

# Gender Profile

## Fiji

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## Gender Context

At the final count of the 2007 Population Census, indigenous Fijians or itaukei comprise 837,271 of the population, Fijians of Indian descent, 313 798 and others 47,734. Women aged 15 years and over comprise 34% of the population. The census figures revealed that more people now reside in urban and peri-urban centres. Fiji remains a military dictatorship that denies its citizens the right to take part in self-government through free and fair elections, as well as the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and religion. Since a coup d'état in 2006, the military and police have arbitrarily arrested and detained human rights defenders, journalists and others perceived as critical of the administration. Four people have died in military or police custody and dozens of people have been intimidated, beaten, sexually assaulted or subjected to degrading treatment. The current administration has made an announcement that elections will be held in September 2014

Social differences are based on traditional rank and increasingly on socio economic status. Most itaukei are Christians, predominantly of the Methodist denomination. Fijian culture places considerable emphasis on communal values and respect for traditional cultural norms and for chiefs. Gender relations are influenced by traditional values that emphasize the authority of chiefs, who are predominantly male, and the precedence of men before women. Traditional institutions allow women few if any rights to inherit land or formally own property, or to take part in public decision making, with an exception made for paramount chiefs who inherit chiefly titles

Itaukei cultural norms do not appear to place restrictions on women's mobility or on most types of economic participation though concerns have been raised recently about the introduction of village by-laws in select villages, prohibiting women from wearing certain types of clothes and wearing certain hairstyles. Itaukei women are active in informal small-scale fisheries, food production, produce marketing and also in formal commercial agriculture, agricultural processing, the hospitality and tourism sector, and other occupations in the paid labor force. Increasingly, itaukei value secondary and higher education for both girls and boys as a means of social and economic mobility. As greater numbers of itaukei move into the urban middle class, gender equality values are becoming more acceptable.

Indo- Fijian societies are more culturally diverse than others, and most belong to various Hindu denominations, but there is also a minority of Muslims and Christians of various denominations, and Sikhs. Gender relations are influenced by various traditional cultural values emphasizing formal male authority in decision-making and over property. Education and employment for women have become increasingly valued, especially in acceptable occupations, such as professional and clerical work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Situation of Women in Fiji, Governments 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> report to the CEDAW Committee

## **Gender Issues**

### **Women in Decision Making**

Participation of women in decision-making bodies continues to be a major challenge in Fiji. Although successive governments have had a policy of having at least 30% representation since 2003, this has not been achieved. Given Fiji's current political situation and the absence of a Parliament there has been no opportunity for women to have influence at the highest level of decision-making. However, Government's second and third report to the CEDAW Committee reviews the slow progress made in this area. In 2006 there were eight women parliamentarians amongst the 71 members of the House of Representatives and five women senators in the 42-member Upper House (Senate). In 2007 there were two women in the Interim cabinet, however this was reduced to one due to the streamlining of ministerial portfolios in 2008. Statistics on women's membership in the twelve Municipal Councils as of 2008 reflect low numbers, ranging from no women's membership to 50% membership in one Municipal Council (Levuka). In the public service, women only occupy 18% of the upper echelon of Government whilst the majority of them are at the lower rung, which includes nursing, teaching and clerical work. A number of women have expressed interest in contesting the 2014 elections with extensive work being conducted by the National Council of Women to empower women from the village level through a civic education project.<sup>2</sup>

### **Unequal access to Productive and Economic Resources**

Women in Fiji continue to be marginalized in terms of access to credit and loans although they are eligible to access loans and credit through commercial banks. As a multi-cultural society, each ethnic group has its own traditions and values, with the common thread, the patriarchal systems that govern them. This has a lot of bearing on the status of men and women. Male heirs are expected to inherit traditional titles and ensuing responsibilities. Practices are such that women can only inherit the title if there is no male survivor. A Fijian woman cannot have a share from communally owned assets but only from the family's private and personally acquired wealth. In Fiji men dominate businesses though there are some successful women entrepreneurs and business owners who have provided employment and made extensive contributions to the economic and social development of the country. According to the 2013 Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Report Fiji shows a low participation of women in the non-agricultural sector with many disparities prevailing such as lower pay for women.

