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Women in the House (of Parliament) in Fiji: What's Gender Got to Do with It?

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ABSTRACT Women in Fiji have made steady, albeit slow, progress in terms of parliamentary representation, with women now holding 14% of seats in the lower house of parliament. Some of the progress has occurred as a result of improvements associated with increased socio-economic development, such as education, female employment and incremental changes in women's standing in Fiji society. Much of this change, however, has been due to women's movements and civil society activism becoming more astute to concerns of gender equality and lobbying for women's political participation. In a country that witnessed four political coups, women have had to create their own path into the public sphere. Despite progress, with an increasing number of women in the 2014 parliament, patriarchy is still a major force hindering women's political advancement in Fiji. This paper argues that a combination of cultural stereotyping and persistent gendered norms contribute to masculinisation of the political realm and eulogise women's role in the private sphere. But gender intersecting with ethnicity, age and class create differential levels of political agency for different groups of women in Fiji.

KEY WORDS: Fiji, women, gender, political participation, elections

Introduction

As of 2014, women hold only 22% of parliamentary seats globally. This is almost double the rate in 1997, at just 12%, but still far from achieving gender parity of 30% representation in parliament. According to UN Women (2014), there are only 18 women heads of state and government, which is about 10%. However, significant regional and country variations exist, and progress is evident: in the Nordic countries, women hold 42% of parliamentary seats; in Rwanda about 64% and in Andorra, Cuba, Nicaragua, Senegal and Seychelles, South Africa, it is about 40% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). All around the world, increased gender equality is seeing more women entering national politics than 10 years ago.

But parliaments in the South Pacific region have had the worst representation of women in politics in the world. According to the most recent Inter-Parliamentary Union statistics (2014), women in the Pacific region represent only 12.6% of all members elected to parliaments, but this figure includes the parliaments of Australia (at 26%) and New Zealand (at 29.8%). In this context, 17 September marked a historic day for Fiji, when eight women were elected to the 50-seat parliament in the nation's first elections

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since 2006. In one of the best results for women in Fijian politics, eight out of the 50 MPs (16%) elected in the 17 September poll were women, up from 11% after the last election in 2006. Since the election that proportion of women MPs has dropped slightly, to 14%. Fiji now has its first female Speaker of the house, following the lead of the Cook Islands in the 1960s. But while it is symbolic that there are now seven women parliamentarians and the nation's first female Speaker, female candidates in 2014 elections received only 15% of the total tally of 496,364 votes (Chattier, 2014). An increase in female presence in the lower house of parliament suggests changing public perceptions towards women and political leadership.

Women's movements have played a pivotal role in building the necessary momentum and consensus for progressive policy and legal reforms around gender equality in Fiji (George, 2012). Strategies to increase women's participation in politics included not only encouraging voters to support women candidates but also providing support for women candidates who stood for elections. Furthermore, transnational discourses on gender equality and international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provided an impetus for delineating benchmarks for gender equality in Fiji. Although many women continue to struggle with gender-based disadvantages in their daily lives, things have changed for the better and at a pace that would have been unthinkable even two decades ago. For instance, women in Fiji have made unprecedented gains in education and in access to jobs, though women continue to cluster in sectors and occupations characterised as 'female'—many of them lower paying (Narsey, 2007). Moving out of the house and into the workforce appears to have a consciousness-raising effect on women and they are more likely to be seen as men's equals in a socio-political context (Matland, 2005).

Fiji's political landscape, however, is still male-dominated, with most women and men not voting for women. Gendered social norms often reinforce the notion that men are better leaders than women, and this limits women's political aspirations. In this paper, a feminist interpretive approach is used to understand the social construct of gender as a conceptual and empirical category of enquiry (Chattier, 2013). There is much theoretical and practical inconclusiveness as to exactly what constitutes women's empowerment, but plans of action such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), the Pacific Platform for Action and Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development universally stress the need for women's equal participation with men in power and decision-making. This is part of women's fundamental right to participate in political life, and at the core of gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the premise of gender equality assumes women to be a common group participating in the public sphere—economically, politically and culturally—and on an equal footing with men (Chattier, 2013).

