BBC MEDIA ACTION



WOMEN IN FOCUS FIJI: BARRIERS, ENABLERS AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

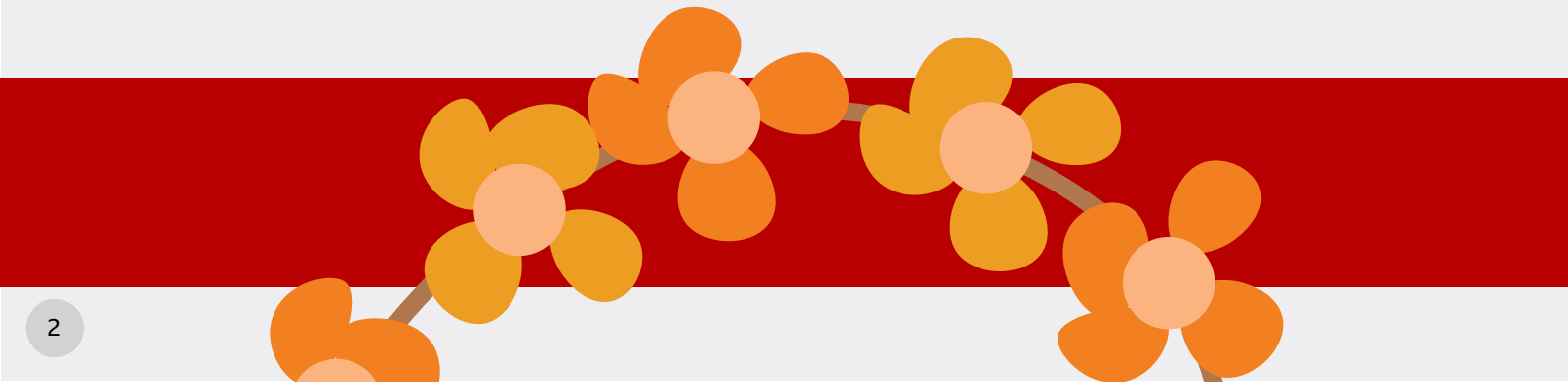
1. Executive Summary

Women's underrepresentation in leadership in Fiji persists despite strong legal and policy commitments to gender equality and high public support for women in decision-making. Women currently hold only 9% of parliamentary seats, around one-third of senior civil service posts, and roughly one-fifth of board positions, even though they vote in large numbers and are widely seen as underrepresented. This report examines why these gaps endure, what supports women to lead, and how media and public discourse shape both constraints and opportunities - particularly in the lead-up to the 2026 national and local elections in Fiji.

The report combines desk research with in-depth interviews with women leaders across politics, media, civil society and business. This research was conducted as part of the Women in Focus Fiji (WFF) project which aims to advance women's leadership and strengthen women's voice, visibility, and political participation.

Findings show that the main barriers to women's leadership in Fiji are structural and sociocultural, not a lack of women's capability or ambition. Key informants describe how deeply embedded patriarchal norms still cast leadership as "men's work," reinforced by women's disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities, biased recruitment and promotion systems, exclusion from influential networks, and the channelling of women into "soft" portfolios. These constraints are intensified by widespread, gendered online and offline abuse - especially targeting women journalists, politicians and advocates - which drives self-censorship, deters potential candidates and contributes to burnout and "battle weariness" among women leaders. Findings highlight the critical role media plays in this ecosystem: key informants note that women are under-represented as leaders and experts in media, frequently framed through their appearance, personal lives and scandals, and rarely afforded the same substantive, issue-based coverage as men. Key informants reported that within newsrooms, women remain clustered in lower-status roles and face unequal access to senior editorial positions and hard-news beats.

At the same time, the research identifies a growing ecosystem of enablers. Civil society advocacy, leadership training and candidate-readiness programmes, mentoring and alumni networks, and supportive families, faith communities and male allies are helping women build leadership skills, confidence and resilience. Organisational practices that acknowledge care responsibilities and embed safety measures - alongside debates on temporary special measures and corporate or political targets - demonstrate practical pathways to accelerate change. Women leaders are clear that progress now depends on moving from symbolic commitments to intentional, data-driven reform: embedding gender lenses, PSEAH and anti-discrimination standards in law and practice; resourcing women's access to training and campaigns; transforming media norms and newsroom leadership; and investing in public education that normalises women's authority. To this end, media outlets can take immediate, practical steps - such as setting simple targets to quote more women experts, adding brief gender-sensitivity checks to existing editorial processes, piloting transparent promotion criteria, and partnering with women's organisations on training or campaigns. More broadly, the report concludes that a coordinated approach – where institutions and media work together to move beyond token visibility towards genuinely shared power – is essential to advancing women's leadership in Fiji.



2. Project Background

The Women in Focus Fiji (WFF) project seeks to advance women's leadership in diverse sectors, with an aim to build women's voice, visibility and political participation in the lead up to the 2026 General and Local Elections in Fiji. The project aims to leverage BBCMA's partnerships with local media in Fiji to amplify the voices and stories of women leaders, inspire emerging talent and promote gender-sensitive reporting.

