

# #NotTheCost

Qualitative Research Report on

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands





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# ABOUT NDI

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National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government.

With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. NDI began working with civil society and women activists in the Pacific Islands in 2015. NDI's programming goal in the Pacific Islands is to support inclusive and citizen-centered governance by advancing domestic election monitoring efforts, strengthening civil society, enhancing government transparency and accountability, and raising awareness on barriers to women's political participation.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Women are historically underrepresented in politics in the Pacific Islands; Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Solomon Islands are no exception. At the same time, women in all three countries experience shocking levels of violence, in the home and in public. The convergence of traditional patriarchal gender stereotypes and societies accustomed to gender-based violence prevents women from claiming their political rights in democratic processes. This assessment builds on and contributes to research and action by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to eliminate violence against women in politics (VAW-P).

In the Pacific Islands, the assessment found that factors that influence and create barriers to women's political participation are socio-cultural and institutional, involving the electoral system and political parties. Many citizens in the region continue to associate politics with men and view political leadership as a masculine trait. Institutional barriers, such as electoral systems and political parties, impact the extent to which women compete in the political arena. Moreover, although women in all three countries have different experiences, levels of success, and come to politics in different ways, they experience violence because of their activism. Most women interviewed for this assessment have experienced, firsthand, or witnessed acts of violence against women engaged in political activities. While physical assault is less common, many politically active women are victims of character assassination and libelous accusations, which tend to be intensely personal and often sexual in nature. Unsurprisingly, in countries where families and communities tolerate and perpetuate gender-based violence, the perpetrators of VAW-P include women, as well as men.

Most participants in the research, including male interviewees, agreed that VAW-P impacts the ambition and overall participation of women in politics. Fear of ostracization or being viewed as a "victim" and a lack of faith in the justice system—fueled by impunity—prevent most women from reporting violence against them. Several female respondents suggested that since violence against women in politics is a large part of their culture, it is an expected price they pay to engage in politics. Although all three countries included in this research have legal provisions outlawing violence against women and many institutions have policies to regulate behavior among members, participants noted that institutional mechanisms to prevent VAW-P are inadequate or not appropriately enforced.

Finally, researchers explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's political participation in the three countries. In the Pacific Islands, health concerns and the pandemic's economic impact have profoundly affected women as they struggle with income loss and food insecurity. Outside of extraordinary election events, in PNG and Solomon Islands, participants reported that where work has slowed down for everyone, women's political activity has also slowed directly impacting advocacy for women's rights at a time when it's critically needed. The assessment confirmed that combating gender-based violence in general and VAW-P, in particular, requires the efforts of a multitude of stakeholders, including election management bodies, political parties, police and security forces, and civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations.

# INTRODUCTION

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The United Nations (UN) defines violence against women (VAW) as “any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”<sup>1</sup> Violence against women in politics (VAW-P) easily falls within this definition. This definition contests customary or common misconceptions that violence against women is strictly physical or sexual violence or contained in the home as a private matter. Around the world, dialogue and actions to address VAW have significantly increased. However, the topic is often taboo and misunderstood in societies where conservative and patriarchal cultures continue to determine gender-based roles and power relationships.

There is also a growing awareness of acts of violence and harassment against women in politics, recognizing the convergence of violence and women’s public participation and how VAW impacts the democratic process. While political violence impacts and can be experienced by both men and women, VAW-P has three particular characteristics: (1) VAW-P targets women because of their gender, (2) VAW-P can be gendered in its form, and (3) its impact is to discourage all women from any political activity. VAW-P impacts the full range of women engaged in political action or activity, such as running as candidates for elected office, participating in political parties, working as election officials, voting, being a civil society activist on political issues, or attending campaign events. VAW-P includes acts of coercion or using force or threats to influence individuals’ participation, which has a more significant impact on women because of their marginalized and vulnerable status in their communities.

Despite efforts to assess violence against women in elections in the Pacific Islands,<sup>2,3</sup> data on VAW-P remains scarce. NDI has therefore prioritized research, dialogue, and action to eliminate VAW in politics in the Pacific Island countries, building on its global #NotTheCost<sup>4</sup> campaign—a call to action to raise awareness to stop violence against women in politics. The campaign’s title reflects the fact that many women consider that harassment, threats, psychological abuse (in-person and online), physical and sexual assault are “the cost of doing politics.” Since 2016, NDI has been working on challenging this claim by raising awareness of the violence that politically active women face, collecting data on it, and building capacity among partners to mitigate its impact and hold the perpetrators to account.