Women in Fiji, as elsewhere, are not a homogenous group and there are major differences between them, based on class, race, ethnicity, cultural background and education, which influence their outlook. Here, Young's (1995) theorisation of gender as seriality is salient to understanding women's political activism in Fiji because although women do identify within the common category 'woman', they also align themselves with ethnic, religious and traditional identities (see also Leckie, 2002). Leckie notes that the ascent of women's presence in high-level politics in the 1999 elections was a result of differing paths of women's agency in Fiji. Even a quick glance at the current composition of women parliamentarians shows that women in Fiji still face numerous obstacles

in articulating and shaping their own political candidacy. Here, I explore how historical, cultural and ethnic specificities complicate the gendered understanding of women's political agency in Fiji. In doing so, 'the dilemmas of treating the category "women" either as unified or as infinitely fragmented' (Leckie, 2002, pp. 156–158) will be unpacked to understand better women's political empowerment and their agency. The starting point is to ask what political, social, cultural and economic dynamics obstruct or facilitate pathways to women's political participation.

Theoretical Framework

In my analysis, the social construction of gender is central as both a conceptual and an empirical category (Barker, 2005). As in many countries, men (and women) in Fiji still view men as better political leaders than women (Reddy, 2000; Chatter, 2014;). Strong gender norms about women's roles often lead women to prefer men in leadership positions. The feminist interpretive approach adopted in this study will illuminate the relationship between the conceptual and empirical aspects of gender. Dismantling women's limited voice in politics requires an understanding of social norms about women and men's roles in society. The social construction of gender is, therefore, central to my argument and analysis.

Despite progress with female education, women's increased participation in the labour force and a relatively long period of feminist activism in Fiji, progress in the political domain has been slow. In fact, the number of women candidates has increased over the years, but patriarchy is still entrenched in Fiji society. Men largely dominate the political arena and formulate the rules of the political game. Thus, when women do participate in politics, they tend to do so in small numbers. Not only that, differences among women (as among men) on the basis of class, religion, race, ethnicity and age tend to play out in different ways in the representation of women in the national parliament of Fiji. As Leckie argues (2002, p. 175), women in Fiji do identify within the common category 'woman' but also align with ethnic, religious and traditional identities. These alliances indicate the intersections within which women find themselves sharing commonalities, as in a 'series' rather than a unified activist group (Young, 1995, pp. 210–211). Leckie (2002, p. 158) states that the heterogeneity of other identities, such as class/ideology/status/tradition/age/sexuality/ethnicity/religion, presents strengths and weaknesses for alliances for women in Fiji. Therefore, in understanding contemporary gender relations and women's political empowerment, one needs to contextualise women's multiple identities and their political agency in the specifics of Fiji's history and culture.

Situating Women in Fiji: The Gendered Context

The colonial period had a profound impact on discourses of ideal womanhood in Fiji society. Today, Fiji has a population of about 837,271 people. About 57% of the population is *iTaukei*¹ and 37% Fiji Indians (descendants of Indian workers brought to Fiji during colonisation), and the remaining 6% consists of minority communities, including people of mixed ethnic origin and settlers from various Pacific Island countries, Australia, New Zealand, China and Europe lumped together as 'others' (Fiji Bureau of

Statistics, 2007). As discussed later, the colonial era had significant gendered implications as colonial policies, religion and traditional hierarchies not only constricted the options for most indigenous women but also informed the discourses of ideal Indian womanhood in Fiji.

The situation for women and men in Fiji is not the same, and there are differences with regard to the roles and controls of *iTaukei* versus Indo-Fijian households. But male-dominated hierarchies are common regardless of ethnicity, which has compromised women's roles in Fiji society. Leckie (2000) states that the legacies of colonial practices reinforced ethnic and gender stereotypes through ideology and traditional discourses moulding women's identities in the past. *iTaukei* culture places considerable emphasis on communal values, respect for the authority of chiefs, who are predominantly male, and the precedence of men over women (Asian Development Bank, 2006). Gender dynamics are influenced by these traditional values, which allow women few if any rights to inherit land or formally own property, or take part in public decision-making (Bolabola, 1986; Ravuvu, 1987). Customary clan hierarchies reinforce inheritance of land upon marriage through the male line (McKenzie, 1990). The colonial authorities strengthened chiefly hierarchies and patriarchy by 'endorsing a male perspective of custom, a reflection of colonial stereotypes about women' (Jalal, 1997, p. 83).

