DESCRIPTION	LOCATION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
Young people	Suva	9
LGBTQI+ community	Suva	6
FijiFirst political party	Suva	5
Activists	Sigatoka	5
We Unite Fiji political party	Sigatoka	5
FRIEND	Lautoka	15
All People's Party	Lautoka	2
People's Alliance Party	Nadi	3