The project goals include:

1. **Inspiring Future Women Leaders** by using media to showcase diverse women leaders, from small scale farmers and entrepreneurs to those in formal politics, to serve as role models.
2. **Amplify Women's Voices** to promote economic empowerment through producing engaging media content (TV, radio, social media) thatv highlights women's career paths, motivations, struggles and successes.
3. **Enhance Media Capacity** by training journalists in gender-sensitive reporting to challenge stereotypes and promote positive, impactful coverage of women in leadership.

3. Research

In support of these project goals, research was undertaken to inform the project's media training and production, specifically to respond to gender barriers and gender differences related to media, governance, and leadership in Fiji. The research aims to understand:

1. What are the leadership pathways and lived experiences of women leaders in Fiji across various sectors, including business enterprise, governance, politics, media, and other sectors?
2. What structural, institutional, cultural, and social factors influence women's access to leadership positions and public participation in Fiji?
3. What enabling conditions (i.e. support systems, media representation, policy/institutional) changes are needed to strengthen women's leadership opportunities and advance gender equity across sectors in Fiji?

The study combined an initial desk review with key informant interviews to generate contextual understanding and in-depth experiential insights.

The desk review synthesised existing literature and prior research on gender equality, women's leadership, cultural norms, and media participation in Fiji, as well as drawing on any relevant regional (Pacific) evidence, where appropriate. This process sought to identify key trends, gaps, and insights within current social, political, media and institutional dynamics.

Primary data was collected through ten semi-structured key informant interviews with women leaders (including iTaukei and Indo-Fijian women leaders) from diverse sectors in Fiji, including governance, politics, civil society, business, and women working in media. A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure diversity in sector/industry and background, including representation of indigenous iTaukei and Indo-Fijian women, as well as including women in positions of leadership at both the local and national level. Interviews explored participants' leadership pathways, experiences of structural and cultural barriers, attitudes and gender norms influencing career mobility, and perceptions of media representation and public visibility.

4. Context: Women's Leadership in Fiji – Progress and Persistent Gaps

> The world is witnessing the erosion of women's political leadership at the very moment we need inclusive decision-making the most…. when women are excluded from the highest levels of leadership, we all lose; as societies forfeit the more equitable, responsive governance that gender-balanced leadership makes possible.
>
> – Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women[1]

Women's equal representation in political and economic leadership is central to democratic governance, inclusive development and the achievement of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5).[2] Globally, however, women remain significantly underrepresented in positions of formal authority. As of January 2026, women hold approximately 27.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide, while at just 7.6%, the Pacific Islands region records the lowest regional average.[3]

Fiji exhibits these global and regional disparities, despite strong formal commitments to gender equality. Fiji's Parliament is recognised regionally as a relative leader in gender mainstreaming. The country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted the 2013 Constitution with a stated commitment to a "Fiji for all Fijians", integrated CEDAW principles into a five-year gender equality plan, and set ambitious National Development Plan targets to reach 30% women in Parliament and 50% representation on boards by 2030.[4] Yet women remain significantly underrepresented in both political and corporate leadership in Fiji:

- As of January 2026, women hold only 5 of 55 parliamentary seats (around 9%), down from 19% in 2018–2022.[5]
- Women constitute around 59% of the civil service but only 35% of senior positions reporting directly to Permanent Secretaries.[6]
- Women hold about 20% of board seats across major boards, with even lower representation at Chair and CEO level.[7]
- At local level, only 2 of 27 councillors on a recent list were women.[8]

This sits against a backdrop of strong female voter turnout (69% in 2022, higher than men)[9] and broad public support for women's leadership: 81% of Fijians believe women are underrepresented

[1]As quoted in a press release published by UN Women (June 12th, 2025), available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/06/womens-political-leadership-declines-with-fewer-women-in-executive-office-in-2025 [Accessed 20th May 2025]
[2]Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) is: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. See United Nations (2026). Available from https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5 [Accessed 20th May 2026]
[3]Inter-Parliamentary Union (2026). Global and regional averages of women in national parliaments. Available from https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/?date_year=2026&date_month=01 [Accessed 5th March 2026]
[4]Chand, Anish. (January 2026). Cabinet approves 5-year plan to strengthen women's rights. The Fiji Times. [online]. Available from https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/cabinet-approves-5-year-plan-to-strengthen-womens-rights/ [Accessed 20th May 2026]
[5]Inter-Parliamentary Union (2026). Available from https://www.ipu.org/parliament/FJ [Accessed 21st May 2026]
[6]Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection (2023). Fiji Country Gender Assessment 2023. [online] Available from https://www.mwcsp.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FCGA_PolicyBriefs-FINAL-FOR-PRINTING-21-FEB-2023.pdf [Accessed 21st May 2026]
[7]Fiji Womens Rights Movement (FWRM) (2023). Annual Report 2023. Available from https://www.fwrm.org.fj/images/PDFs/annualreports/FWRM%20Annual%20Report%202023_final%202.pdf [Accessed 21st May 2026]
[8]Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FRWM) (2024). Low Number of Women in Local Government Appointments Disappointing (3rd January 2024). [online]. Available at https://www.fwrm.org.fj/news/media-releases/low-number-of-women-in-local-government-appointments-disappointing [Accessed 21st May 2026]
[9]Fijian Elections Office (March 2024) FEO encourages women participation in electoral process. [online] Available at https://www.feo.org.fj/feo-encourages-women-participation-in-electoral-processes/ [Accessed 21st May 2026]

