



IN BRIEF



WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT BRIEF FOR 14 PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

Photo: UN Women/Trisha Toangwera

1. What's the issue?

Gender norms and inequality have historically played a significant role in disadvantaging women and girls economically. Women [remain excluded](#) from full and equal participation and leadership within the economic sphere.¹ Participating in economic activities enables women and girls to bring positive changes to their own lives, thereby contributing to wider positive change for their families, communities, and nations. Advancing women's economic empowerment is [key to achieving gender equality](#), poverty eradication, and inclusive economic growth, and underpins the success of all the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) assessed in this brief collectively have a [population of 2.6 million](#) dispersed across an [area covering 15% of the Earth's surface](#).² Facing [geographic isolation and resource constraints](#), labour markets across the region [largely consist of informal and subsistence economies](#). Agriculture, tourism, and fishing drive most economic activity, and many countries in the region [rely heavily on development assistance, remittances, and imports](#). Unemployment is high, especially among people aged between 15 and 24.

Gender disparities are evident in [labour force participation, unemployment, wages, and occupation type](#) across the region. Traditional gender norms mean that women and girls [bear disproportionate responsibility for domestic and care work](#), limiting their ability to engage in the paid workforce, which is [predominantly male](#). While men tend to dominate the agriculture industry, [women perform a greater share of shore-based harvesting and processing](#), including [subsistence farming](#). Women are disproportionately engaged in vulnerable employment and impacted by economic hardship, especially if they are experiencing intimate partner violence, the [lifetime prevalence of which is 49% averaged across Pacific Island countries](#), compared to the [global average of 20%](#) in 2021.

Pacific Island countries are [some of the most vulnerable in the world to the impacts of climate change](#), which include resource depletion, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and natural disasters. The economic consequences of climate change and crises like COVID-19 disproportionately impact women and other marginalised groups, whose livelihoods heavily rely on natural resources and who face the greatest barriers to accessing the resources needed to cope with crisis events.

2. Employment indicators

Data comparability and inconsistency

National employment statistics are difficult to compare across countries in the Pacific region due to differences in definitions used by governments. For example, the official labour force is defined as aged 15 to 64 in [Fiji](#), aged 15 to 59 in [Nauru](#), aged 16 and over in [Palau](#), aged 10 and over in [Samoa](#), and aged 15 and over in the [Cook Islands](#), [Kiribati](#), [Tonga](#), [Tokelau](#), and [Tuvalu](#). In addition, while Samoa and Tonga exclude those doing unpaid domestic or family work from labour participation statistics, Tokelau includes them.

In [Samoa](#), women are also likely to identify as 'unemployed' when engaged in unpaid agricultural work, such as subsistence farming, and women farmers are underreported. In [Tonga](#), women perform many informal economic roles which are often excluded from official statistics, including domestic managers and representatives of local communities, such as church groups.

Several countries (the [Cook Islands](#), [Fiji](#), [Niue](#), [Palau](#), [Solomon Islands](#)) include subsistence work as a type of employment. This leads to comparably high labour force participation rates, especially for women (who are [more likely to engage in unpaid subsistence work](#)), even when there are [few opportunities for income-generating employment](#). Finally, data for several countries is either out-of-date or not available.

1 The governments of the countries covered in this brief use different definitions of the labour force (see discussion below), with many including children 15–17 in official statistics. This brief therefore uses the terms 'women' and 'men' to refer to female and male portions of the labour force, with the understanding that these populations often include girls and boys, too.

2 The PICTs assessed are the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

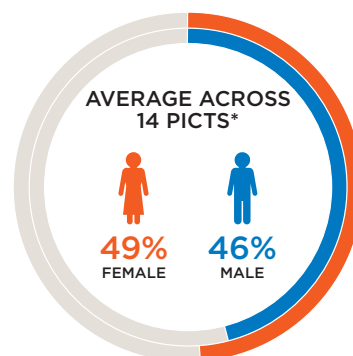
Formal vs. informal labour

The division between formal and informal labour markets in the region varies considerably by country and by gender. According to the [latest data published by the Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#), the countries with the most employed people working in the non-agricultural informal sector are Palau (81.0% in 2014), Nauru (73.7% in 2013), and Tonga (73.6% in 2018). The countries with the least employed people working in the non-agricultural informal sector are Samoa (21.3% in 2017), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (21.5% in 2019), and the Cook Islands (27.7% in 2019).

Non-agricultural informal employment is higher among women than men in all countries assessed in this brief except the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, and Samoa. The greatest gender differences are in Nauru (57.6% of women and 91.2% of men in 2013) and Niue (77.8% of women and 40.9% of men in 2016). There are several issues with SPC data on informal unemployment, however. Data for three countries (the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and Solomon Islands) are from 2013, and no data are available for Tokelau. Further, SPC data only cover non-agricultural informal unemployment, thereby excluding workers in the agricultural sector, many of whom work informally.