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1 Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 December 2006 (A/RES/61/143) point 3, page 3

2 IFES, *Violence Against Women in Elections in Papua New Guinea: An IFES Assessment*, 2019

3 IFES, *Violence Against Women in Elections in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville: An IFES Assessment*, 2019

4 NDI, *Stopping Violence against Women in Politics, A Call to Action*, 2016





# METHODOLOGY

In addition to a literature review, this assessment uses primary qualitative data collected between October and December 2020. Drawing on a research methodology deployed by the Institute in countries such as Honduras, Iraq, Jordan, Mexico, and Tunisia, the research team adapted the research instruments and participants' specifics to the regional context. The participants' recruitment and data collection was led by local researchers in Fiji, PNG and Solomon Islands, with the support of femLINKpacific.

COVID-19 pandemic precautions posed novel challenges in conducting interviews and collecting qualitative data, leading to methodology adjustments. Due to restrictions on movement and assembly, anticipated focus group discussions were replaced by key informant interviews with stakeholders in Bougainville, Goroka, Honiara, Port Moresby, Suva, and two in diaspora. The interviews were conducted in person and by phone or using video conferencing platforms.

Across the three countries covered in the research, the research team interviewed 29 women engaged in political parties and civil society, including current or former members of parliament of government, former candidates, and political party officeholders. Researchers also interviewed 12 male political party leaders and organizers, academics, and civil society activists.

Given the small number of senior female political activists in all three countries, the information presented in the findings has been anonymized unless details are otherwise in the public domain. The women interviewed were extremely frank with researchers and graciously shared sensitive information; to respect their privacy, interviewees' political affiliation and position are not provided for quotes or specific examples.



# PACIFIC ISLANDS CONTEXT

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women are historically underrepresented in politics in the Pacific Islands; Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands are no exception. The percentage of nationally elected women members of parliament (MPs) in the three countries is abysmally low.<sup>5</sup>

	<b>Fiji (2020)<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>PNG (2017)</b>	<b>Solomon Islands (2020)<sup>7</sup></b>
<b>Number of seats</b>	12/51	0/111	4/50
<b>Representation %</b>	23.5%	0%	8.5%

At least two of the three countries—Fiji and Solomon Islands—have made small gains in the last ten years. In Fiji, five of the seven political parties contesting the 2014 elections had female presidents or leaders, and eight of the 50 seats were won by women under rules established by the new 2013 constitution. The 2014 parliament also saw the first woman Speaker of Parliament in Fiji and only the second female Speaker in the Pacific Islands.<sup>8</sup> The subsequent 2018 elections saw an increase of women in the parliament that placed Fiji among the highest performing countries in the region for women's representation<sup>9</sup> and raised its global ranking to 114.

Until the 2019 elections in Solomon Islands, only four women had ever been elected to the national parliament. In 2019, two women were elected to the 50-seat assembly with additional by-election victories in December 2019 and November 2020. Therefore, the current four female MPs equal the total number of women ever elected to the post-independent Solomon Islands parliaments until 2019.

Papua New Guinea is only one of three countries globally, for which data are available, with no female representation in its legislative branch or parliament.<sup>10</sup> The other two countries are also from the Pacific Islands region—Federated States of Micronesia and Vanuatu—which is indicative of a regional context that is inauspicious to women's political leadership. Since PNG's independence in 1975, only seven women have served as MPs in the national parliament, where women's representation has

5 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments* | Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform

6 Following the resignations of MPs Sitiveni Rabuka of the Social Democratic Party and Vijendra Prakash of Fiji First, Tanya Waqanika and Virendra Lal took their oaths and were sworn in as Members of Parliament

7 Although the last general election in Solomon Islands was held in 2019, the 2020 figure reflects by-election results from December 2019 in the East Makira constituency and November 2020 by-election victory of Ethel Vokia in the constituency of North East Guadalcanal

8 Theconversation.com, *Fiji's Women Speak Up in Growing Numbers Inside Parliament*, Oct. 29, 2014

9 Australian National University, *Women's representation in the 2018 Fiji election*

10 IPU, opus cited.



never exceeded three percent. The last election, in 2017, resulted in losses for the only three incumbent female MPs which saw women entirely shut out of the parliament.<sup>11</sup>

In any country or region, several factors present barriers to women's political participation and their representation in legislative bodies. In the Pacific Islands, barriers include socio-cultural factors, and institutional barriers exist within the electoral system, and political parties.

## Socio-Cultural Factors

The cultures of all three countries differ not only from each other but also within each country characterized by the many linguistic, ethnographic, and vast geographical variations. Nonetheless, significant socio-cultural commonalities create barriers to women's political participation and shape public perceptions of acceptable gender roles in politics. All three countries' political systems are highly personalized and local. Racial or tribal cleavages reinforce allegiance to clans and loyalty or *wantok* (PNG and Solomon Islands) or *kerekere* (Fiji).<sup>12</sup> In all three countries, patriarchal chiefs maintain patronage networks and wield significant influence in local decision-making.

