

Genuine empowerment of women

**By National Federation Party Leader
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There are some parties who talk about the empowerment of women. And there are some parties who make it happen.

In May 1996, more than 2000 women marched through the streets of Ba Town in a show of protest against the dramatic increase in violent crimes, particularly violent robberies.

These women were either members of or supported the National Federation Party Women's Movement that was formed only two years before.

While opening the formative meeting of the NFP Women's Movement at Girit Centre, Lautoka, the then NFP and Leader of the Opposition Honourable Jai Ram Reddy urged greater participation of women in politics so that they would be able to shape the future of Fiji.

Within two years the NFP Women's Movement had consolidated itself into a powerful movement, highly capable of influencing change for the betterment of women and girls, both within the NFP and in the society.

Why the success

The demonstrable show of force in Ba over 22 years ago by women was the result of a leadership willing to listen and having a genuine desire to empower women.

It was also a result of concerted efforts to create greater awareness amongst women, of their need not to be bystanders or play second fiddle to men when it came to politics but stand up and be counted as equals and show that they were equally if not more talented.

Historically, the NFP has always encouraged women to participate in politics in any form. Because the NFP knew more than 50 years ago that inclusivity was the only way forward. The participation of women in politics and decision making process is no exception.

And this objective remains true today.

National political participation

While 2014 saw a record number of women take leadership roles – Presidents of all political parties that participated in the 2014 general elections were women and women representation in parliament is significant – it was the NFP that had the first woman legislator.

The late Mrs Irene Jai Narayan was elected to the Legislative Council in 1966 as a Member of NFP. She then served as an NFP Member of Parliament after Independence from 1972 to 1985. She was the NFP President from 1976 to 1979 – another first for Fiji. And yet in another first, Mrs Narayan served as the first woman Opposition Whip in Parliament.

Soon after the 1972 general elections, the first following Fiji's Independence in 1970, Ro Asela Logavatu of Lomanikoro, Rewa became the second prominent woman to enter politics under the NFP banner when she was appointed an NFP Senator along with Mr Jai Ram Reddy and others. Ro Asela was also elected an NFP MP in the general elections of April 1977.

These are no ordinary achievements in an era when women were considered subservient even though they had political rights.

In 1996, the record number of women were elected from the NFP during the municipal elections that year. In the case of Nadi, women elected under NFP's banner have served as either Mayor or Deputy Mayor. The same was in Ba, even in the decade from 2000 to 2009 when the municipal councils were dissolved by the military regime and replaced with Administrators.

In March 2014, the NFP elected its first i-taukei President who was a woman. Indeed Roko Tupou Draunidalo's mother, the late Adi Kuini Vuikaba, was the leader of the NFP/FLP Coalition after the death of her then husband, Dr Timoci Uluivuda Bavadra, deposed together with the coalition government in a military coup in May 1987. She later became one of the two deputy prime ministers in the People's Coalition Government between May 1999 and May 2000.

Militarization

1987 saw the beginning of the coup culture with four military coups from May 1987 to December 2006. The current Fiji First Government is a product of the last coup, similar governments evolving after previous coups.

Unfortunately, the coup culture and the impact of militarisation has had a regressive effect on the genuine participation of women of substance in politics. It restricts them from having a forceful and meaningful role on the national landscape. This is because the system and nature of governance of our nation, including the lack of bipartisanship in parliamentary democracy.

Therefore at the highest level, we as a nation are not encouraging or providing incentives to women to actively participate and influence the decision making process affecting not only women, but the people of Fiji. And we as a nation are not treating women equally.

Such decisions do not encourage women to actively participate in the governance of the nation.

Empowerment of women has been ongoing. However, political empowerment of women has been reduced to tokenism in the last 12 years.

Enabling environment

We firmly believe that unless and until there is a change in the national political landscape, genuine empowerment women and our rising female leaders will remain a mirage.

Women have to take leadership roles and act independently and decisively. And for them to be able to do this, they need an enabling environment.

The NFP is best placed to create such an environment. Our record from the 1960s speaks for itself.

Women retain a forceful and genuine role in NFP, ultimately rising to leadership roles. Two of our Vice-Presidents are women.

The first is Priscilla Singh, who is a Member of the Party's Management Board and the Deputy Chair of the Selection Committee. An NFP Management Board Member for 20 years, she has been a leader of the Women's Movement and a long-serving Suva City Councillor (until the military regime dissolved municipal councils in 2009).

The second is Seni Nabou, who is also a Member of the Management Board and Selection Committee and a trusted advisor to the Party Leadership with wide policy and multi-skilling talents.

Many other women at our branch level swerve with men as the "foot soldiers". We have women candidates who are professionals in their own right.

NFP has shown that it has a formidable track record in promoting and recognising women as being worthy leaders at various levels in the party hierarchy. We have and will always encourage more and more women to become actively involved in the party and in politics so that one day the aim of at least 50% of all positions being held by women – including that of candidates and Members of Parliament – is achieved. It will be a great day when that comes to pass.

Our policy

Our policy is simple – empowerment of women and our young leaders genuinely and not on tokenism.

Only then will our women and young female leaders have a forceful voice.

Empowerment doesn't mean providing our young females tuition-free education, subsidized bus fares for their children or monthly maternity allowances when they are pregnant.

Genuine empowerment is unshackling the restrictive environment so that more and more professional women can enter climb the ladder of political leadership and be recognised as the voices of reason and faces of authority and change.

Only then will women and our young females be empowered for real progress.