Informal Employment in Non-agriculture in PICTs (latest available year)

	Female	Male
Cook Islands (2019)	30%	26%
FSM (2013)	53%	65%
Fiji (2016)	37%	34%
Kiribati (2019)	44%	38%
Nauru (2013)	58%	91%
Niue (2016)	78%	41%
Palau (2014)	79%	85%
RMI (2019)	28%	19%
Samoa (2017)	21%	22%
Solomon Islands (2013)	32%	31%
Tokelau	Data not available	
Tonga (2018)	75%	72%
Tuvalu (2016)	49%	35%
Vanuatu (2019)	55%	45%



* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data
Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#)

While the data landscape is incomplete, existing information shows that, for the Pacific region as a whole, [women engage in informal employment more often than men](#). This means women are [less likely to benefit from the legal and regulatory frameworks of formal employment](#), which can provide benefits, social protections, and workers' representation, leaving them more vulnerable to the negative impacts of frequent natural disasters, climate change, and [crises like the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Women who work in the informal sector and run informal businesses are [unlikely to have insurance, pension schemes, or other forms of protection](#), instead relying on family support or savings. The economic vulnerability of women in the informal sector is further increased by [discriminatory gender norms and laws regarding land ownership and inheritance](#), which result in women having fewer economic assets than men.³

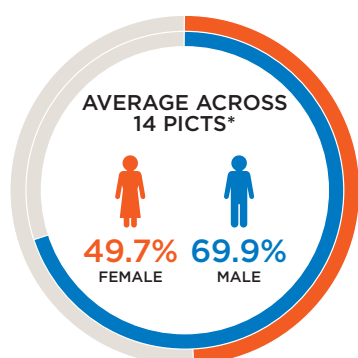
3 For example in [Samoa, Palau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Solomon Islands](#).

Labour force participation

Labour force participation is consistently higher for men than women in the Pacific region. According to the latest national figures, the largest gender gaps are in [Fiji](#) (45.5% of women and 82.6% of men in 2019/2020), [Tuvalu](#) (39.7% of women and 58.5% of men in 2017), and [Tokelau](#) (49.9% of women and 70.0% of men in 2016). Data from Fiji and the [Cook Islands](#) show gender gaps across all age ranges. Men dominate paid work,⁴ and generally have higher employment rates than women.⁵

Labour Force Participation Rate Among Population Age 15+ in PICTs (latest available year)

	Female	Male
Cook Islands (2019)	63.3%	77.8%
FSM (2014)	46.2%	67.8%
Fiji (2020)	45.5%	82.6%
Kiribati (2020)	40.5%	77.8%
Nauru (2019)	52.0%	75.0%
Niue (2017)	60.6%	77.4%
Palau (2015)	74.7%	79.7%
RMI (2019)	27.9%	61.0%
Samoa (2017)	31.5%	55.0%
Solomon Islands (2013)	83.9%	87.9%
Tokelau (2016)	49.9%	70.0%
Tonga (2018)	38.4%	56.2%
Tuvalu (2017)	39.7%	58.5%
Vanuatu (2020)	42.1%	51.5%



* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data

Source: UN Women Gender Equality Briefs

Unemployment

Unemployment data from the Pacific Community (SPC), which are based on [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) definition](#), are the most comparable indicator across countries because some PICTs countries employ non-ILO definition of unemployment for their national data collection. According to the [latest SPC data](#), which exist for 12 of the 14 countries covered in this brief, the average regional unemployment rate is 6.4%. National rates vary widely across the region, ranging from 4.5% in Fiji to 10.8% in Samoa. Unemployment is more prevalent among women than men in 10 countries, with average rates at 7.4% for women and 6.0% for men. Unemployment is more prevalent among men than women in the Cook Islands and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Gender differences vary significantly by country, with the greatest differences recorded in Tuvalu (16.2% female and 4.6% male in 2016), Samoa (21.3% female and 10.6% male in 2017), and the Federated States of Micronesia (13.9% female and 5.4% male in 2014). Female and male unemployment rates differ by less than five percentage points in eight countries. The latest SPC unemployment data based on ILO definitions for Nauru are from 2013 and the latest data for the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau are from 2014.

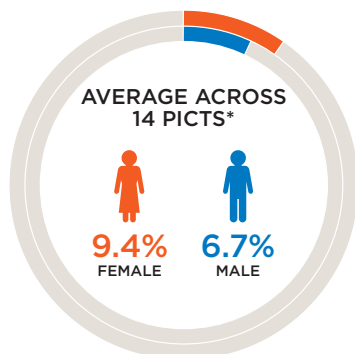
More recent national-level unemployment data are available for some countries. In [Nauru](#), the 2019 Mini Census estimated female unemployment rate at 19% and male unemployment rate at 18%. In [Tuvalu](#), the 2017 Mini Census estimated an unemployment rate of 30.4% for women and 27.2% for men. In [Fiji](#), the unemployment rate was estimated to be 11.7% for women and 5.1% for men in 2019/2020, with higher rates for women in all age groups. However, national unemployment data are difficult to compare across countries due to differences in definitions used by governments. For example, while Tuvalu counts all those in the labour force who are not working as unemployed, Fiji only includes those actively looking for jobs. Niue's [2017 Census](#) recognises that data collection methods it utilized mean that the true extent of unemployment cannot be ascertained. The Census defined a total of 3 people as unemployed, resulting in a total unemployment rate of 0.3%, which is unusually low. Individuals who were undertaking unpaid employment were not asked if they were actively looking for work, and questions relating to unemployment did not sufficiently cater to individuals who intended to start their own business or who were planning to engage in other economic or subsistence activities.