in government, whilst 72% believe greater representation would benefit the country.[10] Despite strong female participation in elections and explicit government commitments to gender equality and gender mainstreaming in laws, policies, and institutional frameworks, this has not translated into female leadership at the highest levels. This persistent gap reflects structural and sociocultural barriers that continue to limit women's pathways to, and challenge women's authority in, leadership.

Despite having strong laws and policies on paper, critics, including the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), believe implementation is lacking. FWRM Board member Akanisi Nabalarua has said that successive Fijian governments pay lip service to gender equality, while failing to make intentional meaningful progress in women's representation in decision making spaces.[11] This critique underscores the gap between policy proclamations and the lived realities of women in Fiji, challenging the notion that a "gender-blind" policy framework can effectively address deep-seated gender disparities and translate formal equality into substantive equality for women.

Media institutions play a critical role in shaping these patterns of representation. Research consistently shows that media coverage can reinforce existing gender stereotypes by portraying leadership through traditionally masculine norms or marginalizing women's political and professional achievements.[12] At the same time, media institutions have the potential to challenge these dynamics by promoting balanced representation, amplifying women's voices, and normalizing diverse leadership styles. As UN Women notes, *"The media has a crucial role in either perpetuating or breaking down gender stereotypes in political life. Fair and diverse media coverage of women candidates and issues that matter to women is essential to ensuring that voters can make informed choices and that women can participate in elections on an equal footing with men."*[13] The role of media is particularly significant as Fiji approaches the upcoming national and local elections in 2026. Election periods intensify media attention on political actors and therefore shape public perceptions of legitimacy, competence, and leadership potential. In this context, gender-sensitive journalism and equitable coverage can play an important role in expanding the visibility of women candidates, challenging exclusionary norms, and supporting a more inclusive political environment.

5. Lived experiences of women in leadership roles in Fiji

Across sectors, women leaders in Fiji describe their leadership as deeply purposeful and values driven, grounded in a sense of duty to "be part of the change" rather than a pursuit of status. At the same time, they are frank about the personal cost: leadership is "tough", emotionally demanding and often isolating. Career progress is seen as gradual and hard-won, with key informants reporting that women have to work "double or triple" to gain and hold leadership space, and that their performance shapes prospects for those coming up behind them.

> "I didn't get into it with any joy or excitement. I did it because it had to be done…if you want change, you have to go and be part of the change."
>
> – Key informant, governance

[10]Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection (2023). Fiji Country Gender Assessment 2023. [online] Available from https://www.mwcsp.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FCGA_PolicyBriefs-FINAL-FOR-PRINTING-21-FEB-2023.pdf [Accessed 21st May 2026]
[11]As reported by fijivillage.com and cited in Radio New Zealand (RNZ) (2025) Why special measures to boost Fijian women's political representation remain a distant goal (23 April 2025) [online]. Available at https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/558871/why-special-measures-to-boost-fijian-women-s-political-representation-remain-a-distant-goal [Accessed 5th March 2026]
[12]Van der Pas, D. J., & Aalderling, L. (2020). Gender differences in political media coverage: A meta-analysis. Journal of Communication, 70(1), 114–143. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz048
[13]UN Women. (2013). In Brief: Women's Leadership and Political Participation, pp. 6–7.
Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2013/6/in-brief-women-s-leadership-and-political-participation

> It's been tough. I think every female journalist would say that…For me personally, the toughest part has been the move up the ladder — especially being thrown into the deep end and having to find my way to shore.
>
> – Key informant, media

> Women always have to work double or triple to gain the space they need. Once you've gained it, hold your ground and deliver — because the rest will impact everybody else coming behind you.
>
> – Key informant, governance

6. Barriers to women's leadership in Fiji

Women leaders in Fiji face layered barriers rooted in patriarchal norms, institutional practices, online and offline abuse, and internalised self-doubt. Desk research and key informant interviews reveal that **cultural attitudes remain a primary obstacle**: politics and senior roles are still seen as "men's work," reinforced by women's disproportionate unpaid care load[14] and male-dominated political and community structures. Survey data from Fiji Council of Social Services and Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) show that respondents most often cite cultural barriers, discrimination, and lack of community support as reasons women do not contest elections, rather than lack of education or experience.[15] As described by a key informant, "our society still looks at men that men should lead, not women,". Key informants also note how patriarchal norms are reproduced by women themselves, especially through voting behaviour and double standards, describing how "the greatest opponent…comes from women" and that many women follow family or spouses' voting preferences rather than supporting female candidates. They describe how women politicians face intense moral scrutiny on both public and private fronts, with women expected to be "perfect" both at work and at home in ways men are not. At the same time, one key informant felt that Fijian culture has been misinterpreted and can also be a source of legitimacy for women's authority.

