



IN BRIEF



# GENDER EQUALITY BRIEF FOR THE COOK ISLANDS



## Women's Human Rights

The [Cook Islands 1964 Constitution](#) affords all individuals equality before the law regardless of individual characteristics such as sex, race, nationality, or religion. The Constitution [does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity](#), although discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited under the [Employment Relations Act 2012](#).

Cook Islands people are citizens of New Zealand. The population are therefore entitled to hold a New Zealand passport and they have the accompanying [freedom to live and work in both New Zealand and Australia](#). This applies to both men and women from the Cook Islands. In the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), the [international migration rate](#) of women in the Cook Islands, at 28.1%, was calculated to be slightly higher than the rate for men, at 27.4%. Under Cook Islands law, [both men and women have equal rights to own, rent, and inherit land](#).

[The age of consent is 16](#). Sexual offences are defined in the [1969 Crimes Act](#). Updates to the Act have been under discussion since 2017, although the new [2017 Crimes Bill](#) has yet to be accepted and passed into law. The 1969 Crimes Act, as well as the proposed 2017 Crimes Bill, defines rape as an offence committed by a man against a woman. The amended 2017 Crimes Bill removed exemptions in the 1969 Crimes Act that permitted marital rape, although, as noted, this has not yet passed into law. Under section 117(5) of the 2017 Bill, an individual is not deemed to have committed an offence of sexual connection with a person under the age of 16 if said individual is married to the child in question.

The [legal marriage age](#) for both men and women to marry in the Cook Islands is 16. A [2015 analysis](#) of data from the 2011 Census found marriage before the age of 20 in the Cook Islands to be uncommon, and the average age of marriage was 32 for both women and men. In the 2011 Census, 30% of women and 21% of men were married or in a de facto relationship before the age of 20, while 15% of the female population and 8% of the male population were married or in a de facto relationship by age 18. Under the [Family Protection Act 2017](#), both financial and non-financial contributions are recognised equally in the allocation of domestic and child support.

## Legal Marriage Age in the Cook Islands

Internationally accepted age:



Cook Islands:



Source: [UNDP](#)

Average marriage age in the Cook Islands



Source: [Cook Islands Government](#)

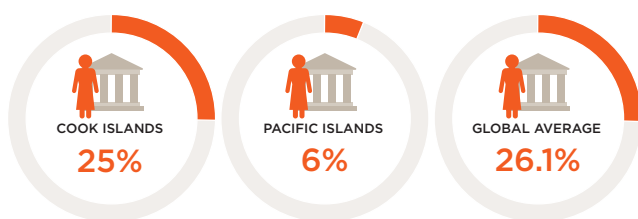
Under the [1969 Crimes Act](#), same-sex sexual contact between adult men and sodomy were criminalised regardless of consent. The Act contained no parallel legislation against same-sex sexual contact between consenting adult women. The draft [2017 Crimes Bill](#) is proposed to remove the offence of sodomy and to express sexual offences in gender neutral terms. The original draft Bill also decriminalised same-sex sexual contact between consenting adult men, although a parliamentary decision in 2019 [voted to reinstate the legislation against same-sex sexual contact](#). Same-sex sexual contact between consenting adult women could therefore [effectively become criminalised](#) if the new Crimes Bill were to be introduced with gender-neutral language. [Same-sex marriage is not recognised in the Cook Islands, and same-sex couples are not permitted to adopt children](#).

## Governance and Participation in Public Life

The Cook Islands' parliament has a single chamber with 24 elected members. [Elections are held every four years](#) with a first-past-the-post electoral system.

During the most recent general election in 2018, [12 of the 58 candidates](#) standing for election were women. Four women were successfully elected, with female candidates therefore experiencing a success rate of 33%, compared to a 43% success rate for male candidates. Following a Court of Appeal decision in December 2018 and by-elections in January 2019, Pacific Women in Politics state that there are six female members of parliament as of March 2022. [Women are therefore reported to hold 25% of parliamentary seats in the Cook Islands](#). This is a significant increase on the rate of female parliamentary representation between 2014 and 2018, which stood at [16.7%](#). Member of Parliament Hon. Vainetutai Rose Toki-Brown is the only female minister of the six-member cabinet.

### Female Representation in National Parliament in the Cook Islands



Source: [Pacific Women in Politics, Inter-Parliamentary Union March 2022](#)

In local governance, four of the 55 Island Government Councillors (7.3%) were women in 2020 according to the [Public Service Commissioner's Annual Report](#). One of the 10 Island Council Mayors (10.0%) and 17.8% of full-time employees on islands administrations were women in 2020.

The [National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment](#), published in 2011, highlighted a number of barriers preventing the increased participation of women in political leadership roles, including a lack of time and financial resources and weak social capital. In addition, women living in the Outer Islands tend

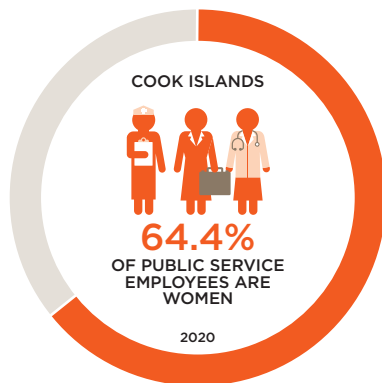
to be pressured by stricter gender roles and have less opportunity to participate in and influence decision-making than those living in Rarotonga. The [Cook Islands Women Parliamentarians Caucus](#), launched in 2018, is a bipartisan group that advocates for gender equality through law-making, budgeting, oversight, and representation.

As noted in the [Alternate Shadow Report](#) to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), produced by the Cook Islands National Council of Women, CEDAW recommendations regarding temporary special measures have not been fully implemented. In response to questions from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 2018, a delegation from the Cook Islands [stated](#) that there was sufficient time before the next election to investigate the use of temporary special measures in the country, however there are no binding temporary measures to promote the participation of women in political leadership roles as of March 2022.

Trends in the gender composition of traditional leadership roles are difficult to precisely ascertain. An Ariki is a paramount chief in the Cook Islands, who represents a specific island or district. The *Are Ariki*, or [House of Arikis](#), is comprised of up to 24 Arikis and makes recommendations to the Legislative Assembly of the Cook Islands on matters involving the welfare of the people. [Both men and women can hold the title of Ariki](#), although [previous analysis](#) has [described](#) these roles as traditionally held by men. The President of the House of Ariki is a prestigious role that has been [held by women several times](#) in recent history, including by Ada Rongomatane Ariki between 2006 and 2008, and Pā Tapaeru Te Ariki Upokotini Marie Ariki from 1994 to 2002. In 2020, [four of the 14 members of the Are Ariki \(28.6%\) were women](#).