Patriarchal dominance in social and political life—often referred to as “big man”<sup>13</sup> culture in the Pacific Islands—perpetuates negative gender stereotypes and creates barriers to women's full participation in several fields. Many citizens in the region continue to associate politics with men and view political leadership as a masculine trait.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the ‘big man’ system is a hallmark of the Melanesian polity. Participating in politics in the region often involves bargaining and seeking support from clan leaders who control voting blocs. As women are mostly absent from tribal leadership structures, they often lack the resources and networks to negotiate the relationships necessary to be successful. Socio-cultural change requires addressing and changing societal attitudes, commonly held beliefs, and biases. Since changing socio-cultural norms requires long-term strategies by a multitude of activists, strategies, and institutions, system design and institutional reform can also influence the level of women's political participation.

## Institutional Factors

### Electoral systems

The design and implementation of electoral systems have a significant impact on the political participation of women. Several factors of electoral processes influence the participation and the likelihood of success for women candidates, including the design of the system, special measures to guarantee a minimum level of participation, and incentives for political parties to nominate female candidates.

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11 Globalcitizen.org, Papua New Guinea's Parliament Has No Women

12 The Island Sun, Reflecting on the Wantok System after 40 years of community, Jul 12, 2018

13 International Public Policy Association, Big Man and Patronage System: Its Role in the Public Administration of Papua New Guinea, 2017

14 Solomon Times, Attitudes Towards Women's Political Participation in Solomon Islands, Sept 22, 2020

Research shows that women fare better in proportional representation (PR) electoral systems.<sup>15</sup> This conclusion is supported when examining the representation of women in Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands. Each country has different elections systems, and Fiji, despite having no gender quotas,<sup>16</sup> has the highest percentage of women in the national legislature thanks in part to its nation-wide proportional representation system to elect MPs. Solomon Islands has a first-past-the-post (FPTP), single-member constituency electoral system, and PNG voters elect MPs in a majoritarian Limited Preferential Vote (LPV) system.

Quotas, seen as controversial when first introduced 40 years ago, are now widely accepted as advancing the pace of women elected to national legislatures globally. In 2020, at least 78 countries around the world have some form of legislated quotas or reserved seats for women.<sup>17</sup> However, none of the three countries in this research have quotas or reserved seats for women at the national level.<sup>18</sup> Solomon Islands mandates political parties to reserve at least ten percent of its total number of candidates for women. Nonetheless, under the provisions of the Political Parties Integrity Act of 2014, political parties are exempt “where the minimum number of women who have applied or agreed to be nominated as candidates of a political party” is less than ten percent.<sup>19</sup> This provision’s weakness demonstrates the prominence of political parties’ role in advancing women’s political participation.

## Political parties

The correlation between the design of the election system and political parties’ behavior impacts women’s political participation. Since election systems influence and determine how political parties and candidates participate,<sup>20</sup> they also influence these crucial organizations’ relative strengths and weaknesses. Political parties play a critical “gatekeeper” role in electoral politics and can provide space for women’s participation and promotion. This is particularly evident in Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands, where women fare better in the country with cohesive and robust political parties.

Of the three countries, PNG has the weakest political parties, and the electoral system favors independent candidates. In 2017, of the 3,332 candidates for the general election, more than half (1,921) were independent candidates. Only five percent of candidates (167) were women, and none of them was elected. There are, currently, 21 political parties and 14 independents in the 111-seat PNG parliament.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, in the 2018 Fijian general elections, women made up 24 percent of all candidates (56 out of 234) and, of those, 18 percent won seats in the 51-seat parliament. Only three parties hold all the seats in the national Fiji legislature.<sup>22</sup> In the Solomon Islands’ FPTP system, there were 26 female candidates out of 334 and eight percent of them won seats. However, as noted above, two women have since won by-elections, doubling the number of women MPs to four. Political parties represent the best vehicles for driving the change needed to break down barriers women face in politics and public life.

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15 European Parliament, *Impact of Electoral Systems on Female Political Representation*

16 UNDP, *Temporary Special Measures to Increase Women’s Political Participation in the Pacific*

17 International IDEA, *Gender Quotas Database*

18 ANU, *Women’s Representation and the Use of Reserved Seats in Bougainville*

19 Solomon Islands Political Parties Integrity Act 2014 (No. 9 of 2014)

20 ACE Project, *The Effect of Electoral System on Party System*

21 European Union Election Expert Mission To Papua New Guinea

22 ANU, *opus cited*.



## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS (VAW-P)

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To understand the roots of violence against women in politics, it helps to locate them in an overall culture of gender-based violence. As their sisters around the world, women in the Pacific Islands are victims of violence in the home and in public life. Conservative and traditional cultures promote women as submissive to family and tribal decisions. As Human Rights Watch noted in 2017, “Papua New Guinea is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman, with the majority of women experiencing rape or assault in their lifetime.”<sup>23</sup> A United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) regional comparison notes that women in Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands report some of the highest levels of experiences of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the last 12 months.<sup>24</sup> Gender-based violence is, perhaps, the one area in life where the three countries’ experiences are similar and common. An inadequate, gender-insensitive and under-funded justice system to hold perpetrators of violence against women to account creates a system of impunity where unequal power relations remain ingrained in social norms and belief structures.<sup>25,26,27</sup>

