Women and politics in Fiji

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Women had a low status in Fiji in the pre-independence era. They suffered from many customs and conventions which discriminated against them. Not many women were in paid employment, although most worked on cane farms, rice farms and copra plantations, making a valuable contribution to the economy as unremunerated workers. The existing laws disadvantaged women, most seriously in the field of employment. Banks and other employers paid unequal wages for the same work to male and female employees. The civil service also had many discriminatory laws against women which deprived them of the rights and privileges enjoyed by their male counterparts. One such regulation required all female permanent civil servants to resign their positions upon marriage and to rejoin on a temporary basis without entitlement to the privileges of a permanent employee, such as long service leave! Under such circumstances, there was no question of women having any say in politics although it is true that towards the end of the colonial period in 1963, women were finally enfranchised. It was no wonder, then, that there were no women of any ethnicity in the Legislative Council of Fiji until the country became self-governing in 1966.

After independence in 1970, many of the discriminatory laws against women were slowly changed, leading to an improvement in the status of women. It was a slow process mainly because women themselves did not agitate for their rights until the 1980s. Women had also not been very active in politics although there were one or two outstanding exceptions in both the ruling Alliance Party and the opposition National Federation Party. Adi Loslini Dovi was the Government Whip in the first parliament of Fiji and the opposition had Mrs Irene Jai Narayan. However, it is significant that Mrs Narayan was not Fiji-born, while Adi Losalini Dovi was no common Fijian woman, but one who belonged to an important chiefly family, being the wife of Ratu Dovi, brother of Ratu Sukuna who is still

regarded as the most outstanding Fijian leader of the twentieth century. There were gradual changes for women in the field of education over the years and the gap between men and women has narrowed considerably.

There has been a tremendous increase in the percentage of girls attaining higher educational levels in the last twenty years. The 1996 national census results show that school attendance for boys and girls of all ethnic groups has increased over the past decade to a high level by international standards.

However, at the post-secondary level, boys outnumber girls, particularly in the science and technical fields and in vocational education. It is believed that one of the reasons for fewer women at higher levels is that fewer women enter vocational and training programs (CEDAW 1999).

The older Indo-Fijian women have been the most disadvantaged group in that 14 per cent of older women have had no formal education. This is followed by Indian male adults of whom 6 per cent have had no formal education. By contrast, the figures for Fijian females and males are 2.5 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively (CEDAW 1999).

Impediments to women's political progress

The deeply entrenched notion that politics is a man's domain created a political culture that excluded women from leadership positions in society. There are many reasons for women being left out of the political arena, including the very distinct and different social responsibilities assigned to men and women; the deeply rooted patriarchal systems in Fiji in which women are always relegated to the background; and the religious and cultural attitudes that restricted and discouraged the potential contribution that women could make in positions of leadership. But slowly, as women started proving themselves in the economic field, in spite of the many barriers in the form of gender discrimination, they began to wonder whether creating a place for themselves in the decision-making bodies of the nation might not remove these barriers and hurdles and help to achieve equality and equity for themselves and their daughters in this male-dominated society.

A global problem

Women have come to realise that active participation at all levels of informal and formal decision making is the only way forward for them. They have often found themselves overshadowed and sidelined by men. Even the woman-to-woman support has been glaringly absent most of the time. These problems are not only common to the women in the Pacific but are experienced in other developing countries and even in the developed nations in spite of the presence of women's movements for a long period of time. But the need for women to participate in politics has been established, and is irreversible. The transition from traditional to modern lifestyles has left an impact on women who have had to cope with all the

social changes and demands made on them as wives, mothers, nurturers and community workers. They have also very strongly felt the need to articulate their interests and concerns at the different decision-making levels, such as the local municipal governments, statutory boards and institutions and, most of all, parliament. They have found that their concerns are listed last in men's order of priority. This has led to their realisation that if they want to bring about changes in the conditions of their lives, then they must be involved in politics.