According to the [Public Service Commissioner's 2020 Annual Report](#), 64.4% of public service employees were women as of June 2020. Women significantly outnumbered men in the two largest public service departments: the Ministry of Education (77.4% female) and the Ministry of Health (73.3% female).

## Women in Public Service in the Cook Islands



Source: [Public Service Commissioner](#)

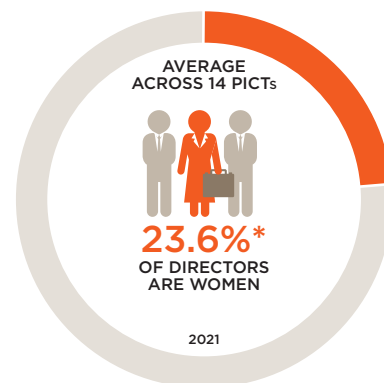
In the education sector, 63% of school principals and 63% of the Ministry of Education senior management are women as of 2021.<sup>1</sup> In the [Cook Islands Police Service](#), approximately 25% of frontline police officers and 40% of the total staff were women as of March 2021. All judges in the Cook Islands come from New Zealand, and sex-disaggregated data on the Cook Islands judiciary is not available. Although the gender composition of Justices of the Peace is not known, [some Justices of the Peace from the Cook Islands are women](#). Women have approximately equal representation to men in public service, although the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative (PSDI) noted in 2021 that [women are overrepresented in clerical and administrative roles](#).

An [analysis](#) of 13 Cook Islands organizations conducted by PSDI in 2021 found that 25% of Board Chairs and 32% of Directors were women. The Board Chairs of two of the seven state-owned-enterprises (28.6%) were female. Women had the highest level of representation as Directors on the boards of state-owned enterprises (38%) and industry associations (32%). By sector, women are most highly represented as Directors in the finance sector (comprising 43% of director positions) and the media and communications sector (40% female representation). Women are less highly represented on boards in the utilities (30%), tourism (23%), and transport and infrastructure (19%) sectors.

## Women on Boards in the Cook Islands



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



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

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

## Education

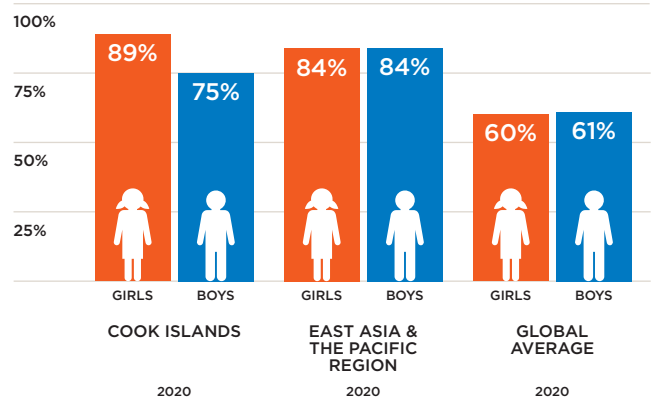
Education is [free and compulsory in the Cook Islands between the ages of 5 and 16](#). As noted in the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), women in the Cook Islands generally complete higher levels of education than their male counterparts.

According to data from the [Ministry of Education](#), the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) for early childhood education was higher for girls (96%) than for boys (79%) in 2020, with no difference between the distribution of male and female early childhood education students across the Rarotonga, Northern Group, and Southern Group islands. According to data from the [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#) the GER for early childhood education was 89% for girls and 75% for boys in 2020.

As of 2020, [0.3% of girls in primary education were at least two years over-age for their current grade](#), which is below the total primary education over-age rate of 0.5%. According to data from the [Ministry of Education](#), the GER was 100% for both boys and girls at the primary education level. In data from the [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), the GER in primary education was 114% for girls and 116% for boys in 2020.

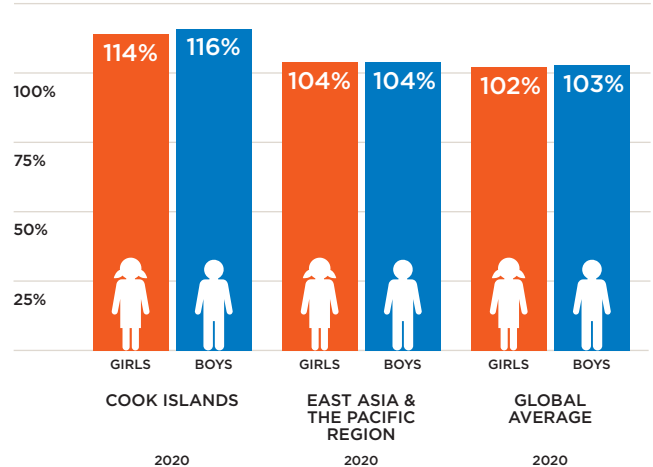
According to Ministry of Education data, the GER for secondary education was 98% for girls and 94% for boys in 2020. In data published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the GER was 99% for both girls and boys in 2020. Between the ages of 14 and 17, the retention rates are higher for girls than boys; in Year 12 – 13, for example, the retention rates for girls and boys are 88% and 72% respectively.<sup>2</sup>

### Early Childhood Education Gross Enrolment Rates in the Cook Islands



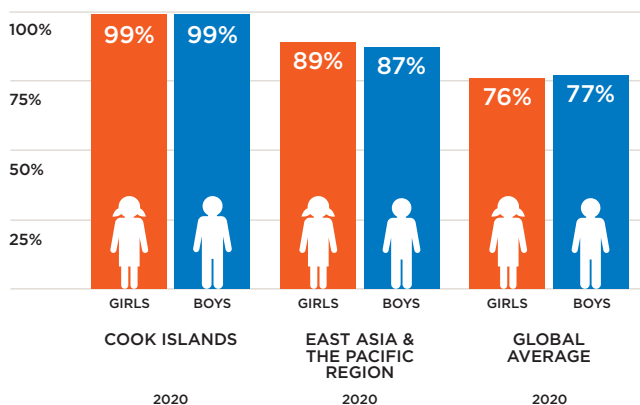
Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#)

### Primary Gross Enrolment Rates in the Cook Islands



Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#)

## Secondary Gross Enrolment Rates in the Cook Islands



Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#)

In a 2021 [report](#) by the Ministry of Education, female students were shown to outperform their male counterparts in primary level numeracy and Maori literacy evaluations.<sup>3</sup> In Year 3 numeracy evaluations, conducted when students are approximately 7 years old, girls outperform boys at the national level: 77% of girls are at or above the expected numeracy level for their age range, compared to 65% of boys. For Maori literacy, measured in Year 4, 65% of girls are at or above the expected level, compared to 52% of boys. A notable anomaly in the data occurs in the Year 3 numeracy achievements in the Northern Group, in which boys outperform girls, with 70% of boys at or above the expected level compared to 50% of girls. No explanation on the reasons is provided in the source.