Studies from all three countries depict shocking levels of intimate partner violence, in addition to high rates of non-partner violence. In Fiji, 72 percent of ever-partnered women surveyed by the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre reported experiencing physical, sexual or emotional violence from their husbands or partners in their lifetime; many suffer from all three forms of abuse simultaneously.<sup>28</sup> In Solomon Islands, 64 percent of ever-partnered women report the same levels of violence by intimate partners,<sup>29</sup> and in PNG, the number is 68 percent.<sup>30</sup>

The desk research reveals that much of the violence against women in the Pacific Islands occurs within families, maintaining a complex web of control, intimidation, and humiliation. Victims of violence seldom report incidents of violence, knowing that the police and courts rarely investigate or prosecute incidents and believing that to report would only bring further shame onto the victim, her family, and her community. A socio-cultural environment inured to various forms of violence against women has crucial repercussions for women’s participation in public life, particularly politics and elections. As voters, women are coerced and intimidated to make choices dictated by their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Threats of divorce, public shaming, or physical violence prevent women from making informed and independent political choices. As candidates, women face public derision, threats, and pressure to withdraw from electoral contests.

All too often, police are not the solution but rather the perpetrators of violence against women, as noted by one police commander in PNG who admitted, “I can honestly say that this practice may have been going on for a while.”<sup>31</sup> Civil society actors have lamented not only the lack of support from law enforcement authorities but, moreover, that police officers sometimes push women victims of

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23 Human Rights Watch, Papua New Guinea Country Report, 2017

24 UNFPA, kNOwVAW data regional VAW map, 2019

25 Pacific Women, Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre: Somebody’s Life, everybody’s business!

26 Lowy Institute, Violence against women in PNG: How men are getting away with murder

27 UN Women, Solomon Islands

28 Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, opus cited

29 UN Women, opus cited

30 kNOwVAWdata, opus cited

31 The Guardian, PNG police chief raises fears officers may have been raping women inside station

domestic violence to reconcile with the perpetrators.<sup>32</sup> Despite states' obligations under international human rights law to take adequate action to protect citizens from SGBV and discriminatory conduct, awareness of these obligations remains low, and gender bias and stereotypes are factors that continue to play into judicial sentencing in the Pacific Island Countries.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Fiji Village, Officers trying to reconcile cases of domestic violence is still a concern – Ali, Dec 4, 2020

33 ICAAD, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Pacific Islands. Handbook on Judicial Sentencing Practices, 2018

# KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

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This assessment focuses on women who are active in political parties or civic groups. It does not examine VAW-P directed at voters or election officials. The women interviewed for the assessment were generously frank with their opinions and observations and, at times, shared sensitive personal information to advance researchers' understanding of their experiences of VAW-P. As noted in the methodology section of this report, researchers also interviewed 12 men for a comparative, gender-sensitive view on drivers of violence and potential strategies to overcome it.

## BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Most of the women interviewed for this assessment confirmed that culture and stereotyped gender roles remain substantial barriers to political participation in all three countries. As a female political leader stated, "a woman's place was not to lead." While most participants did not elaborate on the term culture when asked to identify barriers, at least one referred to the "role of mothers in families," and another called out the media as reinforcing gender stereotypes. According to a female political leader, in Fiji, the media, and one newspaper in particular perpetuate a stereotype image of women politicians, "discussing what women MP's wear in parliament, instead of what women MP's are advocating for and push for as representative of the people in parliament."

“*There was gender discrimination and lack of respect coming from the village setting because of the patriarchal culture. Biased and negative public perceptions were also the challenges I encountered.*”

—Female political leader, Fiji

Support from family and the community is an essential factor determining if and how women compete in politics. Tribal and kinship affiliation in villages and communities provides crucial support to breaking cultural barriers on the election trail. Several former candidates also spoke of the valuable backing of husbands who supported their campaigns. One former candidate in PNG noted, "I am from another province, so I do not speak the language. But my husband was really supportive of my decision to contest, and I received great support from his village and community." The same participant also noted that her failure to develop strong networks, particularly with other women, represented a missed opportunity.



*Women find it more difficult to ask for money compared to men, which is central to an individual's fundraising and campaigning.*

—Female Political Leader, Fiji

The absence of women supporting women candidates is a theme raised by participants throughout the interviews. The lack of networks or support makes it difficult for women to independently raise funds for campaigns, particularly in traditional communities where it is disapproved of women asking for money. Male participants overwhelmingly recognized the lack of financial resources as a crucial barrier for women's political participation, too. While this is commendable, it may also indicate that men may be more open to acknowledging external barriers that don't imply a direct responsibility of male elite in creating a permissive environment for women's participation, such as actively denouncing acts of violence.