> We are a patriarchal Melanesian community and it will always be there, but we have clearly misunderstood some of what our culture says about the value of women. My culture values women in leadership — we've had Marama na Roko Tui Dreketi… Being a patriarchal society does not mean disrespecting women or denying them the opportunity to lead.
>
> – Key informant, governance

[14]Fiji Womens Rights Movement (FWRM) (2023). Beyond 33% - The Economic Empowerment of Fiji Women and Girls. Available from https://www.fwrm.org.fj/images/PDFs/researchanalysis/Breaking_The_33%201.pdf [Accessed 10th March 2026]
[15]Fiji Womens Rights Movement (FWRM) (2023). Beyond 33% - The Economic Empowerment of Fiji Women and Girls. Available from https://www.fwrm.org.fj/images/PDFs/researchanalysis/Breaking_The_33%201.pdf [Accessed 10th March 2026]

These norms are reinforced by institutional and workplace systems that **formally promise equality but informally reserve decision-making power for men**. Desk research and key informant interviews highlight biased recruitment and promotion processes, exclusion of women from influential networks, and a tendency to channel women into "soft" portfolios, while men dominate powerful ministries, diplomacy and corporate leadership. One key informant explained that in party meetings *"women are treated as equals. But when it comes to positions… men will be given all the leadership roles."* Another recalled a corporate hiring decision where *"it came down to two applicants - a woman and a man. They had to give it to the man…just because he's a man,"* concluding *"the systems are set up to keep women away from these things."* In many workplaces, rigid hours, lack of childcare options, and policies built around an "unencumbered" male worker further disadvantage women, who must "work harder…to the point where she's exhausted" before even being considered for promotion.

> "Women get soft issues…As if women are only meant to do that kind of work. Why can't women head the Ministry of Defence? Why can't women head…Finance, or Foreign Affairs?"
>
> – Key informant, governance

> "They said: the policies are not friendly to women. There's no flexibility — working hours, no option to work remotely, no children's facilities at work…For men, it's easy — they just pick up and go."
>
> – Key informant, advocacy

Violence, harassment and internalised barriers compound these structural constraints. Desk and primary research agree that online abuse is "widespread, deeply gendered, and particularly severe" for women journalists, politicians and advocates, who face personal, sexualised attacks and invasive misuse of private images, often with little institutional support. As one media leader put it, *"online harassment is a real issue. Female journalists can face more personal or gender-based criticism,"* while another noted women respond by "limiting their social media use or simply staying quiet…because there is very little support from their workplaces." Key informants stressed that such abuse deters women from entering or remaining in public life and called for stronger protections, including through national policy and AI regulation, to ensure women's safety online. Beyond this, women describe offline intimidation, misinformation campaigns, and "battle weariness" from having to defend and prove themselves continuously. These conditions feed self-doubt and reluctance to step forward, with one informant observing that "women probably underestimate ourselves and our ability to put ourselves out there," underscoring that psychological safety and confidence-building are as crucial as legal and institutional reform.

> With the nature of media today, online harassment is a real issue. Female journalists can face more personal or gender-based criticism, especially when covering sensitive topics.
>
> – Key informant, media

> Online abuse is also a serious issue…Many women are dealing with this by limiting their social media use or simply staying quiet - not because they want to, but because there is very little support from their workplaces.
>
> – Key informant, governance

> We need to talk more to women about what their own barriers are…why aren't you going into leadership positions?
>
> – Key informant, governance

7. Enablers of women's leadership in Fiji

Desk research and key informant interviews point to a growing enabling environment that can help counter Fiji's entrenched barriers to women's leadership.

Civil society advocacy, public campaigns and policy debates are reshaping norms by making women's leadership more visible and legitimate. Initiatives like the "Better Than This" campaign seek to promote respectful political discourse, build public support for women candidates and "demystify" politics as an attainable pathway.[16] Capacity-building and leadership development initiatives also play a critical role in enabling women's political participation. Organisations such as the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) and the Pacific Women's Forum have long supported programmes designed to strengthen women's leadership skills, provide candidate training, and build networks that support women entering political life. Such initiatives are essential for addressing confidence gaps and providing practical knowledge about campaign processes, political communication, and governance structures. Women's rights organisations are also pushing for temporary special measures – such as reserved seats or party quotas – drawing on global evidence that these are among the most effective tools to overcome structural resistance and reverse recent declines in women's parliamentary representation.[17]

Mentoring, peer networks and targeted training emerge as some of the most powerful practical enablers. Training and mentorship programmes can help demystify political processes and provide women with the tools and support required to participate effectively in electoral