In the Ministry of Education’s 2021 [report](#), data from secondary level Maori literacy evaluations, conducted in Year 8 when students are approximately 12 years old, shows that 40% of girls and 37% of boys are at or above the expected levels for their age range. Boys slightly outperform girls in the Southern Group, with an achievement rate of 64% for girls and 68% for boys. The opposite pattern is observed in the Northern Group, where girls have an achievement rate of 50% compared to a rate of 30% for boys.

In the most recent national data, from the [2016 Census](#), 20% of women and 15% of men between the ages of 20 and 24 had completed secondary education, while approximately 50% of women and 44% of men had obtained some secondary qualifications. The national

qualification for senior secondary students in Cook Islands is the New Zealand Qualification of National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Of the 500 students who undertook sufficient credits for the NCEA qualification in 2020, 402 achieved one of the three levels of qualification, with a total achievement rate of 86% for female students and 73% for male students.<sup>4</sup>

In the [2016 Census](#), 11% of women and 10% of men in the Cook Islands had tertiary qualifications. Cook Islands men are more likely to hold professional and vocational qualifications, but the rates of certificates, diplomas, and degrees are higher among women (5%), than men (3%). The government scholarship scheme provides support for students undertaking domestic and international studies. [Between 2015 and 2019](#), 75% of the graduates from the scholarship scheme were female. In 2021, there were more female scholarship recipients than male across all four of scholarship types (domestic full scholarship, in-country study grant, international full scholarships, and start packs).<sup>5</sup>

According to the [2016 Census](#), 6.4% of women and 4.7% of men over age 15 had a university degree, while 1.9% of both men and women had a masters or doctorate degree. The [2019 Labour Force Survey](#) found that in total, 14.3% of people in the Cook Islands (15.7% of women and 13.0% of men) had a university level of education, although data also suggests that 56.3% of the tertiary-educated population in the Cook Islands were born overseas.

Further research is required to understand the barriers women face in transitioning from education to employment in the Cook Islands.

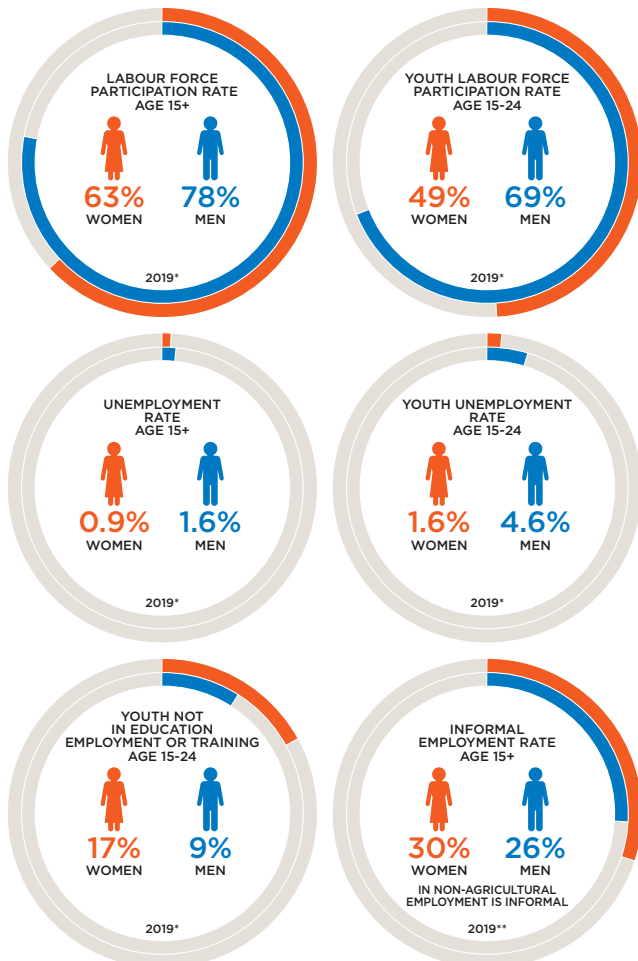
<sup>3</sup> Numeracy evaluations were conducted for Year 3 pupils, literacy evaluations for pupils in Year 4 and Year 8.

<sup>4</sup> Cook Islands Ministry of Education, Education Management Information System (EMIS) 2021 [Unpublished]

<sup>5</sup> Cook Islands Ministry of Education, Education Management Information System (EMIS) 2021 [Unpublished]

## Women's Economic Empowerment

### Economic Empowerment Indicators in the Cook Islands



\* Source: [Cook Islands Statistics Office](#)

\*\* Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#)

The [2019 Labour Force Survey](#) found the labour force participation rate was 63% for women and 78% for men.<sup>6</sup> While both men and women with a tertiary level of education had a labour force participation rate of 80% in 2019, women with a lower level of education were less likely to be in the labour force than their male counterparts. The labour force participation rate for adults with a primary education or below was 15% for men and 7% for women, while the labour force participation rate for adults who had attained a secondary education was 78% for men and 62% for women. The youth labour force participation rate was 69% for men and 49% for women in 2019. Between 2016 and 2019, the female labour force participation rate decreased by four percentage points, from 67% to 63%,

while the male labour force participation rate remained stable during this timeframe.

Geographic location and relationship status both impact women's economic participation. The [2019 Labour Force Survey](#) provides labour force participation data disaggregated by women's relationship status. Across all surveyed age ranges, the female labour force participation rate is lower among married women than it is among never-married women and those in de facto relationships. In the 35-44 year age group, for example, the labour force participation rate is 76% for married women, 88% for single women, and 85% for women in de facto relationships. The regional labour force participation rate for women is lowest in the Northern Group at 52%, with a comparative male rate of 65%. The largest gender disparity is found in the Southern Group Islands excluding Rarotonga, with a labour force participation rate of 54% for women and 69% for men. For individual islands, the female labour force participation rate is lowest on Mauke, at 35% – compared to 47% for men – and Pukapuka, at 39% for women and 66% for men. The only island in which the labour force participation rate is higher for men than women is in Penhryn in the Northern Group, with respective female and male participation rates of 63% and 46%.