Major changes in the world are occurring through globalisation, improved communications, and science and technology. Whilst women have no control over these changes, the consequences do affect them and their families. So the only way open to women to have some say in the global trends, or the processes of change, is active participation in politics at all levels. Through political action women hope to have some influence in future directions of development. Women have come to realise that, in politics, nothing will change unless women participate and create a niche for themselves; otherwise, they will continue to be the marginalised segment of society. Throughout the world very few women have been successful in ascending to top positions in politics. In Asia in the last few decades, there have been only five women as heads of governments, all of whom came into power through their families' long history of political involvement. Although Asia is the fastest growing region of the world in economic terms, there has not been any matching improvement in the status of women. In India and China, there are some very strong non-government organisations which are acting as catalysts in bringing about gender equality.

In India the National Commission for Women, a non-government organisation headed by Mohini Giri, is involved in promoting gender justice, apart from launching specific initiatives to amend laws to protect women's interests in different areas. In 1994 by an amendment to the Indian Constitution, the women were given a one-third representation in the *panchayat* institutions. Since this, a political revolution has taken place whereby about one million women have entered local self government. Although the majority of them are illiterate, they are beginning to grasp the new opportunities offered them and have shouldered their responsibilities with enthusiasm. They are beginning to exercise and enjoy the power vested in them, with the assistance of their husbands. Almost all have vowed to tackle gender inequality as a first priority. One consequence of this was the commitment, spearheaded by the Women's Political Watch, and supported by almost all political parties and the government, to provide 33.3 per cent representation to women in state legislatures and in national parliament. There was almost a national consensus on the proposal, but the untimely fall of the Gujral government pushed this amendment into the background.

In China, the All China Women's Federation has played a key role in the overall development of women in that country. The largest non-government organisation in China, founded in April 1949, is made up of women from all walks of life and all ethnic groups. In the 17 years since the inception of the open-and-reform policy and through the efforts of the All China Women's Federation, there has been some measure of improvement in the status of Chinese women. They have made tremendous contributions to economic growth and social progress, emerging as leaders and helping to transform the political landscape of the country.

Under-representation of women in legislature in the Pacific

According to Jean Drage, the international decade for women acted as a catalyst for change for Pacific women's organisations as their focus shifted from concentration on family concerns to broader issues of the status and safety of women and the need for their greater involvement in formal decision making. She points out that it would be a mistake to assume that the under-representation of women in national legislatures means that women are not politically active as it would be denying their participation in non-government and community-initiated activities, saying that 'It would be a disservice to Pacific Islands women to accept the national election results as a complete portrait of women's political activity' (Drage 1994).

The under-representation of women in political power is a worldwide trend. Explanations for this range from the degree of industrialisation of a country, political ideology, the type of electoral system and the length of time in which women have enjoyed the right to vote. Table 9.1 shows women's political representation in national legislatures in Pacific Island countries around 1994.

In Guam, where women gained franchise in 1934, 29 per cent of parliament were women in 1994 whereas Vanuatu, where women gained franchise in 1975, had only 2 per cent women in parliament. Fiji, where women gained franchise in 1963, had only 3 women in Parliament in 1994 constituting 4 per cent of the total elected representation.

Fiji women

Marjorie Crocombe (1994) wrote that 'The lack of women's representation in parliaments in the Pacific is of great concern to women who understand its implications for development', and that most women in the Pacific were not aware of and not interested in the issue of under-representation. While by and large accurate, Crocombe's observation is not quite true of Fiji. Fiji women had representation in the legislative council ever since the country became self-governing. Although women representatives had been few in number until 1992, they had enjoyed some degree of prominence. Until

Table 9.1 Women's political representation in national legislatures in Pacific Island countries, 1994