Christianity and Christian values crystallised further the 'rightful' roles of women in the domestic sphere of home. When the *Soqosoqo Vakamarama* (SSV) was formed in 1924 as a Methodist organisation, the colonial government used 'native agency' (Lukere, 1997, pp. 149–154; Jolly, 1998) to teach indigenous women how to sew, cook (the European way), learn traditional handicraft, keep homes and gardens clean and bring up healthy families. In post-coup Fiji, SSV played a significant role by emphasising the maintenance of *iTaukei* cultural traditions and crafts, and women's role as wives and mothers (Leckie, 2002, p. 161). Mishra (2012) notes that while women from SSV are still excluded from decision-making processes at the community level they continue to affiliate themselves to political networks led by indigenous men. The tendency to mobilise on the basis of race instead of uniting against traditional chiefly leadership continues to inform Fiji's political landscape and indigenous women's political agency (as discussed later).

On the other hand, Fiji Indian society is culturally more diverse than *iTaukei* society, as Fiji Indians originate from many different parts of the Indian subcontinent and gender relations are influenced by various traditional cultural values (Chatter, 2012). Most belong to various Hindu groups, but there is also a minority of Muslims and Christians of various denominations. During the colonial period, men evaluated women's roles on the plantations in stereotypes and often labelled them 'immoral' and 'socially unredeemable' (Lal, 2004, p. 14; see also Mishra, 2008). The ideal of Indian womanhood was measured against the feminine orientation of *stridharma*, with its emphasis on loyalty, chastity, docility and humility (Kelly, 1991). Lateef (1987) notes how the notions of honour, shame, purity, pollution, chastity, sexual repression and the value of virginity, and *purdah*² played important roles in controlling women and regulating their sexuality. With the establishment of family units after indenture, patriarchal ideology emphasised male authority in decision-making and over property ownership (Carswell, 2003; Chatter, 2008). The post-indenture reforms saw the formation of the Indian Women's Society of Suva (later renamed *Stri Sewa Sabha*) by educated and wealthy middle-class women to alleviate poverty through income-generating activities such as sewing and

cooking (Mishra, 2012). Although economic activity is key to improving women's status, this worked to the detriment of Indian women in the long run by crystallising traditional gender norms of women's domesticated role in the home. Imrana Jalal and Wadan Narsey (Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 1997, pp. 8–9) have labelled this a 'culture of silence' that condemns women's assertiveness as disrespectful towards those with traditional power.

There has, however, been significant progress in the march towards women's rights and gender equality in the last few decades, which has brought about legal reforms to address discrimination against women in Fiji. This promoted women's involvement in political, social and economic activities with a clear acknowledgement that women should now be allowed to transcend the private sphere, as discussed in the next section.

Seizing Windows of Opportunity

The increase in women's political participation in Fiji is influenced by circumstances such as coups, transnational discourses on women's human rights, the activism of women's movements and associated shifts in the socio-economic landscape. While there has been significant progress in the march for women's rights in Fiji, this section will also highlight how race, religion, ethnicity and class identity coexist with gender (or 'intersect'), creating specific effects on women's political agency. As a result, different groups of women in Fiji differ in their needs, experiences and perceptions of social, economic and political reality.

Riding on Transnational Efforts

Transnational efforts have driven the diffusion of gender issues around the globe with policy shifts in favour of women in Fiji. Many of the transnational networks emanate from international women's organisations, the United Nations and international and cooperation agencies that have been repositories of ideas for policy change addressing gender inequality. For instance, CEDAW, other international treaties and regional commitments provided an umbrella framework for ratifying national codes of conduct. Fiji's ratification of CEDAW in 1995 and its constitutional commitment to adhere to the convention were critical for its adoption of a new egalitarian family law in 2003. Further legislation that reflects the Fiji government's commitments to gender equality are the Family Law Act, the Domestic Violence Decree (2009) and the Child Welfare Decree (Ministry for Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation, 2014). Apart from CEDAW, other regional gender-specific dialogues such as the Pacific Platform for Action (1994), Cairns Compact (2009), Beijing, plus 15 reviews of progress for BPA in Pacific Island countries, Pacific reports for tracking progress on MDGs opened political space for Fiji government and stakeholders to raise concerns, generate awareness and momentum, learn about regional experiences, and apply pressure to advance a gender equality agenda at the national level. The women's movement, in particular the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), has been pivotal in lobbying and monitoring the Fiji government's firm commitment to equality of rights and respect of human dignity (see later).