When asked why they were not seeking employment in the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), women were most likely to cite family and household responsibilities: 29% of women outside the labour force and 0% of men gave this answer. This aligns with the findings of the [2016 Census](#), in which 60% of the female population reported being engaged in unpaid housework, compared to 22% of the male population. Furthermore, 36% of the female population and 22% of the male population reported being engaged in childcare responsibilities. Men were more likely to report being engaged in gardening (35% of the male population) and fishing activities (20% of the male population). In the 2019 Labour Force Survey, 22% of men and 12% of women outside of the labour force stated that they were not seeking employment because they were in studies or training.

The [2019 Labour Force Survey](#) estimated the national unemployment rate to be 0.9% for women and 1.6% for

6 Cook Islands Government, 2020, p.35. The 2019 Labor Force Survey was conducted on a sample of 531 household in January 2020. Only private dwellings were eligible for inclusion in the survey. As per the 2016 Census, 11.5% of the population live in non-private dwellings (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2018, p.67).

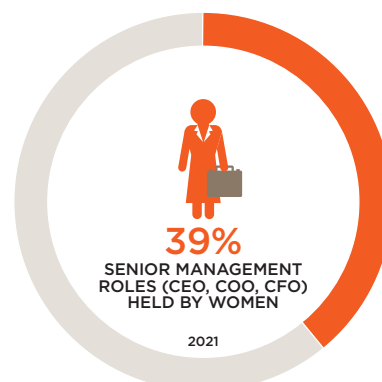


men. This is significantly below the respective female and male unemployment rates of 6.8% and 5.0% measured in the [2016 Census](#). Differences in methodology between the two surveys, however, make it difficult to ascertain trends in unemployment during this period. For young people between the ages of 15 and 24, the unemployment rate in 2019 was 1.6% for women and 4.6% for men. The 2019 female unemployment rate was highest in the Northern Group islands, at 8.7% compared to 5.2% for men in the region.

Between the ages of 15-24, 17% of female youth and 9% of male youth were not in education, employment, or training in 2019. The rates were highest in the Outer Islands, with 31% of young women in the Northern Group and 28% of young women in the Southern Group not in education, employment, or training.

In a 2021 [analysis](#) by the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative, women held an estimated 39% of senior management roles – including Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, and Chief Financial Officer – in the Cook Islands. According to [data published by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community](#), 60% of managerial positions were held by women in 2019. Female employees were more likely than their male counterparts to describe their occupation as managers in the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#): 11% of female employees and 6% of male employees listed their occupation as ‘manager’. By occupation, women in 2019 were found to be most likely to be employed as sales workers (accounting for 18% of female employment), personal service workers (14%), or customer service clerks (8%). Male employment was found to be more evenly distributed across a variety of occupation types, with the top occupations for men found to be protective services workers (7%), agriculture, forestry and fishery labourers (6%), and drivers and mobile plant operators (6%).

### Women in Senior Management in the Cook Islands



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

In the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), 25% of women and 24% of men were found to be in informal employment. In the Outer Islands, the informal employment rate was 38% for women and 30% for men. In 2019, the International Labour Organization estimated that [30% of women and 26% of men were in non-agricultural informal employment](#). According to the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), female informal employment rates are driven predominantly by involvement in craft and related trades sectors at 59%, and women are more likely than men to be involved in informal jobs within the formal sector, such as apprenticeships, temporary part-time employment, or home-based production work. Informal employment is less secure than formal employment and often leaves workers with reduced access to social protections.

In the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), women were more likely than men to be contributing family workers – working informally in a family business without regular pay – with 7% of the female labour force listing this as their primary economic activity in 2019, compared to 4% of the male labour force. Women were also more likely to be own-account workers, accounting for 8% of the female and 7% of the male labour force. The labour market varies significantly between Rarotonga, where the majority of employment opportunities are, and the Outer Islands. In the Northern Group, 17% of women and 0% of men in the labour force were own-account workers in 2019. Meanwhile, in the Southern Group, 16% of women and 14% of men were own-account workers, while 11% of women and 2% of men were contributing family workers.



The [Employment Relations Act 2012](#) legislates equality between men and women in the workplace and sets out maternity leave provisions. Under Section 56 of the Employment Relations Act 2012, 'An employer, or the representative of an employer, must not sexually harass an employee'. The public service [Code of Conduct Policy](#) sets expectations for public sector employees regarding what is considered to be acceptable behaviour in the workplace. An [analysis](#) of seven Cook Islands e-government websites in 2021 found that information regarding laws, regulations, and policies against sexual harassment was effectively displayed on government websites, although the extent to which employees and employers were aware of this information was not clear. [Exploratory qualitative research](#) suggests that sexual harassment remains commonplace in the hospitality and tourism industries in the Cook Islands, manifested in such acts as physical contact, sexual gesturing and propositions, comments on appearance, and intimidation leading to decreased job satisfaction and feelings of anger, disgust, and fear among workers in the tourism industry.

All eligible women working in the Cook Islands are entitled to six weeks maternity leave, as well as the right to return to the same role they held prior to going on maternity leave. Under the [Employment Relations Act 2012](#), the Government provides support to the private sector through the Government funded maternity leave fund, where an employer can request a subsidy for maternity leave payments. This subsidy is equivalent to six weeks of 40 hours minimum wage rate per week. The financial support from this fund is not available for migrant workers or for casual workers, due to the nature of their employment agreement. Men are entitled to two days paternity leave at full pay, and a further three days of unpaid leave. A reform of the Employment Relations Act 2012 is planned to address the gaps and align the national laws to international standards and best practices.

## Parental Leave Entitlements in the Cook Islands



**6 weeks**

government funded maternity leave for women in the private sector



**Two days**

government funded paternity leave and three days unpaid leave for men in the private sector

Source: [Employment Relations Act 2012](#)

The Cook Islands have been a [member of the International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) since 2015 and have ratified the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention. As of February 2022, the Cook Islands have not signed any ILO conventions on the equality of opportunity and treatment, such as those relating to maternity leave, protection from violence and harassment in the workplace, or equal remuneration.

## Health/Sexual and Reproductive Health

The [life expectancy at birth](#) in the Cook Islands was 78.5 years for women and 71.7 years for men in the most recent data from 2013. Non-communicable disease [accounts for approximately 75% of the cases in the Cook Islands healthcare system](#) and are the main cause of death among both men and women. Of the approximately 5,000 Cook Islanders diagnosed with non-communicable diseases in the Cook Islands, [49% are female](#). The most common non-communicable diseases in the Cook Islands are diabetes and hypertension. Diabetes accounted for [10% of female and 9% of male hospital admissions](#) in the Cook Islands in 2018. Risk factors for non-communicable diseases include diet, physical activity levels, and alcohol and tobacco consumption.