[16]Nand, P. (2025). Fiji Village. Better Than This campaign launched to boost women's representation in politics. (1st April 2025). Available at https://www.fijivillage.com/news/Better-Than-This-campaign-launched-to-boost-womens-representation-in-politics-8fxr54/
[17]UN Women (2024). Corporate Thematic Evaluation of UN Women's Support to Women's Political Participation: Insights from the Field, Evaluation Report (May 2024). Available at https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/corporate-thematic-evaluation-of-un-womens-support-to-womens-political-participation-insights-from-the-field-en.pdf

politics. Key informants placed value in a wide range of opportunities - from overseas initiatives to practical training in areas like online safety, video production, and podcasting - as well as mentorship and job-shadowing that directly support career progression. Gender-responsive budgeting was identified as essential to ensure women have equitable access to training, by tracking and correcting imbalances in who gets funded to participate. Key informants also stressed that formal programmes and informal "cups of tea" give women safe spaces to process fear, share strategies and receive honest feedback. Alumni and women's networks – such as the ACS "old girls" and WiM Fiji's mentoring scheme – provide emotional backing, access to funders and opportunities, and a pipeline of younger leaders. These efforts complement long-running capacity-building by groups like FWRM and regional and UN-supported programmes, which build skills in campaigning, governance and communication.

> "WiM Fiji started a mentorship programme in 2023, and the difference it has made in women's confidence and resilience has been clear."
>
> – Key informant, media

> "That ACS network, the old girls — that's a very powerful network…Having people who will tell you the truth, even if it's ugly — you need people like that in your life."
>
> – Key informant, advocacy

Core support, including family, faith and allies within institutions, are identified as another central foundation for women leaders. Desk research highlights how supportive household arrangements can reduce the burden of unpaid care work and enable women to devote time and energy to leadership roles.[18] This is reinforced by key informants who cite supportive households as key to their success: *"My only support system was my family…they were the only support I had who truly understood my work".* Key informants also describe how women-led faith communities and church groups provide quiet but critical solidarity and spiritual support during crises. At the same time, male allies in senior roles – editors, ministers, managers – can shift norms by actively "recognising and supporting the work of women," opening doors to roles historically reserved for men and modelling gender-conscious leadership.



[18]Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FRWM) (2022). Perception study in Leadership in Fiji (November 2022). Available at https://www.fwrm.org.fj/images/women_leadership/FINAL_Perception_Study_on_Leadership_in_Fiji_-_301122.pdf [Accessed 27 May 2026]

> Women stay motivated through personal strength, support from friends and colleagues, and their faith and family time…Those informal moments of connection are important.
>
> – Key informant, media

> I also want to acknowledge and recognise the editors in newsrooms who are actively recognising and supporting the work of women journalists in Fiji. That support matters enormously…Male allies in senior editorial positions who actively champion women on merit also make a real difference.
>
> – Key informant, media

> We need men who are allies, who believe in the leadership of women, who are champions and advocates for women.
>
> – Key informant, governance

Finally, organisational practices that recognise care and safety needs help to turn good intentions into sustainable careers. Key informants linked this to everyday measures that make leadership feasible for women with heavy care loads and safety risks: flexible arrangements, access to counselling and peer support when harassment occurs, and projects designed with built-in contingency and security plans. International experience suggests that institutional reforms – including corporate targets or quotas, transparency on diversity, and gender-responsive procurement – can accelerate women's advancement.[19]

> If you need to bring a carer, if you need to bring your baby, we're flexible with that…Little things like that - they matter.
>
> – Key informant, advocacy

While significant barriers remain, these enabling factors highlight the potential for coordinated action across government, civil society, media, and private sector institutions to expand opportunities for women's leadership. Strengthening these initiatives - particularly through sustained policy commitments, institutional accountability, and continued public engagement - will be critical to achieving more inclusive representation in both political and economic decision-making in Fiji.

[19]UN Women (2024). Corporate Thematic Evaluation of UN Women's Support to Women's Political Participation: Insights from the Field, Evaluation Report (May 2024). Available at https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/corporate-thematic-evaluation-of-un-womens-support-to-womens-political-participation-insights-from-the-field-en.pdf

8. Challenges and opportunities in media and public discourse

Fiji Media Background

Fiji's media landscape is one of the most developed and diverse in the Pacific, comprised of several prominent newspapers (including two major national dailies - the Fiji Times and Fiji Sun), a strong broadcast sector with extensive radio coverage through FBC and Communications Fiji Limited and multiple television stations based in Suva, and a rapidly expanding online news environment. Combined with high mobile penetration, Fiji's media has strong reach and influence over public opinion and political debate.

This influence sits alongside a restrictive legacy. The 2010 Media Industry Development Decree (later law) imposed tight state control, ownership rules and heavy penalties, generating a culture of fear and self censorship that shaped newsroom practices for over a decade. Although the Act was repealed in 2023, its effects persist, with commentators noting "a generation of censorship to undo."[20]



[20] Pacific Islands Media Freedom Index 2023, For Us, By Us, About Us, (2023) https://pacificfreedomforum.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Pacific-Islands-Media-Freedom-Index-and-Report_2023_lr2.pdf

Challenges:

Fiji's media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of leadership - who is seen as a legitimate leader and what leadership looks like. Desk research shows that, as elsewhere, media in Fiji is not a neutral mirror but an active gatekeeper: it decides which leaders are visible, what traits are praised, and whose authority is presented as credible. Gendered norms around leadership are reinforced when women leaders are covered less often, in less serious ways, or framed primarily through their private lives. Key informants confirmed that "*media in Fiji is improving, but it still doesn't fully reflect the real lives of women,*" with rural women, informal workers particularly invisible, and current, former and aspiring women politicians significantly under-represented.