Country	The year all women were eligible to vote and stand for parliament	No. of Parl. seats available*	No. of women elected to parl. seats	Per cent of women in parl. seats	Year of last election
Micronesia					
Northern Marianas	1965	23	2	9	1993
Palau	1965	32	0	-	1992
Guam	1931	21	6	29	1994
FSM	1965	14	0	-	1991
Marshall Islands	1965	33	1	3	1991
Kiribati	1967	39	0	-	1994
Nauru	1951	18	0	-	1992
Polynesia					
Tuvalu	1967	12	1	8	1993
Western Samoa	1991 [#]	47	2	4	1991
Wallis/Futuna	1961	20	2	10	1991
American Samoa	1957	40	1	3	1992
French Polynesia	1953	41	0	-	1993
Niue	1960	20	1	5	1993
Cook Islands	1957	25	0	-	1994
Tonga	1960	30	1	3	1993
Melanesia					
Fiji	1963	71	3	4	1994
New Caledonia	1957	36	0	-	1989
Vanuatu	1975	46	1	2	1991
Solomon Islands	1967	47	1	2	1993
Papua New Guinea	1964	109	0	-	1992

Note: Tokelau, a territory of New Zealand is not included in this Table. Nevertheless, discussion of developments in Tokelau forms part of the analysis of women's political activity.

* In most instances all available seats are included, and whether elected or appointed, and whether in unicameral or bicameral houses.

[#] Prior to universal suffrage there were two seats for which some women (that is, those on the Individual Voters roll) could vote and stand for Parliament.

Source: Alaima, F. and vom Busch, W., 1994. *New Politics in the South Pacific*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva.

the 1980s, Fiji women, like women elsewhere in the Pacific, were not very much concerned about their political rights. But in 1984, with the opening of Women's Crisis Centre, women's issues started taking centre stage, at least occasionally. Shamima Ali, who was (and still is) the major force behind the Centre, is a bold and vocal exponent of women's rights. Following her lead, other like-minded women (mainly professionals) started coming forward openly in support of women's rights. In 1986, they formally established the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. Imrana Jalal has made a noteworthy contribution in promoting the work of the movement. Initially,

there was a lot of opposition to the movement, especially from men, who tried to warn their families against these women leaders who were portrayed as troublemakers. But the women persisted, and slowly gained a firm foothold in society.

Until 1987, Fijian women kept a low profile in politics but this changed drastically after the coups with Fijian women coming forward to assume leadership roles in politics. One Fijian woman to come forward was Adi Kuini Bavadra, who became leader of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) after the death of her husband, the ousted Prime Minister, Dr Timoci Bavadra. The Labour Party's president is a woman, Jokepaci Koroi, while Adi Kuini rose to the position of deputy prime minister. Meanwhile, other women elected to parliament in the 1992 and 1994 elections have also played significant roles in the government. They include Taufua Vakatale, Adi Samanunu Cakobau and Seruwaia Hong Tiy. All three were ministers in the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) government.

Vakatale, who was minister for education and acted as prime minister on many occasions, was well aware of the difficulties of encouraging women to enter politics.

Women clamour for equality with the men, and will lobby for their rights and fight instances of discrimination against women. Yet when the crunch comes and women are required to take up active political roles, very few have the courage to offer themselves (in Drage 1994).

Whilst generally this is true because of the insecurity associated with elective political positions, there were also some very able women who resigned from top civil service positions to contest the 1999 general elections. These included Dr Mridula Sainath, a medical practitioner/HIV specialist and a women's activist; Savitri Chauhan, a principal of a high school; and Manju Verma who was the deputy director of social welfare. None of them got elected.

There has been only one Indo-Fijian woman in parliament since the 1987 coups; she was elected in the 1999 general elections. This disparity between Fijian and Indo-Fijian women could be attributed to several factors. Whilst both were constrained by the same kind of customary and traditional practices during the colonial era and in the period leading up to 1987, the post-coup period witnessed the opening up of greater avenues in the economic and political arena for Fijian women. More Fijian women moved up in the civil service, and most non-government organisations promoting women in politics and donor-funded political-education bodies comprised mostly indigenous women. Coinciding with this was a mass exodus of skilled and professional Indo-Fijian women after the 1987 coups. Why Indo-Fijian women remain in subordinate positions is well described by Imrana

Jalal and Dr Wadan Narsey who have labelled this a 'culture of silence' that condemns women's assertiveness as disrespectful to those with traditional power. They stress that

why women remain silent is neither about being inferior, being less knowledgeable, nor economically disadvantaged. It is a combination of many factors such as religion, culture, upbringing, the fear of retaliation, the lack of protection—dynamics which attributed to people's expectations of an ideal female in a patriarchal society such as Fiji (*Balance* September–October 1997:8–9).