Following the ratification of CEDAW, the government formulated the National Women's Plan of Action, 1999–2008, which focused on five issues to enhance women's

equal participation at all levels of decision-making. This saw a lot more women being appointed at senior management levels in the civil service (currently sitting at 18%) and on statutory boards as well as enabling more women to stand for elections (Reddy, 2000). The representation of women in decision-making bodies continues to be a major challenge in light of the political changes. Past governments had a policy of having at least 30% representation of women, but this has not been achieved. The stereotypical attitudes and practices continue to have a profound impact on formal decision-making where women have not reached parity. These challenges are now being addressed through the implementation of a 10-year Women's Plan of Action (2009–2019), with an acknowledgement of women's rights as human rights. However, these progressive milestones and government's greater attention to women's issues did not happen in a vacuum but were affected by Fiji's political transitions, as discussed below.

Responding to Political Transitions

The political upheavals in Fiji's history were a catalyst for change in the articulation of women's concerns at the national level. Leckie (2000) suggests that while economic pressures and political discrimination in the post-coup period saw an increase in women's subordination across all ethnicities, there were also strong visible actions by women to redress gender inequality concerns at the national level. Women became more proactive through established community structures such as religious groups, women's village committees, service organisations, trade unions and new feminist movements to confront worsening economic realities (see also Leckie, 2002; George, 2012; Mishra, 2012). Other scholars have also highlighted an increase in human rights abuses throughout Fiji, with instances of domestic violence and rape on the rise (De Ishtar, 1994; Teaiwa, 2005).

For many women in Fiji, however, the impact and meaning of the coups varied because of the differences based on ethnicity, class, religion, age and location. The impact of gendered violence was particularly rife for Fiji Indian women, especially after the 1987 and 2000 coups. They suffered the double bind of racial and gender discrimination, which was accentuated by a chilling fear of ethnic violence restricting Indian women's spatial mobility (Leckie, 2002). On the other hand, the post-coup period witnessed more *iTaukei* women moving up the civil service and most non-government organisations promoting (mostly indigenous) women in politics (Reddy, 2000). In fact, the principles of indigenous paramountcy and ethno-nationalist identity further crystallised the ethnic alliances of *iTaukei* women's groups (SSV) and the National Council of Women (NCW) with indigenous political parties, such as the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) party. Reassertion of ethnic politics after the coups in Fiji saw the prominence of more indigenous women's groups than Indian women's groups in the political space. Leckie (2000) argues that these are not easily quantified allegiances, as women sharing such identities may still have diametrically opposed views on the coups. This was evident in the fractures felt by members of FWRM, as indigenous Fijian members struggled to accommodate questions of indigenous political identity with the organisation's firm commitment towards democracy and women's human rights (George, 2012). This brings us to the next section, which situates the critical role played by women's movements in not only trending 'women's rights as human rights' but also providing an enabling political environment for women's representation in parliament.

Pivotal Role of Women's Movements

Earlier scholars have written at great length about the history of women's activism, pathways to the growth of the women's movement in Fiji and the complexities of women organising themselves in the last few decades since the 1980s (see Leckie, 2002; George, 2012; Mishra, 2012). Without getting into the details of these scholarly debates, this section will draw attention to the pivotal role played by the women's movement in becoming a major force for social change in Fiji's history. Certainly trans-national, international and regional discourses on women's human rights have been key factors in enabling women's organisations to create mechanisms and space for the advancement of women's status in Fiji. In particular, women activists or women's movements took the lead in widening the scope of women's participation in public life. For instance, radical women's groups such as Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) and FWRM became pioneers in making the connection between the personal and the political by confronting the realities of women's lives in Fiji.

The two sister organisations, both founded in the 1980s, began confronting Fiji's patriarchal structures using the language of women's human rights. FWCC pioneered what has now become a specific discourse addressing violence against women and helping women to remove themselves from violent situations (Mishra, 2012). On the other hand, FWRM stepped in to fill the vacuum, stimulating national dialogues between women non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the government on women's socio-economic and legal status and issues of women's political participation. FWRM developed a three-pronged mechanism to coordinate their advocacy among civil society, government and women's machinery and the legislative institutions. Examples of the effectiveness of this mechanism are the process FWRM initiated around ratification of CEDAW and also in bringing about other legislative reforms noted earlier. Over the years, both FWCC and FWRM have used mass media (recently social media) to communicate effectively their concerns and highlight topical issues such as rape, sexual harassment, violence against women, and voter awareness campaigns. Furthermore, consciousness-raising has been formalised in their educational and training projects, materials and resources, radio programmes, videos, 'reclaim the night' street march, usually on the International Women's Day, and street theatre in partnership with Women's Action for Change³ (Leckie, 2002).