Male participants also hold mixed views about the roles that women should play in the society, which reflect a tension between more conservative and more progressive currents of thought. One PNG male researcher stated that a small steps approach to pursuing gender equality would be preferable. In his view, "women should not push the agenda for equality too hard. PNG is still developing and culturally gender equality is a very foreign concept, people need time to get used to the idea that women are equal partners, but I think in time we will get there." In contrast, another male researcher encouraged women to be more assertive in their pursuit, "women need to raise their hands and to be interested to participate in politics, they need to start taking ownership of the political issues and interest needs to be raised." Despite a certain sense of openness and sympathy to women's challenges, male leaders remain largely uncommitted to driving structural and behavioral change in their political parties.



*Leaders should be the ones leading as flag bearers and lead in harmony and peace to open the door for progress and prosperity in the light of harmonious coexistence. [We] need effective, dynamic leaders to be able to help grow and advance women in politics.*

—Male political leader, Solomon Islands

Cultural attitudes, lack of support, and meagre financial resources are, however, insignificant roadblocks compared to the alarming levels of violence experienced by women who "dare" attempt to break down the barriers to their participation in public life.





## PATTERNS OF VAW-P

Around the world, verbal attacks against women tend to be personal, to the extreme. Character assassination and libelous accusations are often of a sexual nature. This is no more true than in the Pacific Islands, where women from all three countries interviewed for this research report being the victim of or witnessing psychological violence. Several interviewees reported being victims of violence related to their political activity or activism.



## The case of Lenore Qereqeretabua

Lenore Qereqeretabua is a member of the Fijian parliament, having won a seat in the 2018 elections on behalf of the National Federation Party (NFP). During the campaign, she advocated for women's rights and more women in parliament. She won 1,811 votes, winning the NFP's third seat in parliament in Fiji. In 2020, a teacher, Kishore Kumar, accused Qereqeretabua of participating in a pornographic video. He also claimed he had evidence but never presented it. MP Qereqeretabua filed a report against him to the police, to the Ministry of Education, and the Online Safety Commission. Meanwhile, women's human rights groups have stated that they are disgusted and appalled at the misogynistic attacks made by Kishore Kumar on social media against female members of parliament and have strongly condemned this act of violence and cyber-bullying. The case remains open at the time of writing.<sup>34</sup> The publicity surrounding the case of Ms. Qereqeretabua is unusual in the Pacific Islands. Violence against women in the region goes mostly unreported by the media. Women politicians rarely speak up in public about VAW-P, let alone direct acts of violence against them. Unfortunately, the online accusations of Kumar against Qereqeretabua are not as uncommon as the silence suggests.

Male participants in this research believe that intimidation is a form of psychological violence faced by women in politics. With the rise of social media, several interviewees noted that psychological violence, hate speech, defamation, and attacks against them are online. In small communities, however, defamation—disguised as “gossip”—can be as devastating as online social media attacks. One senior female political leader participating in the research recounted a Facebook posting of a naked picture with her face cropped into the photo. Another female leader from Fiji explained, “[t]here were threats made on social media whereby the posts were insulting and intimidating... Public defamations during elections jeopardize your credibility due to competition or jealousy. There is also a likelihood of tapping communication devices. Moreover, character assassinations lead to mental disturbances and anxiety.”

“*The elderly women of our society were opposed to my intention to contest... They told me that I was too young and inexperienced to be a representative. They also tried to influence voters to not vote for me. This intimidation was disheartening because I think the older, more experienced women, should be able to advise and encourage the younger generation to be politically involved and interested.*

—Female political leader, PNG

<sup>34</sup> The story became viral on Facebook and then was amplified in traditional media. Illustrative sources: <https://www.facebook.com/Baikaicorruption/posts/you-sexist-knob-u-didnt-say-a-word-about-melis-multiple-videos-evidence-yet-u-ac/3381812611887868/> and <https://fjijun.com.fj/2020/10/26/code-of-conduct-now-in-question/>



More than one interviewee stated that they experienced physical assaults, including punching, hitting, and “being beaten up.” A female leader in Fiji recalled her experience, “[h]e verbally abused me over the phone, telling me ‘Just because you’re in the party, you think you know this and that’ and once asked me, ‘who do you think you are’ and smacked me against a wall in the office; he continued to verbally abuse me at public party events.”

Since a major intention of violence against women is to deter their public engagement, it is unsurprising that most of the attacks against the women politicians in Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands seem to occur during election contests—either when the activist seeks the nomination within her party or during the election campaign itself. At times, violence goes beyond the candidates themselves and affects their staff. One interviewee noted that her campaign workers experienced violence directed towards them because of her candidacy.