4 For example, see data from [Palau](#), [Solomon Islands](#), and [Tonga](#).

5 For example, see data from [Fiji](#), [RMI](#), and [Samoa](#). Employment rates are not always equivalent to labour force participation rates.

National Unemployment Rate Among Population age 15+ in PICTs (latest available year)

	Female	Male
Cook Islands (2019)	0.9%	1.6%
FSM (2014)	13.9%	5.4%
Fiji (2020)	11.7%	5.1%
Kiribati (2020)	12.4%	10.4%
Nauru (2019)	19.0%	18.0%
Niue (2017)	0.3%	0.2%
Palau (2015)	1.5%	1.8%
RMI (2019)	4.3%	7.3%
Samoa (2018)	21.3%	10.6%
Solomon Islands (2021)	1.1%	1.0%
Tokelau	Data not available	
Tonga (2018)	3.6%	2.6%
Tuvalu (2017)	30.4%	27.2%
Vanuatu (2019)	9.4%	6.7%

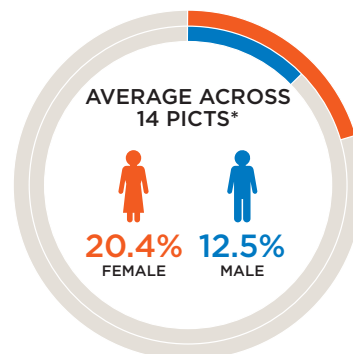


* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data
Source: UN Women Gender Equality Briefs

Within Pacific Island countries, [unemployment is generally higher among youth populations](#). In Tokelau, those aged 15 to 19 were the least represented in both the paid labour force (19.1%) and combined paid and unpaid labour force (18.2%) in 2016. According to the latest national data, higher youth unemployment levels are reported for females than males in the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. In the Cook Islands and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the male figures are higher. Latest youth unemployment data on Palau and Solomon Islands show near gender parity.

Youth Unemployment Rate Among Population Age 15-24 in PICTs (latest available year)

	Female	Male
Cook Islands (2019)	1.6%	4.6%
FSM (2014)	29.9%	10.4%
Fiji (2016)	22.4%	11.9%
Kiribati (2019)	24.6%	20.9%
Nauru (2013)	37.5%	20.9%
Niue	Data not available	
Palau (2015)	4.4%	4.6%
RMI (2019)	14.2%	30.4%
Samoa (2017)	30.0%	13.3%
Solomon Islands (2013)	1.6%	1.1%
Tokelau	Data not available	
Tonga (2018)	13.0%	5.7%
Tuvalu (2016)	45.9%	9.8%
Vanuatu (2019)	20.1%	16.1%



* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data
Source: UN Women Gender Equality Briefs

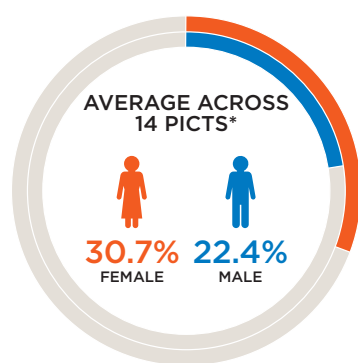
A significant proportion of people aged 15 to 24 in the Pacific are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). In all 13 countries for which NEET rates are available, young women are more likely to be outside education, employment, or training than young men.

The highest female NEET rate is in Kiribati, where 48.9% of female youth and 45.7% of male youth were outside of education, employment, or training in 2020. There are significant gender disparities in NEET rates in the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Nauru, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, and Tuvalu. The lowest national NEET rate is found in Niue, based on the 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HEIS), which found a youth NEET rate of 2.9% (5.9% for women and

girls vs. 0% for men and boys). However, these rates are not comparable with those for other countries employing different definitions.

Youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training, age 15-24 in PICTs (latest available year)

	Female	Male
Cook Islands (2019)	16.9%	8.6%
FSM (2014)	29.1%	18.3%
Fiji (2016)	29.6%	10.8%
Kiribati (2020)	48.9%	45.7%
Nauru (2019)	44.0%	30.0%
Niue (2016)	5.9%	0.0%
Palau (2015)	14.4%	11.1%
RMI (2019)	45.2%	37.1%
Samoa (2017)	41.5%	34.6%
Solomon Islands (2013)	8.7%	3.8%
Tokelau	Data not available	
Tonga (2018)	31.5%	29.0%
Tuvalu (2016)	37.4%	21.7%
Vanuatu (2019)	46.0%	40.2%



* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data
Source: UN Women Gender Equality Briefs

Occupation type

Occupation type varies considerably by gender across the Pacific region. While [men tend to dominate the fishing, agriculture, and forestry industries](#), women are more engaged in shore-based harvesting and processing. There are some exceptions, however: in [Tokelau](#), 42.4% of women engaged in paid roles were estimated to work in fishing and agriculture in 2016, compared to 37.8% of men. In general, women are concentrated

in manufacturing roles, such as making handcrafts, garments, and cigarettes, as evidenced in [Kiribati](#), [Republic of the Marshall Islands](#), [Samoa](#), and [Tonga](#).