Both desk research and key informant interviews highlight **patterns of under-representation and "soft" framing**. Women do appear in Fijian media, but they are far less likely than men to be quoted as political, economic or technical leaders, and their contributions are often presented as human-interest or community stories rather than hard news. The decline of specialist beats and limited in-depth reporting further pushes coverage toward surface-level, personality-driven stories, with media coverage described as being "drawn to the drama," which can do "injustice" to complex governance issues and to women leaders whose substantive work is overlooked.

> "Media has captured some of it, but it seems to always be from the soft side of things…We come to women when we want an opinion on something soft, but when it comes to a project that's happening, the media runs all over the place for the male voice."
>
> – Key informant, advocacy

Research consistently shows that women politicians and business leaders face a **gendered media landscape**. Coverage of women in Fiji's media is also heavily shaped by a gendered gaze that prioritises appearance, femininity and domestic roles. Desk research shows, and women leaders confirm, that stories often spotlight women's roles as mothers or their "feminine side" instead of their professional achievements[21]. Furthermore, images used by the media frequently focus on what women are wearing, inviting negative or mocking online comments. As one leader put it, "*The focus is on their personal life, personality, or appearance rather than their work and achievements," with "a lot of space…taken up with what they're wearing.*" Key informants note that such coverage is visibly incomplete - "not the full picture" - and crowds out serious recognition of their professional contributions.

> "We portray women because of their feminine side rather than the things they've been able to achieve…'Mother of five secures whatever'…Would you say 'father of five'? No, of course not."
>
> – Key informant, media

[21]Van der Pas, D. J., & Aalderling, L. (2020). Gender differences in political media coverage: A meta-analysis. Journal of Communication, 70(1), 114–143. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz048

> The focus should not be on what we are wearing…But somehow, they are distracted - using some odd photo and inviting negative comments on that rather than on the content.
>
> – Key informant, governance

Sensationalism and unequal treatment in scandals add another layer of harm. Desk research highlights how gender stereotypes, which associate leadership with agentic traits such as dominance, decisiveness, and assertiveness, are socially coded as masculine, producing a "double bind" for women leaders: they are penalized if they conform to communal or stereotypically feminine behaviours and criticized if they adopt agentic leadership styles.[22] Reflecting this, key informants describe how women leaders are often treated unfairly by the media, with women leaders being more likely than men to be sensationalised and treated as "already guilty" when facing controversy or legal proceedings, with front-page headlines and intrusive photography focusing on their downfall. Key informants reflected on the stress that unfair media treatment had had on them personally, including the harm it had caused their families. They also pointed to the fact that such treatment undermines public trust when parliamentary and judicial reporting lacks balance, right of reply and due process.

> An attack on a woman is an attack on her family, and it can break up families. It can harm; it can be just very destructive.
>
> – Key informant, governance



> Sometimes the way stories were portrayed suggested that someone is already guilty before anything is proven... Experiences like that make me feel the media has to tread cautiously and do its role with dignity and honesty - give the public just enough of what they need to know. Do not paint the stories and lead people to a certain opinion.
>
> – Key informant, governance

[22]Heldman, C., Carroll, S. J., & Olson, S. (2018). Gender and political communication in the twenty-first century. Routledge.

A further issue is the **persistent absence of women as experts and commentators**. Desk research shows that media framing of authority still defaults to male voices, and key informants see this frequently: *"When it comes to the talking heads – the experts and commentators quoted in news stories – most are still men."* They report *"not having enough women sources or experts to call on,"* and at the same time, *"not that many women experts stepping forward,"* resulting in a narrow, male-skewed pool of sources. Initiatives such as Women in Media (WiM) Fiji's 50/50 database are designed to fill this gap by giving journalists an accessible list of credible women economists, environmentalists and other specialists, but informants emphasise that newsrooms must actively choose to use these tools and *"don't just go to women for soft comments."*

> "We don't have that many women experts stepping forward and able to voice their concerns or give their expert opinions on issues. That's a big gap that we keep seeing through WiM Fiji - and it's happening across all the newsrooms."
>
> – Key informant, media

> "When it comes to the talking heads - the experts and commentators quoted in news stories - most are still men. That is a gap that needs to close."
>
> – Key informant, media

> "Don't just go to women for soft comments. Go to the economists. Go to the environmentalists… Why isn't the media covering their voices?"
>
> – Key informant, advocacy