Women's contribution to the economy

Women's contribution to the economy has always been significant although most of it has not been recognised as paid work or entered in any statistical data. Women's work on sugar farms, rice farms, copra plantations, in fishing and horticultural activities, although unremunerated, was essential for the economic survival of families. After Independence, women's entry into the paid workforce expanded; their other work was largely unremunerated and only 14 per cent of women workers were in paid employment. However by 1992 this figure rose to 30.5 per cent (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1996) which represented 55 per cent of Fiji's economically active female workforce.

After the coups when Fiji, under special arrangements like SPARTECA, began to export locally made garments overseas, the manufacturing industry began to boom. At the present time, the industry employs about 18,000 to 20,000 women. Although poorly paid and often working in intolerable conditions, the only consolation is that these women are at least able to bring home a pay packet at the end of the week, when some husbands become unemployed at the close of the sugar cane harvesting seasons and for other reasons.

Concern has also been raised about the gender imbalance in the civil service. Although women comprised 45.3 per cent of the total civil service in 1996, only 11 per cent were in the senior management level; 27.9 per cent in the middle and 50.5 per cent in the lower level. Table 9.2 shows the percentage and number of females in the three broad civil service categories (Ministry of Women and Culture 1998).

It is significant that while the numbers of those in lower and middle management remained virtually the same from 1990 to 1996, the number of women at senior management level actually declined by 1.5 per cent.

This disparity in the economic arena, not only in the civil service but also in the private sector, could be partly addressed if the stereotyping of roles for boys and girls in the education system was discouraged and girls were actively encouraged to choose professions dominated by men. In many

Table 9.2 Percentage and number of females in the three broad civil service categories, 1990–96

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Senior management %	12.5	12.0	11.4	11.4	11.1	10.5	11.0
(number)	(184)	(192)	(202)	(210)	(217)	(228)	(246)
Middle management %	27.1	27.1	27.4	27.8	27.8	30.0	27.9
(number)	(3119)	(3190)	(3281)	(3397)	(3491)	(3596)	(3716)
Lower level %	50.6	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.6	50.9	50.5
(number)	(8336)	(9039)	(10037)	(10797)	(11470)	(12596)	(14153)

Source: Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998. *Women's Plan of Action, 1999–2008*, Ministry of Women and Culture, Suva, Vol. 2:90.

instances, women have felt pressurised by the traditional norms that force women to choose family over a career, maintaining the economic differences between themselves and men.

Launch of the Fiji women's plan of action

The SVT government, particularly former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka, were very sympathetic towards women and their development. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, was ratified by the Rabuka government in 1994, with reservation on some issues (Articles 5(a) and 9). The Fiji government and the non-government organisations were well represented at the United Nations fourth World Conference for Women held in Beijing in September 1995 in which 12 critical areas of concern were identified for women's overall development. To give effect to the commitments that Fiji made at the Beijing Conference, a Women's Plan of Action was launched in 1998 by the Ministry of Women and Culture, focusing on five issues

- mainstreaming women and gender concerns
- review of laws that are disadvantageous to women
- micro-enterprise development for women
- violence against women and children
- gender-balanced partnership in decision making.

The Plan of Action called for a coordinated approach by the government, civil societies, academic institutions and private sector to fulfil Fiji's obligations.

Whilst consideration was given to previous efforts to address the inequality between men and women through special programs and projects for women, mainstreaming aims to integrate women's concerns into the whole system of government whilst at the same time recognising and affirming equal rights for men and women.

The second commitment in the Plan is a review of laws that are disadvantageous to women. Although the 1997 Constitution guaranteed

non-discrimination on the basis of gender, this in itself cannot change overnight the ingrained customary practices that regulate the roles of men and women in society. The Family Law, Employment Act, Evidence and Criminal Act were to be reviewed with special focus on gender concerns.