Women are more likely than men across the region to be [employed in care-based sectors](#), such as health. This type of work often involves long hours, low pay, contracts that are temporary or without guaranteed hours, and difficult working conditions, including harassment and violence, which has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the [Republic of the Marshall Islands](#), Tokelau, and Tonga suggest that women are over-represented in some professional roles such as teachers, doctors, and finance officers. In 2019, there were [more female than male doctors in Palau](#), although this is an exception. Women also dominate the service sector,⁶ and are more likely than men to work in clerical, sales, administrative, office-related,⁷ and wholesale and retail⁸ roles. Men, meanwhile, are more likely than women to work in trade,⁹ construction, transport, and storage roles.¹⁰ Across the Pacific region, men are more likely than women to hold private sector jobs.¹¹

Subsistence work

Women are [generally more likely to engage in subsistence work](#) across the Pacific region. For example, in [Tonga](#), 83.2% of the population was engaged in subsistence work in 2018, of whom 55.5% were women and 44.5% men. In [Solomon Islands](#), 71% of women and 51% of men were engaged in subsistence agriculture in 2013. In [Vanuatu](#), 9.3% of women and 12.1% of men were engaged in subsistence work in 2019, where it is defined as persons whose main economic activity is working in farming, raising animals, fishing, or making handcraft exclusively for own consumption by the family. In [Fiji](#), however, the same percentage of women and men engaged in subsistence farming in 2019/2020 (12.7%). Sex-disaggregated data on subsistence work is incomplete across the Pacific region.

6 For example in [Tonga](#) and [RMI](#).

7 For example in the [Cook Islands](#), [Tokelau](#), [Samoa](#), [Tonga](#), and [RMI](#).

8 For example in [Tonga](#), [Kiribati](#), and [RMI](#).

9 For example in [Tokelau](#) and [Samoa](#).

10 For example in [Tonga](#) and [RMI](#).

11 For example in [Solomon Islands](#), [Niue](#), and [Tonga](#).

Subsistence work is, by definition, unpaid. The fact that most subsistence workers in the Pacific are women therefore contributes to gender income disparities. Subsistence workers also [do not benefit from pension schemes or other protections provided by employment law](#), leaving workers – most of whom are women – reliant on family support or savings. Women in these situations are particularly vulnerable, as traditional gender norms and laws regarding property and divorce mean that they are less likely to have economic assets to fall back on.¹²

Unpaid domestic and care work

Women do [substantially more unpaid domestic and care work](#) than men across the Pacific region. Data from [Niue](#), the [Republic of the Marshall Islands](#), [Tonga](#), and [Vanuatu](#) show that women are more likely than men to engage in domestic or family work. In [Fiji](#), women spend on average 16 hours per week doing unpaid domestic and care work, while men spend just six hours. In [Nauru](#) ‘taking care of the household or family’ was the main economic activity for 29% of women aged 15 and over in 2019, compared to 7% of men. Within the unpaid workforce in [Tokelau](#), women disproportionately care for children in their own household (80.6%, compared to 52.7% of men in 2016) and other households (43.4%, compared to 26.0% of men in 2016).

Pay inequity and poverty

Within paid work, women generally earn less than men across Pacific region. On average, women earn 29% less than men per month in [Tonga](#) (2018), and 13% less than men in the [Federated States of Micronesia](#) (2013). In [Solomon Islands](#) women earn 12% less than men in the public sector, 62% less than men in the private sector, and 60% less than men in other sectors like church groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (2012). As an exception, the average female salary in [Palau](#) was 5.4% greater than the average male salary in 2018.

Women are more likely than men to be in vulnerable employment and experience economic hardship. Women who experience intimate partner violence [often face](#)

[economic deprivation](#) or neglect by their partners with limited access to income. Discriminatory inheritance rights¹³ as well as norms and legislation regarding access to and control over land,¹⁴ while varied across the region, further limit women’s access to resources.

Barriers to entering the labour force

The main barriers to entering the labour force in the Pacific region include family and domestic responsibilities and studies. In the [Cook Islands](#), 29% of women and 0% of men cited family and domestic responsibilities as the main reasons they were outside of the labour force in 2019. In contrast, the main reason men cited for being outside of employment was study and training (21%). In [Palau’s 2015 Census](#), 35% of women and 41% of men outside the labour force stated they were full-time students. In [Niue](#), women outside the labour force were more likely than men to be students (7.8% vs. 6.9%), homemakers (14.2% vs. 2.9%), or retired/too old to work (14.2% vs. 8.6%) in 2015/2016. In a [study on women’s economic empowerment in Solomon Islands](#) conducted in 2018, women and young women identified unpaid care work as the largest barrier to them engaging in economic activity, which is linked to restrictive gender norms. In [Tuvalu](#), while sex-disaggregated data are not available, 58% of those outside the labour force in 2017 cited ‘full-time home duties’ as their main reason for not being economically active. In [Kiribati](#) and [Nauru](#), social norms expecting women to do the majority of unpaid domestic work limit women’s ability to engage in income-generating activity and increase their risk of experiencing poverty.