Within Fiji's media sector itself, occupational segregation persists. While representation has improved in recent years, **underrepresentation in senior editorial positions further shapes newsroom culture and story framing**, limiting opportunities for gender-responsive coverage. Key informants note that some continue to face unequal pay and limited leadership opportunities, with women journalists disproportionately assigned to lifestyle and community reporting, while men dominate political and investigative beats, roles more closely linked to editorial authority. Key informants stress that these problems are systemic rather than individual and that stronger training and institutional change are needed to enable more gender-responsive, impartial coverage. Furthermore, desk research reveals that female journalists experience much higher levels of online harassment compared to male journalists. Online harassment contributes to self-censorship and attrition among women journalists, reflecting broader patterns of intimidation faced by women in public life.[23]



[23]UN Women. (2025). Women in public life: Barriers and opportunities in Fiji. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

> Out of the publishers and editors, we only have one woman publisher…Why aren't media organisations putting up women to lead?
>
> – Key informant, governance

> Today I don't blame the journalists. I blame the system. That's why there has to be more training, to get our people to become impartial sharers of the news.
>
> – Key informant, governance

Opportunities:

Despite these challenges, both desk research and interviews underscore that media could be a powerful changemaker for women's leadership. As Fiji prepares for the 2026 General and Local Elections, media's role in shaping perceptions of women's leadership will be crucial.

Balanced, gender-sensitive reporting can normalise women's authority, diversify public images of leadership and inspire younger women to see political and corporate leadership as attainable. By amplifying women's voices and holding institutions to account for gender gaps, media has the potential to be a transformative force to support more equitable leadership in politics and business.

> The media has a key role to play, because for the next generation, this is their life… How can the media shape up to focus on what matters most rather than the noise?
>
> – Key informant, advocacy

To realise this potential, **media organisations need deliberate reforms in content, practice and staffing**. Desk research points to gender-sensitive reporting guidelines – using gender-neutral language, avoiding commentary on irrelevant aspects like clothing, ensuring balanced sourcing, and tracking parity in who is quoted – as key tools.[24] International models such as gender-equal reporting scorecards show how progress can be measured and publicised.[25] Increasing women's representation in editorial leadership and on boards is equally important: fairer appointments and gender-balanced decision-making teams can shift newsroom culture and the kinds of stories that are commissioned, making women's expertise and authority more visible and less "exceptional."[26]

Reflecting this, key informants want **media to move away from soft, superficial and personality-driven coverage to deeper, issue focused reporting** that treats women as changemakers and experts and urges journalists to see themselves as watchdogs and norm-shifters, not just "disseminators of information." Gender-sensitisation for journalists is seen as critical so they "place women as equal to men" and stop asking questions that would never be put to male leaders.

[24]Van der Pas, D. J., & Aalderling, L. (2020). Gender differences in political media coverage: A meta-analysis. Journal of Communication, 70(1), 114–143. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz048

[25]UN Women. (2025). Women in public life: Barriers and opportunities in Fiji. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

[26]Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. Psychological Review, 109(3), 573–598. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573

> [Journalists should ask themselves] Am I perpetuating discrimination here…am I making it about this person being a woman?...If you wouldn't ask a man that question, then you should not ask a woman that question.
>
> – Key informant, governance

> There has to be a purpose. Why are you telling that story? What is the impact? Can you bring change? …I don't know if journalists think of themselves as changemakers or just as disseminators of information.
>
> – Key informant, governance

Key informants emphasise that these changes must be **backed by clear standards, monitoring and safer digital environments**. They call for media councils, journalism schools and newsrooms to adopt gender-aware training and policies, systematically track how many women appear as experts and "talking heads," and adjust commissioning when coverage skews male. They also highlight the need for robust online safety measures and gender-responsive regulation – including stronger moderation on platforms and organisational responsibility for protecting female journalists – so that media visibility does not expose women to unchecked abuse that deters them from public life. More broadly, women leaders frame media reform as part of a wider shift from token visibility to shared power. They want intentional, data-driven action – such as equal-opportunity policies, gender-responsive budgeting for training.

> Newsroom leaders have to be really intentional…monitor every day how many women are the expert voice.
>
> – Key informant, media

Beyond media reforms, key informants stress that **supporting women's leadership in Fiji demands structural change**, not just "adding more women." They call for deliberate measures to reach at least 50% women in leadership across politics, business, civil society and media, including gender-conscious selection, equal-opportunity frameworks (fair promotion, equal pay, flexible work and childcare) and, in some areas, temporary special measures and quotas. Some argue that when women and men have equal credentials, selectors should "choose a woman… to bring that balance," while others worry about the stigma of "back door" reserved seats and emphasise changing women's own confidence and ambitions. Across these perspectives, there is a shared push for gender-responsive budgeting for training and campaigns, community-level initiatives to build a pipeline of female leaders, and embedding gender equality, PSEAH and anti-discrimination standards into laws, codes of conduct and everyday recruitment—"in any policy we are making, we have to have a gender lens."