The third commitment is the allocation of additional resources to develop women's micro-enterprises. In the informal sector, women are encouraged to develop small-scale enterprises. Although the number of women employed in the formal sector rose during the 1990s, it only accounts for 35 per cent of total paid employment today. Women are generally employed in the lower income occupations or industries and more often hold junior positions. The development of the informal sector is seen as a contribution to the economy and also a means of alleviating poverty.

Reducing violence against women and children is a major challenge. Statistics show that reported cases of violence against women are increasing, but this is believed to represent only a small percentage of the total number of crimes committed. A large number are never reported, and there are families where violence is accepted as normal behaviour. The Rabuka government had introduced the 'no drop' policy but whether this is implemented by the Fiji Police to the maximum is another matter. Women in Fiji have been, through the Fiji Crisis Centre and other sister organisations, lobbying for changes in legislation that will lessen domestic violence in Fiji. The Regional Human Rights Education Resource Team (RRRT), funded by British Aid, is an advocacy group working together with other civil society organisations to educate women on their human rights and legal rights.

The final and the most important commitment that the government made was for

gender balance partnership at all levels of decision-making and assigning fifty per cent of representation, participation, training, appointments and promotions at all levels of government to women on merit and as appropriate and to encourage the same in the private sector (Ministry of Women and Culture 1998).

We all agree that increasing women's participation at all levels of decision-making plays a pivotal role in the advancement of women. As a result of the SVT government's decision, a lot more women have been appointed to statutory boards and other institutions where previously they were absent, the overall representation now being at 14 per cent.

Fiji Women in Politics project

In addition to the role played by the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, the Women's Crisis Centre and similar organisations in changing the attitudes of both men and women towards women's role in society, a need was felt

for an organisation to motivate, educate and train women for leadership roles in the political structures of the country. Consequently, the Fiji Women in Politics Project, an initiative of the Fiji National Council of Women, was launched in 1994 with the objective of, amongst other things, encouraging women to participate in party politics and be elected to parliament and local government offices. During the last five years, along with the women's wings of various political parties, the project has been vigorously engaged in political awareness, education and training programs both for women voters and potential candidates.

During the 1997 municipal elections, 28 women candidates contested. Out of a total of 127 positions, 14 women became councillors. One woman councillor was elected a mayor and another a deputy mayor (Ministry of Women and Culture 1998). Table 9.3 shows the number of women candidates, the gender ratio of candidates and the actual councillors in the 1997 municipal elections.

'The low number of women was almost entirely due to their very low participation as candidates' said the Fiji Women's Plan of Action (1998). Whilst this is partly true, women face discrimination in the selection process itself, apart from other factors that weigh against them. The selection of candidates by all political parties has always been in favour of men as they have better financial resources and are better able to lobby for support around the 'grog bowl' and at the 'drinking parties'—where the real politicking takes place and where women in general are expected not to be present.

A major highlight and achievement through cooperation and coordination of the various women's political groups and the Women in Politics Project was the formation of a Fiji Women's Caucus which will collectively voice the concerns of women in the legislature, irrespective of political affiliations, and ensure these are translated into legislation to lift the overall status of women.

Women and the 1997 Constitution

Fiji's Constitution Review exercise (1995–96) took place in an atmosphere of dialogue, compromise and widespread consultation. The women of Fiji participated fully in making their views known to the Constitution Review Commission. For the first time, Fiji had a Constitution that reflected the wishes of the vast majority of its people, including women. The Constitution was based on principles of representative democracy and removed all discrimination based on race, religion, age, and most importantly, gender.

