



Funding Equality: Reimagining Fiji's Political Landscape through Gender-Inclusive Political Party Funding

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Recent reforms in political party funding by Fiji's new coalition government have reignited crucial discussions about the foundations of democratic participation and representation. With increased financial allowances for members of parliament and substantial annual grants for political parties, these reforms are intended to strengthen the structural framework of Fiji's political landscape. However, they glaringly overlook a critical dimension: the promotion of gender diversity in the political arena. The 2022 general elections have highlighted a significant regression, with a decrease in women's representation in parliament and their continued underrepresentation in appointments to statutory boards.

This In Brief argues that the financial reforms, while structurally significant, represent a missed opportunity, in failing to address the underlying gender disparities that inhibit women's political participation. The paper instead proposes targeted reforms that align Fiji's political financing mechanisms with its commitments to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI). By examining effective legislated and non-legislated measures from various global contexts, the paper makes recommendations aimed to bridge the gap between Fiji's democratic aspirations and the lived reality of Fijian women, ensuring a more inclusive political landscape that reflects the diverse makeup of Fijian society.

Women's participation in Fiji elections: 2014–2022

Women in Fiji have had a fluctuating yet persistently low representation in politics. Despite a slight increase in the number and proportion of women candidates between 2014 and 2018 (Baker 2018), the 2022 elections saw a decrease in the success rate of women, with a lower proportion of women elected. This trend highlights persistent challenges for women in achieving equal representation in Fiji's parliament. Implementing specific gender-targeted measures could be a significant step towards ensuring a more balanced and representative political landscape in Fiji.

The shift in political party financing

The introduction of a FJD325,000 annual grant for each political party represented in parliament is a significant shift from Fiji's previous funding allocation model. During the tenure of the FijiFirst government, funding was on a per-member basis, providing FJD15,000 for

each MP. This older system inherently favoured larger parties with greater parliamentary representation, as it directly linked financial support to electoral success.

In contrast, the new funding model offers a uniform grant of FJD325,000 to each party, coupled with a reduced MP-specific tax-free allowance of FJD10,000 per MP, effectively decoupling financial support from the number of parliamentary members. Furthermore, each political party will receive FJD5,000 for every MP, ensuring that the total contribution per MP remains at FJD15,000. This new model ostensibly aims to level the playing field by providing equal foundational funding to all parties represented in parliament, regardless of their size or parliamentary strength. The shift represents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these funds are crucial for the operational viability of political parties and carrying out essential functions of representing constituents. However, while the new funding model equalises the baseline financial resources available to each party, it does not explicitly detail measures to foster greater diversity within political parties, including enhanced representation for women and minorities. This is in contrast with significant legislative and policy reforms in Fiji which embody the nation's dedication to gender equality and the empowerment of marginalised groups. Adopting gender responsive planning and budgeting under the Public Financial Management Improvement Plan illustrates a conscientious effort to weave gender considerations into fiscal policy and governance (MoFSPNDS/MWCSP 2024).

Without targeted provisions or incentives embedded within the funding model, the mere equalisation of party grants does not — and indeed was not intended to — address the structural and systemic barriers that historically disadvantage smaller parties or those more inclined to field diverse candidates.

That is, while the new funding model may help reduce disparities between larger and smaller parties in terms of their basic operational funding, it does not inherently encourage or reward the diversity of candidates within these parties unless specific mechanisms are put in place to achieve these broader social objectives. To genuinely enhance diversity and inclusiveness, additional measures such as earmarked funds for underrepresented groups, or incentives for parties that meet certain diversity benchmarks, would need to be incorporated into the funding scheme.

Structural barriers to women's political participation

Historically, the intersection of socio-economic barriers, entrenched gender norms and the electoral and party systems together have marginalised women from the political domain (Palmieri and Zetlin 2020).

Insights from Julie Ballington and Muriel Kahane's (2014) analysis illustrate how political finance systems often disadvantage women candidates by reinforcing existing socio-economic and cultural barriers. For instance, the high costs associated with campaigning disproportionately impact women, who typically have less access to the financial resources and moneyed networks crucial for political success. These systemic challenges are further exacerbated by cultural norms that restrict women's active participation in politics. In Fiji, these insights are also reflected in a clear misalignment between Fiji's financial reforms and its gender equity goals.

There is a pressing need for a recalibrated approach that aligns Fiji's political funding mechanisms with explicit gender-responsive measures. Such reforms should aim to reduce the financial entry barriers for women and ensure that political party structures support and enhance women's representation in politics, thereby fulfilling Fiji's broader commitments to creating a truly inclusive and representative democratic process. By integrating explicit incentives for gender diversity and providing robust support mechanisms for women candidates, these reforms will bridge the significant gap between the theoretical commitments to gender equality and their practical implementation.

Recognising a missed opportunity: More reform is needed

To bridge the gap between Fiji's financial reforms and its aspirations for a gender-inclusive democracy, a series of targeted measures is essential. Although recent legislation has made strides towards updating Fiji's financial system, it regrettably overlooks a critical chance to introduce gender-targeted measures aligned with Fiji's GESI legal framework. This oversight not only highlights a missed opportunity but also underscores the need for additional reforms that directly address gender inclusivity in politics. Two measures are proposed:

- For political parties that achieve a minimum of 30 per cent women as candidates, the FJD1,000 nomination deposit for these women candidates should be waived.

- Financial Incentives for Diversity: Annual political party grants should be allocated to those demonstrating a commitment to diversity leadership, specifically by ensuring gender diversity in political party executive membership.

Despite steps towards reforming Fiji's political funding structure, the current system fails to address gender disparities, overlooking the demonstrated economic, social and cultural benefits of gender diversity. This paper proposes essential reforms to align Fiji's political finance mechanisms bearing in mind its gender equality and social inclusion goals. By implementing measures such as waiving nomination fees for women and introducing financial incentives for diversity within party leadership, Fiji can better dismantle barriers that prevent women from fully participating in politics. These reforms are vital not only for promoting gender diversity but also for enhancing Fiji's democratic integrity. To ensure the effectiveness of these changes, transparency and accountability in their implementation are essential. Ultimately, by integrating gender considerations into its political funding laws, Fiji can foster a more inclusive and representative democratic environment, setting a strong example for democratic evolution towards inclusivity.

Notes on author

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