A lack of training or technical skills has been [identified as one major barrier to women entering the labour force](#). In [Solomon Islands](#), women often lack the technical skills needed to start and expand businesses, and most women have not received training in economic fields like investment, financial management, and saving. Women’s economic participation and control over productive resources in Solomon Islands is [further limited by lack of education, sociocultural discrimination, and lack of access to key resources like market infrastructure and transport](#). A [United Nations survey conducted in 2019 in Kiribati](#) found that most women producers and traders – most of whom produce or trade handcrafts, garments, smoked fish, cigarettes, or coconut-base products – across all age ranges cited limited access to training and skill

12 See, for example, [Samoa](#), [Palau](#), [Tonga](#), [Tuvalu](#), and [Solomon Islands](#).

13 For example in [Palau](#), [Tonga](#), [Tuvalu](#), and [Vanuatu](#).

14 For example in [Solomon Islands](#).

development as a key obstacle to expanding their businesses. Many lacked the marketing skills and the packaging and labelling knowledge needed to enter international markets. In [Tonga](#), limited education is a key barrier to women diversifying their livelihoods.

3. Social norms

Gender norms within Pacific communities [create social expectations](#) for women to do more unpaid domestic and care work than men. This increased level of domestic responsibility [limits the amount of time women can dedicate to paid employment](#) and advancing their careers relative to men, further increasing earning power inequity. For example, [Samoa gender norms](#) dictate that men earn income and cash ‘outside the home’ while women meet domestic duties ‘inside the home’. In line with this, most men are employees, subsistence workers, or self-employed, while most women are unpaid domestic workers. Similarly, gender roles in [Nauru](#) and [Tonga](#) dictate that women, not men, are primarily responsible for childcare and domestic duties. Women in [Palau](#) are generally perceived to be caregivers and expected to perform this role within families, regardless of their work or education outside of the home. In most families in [Niue](#), women spend more time than men cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the sick, and the elderly, regardless of their non-domestic work. In [Solomon Islands](#), gender norms dictate that women are responsible for unpaid care work and should prioritise this over other economic activity, and that men should not be involved in unpaid work. Gender norms in [Kiribati](#) also expect women to bear the burden of unpaid work. This leads many women to de-prioritise income-generating activity, increasing their risk of poverty, an impact most felt by rural women. Social norms giving women more home-based responsibilities in [Tonga](#) limit women’s abilities to diversify their livelihoods relative to men. According to [Vanuatu’s 2020 Census](#), 66% of males and 70% of females cited domestic work as their main reason for not looking for work in the past week. It is widely recognised in [Palau](#) that women bear care-giving responsibilities for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities or chronic health conditions.

Gender stereotypes also influence the types of paid economic roles undertaken by women and men in the Pacific region. In [Niue](#), men are underrepresented in care-based nursing and teaching roles, which has been linked to gender stereotypes, stigmatisation, and time constraints linked to family and care-giving community duties. In [Solomon Islands](#), there is a social norm that women only have control over some female-dominated economic activities – such as sewing, weaving, and vegetable production. Gender stereotypes in [Tonga](#) regarding ‘suitable’ occupations for women mean that higher levels of education do not always translate to better employment outcomes, with women often holding lower-paid roles.

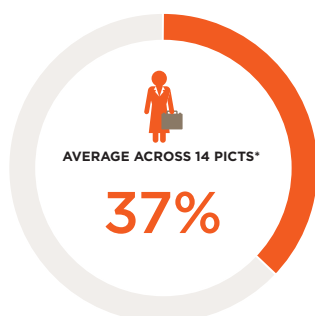
Some evidence suggests that [traditional gender norms and unconscious bias impact women’s earning potential in employment](#). In [Nauru](#), employers reportedly prefer to hire women for lower-paid service and clerical jobs and men for more technical or professional roles, in line with traditional gender roles in employment. This stereotyping in the workplace contributes to gender inequity in earnings.

4. Management and board positions

PICTs have differing definitions of what constitutes a ‘manager’; some national estimates rely on self-reported census data, while others may define managers as employees holding certain roles within the public sector. Internationally comparable data is collected by the ILO. In the Pacific region, women hold, on average, 36% of managerial roles according to the [latest ILO data published by the Pacific Community](#). According to this ILO/SPC data, the countries in which women are most represented among managers are the Cook Islands (60% in 2019), Samoa (43% in 2017), and Tonga (42% in 2018). Women are least represented among managers in the Federated States of Micronesia (20% in 2014) and Solomon Islands (26% in 2013). No data are available for Niue or Tokelau, and data for the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, and Solomon Islands are from 2013–2014.