As I mentioned earlier, the Fiji Government when ratifying CEDAW in 1995 noted its reservation over Article 5(a) dealing with Fiji Islands' customary traditions and practices and Article 9 which deals with the citizenship rights. The previous Constitution treated men and women who married foreign citizens differently. Whereas the foreign wives of Fiji men

Table 9.3 Numbers and gender ratios—candidates and elected members of municipal councils, 1997

Municipality	Candidates gender ratio women:men	Elected members gender ratio women:men	Actual numbers of elected women:men	Number if voters gender women:men	Gender neutral - N Gender biased - B
Suva	1:15	1:19	1:19	1:19	N
Lautoka	1:4	1:6	3:17	4:16	B
Nadi	1:9	1:14	1:14	1:14 or 2:13	N
Ba	1:5	1:5	2:10	2:10	N
Sigatoka	1:21	1:9	1:9	1:9	N
Nausori	0:22	0:12	0:12	all males	
Lami	1:9	0:12	0:12	all males	
Labasa	1:9	0:12	0:12	1:11	B
Savusavu	1:22	0:9	0:9	0:9	N

Source: Ministry of Women and Culture, 1998. *The Women's Plan of Action*, Ministry of Women and Culture, Suva, Vol. 2:79.

were eligible for citizenship rights of Fiji as written in Section 26 of the Constitution, the foreign husbands of Fiji women were not. As a result, there was a lot of scepticism over whether the Constitution Review Commission would recommend equal citizenship rights bearing in mind the government's stand on this issue. The Commission did not disappoint the women of Fiji. Now under the new Constitution both the husband and the wife enjoy equal privileges in applying for citizenship rights. Equally importantly, the child or children of both the mother as well as the father born overseas are entitled to Fiji citizenship whereas before the male descent was the only privileged one.

Another highlight of the new Constitution has been the establishment of the Human Rights Commission under the Bill of Rights which incorporates principles and values enshrined in all the major international human rights conventions and instruments. The Constitution's affirmative and social justice provisions oblige the government to enact affirmative action policies in an open and transparent way, not only for the various ethnic groups but also for men and women. In the area of parliamentary politics, women were disappointed that their demand for a quota system for female representation in parliament was rejected especially in view of the many social and cultural obstacles faced by women who want to get into decision-making positions in public life.

But any constitutional provisions, however worthy or noble, cannot achieve much by themselves. Women in Fiji, as elsewhere, suffer disadvantages in the public and private sector because of their gender. However, our experience has shown that whilst laws are unquestionably necessary, they are not sufficient by themselves to achieve the end. Although

the new 1997 Constitution that was promulgated in July last year specifically prohibits discrimination of any kind, this only remains so on paper at least at this stage. What is required is proper and quick implementation through action and if necessary, through legislative measures.

The 1999 general elections in Fiji

During the elections of May 1999, the efforts of the women's organisations were rewarded by an increase in women representatives in parliament. Twenty-seven women contested out of a total of 251 candidates. Of these, eight were elected, five of whom were appointed ministers—three as cabinet ministers and two as assistant ministers. In the upper house, five women were sworn in as senators, and one was elected its vice-president. So there was a definite improvement in terms of the percentage of women in representation at the highest level of decision making; that is, the parliament. It remains to be seen if they become an effective voice on women's issues in parliament or become drowned amongst the heavy male voices that dominate the floor.

Conclusion

The government, the civil society organisations and the non-government organisations all have to play their rightful roles in lifting the status of women in all stratas of society. The women's non-government organisations have been instrumental in raising public awareness on women's issues and in lobbying for law reform on these issues. Noteworthy among these are the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, which is involved in raising public awareness on women's human and legal rights and economic empowerment for women; the Fiji Crisis Centre which addresses the sexual assault and violence against women and children; the National Council of Women which coordinates special programs for its affiliate organisations throughout the country; the Fiji *Girmit* Council of Women which concentrates on programs for development of rural women and disadvantaged girls; and the Women's Action for Change, to name a few.

The Rabuka government started the process by launching the Women's Plan of Action which focuses on these issues, and enacting various legislative measures to ensure equality and equity for women. It established the Fiji Law Reform Commission to review many existing laws. The most recent was the review of the Family Law in Fiji which has definitely, amongst other things, improved the position of women as far as the division of matrimonial property and child maintenance is concerned.

In conclusion, it is the hope and aspiration of all women globally that, through legislative changes, networking with government and non-government organisations, fully implementing international covenants like CEDAW and other laws pertaining to women, gender parity will one day be realised.