## PERPETRATORS

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Almost all female interviewees indicated that they were the direct victims of violence. Former candidates noted that campaign workers or supporters of other candidates, “both men and women” perpetrated violence against them. Information provided by the interviewees on perpetrators of violence confirms that gender-based violence is tolerated and committed by a broad range of community members—including women.

Several participants specifically mentioned women as perpetrators of violence against them. One former candidate in PNG lamented the failure of women who turn on each other, “[t]he intimidation from the older women in my community, many of them discouraged me, saying that I was too young and inexperienced to be a political representative.... Instead of intimidating one another, women should be supporting each other.”

While a few interviewees also reported that family members or relatives committed acts of violence against them because of their political activity, other women reported that perpetrators were of a different tribal, ethnic or linguistic group, reinforcing political cleavages in all three countries.

“*Opposers within my community, especially some of the village chiefs, went to the point of influencing [a family member] to contest against me. They said that I was too young, a woman, and that I was married to someone of a different province and that if I won, I would take all the money to my husband’s people.*”

—Woman political leader, PNG

As the case of Lenore Qereqeretabua suggests, violence against women in politics is taken to new dimensions by increased access to the Internet, easiness to manipulate information and images, and the lack of effective means to limit the propagation of fake news. A woman researcher from PNG explains, “[a] lot of this kind of abuse happens online by trolls. These are politicians and their supporters carrying out the acts.”

## THE CAUSES AND IMPACT OF VAW-P

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As noted earlier, participants largely point to culture and gender stereotypes as factors influencing women’s participation in politics. They also attribute these factors to the motivation or cause of VAW-P, as a female leader in Fiji notes, “[i]t hinges enormously on culture and tradition, especially the entrenched male patriarchy. It also has a lot to do with intimidation and fear-mongering.” These deep beliefs of women’s roles have “been ingrained in the psyche of members of the society” and women also become the agents of perpetuating the same detrimental norms, “I see that women are often our worst enemies; we tend to not support each other, especially in contemporary politics”, noted a female political leader from PNG.

“*People perceive female candidates as not fit for political leadership. Women are not fit to come in as political leadership. Efforts to come in as a woman political leader are very challenging.*”

—Female former candidate, Solomon Islands

VAW-P has a profound impact on the engagement of women in politics. Several male and female interviewees stated that violence impacts women’s political ambitions, participation, and overall expression. Several also noted that violence intends to shame or belittle women to minimize their opportunities in elections. A female political leader in Fiji shared her experience, “[i]t makes you feel vulnerable and alone and drives away supporters as a result of political differences.” Sometimes consequences spread beyond women’s political participation and affect all aspects of their lives, having serious effects on victims, “women are the center of family. Therefore, families get affected as well. Because of character assassinations, women don’t venture into politics” said a political leader in Fiji.

One veteran female politician suggested that VAW-P also makes women fearful of victimization, which influences whether they reach “across the aisle” and cooperate with women from other parties. Her comments imply that people perceive victims to be weak, and cooperating with your opponents is a sign of weakness that women politicians wish to avoid, even at the cost of collaborating to address issues and challenges affecting all of them. The fear of victimization or exposure to a violent political culture is often enough to keep women from participating at all. As one female political leader noted, “women could feel the element of fear in Fiji’s political climate. Fear has a lot to play in terms of suppressing women’s voices and their ability to raise issues.”





*It is obvious that all candidates are vying for the seat; thus, it is anticipated that threats, downplay, and verbal abuse will be experienced. This normally happens when one takes this too personal. Or they have a vested interest that they go out of the normal way of campaigning to lure and convince candidates or to weaken the person, in this instance the current member of parliament and the only female candidate contesting in that constituency.*

—Female political leader, Solomon Islands

While several participants acknowledged the impact of violence is the victimization of women, many rejected this characterization for themselves and, instead, suggested that violence is the “cost of politics.” The notion that one has to toughen up and endure whatever one encounters is shared among many interviewees. A female political leader in Solomon Islands noted that when candidates decide to run for office, they prepare to face such actions, “candidates take it as a stepping stone” because “[violence] is part of the culture, so the campaign team and the victim just leave it like that”.



*I would not say that I was the victim, because I did not respond or react to their intimidation. Also, the community saw that I was vested in community interests and very passionate about change and the future of Bougainville so they supported me and I won despite the threats to violence in the very beginning.*

—Female political leader, PNG



*It made me more determined and strong to fight back. I was determined not to give up and had to battle till the end. It also prepares one to handle a particular situation in a safer and smarter way. After all, intimidation, fear, and dramas are created to place obstacles on the path and change the mindset of others. This situation made me more resilient and more resolved.*

—Female political leader, Fiji

Believing that violence is the cost of participating in politics affects whether women report violence, thus perpetuating a culture of impunity. Almost all the interviewees who discussed violent incidents with researchers, for this assessment, chose not to report the episodes or facts to authorities or officials in their parties or organizations. A female leader in Bougainville shared her way of dealing with the violence suffered due to her political engagement, saying “this is part of politics, so I cannot report this kind of verbal intimidation, but I can grow from it and encourage others in the future.”

