

# WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT



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## Fiji

The women's political participation and leadership (WPPL) assessment in Fiji—conducted under the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Learning, Evaluation, and Research II activity—uses the latest iteration of USAID's [WPPL Assessment Framework](#). The Fiji assessment investigates the barriers to and opportunities for expanding women's political participation and leadership in Fiji along socio-cultural, institutional, and individual dimensions. Despite a successful transfer of power following the 2022 general elections, women's representation in elections and government positions remains limited due to complex barriers, including patriarchal gender norms, turbulent political history, and current political dynamics that do not value women's political participation. The Fiji WPPL Assessment Report findings are derived from a desk review of relevant literature and USAID documents and 33 key informant interviews (KIIs) and eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with politicians, experts, activists, civil society organizations (CSOs), and media in Suva, Sigatoka, Lautoka, and Nadi. Relevant stakeholders can use the report's findings to identify priority areas where their investments in programs and initiatives to support women's political participation and leadership will have the greatest and most meaningful impact.

## FINDINGS

### BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

- Culture and tradition shape patriarchal social norms; for instance, men are traditionally leaders and decision-makers in their homes and communities, while Fijian women must reproduce and care for the family. Political parties are dominated by men and commonly structured along ethnic lines, using kinship and the traditional cultural system to build power bases. Cultural practices demand deference to elders and male leaders and adherence to gender norms, leading to skepticism of women in leadership roles.
- Widespread gender-based violence (GBV) in Fiji compounds pressures to vote in line with the preferences of local male leadership and may prevent women from attending political rallies or other events. Women in politics experience risks to personal safety and security, as well as threats, intimidation, and slander.
- Fiji has a long history of political violence, leading to instability, the absence of consistent strategies or programs for women's empowerment, and a lack of opportunity for women in politics. Additionally, legislation such as the 2021 Registration of Voters Amendment discriminated against women and marginalized populations and has created additional barriers to women's political participation. This amendment was repealed after the 2022 election.
- Fiji has a single national constituency in which candidates run on an open list for a proportional representation system. The electoral system does not include special measures for women or a gender quota, and there is little support for one. In addition, the system has been noted to slightly favor parties with strong known personalities, also known as “rock star” personalities, and a more established base, which disadvantages new and smaller parties and independent candidates.
- Coordination among international donors and partners regarding women's political participation and leadership is limited and inconsistent. Recent programming has not been long-term, built on previous research and programs, nor extended outside Suva.
- There is a lack of financial, social, and professional support for women who want to engage in politics. This includes political parties, most of which lack a women's wing, do not keep accurate data on women in leadership, and do not include issues that disproportionately affect women in their platforms. A lack of support, along with a lack of self confidence, discourages women from running for a formal political position when they might make more of an impact elsewhere.

**“People want to break the cycle we are in.”**

**—Woman political party official, Suva**

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP**

- There is a long history in Fiji of strong women leaders and women’s rights organizations focused on fighting GBV and discrimination against women. While some organizations, such as Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, are involved in voter literacy and awareness, CSOs generally do not focus on women’s political participation and leadership. This is rooted in the need for them to remain politically neutral because of restrictive laws.
- There are several organizations that have worked for years to change norms and attitudes toward GBV, providing services to survivors and advocating for increased support services. Additionally, while social media is currently a significant contributor to harassment and threats against women in politics, it can also be used to encourage participation and change norms and attitudes.
- The media in Fiji was tightly controlled and diminished by the previous government, causing men to get more media coverage. When women are covered, it is often about their clothes, physical appearance, or personal life. However, the Coalition Government recently repealed the most restrictive laws on the media, so there may be an opportunity to support fledgling media organizations, most importantly with capacity strengthening.

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

**—Male IP staffmember**

## **SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS**

- Engage with CSOs, including those outside of Suva, to translate women’s leadership outside of politics to political participation and leadership and address violence against women in politics by supporting victims, promoting women’s solidarity, and working with political parties.
- Engage men to become allies by unpacking how patriarchal norms harm all members of society, showing the role men play in perpetuating these harms, and demonstrating why women’s political participation and leadership 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.
- Work with the government to create civic education in schools, including mock elections, and public service campaigns directed towards adults to inform Fijians about voting and the role of government in their lives. Address why women and youth should participate in politics and the positive benefits for all citizens.
- Conduct capacity-strengthening activities with the media to highlight how women are serving as political leaders even in traditional and religiously conservative contexts and highlight women’s political participation and leadership in Fiji.

### **INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS**

- Work with political party leaders to meaningfully include women as party leaders and candidates and update strategies and structures, including re-establishing regional branches and youth and women’s wings with defined roles and mentoring opportunities.
- 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 relationships and co-create a long-term strategy with local actors outside of election dates that focuses on women’s leadership skills. This could also include regular coordination between donors and implementing partners.
- Engage men and women leaders across sectors (political, social, and economic) to discuss election law reform that might allow for greater women’s leadership.

### **INDIVIDUAL FACTORS**

- Create networks of women who are already working to make change in their communities and are interested in political participation and leadership so they can share information, advocate for women’s rights, and take part in skill-building activities. Equip them to participate in community decisions, hold officials accountable, and run for office.
- 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, and think about offline communications with participants.