Managerial Positions Held by Women in PICTs (latest available year)

Cook Islands (2019)	60%
FSM (2014)	20%
Fiji (2016)	39%
Kiribati (2019)	40%
Nauru (2013)	36%
Niue	No data available
Palau (2014)	30%
RMI (2019)	33%
Samoa (2017)	43%
Solomon Islands (2013)	26%
Tokelau	No data available
Tonga (2018)	42%
Tuvalu (2016)	36%
Vanuatu (2019)	37%



* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data

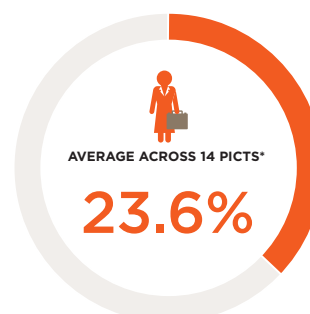
Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#). National estimates may vary.

Women hold 23.6% of board seats and 16.4% of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) roles across 14 PICTs, on average, according to [2021 data from the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative \(PSDI\)](#).¹⁵ These are above the global averages of 16.9% and 4.4%, respectively, but far below gender parity. The highest percentages of female CEOs are in Kiribati (29%), Palau (29%), and Tuvalu (29%). The lowest percentages are in Solomon Islands (7%), Nauru (0%), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (0%). The percentages of women holding board seats range from 38% in Palau to 11% in Solomon Islands.

Data limitations make it difficult to draw region-wide conclusions, however. PSDI data are based on information about 274 organisations with boards operating in the region, 52 of which are based in Papua New Guinea (outside of this study) and none of which are based in Tokelau. Of these, 137 are wholly or majority state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which are among the largest commercial employers in most Pacific Island countries. Family-owned businesses and business activities are excluded from the data. Also excluded is business in the informal sector, which [accounts for up to 81% \(78% of female and 91% of male\) of non-agricultural employment in some countries](#).

Women on the Boards of PICTs Organisations (2021)

Cook Islands	32%
FSM	19%
Fiji	20%
Kiribati	22%
Nauru	12%
Niue	29%
Palau	38%
RMI	25%
Samoa	33%
Solomon Islands	11%
Tokelau	No data available
Tonga	19%
Tuvalu	29%
Vanuatu	18%



* Average calculated as the mean value across countries with available data

Source: [Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative](#)

Across the Pacific region, the organisation type in which women are best represented in senior management is industry associations (53%), or organisations that support businesses and employers in sectors such as chambers of commerce, manufacturing, resources and tourism.¹⁶ This is followed by regional private sector organisations (45%),

15 No data are available for Tokelau. PSDI data were used here as the consistency in data collection methods across countries makes them better for cross-country comparison than national-level data, which vary in data coverage and collection methodology.

16 Senior management positions include CEOs, Chief Financial Officers (CFOs), and Chief Operating Officers (COOs).

other private sector organisations (33%), SOEs (26%), and publicly listed companies (23%), according to the 2021 data from the PSDI.¹⁷

Some national-level data on women managers, CEOs, and board members are available, although most only cover the public sector, or SOEs. Due to differences in collection methods and data dates, these data are not as comparable across countries as the PSDI data above. In the [Cook Islands 2019 Labour Force Survey](#), 59.8% of those who listed their main job as ‘manager’ were female, up from 46.7% in the [2016 Census](#). Overall, 10.9% of the female labour force were ‘managers’ in 2019, compared to 6.3% of the male labour force. In [Kiribati](#), women held 37% of managerial roles in 2015, and men 67%. The proportion of women managers – including politicians, senior government officials, and corporate and general managers in the public and private sectors – was 37% in [Nauru](#) in 2017, and 38% in [Niue](#) in 2017.

Three countries report on the percentage of female Chief Executives, senior officials, or legislators: the [Cook Islands](#) (40.8% in 2018), [Fiji](#) (34% in 2018), and [Palau](#) (28.1% in 2015). In [Tonga](#), women held 43% of CEO roles in 2017. Four countries only report sex-specific CEO data for the public sector, or SOEs. In [Kiribati](#), 15% of public sector CEOs were women in 2017. In [Niue](#), women held 11% of senior management roles in the public sector in 2016. In Samoa, women comprised [50% of public sector CEOs in 2019/2020](#), rising to [67% in 2021](#).

Regarding women on boards, in Vanuatu, women held [22% of private sector board roles in 2015](#), and [7% of SOE board roles in 2018](#). For some countries, data on the percentage of women holding board seats are only available for SOEs: [Fiji](#) (21% in 2020), [Niue](#) (3% in 2016), [Palau](#) (19% in 2017), [Samoa](#) (24% in 2020), [Solomon Islands](#) (15% in 2015), and [Tonga](#) (17% in 2017). In Tokelau, [five out of the 19-person public service senior management team were women in 2016](#) (26%), down from [seven in 2014](#) (37%).

5. Legislative and policy barriers

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination

Legislative and policy protections against sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace are unevenly adopted across the Pacific region. Most of the 14 countries assessed in this brief [do not explicitly ban sexual harassment in formal employment legislation](#), with the exception of the [Cook Islands](#), [Fiji](#), [Tokelau](#), [Samoa](#) and [Tonga](#). Some countries have protections against sexual harassment (e.g., [Solomon Islands](#), Nauru) and sex discrimination (e.g., the [Federated States of Micronesia](#)) that only extend to public sector and civil service employees, and not the rest of the workforce.