## **INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO VAW-P**

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Respondents interviewed for this assessment report that most political parties in the Pacific Islands have guidelines or policies to regulate behavior between members. Several interviewees noted that their parties have guidelines on sexual harassment. Respondents also cited guidelines against threatening members or their families to control their actions, including how they might vote. Except for sexual harassment, it is not clear that party guidelines or rules regulating behavior between members address violence against women.

Participants had mixed opinions on the effectiveness of political party mechanisms that regulate behavior. A few of them had favorable attitudes about the effectiveness of party rules governing behavior, while others, including a political activist in Solomon Islands, were skeptical that existing guidelines protect women against violence, “[the] code of conduct [is]not effective due to a lack of understanding”.



*I think our party’s approach to be united and not engage in intimidation worked well for us because most of our candidates won in their constituencies.*

—Female political leader, PNG



Interviewees were less optimistic about the legal frameworks of all three countries. While each country has variable and general provisions on gender-based violence, most respondents suggested that none of them address violence against women in politics.

For those who did think existing laws were sufficient, they noted that enforcement is weak. One female politician in Fiji indicated that even where policies exist, a culture of victim-shaming and impunity of perpetrators outweigh possible legal protection. In her view, “current HR processes and legal processes are expensive, and further costs the victim in that they are at risk of being maligned, defamed, and therefore have not been sufficient in penalizing perpetrators, or even deter perpetrators from continuing violent acts against women in politics. Current efforts by stakeholders have not been enough, and therefore violence against women whether in politics or not need to be addressed in the family, and not just by feminist NGOs or government policy.”

“*The law needs to be specific, the Family Protection Act is too broad. Need more awareness and enforcement in the Family Protection Act.*”

—Female CSO leader, Solomon Islands

Respondents agreed that various stakeholders are responsible for combating VAW-P, including election management bodies, political parties, police and security forces, and civil society organizations, particularly women’s organizations, but more needs to be done, according to a former candidate in PNG, who explained, “I am not really aware of any laws that specifically protect women in instances of violence during elections, but policing must be improved and increased during elections.”

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has extensively affected women’s lives regarding work, family responsibilities and increased vulnerability to violence. All three countries participating in this research put in place state of emergency or national disaster legislation which included movement and public assembly restrictions. Research participants appreciate that the Pacific Islands health concerns and the pandemic’s economic impact have had profound effects on women as they struggle with income loss and food insecurity. As a female leader in Solomon Islands noted, “[w]omen participate less in politics during this pandemic as their focus is more on their family, providing the care and support the family basically needs to survive. So the focus is on gardening, looking for ways to generate income to support their children in school, as well as involving in church and community programs. The focus is more on their survival with their families.”

Women with disabilities may suffer a compounded effect due to increased exposure to health risks, social marginalization and discrimination, and public policies that are not adapted to their needs. A female public official in PNG spoke from her experience working with people with disabilities during the pandemic, “[w]e have been advocating on the dos and don’ts on COVID-19 through Zoom sessions because of social distancing. For people with disabilities, it is hard to communicate because there are

special needs and assistance needed for us to do so. (...) It has affected women greatly because when if we talk about women’s involvement, women with disability face a lot of discrimination. Because one, we are women and two, we have a disability; prioritizing participation is limited. (...) Women have been participating less in politics because we are into the informal sector making ends meet for our families. The loss of income is one. Observing social distancing has also contributed to that loss of income because women are participating more in the informal sector. Contributing to family has its issues of violence and being homeless. And mostly we fear for our health and safety. (...) Job loss, business closure, state of emergency, and economic stimulus packages impact women. From a disability perspective, when the new normal [started] and the Pandemic Act was made, they did not consult us people with disability. The Act and the Handbook were developed from the perspective of a normal person. So for example, how can a person who has no limbs cough into their elbows or use a hand sanitizer?”

Most participants reported that where work has slowed down for everyone, women’s political activity has also slowed, impacting women leaders’ ability to continue advocating for gender issues. While a few participants mentioned turning to messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Viber or to video conferencing platforms to maintain communication with party membership, some recognize the limitations of online communication. A few interviewees mentioned that female political party members might have shifted their efforts to church or community groups providing relief services to members in need. Interviewees have mixed opinions of how COVID-19 restrictions have affected the normal functioning of society. From the various responses, it appears that COVID-19 mitigation measures in PNG were less uniform around the country and less restrictive than in Fiji or Solomon Islands.

