

Policy Brief: Advancing Gender Equity in Birth Registration in Fiji

Context and Rationale

Universal and timely birth registration is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of good governance. For Fiji, it secures every citizen's legal identity and access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and social protection. Despite progress, analysis of national Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) data revealed persistent gender and geographic inequities in on-time birth registration, particularly in rural, maritime, and socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

In 2025, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the Fiji Ministry of Justice, through the Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) Office, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS), and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs—with support from Vital Strategies under the Bloomberg Philanthropies Data for Health Initiative Global Grants Programme (GGP)—undertook a multi-staged project to identify and address these gender inequities.

Project Objectives

The project aimed to generate evidence and practical solutions to improve gender-equitable, on-time birth registration across Fiji through four sequential stages:

1. **Data Standardisation:** Standardise “place of birth” and “place of birth registration” fields to allow geographic analysis.
2. **Identification of Priority Areas:** Analyse ten years of national data (2015–2024) to identify civil registry offices with the greatest delays in on-time birth registration.
3. **Stakeholder Consultation:** Understand gender-specific and structural barriers through engagement with civil registrars and CRVS partners.
4. **Targeted Outreach and Awareness:** Implement birth registration awareness campaigns and mobile registration activities in identified priority areas.

Key Findings

- ❖ **Geographic and Gender Disparities:** Analysis of 158,153 birth registration records identified wide variation in registration timeliness across Fiji's registry offices. Ten registry offices—spread across all four Divisions—had the longest average registration delays, often exceeding 600 days between birth and registration. These delays were most pronounced among iTaukei children, single mothers, and younger mothers, reflecting the intersection of gender, social, and geographic barriers that influence access to timely registration. This pattern underscores the need for targeted strategies that specifically address the compounding effects of gender and location on registration outcomes.
- ❖ **Administrative and Operational Barriers:** Delayed issuance or loss of Notification of Birth forms from health facilities remains a major cause of late registration, creating extra costs and administrative burdens for parents. In some cases, families must return to health facilities multiple times to obtain replacement documentation, causing further delays and discouragement. Limited connectivity and high travel costs in remote and outer island communities also impede both families' access to registration services and registry teams' capacity to conduct regular outreach visits. In response to these constraints, some families present unofficial documents for school admissions in place of birth certificates, such as in Lakeba where baptism cards are frequently used.
- ❖ **Social and Cultural Challenges:** Stigma surrounding young and single motherhood, and cultural expectations related to family lineage, have particularly disadvantaged teenage and single mothers, leading to delays in birth registration. In Tailevu and other districts, a growing number of children born outside of marriage are not being recorded in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB).¹ This is often due to uncertainty among mothers about their child's right to registration, especially in

¹ The Vola ni Kawa Bula is the official register of iTaukei landowning units and their members, maintained by the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission.

communities where family acknowledgment and lineage are central to cultural identity. Such social pressures and cultural sensitivities discourage some parents, particularly single mothers, from initiating the registration process.

- ❖ **Promising Practices and Insights from Outreach:** Awareness and outreach programs increased birth registration, showing that accessibility and proximity are key drivers of participation. Coordinating outreach with local events, such as health clinics and community gatherings, greatly improved turnout and public awareness, as these occasions facilitated dispersed populations being present in central locations. Communities also strongly value integrated outreach that offers other civil registration services, such as death registration and marriage certificate issuance, alongside birth registration. This holistic approach allows families to complete multiple administrative tasks at once, increases efficiency, and enhances trust in government services.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen Inter-Agency Coordination

Formalise collaboration between BDM, MHMS, FBoS and iTaukei Affairs through shared planning, data exchange, and joint outreach scheduling to improve efficiency and reduce duplication.

2. Improve Access and Connectivity

Invest in digital and transport infrastructure for remote divisions, and equip mobile teams with offline-capable systems to ensure continuity of registration even in areas with poor network coverage.

3. Enhance Capacity and Community Awareness

Train health facility and registry staff on the timely completion and safeguarding of Notification of Birth forms. Continue gender-sensitive community education that emphasises legal identity and equal rights for all children.

4. Strengthen Data Integrity and Record Management

Implement secure electronic transmission of Notification of Births and establish standardised digital workflows to prevent data loss and improve verification across agencies.

5. Address Social and Cultural Barriers

Engage iTaukei Affairs, community leaders, and faith-based organisations to promote inclusive registration practices, particularly for children born outside marriage, and ensure equitable inclusion in the VKB.

6. Integrate Civil Registration Services During Outreach

Expand outreach activities to include death registration, marriage certificates, and other vital events, allowing families to complete multiple registration tasks simultaneously.

7. Increase Funding and Establish Divisional CRVS Committees

Allocate dedicated funding to strengthen CRVS operations and establish Divisional CRVS Committees to enhance coordination, planning, and monitoring at the divisional level. These committees would provide a structured mechanism for aligning resources, addressing operational challenges, and ensuring consistent implementation of CRVS activities across divisions.

Next Steps

Sustaining recent gains requires continued government commitment, targeted resource allocation, and donor support for digital transformation. Integrating outreach programs into routine CRVS operations, coupled with ongoing monitoring of gender-disaggregated data, will accelerate Fiji's progress toward universal, timely, and equitable birth registration, ensuring that every child's identity is recognised and every life is counted.