Severe obesity is more common among women than men. In 2016, [24% of the female population over the age of 15 was severely obese](#), compared to 14% of the male population. Further data is required to determine the prevalence of obesity among children in the Cook Islands. In 2013, the [diabetes prevalence rate among 20-79 year olds in the Cook Islands was estimated to be 26%](#); this was the fifth highest rate in the world. More recent data

is required in order to assess current trends.

Women have [lower recorded rates of consumption of alcohol and tobacco](#) than men. In the [2016 Census](#), 52% of women and 62% of men reported that they consumed alcohol. An estimated 24% of women and 32% of men reported that they either 'sometimes' or 'regularly' smoked. Women [account for an estimated 60% of new cancer cases in the Cook Islands](#). Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among women in the Cook Islands. [Smear test and breast screening programs](#) are carried out to detect cervical and breast cancer in the general population, although access to these tests is [reportedly limited](#).

The [National Youth Policy 2021-2026](#) identifies barriers to good health and resilience among youth in Cook Islands, including a lack of access to confidential medical services, the stigmatisation of mental health issues and accessing of mental health services, rumours and misinformation regarding health matters, limited access to specialised care, delayed help-seeking behaviour, and the culture surrounding weight and obesity in the country. Te Marae Ora, The Cook Islands Ministry of Health, has set up confidentiality clinics in recent years and local non-governmental organisation Cook Islands Family Welfare Association (CIFWA) provide confidential services.

All mental health care in the Cook Islands is provided by [one trained staff nurse, one medical officer, and a clinical psychologist](#). In 2018, [41% of inpatient admissions](#) for mental and behavioural disorders were female. While patients can receive emergency psychiatric care at the primary care level, there are no specialized facilities providing mental health services. Patients considered to be a risk to themselves or others are accommodated in a prison rather than a healthcare facility due to a [lack of suitable facilities](#). Between 2009 and 2018, there were 22 reported suicides in the Cook Islands, [86% of whom were male](#). The CEDAW committee [noted](#) in 2018 that the lack of appropriate mental health services in the Cook Islands is of concern due to the high number of women and girls with mental health problems. A new Mental Health Facility in the Cook Islands is reportedly due to be completed in 2022.

The total fertility rate was a lifetime average of [2.5 children per woman](#) in 2018. The adolescent fertility rate was estimated to be [38 births per 1,000 females between the ages of 15-19](#) in

2018. In 2018, [10% of births were to teenage mothers](#). According to the Ministry of Health, [24% of women were using family planning contraceptives](#) in 2018. This is a reduction from a rate of 36% five years earlier. The reason for the reduction is not clear. As of 2015, an estimated [76% of women aged 15-49 had their needs for family planning met with modern methods](#). Further breakdown data for age groups, marital status or urban/rural residential status was not available.

### Adolescent Fertility Rate in the Cook Islands

Sustainable Development Goal target:	Cook Islands:
reduce adolescent fertility rate to	
<b>less than 13 live births per 1,000</b>	<b>38 live births per 1,000</b>
women aged 15-19 by 2030	2018

Source: [Te Marae Ora](#)

### Maternal Mortality Ratio in the Cook Islands

Sustainable Development Goal target:	Cook Islands:
reduce maternal mortality ratio to	
<b>less than 70 per 100,000 live births</b>	<b>0 per 100,000 live births</b>
by 2030	2017

Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#)

### Under-5 Mortality Rate in the Cook Islands

Sustainable Development Goal target:	Cook Islands:
reduce under-5 mortality rate to	
<b>less than 25 per 1,000 live births</b>	<b>7.2 per 1,000 live births</b>
by 2030	2018

Source: [Te Marae Ora](#)

The [maternal mortality rate in the Cook Islands is estimated to be zero](#), but this is difficult to measure accurately given the small population and low overall number of births. However, the country tends to perform well in other indicators of maternal health, such as [100%](#)

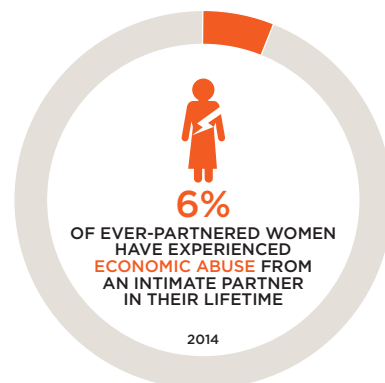
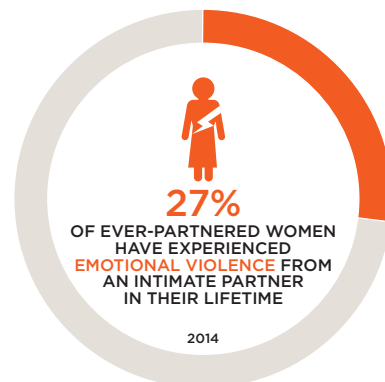
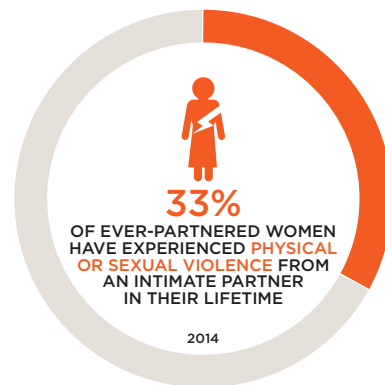
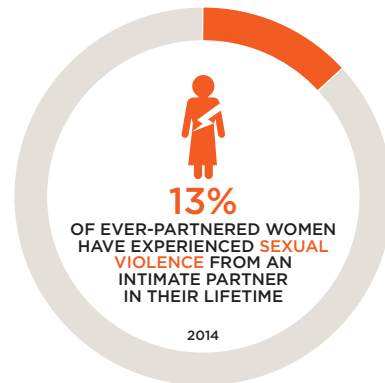
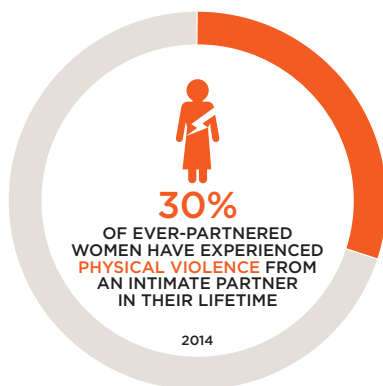
of births attended by skilled health professionals. The incidence of maternal anaemia is [not well documented](#) and further research is required in this area. Due to the low overall incidence of infant deaths, infant mortality rates can fluctuate significantly. The highest rate in recent years was in 2018, with a rate of [16.7 deaths per 1,000 live births](#), although this corresponded to just four infant deaths that year. The under-5 mortality rate was [7.2 per 1,000 live births](#) in 2018.