FWCC, FWRM and similar organisations have also been instrumental in changing attitudes towards women's status in Fiji society and the need to encourage women's political participation. For instance, the post-coup crisis empowered a lot of younger women, with some joining existing women's organisations and others establishing new organisations such as Women's Action for Democracy and Pace and the femLINK Pacific (Mishra, 2012). The Women in Politics (WIP) project implemented by NCW in 1994 saw an increasing number of women standing for local-level (1997) and national elections (1999). Over the years, Fiji's women's movements have actively been involved in political awareness, voter education and awareness training programmes for women voters, and potential conditions. In 2012, femLINK Pacific, FWRM, NCW and *Soqosoqo ni vakamarama* convened the first ever Fiji Women's Forum. This created a platform for increasing women's participation in politics and leadership for 2014 national elections. In June 2014 female representatives from most political parties also participated in campaign training, hosted by Fiji Women's Forum. The workshop

discussed women's issues in politics and, more importantly, how women candidates can better prepare themselves.

Pathways to Change—Women in Education and Paid Employment

There is no clear path to greater gender equality, but the factors discussed above certainly created an enabling environment for shifting attitudes towards women's standing in Fiji society. This saw education levels of all women in Fiji increasing over the past two decades, with achievement of gender parity in primary and secondary education. In 2000, at the age of six, 97.5% of females and 97.6% of males attended school in Fiji. By 2006, the rate had fallen to 91.1% for female enrolment and 91.4% for male enrolment (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2007). In fact, female enrolment is 7% higher than males at ages 23–34, usually the time of fledgling career development when females decide to go back to their studies after marriage and raising children.

Similarly, female labour force participation has also grown over the years, with expanding economic opportunities drawing large numbers of new female workers into the market. The female labour force participation rate (LFPR) increased from 29.1% in 1990 to 39.2% in 2007, whereas for males this rate actually declined from 83.6% in 1990 to 78.8% in 2007 (Fiji Ministry of National Planning, 2010). The gender gap narrowed, with the LFPR increasing for women with some level of education (Narsey, 2007). Poverty is perhaps one of the significant factors that have pushed more women into the labour market, especially with economic restructuring in the late 1980s to 1990s and the demand for female labour (Narsey, 2007). Therefore, it would be a mistake to assume that Fiji women are completely powerless or that they exert no influence on the country's rapidly changing social structures. Women increasingly work in civil service roles, they are active participants in Fiji's civil society, and they are involved in NGOs as well as more traditional community women's groups and church groups. As Leckie (2000) notes, the public sector continues to attract many well-educated women, mostly in nursing, teaching and clerical jobs. Increasing numbers of women are now able to transgress and negotiate traditional gender roles, with achievements in education and employment (Chatter, 2013). However, the post-coup period saw more *iTaukei* women moving up the civil service ladder when race and the protection of indigenous paramouncy were predominant themes.

Standing on Other Women's Shoulders: 2014 Elections

Women have come a long way since Adi Losalini Dovi became the first woman to be nominated as a member of the Legislative Council and then elected to the House of Representatives in 1972. Irene Jai Narayan was well known in the 1970s for her role as the National Federation Party president from 1976 to 1979. She was also one of the first Indian women politicians and a long-serving opposition parliamentarian with NFP, who later joined the Alliance Party and served as the minister for Indian affairs from 1987 to 1992 in the Rabuka-led military regime. Taufa Vakatale was Fiji's first female deputy prime minister from 1997 to 1999 in the Rabuka government. Another prominent female politician, Adi Kuini Speed, was one of five women representing the Great Council of Chiefs and also a former leader of the Fiji Labour Party and Fiji Association Party. Elections since the 1987 coups have seen an increasing presence of women not

only in the lower house but also in the Senate. Adi Samanunu Cakabau, Adi Lagamu, Adi Koila Nailatikau and Adi Laufitu Malani were appointed to the 2001–6 government (see Nicoll, 2007; Siwatibau, 2007). While the post-coup period opened up more avenues for *iTaukei* women in politics, the participation of Indian women in politics has always lagged behind. Jalal (1997) argues that indigenous women have accessed the public realm more successfully than Indian women because of linkages through traditional chiefly power. This trend was obvious in the 2014 elections as well.