### **Violence Against Women**

A recent national survey of women in Fiji has found that more than three in five (64% of women) who had ever been in a relationship have experienced physical or sexual violence or both by a husband or intimate partner. The major findings of the research include the high prevalence and severity of violence in all forms within relationships, the higher risk Fiji's rural women face of experiencing violence, and the likelihood that women who encounter intimate-partner violence are also subjected to controlling

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<sup>2</sup> The Situation of Women in Fiji, Government of Fiji Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2008

behaviours that undermine their access to health care and their economic and social development and rights. The survey found that rates of emotional, physical and sexual violence against women by husbands or partners are higher in rural areas than in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> According to Government's CEDAW Report, Gender Based Violence is not confined to any particular ethnic group and is common amongst all Fijians. Fiji introduced a Domestic Violence Decree which creates a DV offence and civil remedies and protection orders. The Family Law Act 2003 continues to address violence within families through the provision of financial security, right to reside in marital home for victims of violence and protection orders. Sexual offences reform through the crimes decree accords high penalties and deterrence to commit such sexual assaults. Sexual harassment at the workplace is dealt with by the Employment Relations Promulgation. A much updated Family Health and Safety Study is planned for Fiji. Access to legal services has been improved through legal aid commission and support is provided to survivors of violence through the Fiji Women's Crisis Center. In the absence of state owned safe houses, faith based organizations continue to provide temporary shelter for women and young girls.

### **Gender in Development**

According to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Poverty Alleviation and Women, integrating gender equality issues and concerns into Government policies and programmes have not achieved the desired results. Government, over the years has made known its intentions to work towards achieving active participation of women in all aspects of society. These are documented not only in previous *Development Plans* but more importantly in the current Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development (RDSSED) 2009–2014 and in the State's 2008 CEDAW Report. The Women's Plan of Action (2009 – 2018) aims to provide direction for actions to be taken by government, its development partners, other stakeholders and NGOs to promote gender equality and reduce inequality and discrimination against women in all sectors. The WPA reflects critical areas of action and government's commitment to the following areas of concern: Formal Sector Employment and Livelihoods; Equal Participation in Decision-Making; elimination of Violence Against Women and Children; Access to Services and Women and the Law.<sup>4</sup>

## **Sector Issues**

### **Health**

Access to health care services is still a major concern particularly in geographically remote villages and settlements throughout Fiji. In most cases rural and outer islands services lack funding for essential medical supplies and maintenance of facilities as central hospitals and overseas referrals tend to absorb most of the available resources. Although reproductive health services are widely available also for adolescents and young women, there is a need to improve access in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> With poor facilities and difficult transportation and communication, many women in rural areas and outer islands are isolated from maternal and infant health services. In addition nurses and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.islandsbusiness.com/news/fiji/344/violence-against-women-in-fiji-touches-all-aspect/>

<sup>4</sup> The Situation of Women in Fiji, Government of Fiji Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2008

<sup>5</sup> 2013 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report

village health assistants often work in difficult circumstances and poor conditions and inadequate health supplies.<sup>6</sup> There is currently no data on unmet needs for family planning. It should be noted that Fiji has 100 percent skilled birth attendance and very high antenatal coverage rates.

### **Education**

The 2013 Regional MDG Tracking report notes that gender parity in education has been achieved at all levels, however more data is needed for tertiary level education especially in Fiji Universities. There is a need to provide opportunities for girls and women to enter into non-traditional fields such as science, technology and engineering. Education issues remain for women with disabilities with the absence of policies and practical measures on inclusive education. Pre-school is now becoming accessible to a greater number of children and there is almost universal access to primary education. Despite this Government's commitment and other assistance for disadvantaged children and now compulsory school attendance, a number of girls and boys of primary school age continue to drop out of school. This has been attributed to the other fees levied by the schools and costs such as uniforms, books and transport that families cannot afford to pay.<sup>7</sup>

### **Peace & Security**

The four coups in recent history, two that took place in 1987 and the more recent coups in 2000 and 2006 have had a chilling effect on women's rights advocacy and programs. Research carried out by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and others show that violence from intimate partners and from strangers, increases during and following the coups, while at the same time the capacity and willingness of Police to respond diminishes. Women were the target of ethnically motivated attacks following the 1987 and 2000 coups, while the increase in poverty following each coup has had an impact on women's empowerment. Since the 2006 coup, coordination between civil society and government agencies has largely broken down, and rifts have emerged within CSO's, not only around engagement with the Interim Government, but also regarding such core issues as the role of a human rights perspective in development.<sup>8</sup> Human Rights defenders and key activists in the women's movement have repeatedly expressed concern around the violation of their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly which has resulted in arrests and detaining of people under the Public Emergency Regulations.<sup>9</sup> Fiji has yet to develop a national policy and plan on women, peace and security.

