



# Women's Rights in Fiji Islands (2001)

## Women in politics and decision-making

Women in both the indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities have functioned primarily in traditional roles; the percentage of women and minorities in government and politics does not correspond to their percentages of the population. However, until the takeover of Parliament in May 2000, an increasing number of women were rising to prominent positions in politics and public service.

In the August elections 2001, 30 Fijian women and 1 Indo-Fijian woman ran for election; 5 women were elected to the House of Representatives. Two women were appointed to the Senate. In contrast, there were 8 women in the House and 3 women in the Senate in 1999.

After the 2001 election, four ethnic Fijian women were appointed to the Cabinet (two as ministers and two as assistant ministers), and another was appointed to fill a vacancy in Parliament. Women also play important roles in the chiefly system and can be chiefs in their own right. The wife of former President Ratu Mara is one of the three highest-ranking chiefs.

## Violence against women

Reliable estimates indicate that 10 percent of women have been abused in some way. However, following the attempted coup in 2000 and the resulting general sense of lawlessness and downturn in the economy, reports of domestic violence and police brutality against women increased. An active women's rights movement is addressing the problem of domestic violence. Police have adopted a "no-drop" rule, under which they prosecute cases of domestic violence even when the victim does not wish to press charges. The traditional practice of "reconciliation" between the aggrieved parties sometimes is taken into account in mitigation of sentences in domestic violence cases. During the year, the police began a program to find unaccompanied women and drive them to their neighborhood police station to be picked up by a family member. This plan was intended to protect women; however, it was ended after a brief experimental period, following protests from two women's rights groups.

The women's rights movement also pressed for serious punishment for rape. Courts have imposed sentences that vary widely but generally were lenient. For example, a grandfather charged with raping a 10-year old girl was given a suspended sentence in January, but in another case in February, the guilty party was given a 3-month jail term. Women's groups continued to push to have all rape cases heard in the High Court, where sentencing limits are higher; however, the accused decides where the case will be heard. Only one case in the last 5 years has been sent to the High Court.

In addition to the rise in domestic violence, there have been approximately 30 "suicides" by Indo-Fijian women that appeared to have been bride burning. Police investigations report that the women burned themselves so severely as to cause death, but the women's rights community believes that the deaths are the result of bride burning.

Prostitution is illegal; however, it is a growing problem, especially in Suva. The law prohibits sex tourism as well as sexual harassment, which are not considered to be significant problems.

Suva, Ba, Labasa, and Lautoka have women's crisis centers funded by foreign governments, which offer counseling and assistance to women in cases of domestic violence, rape, and other problems such as child support. A newly organized NGO, Fem'link Pacific, spreads information at the grassroots level and encourages community-based dialog. Also, in January the Ministry of Women began a Gender Awareness Program to educate soldiers and police officers about women's issues.

### **Equal Opportunity**

Under the Constitution, male and female citizens enjoy equal rights in regard to the granting of residence for spouses, and registering and racially designating children in regard to electoral rolls and ethnic communal property.

In general women in the ethnic Fijian community are more likely to rise to prominence in their own right than are women in the Indo-Fijian community. Women have full rights of property ownership and inheritance, and a number are successful entrepreneurs. Women generally are paid less than men, a discrepancy that is especially notable in the garment industry. Garment workers, most of whom are Indo-Fijian, ethnic Fijian, and Chinese females, receive wages that are considerably lower than in other sectors. During the year, the garment industry saw the closing of several factories and the layoff of hundreds of seamstresses. A significant number of garment workers reside at their places of work. According to press reports, some garment workers supplement their low income through prostitution.

### **Source:**

Country Report on Human Rights Situation in Fiji  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/eap/8308.htm>