Maternity and paternity leave

Fiji is the [only country in the Pacific which specifies maternity and pregnancy as prohibited grounds for discrimination](#). Fiji has the longest national maternity leave provisions in the region, with 98 days of paid leave. The most common length of maternity leave provided in the assessed countries is 12 weeks, which is mandated at full pay to female employees in [Tuvalu](#), and at various levels of reduced pay in [Solomon Islands](#), [Niue](#), and [Vanuatu](#).¹⁸ The [Cook Islands](#), [Samoa](#), and [Tonga](#) allow women six weeks of paid maternity leave,¹⁹ although women in the [Samoan](#) and [Tongan public sectors](#) are entitled to three months of paid leave. Some countries only entitle public sector employees to maternity leave. In the [Federated States of Micronesia](#) and [Nauru](#), women in the public sector are entitled to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave.²⁰ In [Tokelau](#), women in the public sector are entitled to six weeks of paid maternity leave, conditional on one year of service. Kiribati, Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands do not mandate paid maternity leave. Some countries – including the [Cook Islands](#), [Fiji](#), [Niue](#), [Samoa](#), and [Tonga](#) – provide fathers with five days of paid paternity leave.²¹

17 ‘Regional private sector organizations’ include ‘regional organizations with a private sector and/or industry/sectoral mandate such as regional associations for utilities and regional industry associations.’

18 In Niue, maternity leave for women is conditional on one year of service in their current employment.

19 Payment arrangements in Tonga are not guaranteed, and instead negotiated between employees and employers.

20 In Nauru, this is conditional on six months of service.

21 The Cook Islands provides for only two days of paternity leave paid, and three unpaid. Samoa requires fathers to have worked in their current employment for at least 12 months. Payment arrangements for three countries’ paternity leave provisions are unclear. In Tonga, paternity leave provisions apply only to the public sector.

In Fiji in May 2020, this was [shortened to two days](#), applicable 'within the COVID-19 period' and conditional on a year of service in current employment. [Nauru](#) provides fathers in the public service only with two weeks of paid paternity leave, conditional on six months of service.

Early childhood education

All of the countries covered in this report [included early childhood care and education \(ECCE\) in their Education Acts](#) as of 2016 except Tuvalu, and all countries had National ECCE Policies except Palau and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. No data were available for Tokelau. Half of the countries covered in this report had ECCE policies for children as young as 4 years old (the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu), with the rest only providing for older ages. Nauru has a new Zero to Three Development Centre Policy under development.²² It is important to note that ECCE policies are often roadmaps, and do not equate to free or subsidised ECCE delivery. As of 2017, only four countries (the Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands) mandated at least one year of free early childhood education. Despite widespread legislative ECCE provisions, 70% of children in Pacific Island countries aged 3 to 5 did not have access to primary or pre-school education in 2016. Low attendance was partly driven by poor-quality service provision and lack of awareness among parents of the benefits of early learning. Many countries lack the capacity and funding to enforce regulations and ensure ECCE centres meet basic standards.

International Labour Standards

Most of the 14 countries assessed in this brief are [members of the International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#), with the exception of the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and Niue. Tokelau is a dependent territory of New Zealand and all ILO Conventions ratified by New Zealand are in effect within Tokelau. Among members, the signing of ILO International Labour Standards on equality of opportunity and treatment in the workforce varies by country and Convention. Five countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu) have

signed Convention 100 on Equal Remuneration, Convention 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour, Convention 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, and Convention 173 on the Minimum Age. The Cook Islands and Tokelau have also signed Convention 105, and Tokelau has additionally signed Conventions 100 and 111. Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour is signed and in force in all 11 ILO member countries, while Convention 3 on Maternity Protection and Convention 156 on Workers With Family Responsibilities have not yet been signed in any country in the region. Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment is only signed and in force in Fiji. Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu have only signed one ILO Convention (182).

6. Access to financial and other institutions

Women generally have [lower levels of access to financial services](#) than men in the Asia-Pacific region, making it harder for them to start businesses. In [Fiji](#), 57% of women and 69% of men held accounts at financial institutions or mobile-money-service providers in 2017. In [Vanuatu](#), 25% of women and 37% of men held a bank account at a commercial bank in 2016. [Several factors drive this gender gap](#). For example, women in the region often lack traditional forms of collateral needed to establish creditworthiness and secure loans, such as cash, houses, land, and other assets. This is linked to gender inequity in property rights and land ownership. Women are also less likely than men to have or be able to understand the required documentation needed to apply for bank accounts or loans. Further, financial institutions have traditionally been reluctant to view women as a market segment worth pursuing and therefore have not developed tailored products and services for women. The [lack of representation of women in finance sector leadership](#) (with the exception of development banks) compounds this issue.