### **Institutional and Legal Framework**

The Government of Fiji has made commitments to a number of major international agreements and programmes of action on gender equality and the advancement of women and has identified key issues to address these commitments. These include the Beijing Platform for Action 1995, CEDAW, MDGs, the UNESCAP Biwako Millennium Framework for Action 2003; the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005– 2015 and the Revised Pacific Platform for Action 2005–2015.

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<sup>6</sup>ibid

<sup>7</sup>The Situation of Women in Fiji, Government of Fiji Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2008

<sup>8</sup>Violence Against Women in Melanesia and East Timor; Building on Global and Regional Promising Approaches, 2008, Australian Government.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch submission to the Fiji Universal Periodic Review process, 2009

Other international Conventions ratified include the Convention **on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)** and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Department of Women situated under the Ministry of Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation has the role of primary advisor to Government on public policies that affect women and the key catalyst in the implementation of the Women's Plan of Action (WPA) referred to above.

Fiji has since submitted its initial and periodic second and third report to the CEDAW Committee. Following the submission of its last report the UN CEDAW Committee called on the government to submit a follow-up report on the adoption of a new constitution involving the full participation of women and the steps taken to ensure the Public Emergency Regulation and the Media Decree do not infringe upon the rights of women.<sup>10</sup>

A total of 200 and more decrees were introduced after the 2006 coup, with the following focusing on issues of gender equality: The HIV Decree, Domestic Violence Decree and the Crimes Decree.

Under the interim administration, the President of Fiji signed into law a new Constitution in September, 2013. The new constitution has come under criticism by Amnesty International for falling short of international standards of human rights law and is seen to be a step backwards in guaranteeing human rights protection for all. The current text is noted to uphold decrees that severely restrict free speech, grants the state the power to detain people (potentially indefinitely) without charge or trial in times of emergency. It also gives state officials immunity for a wide range of acts, including crimes under international law such as torture.

### **Actors**

Women's NGOs in Fiji are instrumental in the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment. The Fiji Government recognizes the significant role of NGO's and CSO's with representatives from civil society in the Women's Advisory Committee and also in the five taskforces of the WPA and these are:

- Gender mainstreaming taskforce: National Council of Women (NCW), Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSVM), Fiji Disabled People's Association (FDPA) and Fiji National Council of Disabled Persons.(FNCDP)
- Balancing Decision Making Taskforce: NCW, SSVM, Fiji Employers Federation, Fiji Trades Union Congress, Pan Pacific South East Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA) and FemLink Pacific
- Review of Laws Taskforce; Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), NCW, SSVM
- Micro Enterprise Development; Micro Finance Unit/NCSMED, NCW, SSV
- Elimination of Violence Against Women; FWRM, FWCC, NCW and SSV

### **Recommendations**

The revised WPA attempts to provide an opportunity to put into place necessary mechanisms to improve the situation of women and children in Fiji. It recognizes that

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/co/CEDAW-C-FJI-CO-4.pdf>

women continue to be marginalized at all levels from communities up to decision making at national levels. The recommended areas of concern are interlinked with the ultimate goal of improving the situation of women. The WPA recommends:

- The adoption of institutional mechanisms
- A shift in the broad functions of the Department of Women (to enable the Department to focus on the provision of policy advice and a catalyst in the implementation of the WPA and international commitments)
- Necessary legislations or policy frameworks to be put in place

It is recommended that any support towards gender mainstreaming in future programme action and or priorities be carried out in close coordination with the Department of Women who has a clear plan of action on the way forward outlined in the WPA.

The following recommendations should also be considered

- Safety net/social protection for women participating in 2014 elections
- Support for ongoing gender and civic education programs in rural and outer island communities
- Implementation of the immediate action areas proposed by CEDAW committee following the last CEDAW Report
- Awareness of Decrees having an impact on women's lives such as crimes decree, Domestic Violence decree, Employment Relations Promulgation
- Promote the inclusion of quota for women in political parties and reserve seats in parliament
- Gender Audit of the public service
- Creation of a holistic enabling environment for women's economic empowerment
- Support for a multi-sectoral national response to EVAW