**REASONS WOMEN PARTICIPATE LESS IN POLITICAL ACTIVITIES DURING THIS PANDEMIC**

- FEAR FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY**
- FAMILY CONCERNS, CARETAKING ROLES**
- THE STATE OF EMERGENCY**
- UNCERTAINTY, LACK OF UNDERSTANDING**
- MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS**
- NEED TO PROVIDE FOR FAMILIES**
- SHIFTED TO CHURCH AND COMMUNITY**
- LACK OF INTEREST**
- POLITICS HAS BECOME A SECONDARY PRIORITY**



“ COVID is a global pandemic, but in PNG I observed that restrictions were practiced mostly in Port Moresby. So in other centers, especially where I live, it has not really affected people. So I do not think it affected the performance or participation of women in political activities.

–Female former candidate, PNG

“ Women participate less in political activities due to uncertainty [related to] the State of Emergency that is in place in the country at the moment.

–CSO leader, Solomon Islands

While much political activity has slowed for many women and men, recent elections in Bougainville<sup>35</sup> and by-elections in Solomon Islands and PNG saw campaigning as usual with little observation of physical distancing. A former candidate in Bougainville explained, “[women’s involvement in political activities was] not impacted much, I was able to carry out my (...) awareness and seminar as part of my campaign.”

“ For Solomon Islands everything is normal. Now the by-election is on. Four women are contesting. [It] shows women are fully participating in political activities.

–Female CSO leader, Solomon Islands

Interestingly and contrary to emerging global evidence, none of the participants mention increases in violence against women due to COVID-19 restrictions imposed by governments. While a few respondents refer to concerns for women’s “safety” during the health crisis, it is not clear if these concerns relate to gender-based violence. One possible explanation for the lack of specific references to increased VAW during the pandemic is that the levels of violence are currently so pervasive that respondents do not believe COVID-19 restrictions exacerbate the already intolerable heights of violence.

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35 NDI-supported citizen observers of the August 2020 general elections in Bougainville noted that physical distancing and mask wearing occurred in about half of polling stations visited. Source: BWF, Report on the Observation of the 2020 General Election of the Autonomous Bougainville Government, 2020

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Countries in the Pacific Islands have some of the lowest rates of women's political participation and some of the world's highest levels of gender-based violence. Historically, women have been excluded from political structures and processes, dominated by patriarchal and traditional tribal norms. While the 21st-century political environment is changing in Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands, violence against women continues to be a largely silent plague that affects women's public participation and deprives them of achieving full political rights in society.

The women interviewed for this assessment are exceptions among their compatriots; they challenge cultural norms and endure character assassination, psychological and physical assault to break barriers and contribute to their communities. As such, they deserve support. Support not only in their personal pursuit to exercise their fundamental rights but also to combat and eliminate violence against women.

## **For governments and legislative bodies:**

- Introduce and implement meaningful temporary special measures, such as election quotas or reserved seats for women.
- Review and improve legislation to prevent violence against women.
- Ensure the enforcement of legislation to prevent violence against women, including strengthening police and judicial procedures.
- Ensure consultation with groups broadly representative of women's views in determining legal and administrative measures to address violence against women.

## **For election management bodies:**

- Become active and responsible partners in mitigating VAW-P, including developing awareness among election officials and implementing strategies to combat VAW-P during elections.
- Work with political parties to support codes of conduct on VAW-P during elections.

## **For political parties:**

- Conduct gender audit of political parties, including reviews of intra-party conduct.
- Initiate internal procedures to openly discuss mechanisms to regulate the behavior of members, especially towards female members.
- Consider introducing protections for women politicians who hold public positions on behalf of the party.
- Develop robust mechanisms for reporting and processing complaints and incidents within the party that meet international standards of fairness and transparency, thus creating an atmosphere of trust and encouragement for victims of violence to come forward.



- Consider sanctions and dismissal from party functions for members who engage in any form of harassment, bullying and violence.

### **For women political activists:**

- Provide support and information to members and colleagues who are victims of violence.
- Actively promote women's solidarity and support of women victims of violence.
- Publicly support victims and speak out regarding different forms of violence women face in politics.
- Consider inter-party collaboration to educate and develop strategies to combat VAW-P.

### **For civil society organizations:**

- Conduct additional research on VAW-P in the Pacific Islands region, including on women as voters and election officials.
- Implement and support programs to strengthen women's involvement in political processes.
- Organizations that engage in election observation efforts should incorporate violence against women in election in their methodologies, data collection and reporting.
- Organizations that engage in media monitoring should include the collection and reporting of data related to VAW-P.

### **For media:**

- Nurture positive images of women in politics, abstain from using stereotypes and sexist language.
- Provide special education for journalists covering politics or elections to prepare them to understand and report on incidents or threats of VAW-P.
- Refuse to give an outlet to perpetrators of violence who use the media to perpetuate gender stereotypes and target politically active women.
- Focus attention on gender-based violence in communities and call the police and judiciary to account for any failure to prosecute acts of violence.