In 2014, out of 249 candidates, women made up 17%. There were some 44 aspiring women candidates with 43 from six parties and one independent. Of the 44, the majority were indigenous women, with only 11 Indian women contesting the election. Many of these women represented the ‘old guard’, coming from elite or political families such as Ro Teimumu Kepa, Mere Samisoni, Lavenia Padarath and Adi Sivia Qoro, who are not new to politics. This election also saw a number of women holding leadership roles as presidents or party leaders. These include Ro Teimumu Kepa for the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Linda Tabuya for the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), Tupou Draunidalo for the National Federation Party (NFP) and Lavania Padarath for the Fiji Labour Party (FLP). Jiko Luveni was the president of the ruling FijiFirst Party (FFP), led by Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama.

In terms of voter popularity, Ro Teimumu Kepa was the leading woman candidate, scoring a total of 49,485 votes. She was followed by Tupou Draunidalo of NFP with 2,966 votes, Salote Radrodro of SODELPA with 2,300 votes, and Jiko Luveni of FFP with 2,296 votes. Kepa not only comes from a chiefly family but also was appointed an interim minister of women, culture and social welfare in 2001, which earned her the mandate of Fiji’s indigenous people. This time around, she would have secured a majority of *iTaukei* male votes based on SODELPA’s socially conservative and ethno-nationalist propaganda. On the other hand, Luveni, who had been a minister of women, social welfare and poverty alleviation since 2008, went into the campaign with an established seven-year profile as an advocate for women’s issues. On this account, she would have scored a good number of female votes. An increase in female presence in the lower house of parliament suggests changing public perceptions towards women and political leadership. This concurs with FWRM’s (2014) new study on *Public Perceptions of Women in Leadership*, which reveals changing community attitudes about the role of women in political leadership in Fiji.

Courage to Stand up and Be Counted

Attitudinal change is happening, with strongest support for female leadership among young voters. Roshika Deo was one of the first women to declare her interest to stand for elections as an independent candidate. She created the ‘Be the Change’ political campaign to encourage women and young people to embrace civic action through social media. For her work promoting democratic change, social justice and ending discrimination and violence against women and girls, Deo won the US Secretary of State’s International Women of Courage Award (2014). While Deo polled 1,055 votes, she proved to be more popular than some more seasoned politicians who scored fewer than 1,000 votes. Nonetheless, Fiji’s political landscape is still male-dominated, with the vast majority of men not culturally receptive to women’s leadership. Throughout her campaign, Deo faced vicious verbal attacks for her international profile as a feminist.

Opponents posted photoshopped pictures of her as the fierce *Hindu Goddess Kali*, garlanded with skulls, and called for her to be ‘taken to the cassava patch’—a local euphemism for rape. Roshika’s vocal and forthright demeanour at community gatherings was often viewed negatively as a woman stepping out of her traditional gender role and thus requiring control of her sexuality.

Like almost everywhere else in the world, politics in Fiji is still male-dominated, with men formulating the structures and rules of the political game. Women who enter politics find that the political environment is often unfriendly or even hostile to them. Roshika noted that ‘for a young Indian woman, and that too not being married it’s like they have to penetrate a marble ceiling to enter politics, which is harder or impossible to break due to intersectionalities of gender, ethnicity and age’ (personal communication, December 2014). Therefore, male-style politics may continue to discourage Indian women from entering politics in future elections; while *iTaukei* women’s active participation in community, church groups and other national-level women’s movements may continue to promote their increasing presence in the lower house of parliament.

Conclusion

Women have come a long way in carving their mark in Fijian politics. Every election has provided a critical opportunity to make progress towards increased participation of women as voters and candidates. There is some hope that with eight women inside parliament, women’s perspectives and interests are more likely to be taken into account and their concerns given higher priority. The slogan ‘a woman’s place is in the House of parliament’ offers some promise for greater social and political change in Fiji. Seven women parliamentarians and the nation’s first female Speaker suggest that these women have broken the glass ceiling for women entering politics. But more political commitment is needed in effecting change for the political participation of more women from diverse backgrounds.

Notes

1. The descendants of the early settlers in Fiji are known as *iTaukei* and are the ‘native’ people in Fiji.
2. *Purdah* ideology is embodied in practices of avoidance in interaction with men, although the specification of which men and in which social contexts varies across groups and communities in Fiji Indian society. The rationalisation for this avoidance through veiling is cloaked in terms of *izzat* (family and personal honour), female chastity, modesty and the control of female sexuality.
3. Women’s Action for Change, formed in 1993, uses community theatre (such as drama, song, dance, or storytelling) as an advocacy tool to empower and assist women in Fiji (George, 2012).

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