Chlamydia is the most prevalent sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the Cook Islands, with [103 laboratory confirmed cases accounting for 58% of STI diagnoses in 2018](#). Recent data on STI rates is not disaggregated by age or sex. As of 2017, there were [no known cases of HIV](#) in the Cook Islands. While the rate of STIs is believed to have declined in recent years, the [use of condoms during high-risk sexual activity is believed to be below 50%](#). This poses a significant risk for the transmission of infections. The curriculum in schools regarding sexuality, contraception, and STI prevention is limited and is [reported to be inconsistently implemented](#).

## Ending Violence against Women and Girls

The [most recent national survey](#) on violence against women and girls in the Cook Islands was conducted by the Ministry of Health in 2014. As of 2014, 33% of ever-partnered women reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner in their lifetime.

### Lifetime Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence in the Cook Islands





Among ever-partnered women, 30% reported experiencing physical violence from a partner in their lifetime, with 67% stating that they had experienced physical partner violence in the past 12 months. The lifetime prevalence of physical partner violence for ever-partnered women was found to be highest in the Southern Group Islands at 40%. Among ever-pregnant women, 8% reported experiencing physical violence during pregnancy; the father of the child was the perpetrator of the violence in almost all cases.

13% of ever-partnered women reported experiencing sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime, with 5% reporting that they had experienced sexual partner violence in the past 12 months. In total, 10% of women reported experiencing forced sexual intercourse from a sexual partner during their lifetime. The rate of sexual partner violence among ever-partnered women was highest in the Southern Group Islands (22%). The lifetime prevalence rate of emotional abuse – including insults, humiliation, intimidation, and threats – among ever-partnered women was 27%. The rate of emotional abuse among ever-partnered women was highest in the Southern Group (31%). Intimate partner violence presents a significant threat to the health and well-being of women in the Cook Islands and has been found to lead to an increased risk of suicide attempts among victims as well as problems performing day-to-day activities.

In 2014, 39% of women reported that they had experienced physical violence from a non-partner in their lifetime, most commonly from female family members. Among all respondents, 7% had experienced sexual violence from a non-partner since age 15, while 8% had experience child sexual abuse.

Violence against women and girls in the Cook Islands is intrinsically linked to the perceived role of women and girls within families and society. This is influenced by traditional values as well as the impact of missionary and colonial intervention on the Cook Islands' culture and governance. In 2014, 26% of women in the Cook Islands believed that a woman should obey her husband even if she disagrees, while 24% believed that a man should show that he is the boss in a relationship. Attitudes such as these were found to be most prevalent in the Northern Group Islands.

Controlling behaviours from intimate partners was found to be common in the 2014 survey. Among ever-partnered women, 32% reported being subjected to at least one type of controlling behaviour in their lifetime, most commonly by their partner *'insisting on knowing where she is at all times'* (26%) and *'getting angry if she speaks with another man'* (16%). 4% of ever-partnered women reported that during their lifetime they had experienced controlling behaviour from an intimate partner in which they needed to ask permission before seeking healthcare.

There were 73 domestic violence incidents reported to the Cook Islands Police Services in the year 2020; this represents an 11% annual increase on the number of incidents reported in 2019.<sup>7</sup> Between January and July 2021 there were 48 reported incidents. The majority of domestic violence incidents that were reported involved familial rather than intimate partner relationships. The most common action taken in response to domestic violence reports, accounting for 40% of actions taken, was to issue a warning. Other potential actions include issuing safety and protection orders, removing or restraining the perpetrator, and arresting the perpetrator.<sup>8</sup>

In March and April 2020, there were [17 domestic violence incidents](#) reported to the police. *Alcohol* and *assault* were listed as the most common probable causes of violence, and the type of relationship involved was listed as *'partner, husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend'* in approximately 75% of incidents. The available data is not disaggregated by gender of parties involved. While perpetrators received a warning in a small number of cases, the majority of incidents resulted in no warning being issued.

There is a ['No-Drop Policy'](#) for intimate partner violence cases in the Cook Islands, whereby cases must still progress through the court system regardless of whether the victim wishes to withdraw the charge. Policies such as this are intended to prevent the promotion of reconciliation as an acceptable outcome in cases of intimate partner violence and abuse. Women may also wish to withdraw domestic violence charges [due to economic concerns if their partner is the primary source of income in the household](#), or they may feel threatened by their partner.

<sup>7</sup> Cook Islands Police Service, 2021, Domestic Violence Statistics [Unpublished]

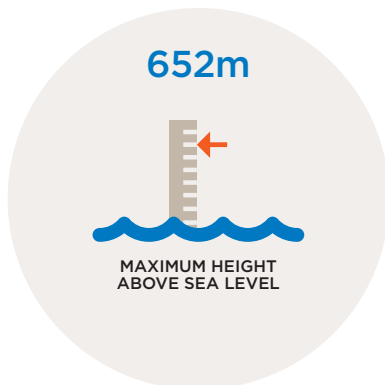
<sup>8</sup> Cook Islands Police Service, 2021, Domestic Violence Statistics [Unpublished]

The Cook Islands National Council of Women [reported](#) in 2018 that there was a lack of domestic violence prevention and intervention initiatives such as sexuality and relationship education in schools.

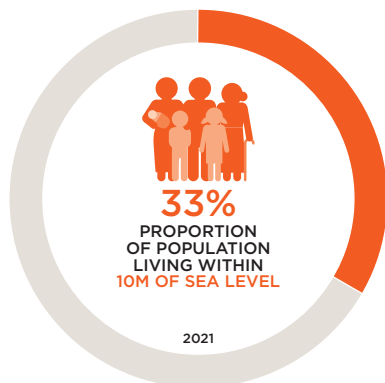
## Gender and Protection in Humanitarian Action

The Cook Islands is vulnerable to disasters and climate change, with [an estimated 33% of the population living within ten metres of sea level in 2021](#). The Cook Islands is not included within the World Risk Report on disaster risk or the Global Climate Risk Index. There is limited available information on the exact impacts of climate change on the population of the Cook Islands. Further research is required to adequately understand the gendered impact of climate change and how the population will adapt to climate stresses. For the Cook Islands, the main climate-related hazards are [heatwaves, drought, and flooding, cyclones, and storm surges](#).