7. Disaster Resilience

COVID-19

Women and girls have been [disproportionately impacted by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) in the Pacific region. Because women are more likely than men to be employed in informal, low-paying, and precarious work, they are more vulnerable to the short-term and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on Pacific economies. The livelihoods women rely on – carers, farmers, fishers, and market vendors – are largely in the informal sector, where support is limited and provisions for paid leave rarely exist. Rural market vendors in Fiji have reported losing income due to customers fluctuating, competition rising, and costs of sourcing produce increasing. Tourism and related livelihoods dominated by women, including handcrafts and food services, [have been severely impacted by COVID-19 travel and border restrictions](#). In Tuvalu, the income-generating activities most impacted by the pandemic, handcrafts and tourism, are both female-dominated; a [survey conducted by the Tuvalu Ministry of Health, Social Welfare, and Gender Affairs](#) in May 2020 found that 63% of female business owners and 37% of male business owners were impacted by border closures and flight cancellations. In [surveys conducted by Pacific Trade Invest](#) in 2021, 69% of surveyed female-led businesses in Pacific Islands countries reported that their business sales/revenue had significantly declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 32% of male-led businesses.²³

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, [gender norms dictating that women are responsible for caring for family members](#), including ones who become sick, have limited their capacity to engage in economic activities – as well as put them at higher risk of contracting the virus. Reports from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu have documented a rise in women’s unpaid work caring for relatives either returning or migrating from urban areas as a consequence of the pandemic. In the context of school closures due to COVID-19, women’s unpaid domestic responsibilities have also expanded to include

home-schooling, further limiting them economically. Some 60% of women business owners in Fiji reported struggling to balance work and home responsibilities as a result of COVID-19. Girls in the Pacific have also taken on increased domestic caring duties as a result of the pandemic, [impacting their participation and achievement in school, and therefore their future employment prospects](#). Due to these increased domestic responsibilities, women working in the informal sector are struggling more to earn enough money to meet basic needs, and women in the formal sector are at higher risk of pay cuts and layoffs. In some cases, increased duties to care for community members have [forced women out of the formal labour market](#).

Some evidence suggests that the pandemic has shaped gender norms themselves in ways that further disadvantage women economically. Partners of Pacific Women in Tonga [reported](#) that increased time spent at home due to the pandemic has reinforced gender norms, including that women and girls bear more responsibility for domestic care work than men and boys.

Climate Change

Pacific Island countries are [some of the most vulnerable in the world to the impacts of climate change](#), which include resource depletion, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and natural disasters. The [recent eruption](#) of Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha’apai underwater volcano in Tonga on 15 January 2022, one of the largest in the past 30 years, led to a 1.2-metre tsunami wave in the capital Nuku’alofa and tsunami warnings as far away as Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Australia, and New Zealand. The eruption directly impacted 84% of people in Tonga, destroyed or damaged 240 houses, and threatened access to safe water and food security. The majority of workers in the Pacific region are [employed in the sectors most threatened by climate change](#) (agriculture, fishing, and tourism), with the tourism sector already hard-hit due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The economic consequences of climate change in the Pacific [disproportionately impact women and other marginalised groups](#), including youth, people with disabilities, and people who are poor. Women and girls often have livelihoods that depend on natural

²³ Pacific Trade Invest conducted eight waves of surveys in 2021, each including a sample of over 100 businesses across 16 Pacific Islands countries.

resources, particularly as women are over-represented in the informal economy and as subsistence workers in rural areas. Women and girls also have limited access to the resources needed to cope with disaster events, including information, rights, education, employment opportunities, economic assets, and healthcare. Gendered barriers to participating in the paid workforce²⁴ make it more difficult for women to diversify their livelihoods in response to natural disasters and climate change, contributing to gender inequity in climate resilience.

8. Conclusions

Women and girls face significant barriers to participating and leading in the economies of all 14 Pacific Island countries assessed in this brief. Traditional gender norms stipulating that women and girls bear a disproportionate share of domestic and caring responsibilities limit the time that women can spend doing paid work or advancing their careers. Workforce participation is [lower among women than men](#) in the Pacific, and unemployment is higher.

In addition to gender norms, other barriers to women entering the paid workforce include lack of training, technical skills, and access to financial institutions needed to start businesses.²⁵ The latter is [partly driven by unequal property and inheritance rights](#), which result in women having fewer assets to use as collateral to obtain loans.

Women are [more likely to work in the informal sector](#) than men, meaning they have [less access to policy and social protections](#) that come with formal employment. Moreover, legislative and policy protections for women in the workforce are uneven across the region and are far from comprehensive. [Limited provisions for paid maternity](#) and paternity leave and childcare discriminate against female workers,²⁶ particularly those with low incomes.

Within the paid workforce, women are [likely to have lower-paid jobs and earn less than men](#).²⁷ This is driven by a combination of discriminatory gender norms and [‘unconscious bias.’](#) Women are also underrepresented in business leadership, comprising [one third of managers](#) and [13% of CEOs](#), further contributing to pay inequity.

Women, girls, and other marginalised groups are [disproportionately impacted](#) by the economic consequences of climate change and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. These crises have most impacted livelihoods that women disproportionately rely on, while social norms expecting women to perform more care work in affected communities have [further limited women’s ability to dedicate time to income-generating activities](#). Up-to-date data are necessary to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women’s economic empowerment in the Pacific region.

²⁴ See above sections for more detail.

²⁵ See, for example, [Solomon Islands](#).

²⁶ For example, in [Tokelau](#).

²⁷ For example, in [Samoa](#).