> We can have a national action plan on gender empowerment, we can sign conventions, we can make it law - but if we don't apply that to standards of leadership recruitment, it just remains on paper.
>
> – Key informant, governance

> Within organisations, the most urgent things are creating fair and clear promotion systems, offering flexible working hours, and providing equal pay where it is possible to do so. Women should not have to fight harder than men for recognition that their competence already justifies.
>
> – Key informant, media

> What we can do — and what we need more support to do — is organise activities that help women build their skills, their confidence, and their professional value. If we can raise the quality and visibility of women journalists, that case for better pay becomes harder to ignore.
>
> – Key informant, media

Finally, they emphasise **broad public education** - through schools, faith communities, NGOs and media - on the value and realities of women's leadership, combined with mentoring and skills training to build women's confidence to step forward.

> Parliament is ready for more women…we really have to build the confidence of women to put their hand up.
>
> – Key informant, governance

Building women's confidence and agency through mentoring, skills training and early political engagement is seen as essential. Together, these media and institutional changes are presented as necessary to move from individual resilience to systems that consistently protect and amplify women's voices.

9. Conclusions

The evidence from this study indicates that women's underrepresentation in leadership in Fiji is not the result of a shortage of talent, interest or commitment. Women leaders interviewed for this report are highly qualified, values-driven and deeply motivated by a sense of duty to "be part of the change." Yet they operate within systems that still presume male authority, reward uninterrupted work patterns that ignore care responsibilities, and tolerate high levels of gendered abuse and scrutiny. These dynamics are mirrored and magnified in media coverage, where women are less visible as decision-makers and experts, more likely to be judged on their looks and private lives, and more harshly sensationalised when controversy arises. The gap between Fiji's progressive laws and policies and the lived realities described by women leaders underscores the limits of gender-neutral or "on paper" approaches to equality.

At the same time, the report highlights that the conditions for change already exist. Civil society organisations, women's networks, and some public and private institutions are actively building leadership pipelines, mentoring younger women, and experimenting with gender-responsive policies. Families, faith communities and male allies provide crucial, if often undervalued, foundations of support. Fiji's relatively strong media infrastructure and its current political moment - approaching the 2026 elections - offer a strategic window to reframe public narratives about who can lead and what leadership looks like. Realising this potential, however, requires deliberate action: to adopt and enforce gender-conscious recruitment and promotion practices; to consider temporary special measures where gaps are entrenched; to make workplaces and digital spaces safer; and to transform media practice so that women's authority is normalised rather than treated as exceptional. Moving from individual resilience to systemic protection and amplification of women's voices is not only a matter of fairness, it is central to achieving more responsive, legitimate and inclusive governance in Fiji.

Without intentional, sustained action, current patterns, which reflect declining women's representation in Parliament, persistent bias in corporate leadership, and hostile online environments, could become further entrenched. The tools to change course are clear and grounded in both global evidence and local experience: coordinated policy reform, accountable institutions, reformed media practices, and a societal commitment to valuing women's leadership.

10. Recommendations

Media outlets in Fiji have significant power to either reinforce or disrupt gender inequality in leadership. The literature and interviews with women leaders point to five main areas where media organisations can act: newsroom leadership and staffing; editorial policies and practices; sourcing and expert representation; safety and wellbeing; and monitoring and accountability.

Strengthen women's leadership and participation inside media organisations. Support editors and managers to embed gender equity within the organisation. Invest in leadership development and mentoring programmes for women. Alongside this, adopt transparent promotion criteria and use gender-conscious selection to proactively promote women into senior editorial and management roles with clear targets to achieving gender-equality

Adopt and enforce gender-sensitive editorial standards. Equip journalists and editors with practical techniques to avoid bias and focus on substance. Shift coverage of women from personal to professional, guided by written gender-sensitive reporting guidelines and regular training on bias, ethics and issue-focused questioning. Introduce internal checks to avoid sensationalism and gendered double standards, especially in scandals and court reporting.

Normalise women as experts and hard-news sources. Increase the number and visibility of women as authoritative voices across all beats. Set sourcing targets and use tools like WiM Fiji's 50/50 expert database so women are routinely quoted across all beats. Regularly profile women in non-traditional and senior roles, placing these stories prominently.

Ensure safe, supportive workplaces and digital safety. Help media staff recognise, report and manage online abuse, and clarify organisational responsibilities. Implement strong anti-harassment policies with clear procedures and treat abuse from external actors as an organisational issue. Establish protocols and training on online safety, AI-enabled abuse and digital resilience, with concrete support for affected staff.

Monitor and act on gender data. Collect sex-disaggregated data on staffing, pay, promotion and content, and use simple scorecards and audits to identify gaps and drive change. Engage with independent observatories and regulators to benchmark and publicly track progress.

Collaborate for sector-wide change. Partner with women's organisations and training providers to co-design training, share expert databases and run joint campaigns. Develop shared industry standards on gender-sensitive reporting and workplace policies and create peer-learning spaces across outlets.

Embed a change-driven editorial ethos. Encourage journalists to see themselves as changemakers, asking about impact as well as events, and to challenge rather than reproduce patriarchal norms. Apply equal seriousness, scrutiny and respect to female and male leaders alike.



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