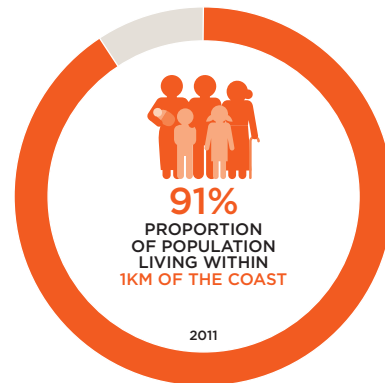
### Climate and Disaster Profile of the Cook Islands



Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#)

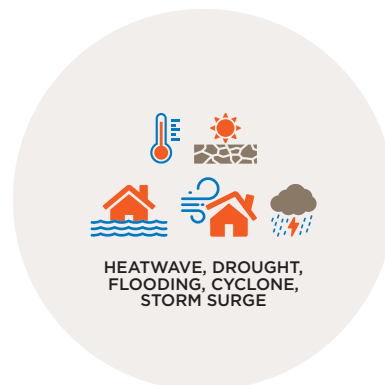


Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#)



Source: [Pacific Community \(SPC\)](#)

### Main Climate-Related Hazards



Source: [World Bank](#)

Women living in the Outer Islands are more reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods and are therefore more vulnerable to environmental and climate factors. The [2011 National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment](#) recognised that men and women are impacted differently by climate change factors, due to the different roles they currently undertake in the society. The policy therefore advocated for gender-responsive climate strategies in order to build capacity and reduce vulnerability. The [2019-2024 National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Action Plan](#) does not mention the impact that disasters and climate change have on women and girls, or the involvement of women in disaster preparedness and decision-making. The overall representation of women in leadership roles relating to disaster preparedness and response is not known. The Cook Islands' *National Health Emergency Taskforce* was [headed by a woman](#).

The [2017 Joint National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation](#) recognises that women and other marginalised groups are more vulnerable to both the physical and socio-economic impacts of climate change. The plan aims to strengthen the governance for climate change adaptation through increased participation of women in decision-making roles within the climate change and disaster risk management sector. Gender and the vulnerability of women and other marginalised groups is not mentioned in the [2018-2023 Strategic Roadmap for Emergency Management in Cook Islands](#).

Rates of violence against women and girls are [known to increase](#) during disasters and the subsequent recovery period. [During the COVID-19 pandemic](#), the rates of violence were impacted by a number of factors, including: a) lockdown induced increased exposure to perpetrators in the home, b) increased stress of perpetrators, which exacerbates existing violence, and c) limitations on access to services. [Girls' access to education](#) is also disproportionately affected by disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, although there is a lack of available data in the Cook Islands for monitoring the gendered impacts of the pandemic on education.



## Appendix 1: Country Background

Capital	Avarua
Population	<a href="#">15,342</a> (2021). In the <a href="#">2016 Census</a> , 51.1% of the population were female.
GDP per capita (USD)	<a href="#">\$24,913</a> (2019)
Human Development Index	Not available
Type of Government	The Cook Islands is a self-governing democratic state in free association with New Zealand for the functions of defence and foreign affairs. The country follows a <a href="#">Westminster parliamentary system</a> of government.
Women in Legislature	According to Pacific Women in Politics, <a href="#">six out of 24 MPs (25%) are women as of March 2022</a> .
Legal System	The legal system is based on an English Common Law model and closely resembles that of New Zealand.
<a href="#">Ratified Human Rights Conventions</a>	<p>The Cook Islands have signed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Accession 1997). Cook Islands have not signed the Optional Protocols to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.</li> <li>• Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Accession 2006). Cook Islands accepted the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW in 2007.</li> <li>• Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Accession 2009). Cook Islands accepted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009.</li> </ul> <p>Cook Islands have not signed: the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT); the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.</p>
Urban vs. Rural Women (%)	Rarotonga is the largest island in the Cook Islands and is home to the capital Avarua. The whole island of Rarotonga is classified as an urban area, while the outer islands, <i>Pa Enua</i> , are all classified as rural. In the 2019 <a href="#">Labour Force Survey</a> , 72% of women and 71% of men reside in Rarotonga.
Female-Headed Households (%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The rate of female-headed households is estimated at between 33.3% (<a href="#">2016 Census</a>) and 45% (<a href="#">The Labour Force Survey, 2019</a>).</li> <li>• The urban island of Rarotonga contained 74% of female-headed households and 72% of male-headed households in 2016.</li> <li>• Women are more likely to be heads of smaller households; in 2019, 57% of female-headed households and 39% of male-headed households contained just one or two people per household.</li> </ul>
Women in the Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25.3% of employed women and 24.1% of employed men were found to be in informal employment in the <a href="#">2019 Labour Force Survey</a>.</li> <li>• Gender disparity is higher in non-agricultural employment. The International Labour Organization estimated that <a href="#">29.9% of female and 25.7% of male non-agricultural employment was informal in 2019</a>.</li> </ul>
Women CEOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of the 669 individuals who listed their main job as ‘manager’ in the 2019 Labour Force Survey, 59.8% were female. In total, 10.9% of the female labour force were managers compared to 6.3% of the male labour force.</li> <li>• 2.9% of women listed their occupation as Chief Executive, senior official, or legislator; women therefore accounted for 40.8% of these occupations.</li> <li>• In the 2016 Census, women were found to hold 46.7% of management jobs.</li> <li>• <a href="#">56.0% of Managing Directors and Chief Executives were women</a> in 2019 according to ILO estimates.</li> <li>• An <a href="#">analysis</a> of 13 Cook Islands organizations conducted by Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative (PSDI) in 2021 found that 39% of senior management including 27% of Chief Executive Officers and 50% of Chief Financial and Chief Operating Officers were women.</li> </ul>
Women on Boards	<a href="#">Analysis</a> by PSDI in 2021 found that 25% of Board Chairs and 32% of Directors were women. Women are most highly represented as Board Chairs and Directors in industry associations and state-owned enterprises; 50% of Board Chair positions and 32% of Director positions in industry associations were filled by women in 2021, while 29% of Board Chairs and 38% of Directors were women in in state-owned enterprises.

## Appendix 1: Country Background (continued)

The Cook Islands is an independent self-governing state in free association with New Zealand and is situated midway between French Polynesia and Niue. Under the free association relationship, New Zealand has responsibilities for the external affairs and defence of the Cook Islands. Decisions regarding such matters are to be made in consultation between the two countries. The Cook Islands may undertake diplomatic relations and sign international treaties in their own right. New Zealand does not have power to legislate for the Cook Islands, except by request of the Cook Islands itself. [The Constitution of the Cook Islands](#) is the country's supreme law.

The Cook Islands comprises of 15 islands with a [total land area of 237km<sup>2</sup>](#) and an estimated [population of 15,342 in 2021](#). The Cook Islands is divided into a Southern Group of nine islands and a Northern Group of six islands. The island of Rarotonga, located in the Southern Group, is the largest of the 15 islands and contains the country's capital, Avarua. Rarotonga is the administrative and commercial centre of the country. According to the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), Rarotonga was home to 71% of the population in 2019. In addition to Rarotonga, there are a further six inhabited islands in the Southern Group, containing 21% of the population in 2019, plus five inhabited islands in the Northern Group, containing 8% of the population in 2019.

The 14 islands of the Cook Islands besides Rarotonga are known as the outer islands, or *Pa Enuu*. The population in Rarotonga are on average younger than the population in Pa Enuu; in the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), 39% of Rarotonga's working age population were below the age of 35, compared to 31% of Pa Enuu's population. In Rarotonga, 13% of the population were over the age of 65, compared to 20% of the population in Pa Enuu. The whole island of Rarotonga is classified as urban, while the outer islands are all classified as rural.

In the [2016 Census](#), 90% of the population had New Zealand nationality, with other notable national groups including Fiji (3%), the Philippines (2%) and Australia (1%). By ethnicity, 78% of the population were Cook Island Maori, and a further 8% of the population were part-Cook Island Maori. The remaining 14% were of other ethnic origins.

According to the [2019 Labour Force Survey](#), 45% of households in the Cook Islands were headed by women in 2019. Women are more likely to be heads of smaller households; in 2019, 57% of female-headed households and 39% of male-headed households contained just one or two people per household. In the [2016 Census](#), the urban island of Rarotonga contained 74% of female-headed households and 72% of male-headed households.

## Appendix 2: Country Commitments on Gender

### International Commitments

Gender Commitments	Status	Actions
<a href="#">Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)</a>	The <a href="#">most recent national reporting cycle</a> was conducted in 2019.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, produced at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, laid out comprehensive commitments for the global attainment of women's empowerment and gender equality.</li> <li>In line with the commitments of the Beijing Declaration, the Cook Islands have worked to improve gender equality and the empowerment of women through multiple iterations of their National Policy on Gender Equality.</li> <li>Between 1995 and 2020, the Cook Islands made efforts to improve women's participation in the labour force through amendments to employment laws and maternity protections.</li> <li>Since signing the Declaration, the Cook Islands have made significant improvements to education and health outcomes for women and girls.</li> <li>Violence against women and girls has been targeted with new legislation and increased public awareness. The Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study in 2014 was the first comprehensive study of gender-based violence in the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands introduced the Family Protection and Support Act and the Harassment Act in 2017 (see below for details).</li> <li>The 2019 review identified the major barriers to progress as: ineffective gender mainstreaming in government, low participation of women in leadership and decision-making, and persistently high levels of violence against women.</li> <li>The delayed enactment of legislation has been a major setback. The Family Law Bill was originally proposed in 2010, and eventually passed into law in 2017 as the Family Protection and Support Act. The 2017 Crimes Bill is yet to be passed into law.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)</a>	Accession 1992  The <a href="#">most recent national reporting cycle</a> took place between 2017 and 2018.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Cook Islands initially <a href="#">made a number of reservations</a> to CEDAW following its creation in 1979, however these were withdrawn in 2007 following their accession to the convention.</li> <li>Since accession to CEDAW in 2006, the Cook Islands has introduced legislative reforms to protect the rights of girls and women, including to facilitate justice and protection from gender-based violence, to protect against harassment and abuse, to provide women with autonomy in healthcare, to prohibit workplace discrimination due to pregnancy, and to provide continued education for young mothers.</li> <li><a href="#">Recommendations</a> made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 2018 include: establishing an independent human rights institution; extending current legal protections for domestic violence victims to all victims of gender-based violence; addressing harmful discriminatory stereotypes; and raising the legal marriage age to 18.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration</a>	2012  <a href="#">Regional review</a> published in 2016.	<p>In a <a href="#">2016 regional review</a> of the Pacific Leader's Gender Equality Declaration, progress was noted in a number of areas, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Record numbers of female parliamentarians and an increase in the participation of women in local government.</li> <li>The number of domestic violence incidents reported to the police increased from 18 in 2013 to 77 in 2015, while the number of women accessing support services for survivors of violence increased from 36 in 2013 to 170 in 2015.</li> <li>Between 2013 and 2015, there was no progress on the representation of women in senior management within the public sector or in seats on the boards of state-owned enterprises.</li> </ul>



## Appendix 2: Country Commitments on Gender (continued)

### National Commitments

Gender Commitments	Status	Actions
<a href="#">Family Protection and Support Act</a>	2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Family Protection and Support Act defines domestic violence to include physical, sexual, economic, and psychological forms of abuse.</li> <li>The Act outlines no-fault divorce and domestic and child support procedures.</li> <li>The Act details the procedures involved in the application of protection orders and police safety orders for victims of domestic violence, as well as setting out the obligations of the police force when dealing with such cases.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Harassment Act</a>	2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Harassment Act 2017 provides an explicit definition of what constitutes harassment, empowering the courts to take action to protect victims of harassment.</li> <li>The Act outlines the application procedures and conditions of restraining orders.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Gender Policy</a>	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Cook Islands Gender Policy is the ‘overarching national framework on gender equality and women’s empowerment.’ The policy acts as a guide for the implementation and monitoring of the Cook Islands’ commitments towards gender equality and women’s empowerment.</li> <li>The policy provides key questions and gender checklists for agriculture, natural resources, water supply, sanitation, infrastructure development and housing sectors to ensure that gender issues are adequately addressed during projects in these sectors.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment and Action Plan 2019-2024</a>	Published 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The first National Policy on Women was developed in 1995. The most recent iteration of the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment was published in 2019.</li> <li>The policy aims to address the unequal balance of power between men and women and to provide an equal share of power at all levels of society, from within the family unit to high level leadership positions.</li> <li>The five key priority areas for the policy are: a gender-responsive government; gender equity in leadership and governance; women engaged in economic development; healthy women and girls; and eliminating violence against women.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">National Sustainable Development Plan 2021-2026</a>	Published 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <a href="#">National Sustainable Development Agenda NSDA 2020+</a> was published in 2021. The <a href="#">Five Year Scorecard</a> for the NSDA lists 15 national development goals to promote and monitor development in the Cook Islands.</li> <li>Goal nine promotes <i>Gender, Equity, and Social Inclusion</i>. The political representation of specific interest groups including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, young people, and people with disabilities is used as an indicator of progress for this goal. Other indicators include gender equality in the workplace, as measured by gender income disparity.</li> </ul>