



IN BRIEF



WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL LIFE BRIEF FOR 14 PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

What's the Issue

The 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) assessed in this brief have a combined [population of 2.6 million](#) dispersed over an area encompassing [15% of the earth's surface](#). There are an estimated 1.3 million women and girls across the 14 PICTs, comprising 49% of the total population, yet women are vastly underrepresented in leadership positions in public and political life. The representation of women in decision-making remains significantly below that of their male counterparts, and the Pacific Islands region has the lowest proportion of female members of parliament of any global region.

As noted in the [1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), women's full participation in all spheres of society, including decision-making and access to power, is essential for achieving equality, development, and peace. When the Beijing Declaration was first introduced in 1995, [women held 2% of parliamentary seats in the Pacific Islands region](#); in July 2022, [female representation in Pacific Islands legislature was 7%](#).

Significant milestones have been reached in PICTs in recent years, including the introduction of Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) for [female representation in Samoa's national parliament](#) in 2013 and the election of the first female Heads of Government in the [Republic of the Marshall Islands](#) in 2016 and in [Samoa](#) in 2021.

Global and Regional Commitments

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the [Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) in 1979. Under Article 7 of the Convention, State Parties must take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the public and private life of the country. State Parties must therefore ensure that women can, on equal terms with men: vote in all elections and be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies; participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy; hold

public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; and participate in non-governmental organisations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

This brief assesses the participation of women in governance and public life in 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs): the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Among these PICTs, [12 have independently signed or accessioned CEDAW](#). Niue ratified CEDAW by association with New Zealand in 1985 however has not independently signed or ratified CEDAW since the full treaty-making capacity of Niue was [recognised by the United Nations \(UN\) in 1994](#). Tonga has not signed CEDAW.

The importance of women's participation in public life was reiterated in the [2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), which stated that women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life are critical for the attainment of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. In 2021, the 65th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) [adopted agreed conclusions](#) on the topic of women's full and effective participation in decision-making and public life, including the encouragement of the implementation of measures and mechanisms to achieve the goal of 50/50 gender balance at all levels of elected positions.

The first regional instrument for the promotion of gender equality in the Pacific was the 1994 [Pacific Platform for Action](#), which was created alongside the global commitments of the Beijing Platform for Action to ensure that issues of particular relevance to Pacific women were included in a manner that reflected the context of their lives.

In August 2012, the Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum met to reaffirm commitments to gender equality in the region and adopted the [Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration \(PLGED\)](#). Through the PLGED, leaders committed to implement specific national policy actions including adopting measures 'to accelerate women's full and equal participation in governance reform at all levels and women's leadership in all decision making',

and to advocate for ‘increased representation of women in private sector and local level governance boards and committees’.

The new [Pacific Platform for Action for Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights 2018-2030](#) was introduced in 2017 to accelerate the implementation of gender commitments in the region. Building on commitments made under the PLGED, the new Pacific Platform for Action shares a core set of priority areas, including the full and effective participation of women and equal opportunities in leadership and decision-making.

Women in Political Leadership

The active involvement of women in decision-making, including through participation in national, local, and traditional governance structures, is an essential component of the realisation of women’s rights, and contributes not only to the empowerment of women and girls but also to the welfare and development of communities and nations. Women in decision-making positions can influence a change in political priorities to spotlight gender-specific concerns, values, and experiences, and support more inclusive policies and service provision.

The 14 PICTs analysed in this brief have a variety of governance structures with varying levels of female participation. Most PICTs are parliamentary or presidential democracies, except for Tonga, a [hereditary constitutional monarchy](#). All PICTs have unicameral parliaments, except for Palau, in which the House of Delegates and the Senate [form a bicameral system](#) of government.

The first female Head of Government in a Pacific Islands country was Hon Dr Hilda Heine, who was [elected as the President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands](#) for the period 2016 to 2020. Hon Fiame Naomi Mata’afa became the second-ever female Head of Government among the PICTs when she was [elected Prime Minister of Samoa](#) in 2021. Other notable female political leaders in the region include Senator Jerrilyn Uduch Sengebau-Senior, [Vice President of Palau](#)

since 2020, and Hon Teima Onario, the [Vice President of Kiribati](#) for the period 2003 to 2016.

Women also hold positions of political leadership within a number of opposition parties in the Pacific region, including the leader of the Cook Islands’ Democratic Party, Tina Browne; the leader of Fiji’s HOPE party, Roko Tupou Takaiwai Senirewa Draunidalo; and the leader of Kiribati’s Boutokaan Kiribati Moa Party, Tessie Eria Lambourne.

As of January 2023, the highest proportion of ministerial positions held by women is observed in [Niue](#) and [Samoa](#), both at 25%, followed by [Palau](#), at 22%. No ministerial positions were held by women in Tuvalu or Vanuatu.

Women in Ministerial Positions

January 2023 or latest available

Cook Islands	17%
FSM	18%
Fiji	5%
Kiribati	7%
Nauru	17%
Niue	25%
Palau	22%
RMI	10%
Samoa	25%
Solomon Islands	11%
Tokelau	0%
Tonga	8%
Tuvalu	0%
Vanuatu	0%

Sources: [Council on Foreign Relations](#), [Cook Islands Office of the Prime Minister](#), [Niue Government](#), [Parliament of the Republic of Fiji](#), [The Marshall Islands Journal](#), [Samoa Government](#), [Government of Tonga \[Unpublished\]](#)

As [noted](#) by UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2021, globally, female ministers are often concentrated in particular roles, most commonly as ministers of departments for the environment, natural resources, and energy; social affairs; family, children, youth, elderly, and disabled persons; employment, labour and vocational training; and education. Significantly fewer women hold ministerial roles overseeing transport, economy and finance, and defence sectors. In Fiji, as of January 2023 there is [one female Minister](#), for the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, as well as female Assistant Ministers in the Ministry of Women Children and Poverty Alleviation; the Ministry of

Tourism and Civil Aviation; and the Ministry for Housing and Local Government. Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua, the Assistant Minister for Housing and Local Government, is also Fiji's first female Deputy Speaker.

All 14 PICTs analysed in this brief have special formal relationships with certain outside countries which provide them with varying levels of support in governance, administration, foreign affairs, and defence. Eight of the analysed PICTs – Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu – are [members of the Commonwealth](#). The British monarch remains the official head of state in Solomon Islands and Tuvalu, and both countries maintain the position of [Governor-General](#).

The Governor-General is the *de facto* head of state, the monarch's representative within the country, and carries out ceremonial duties on the monarch's behalf. The Governor-General is appointed by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister (as in Tuvalu) or elected legislature (as in Solomon Islands). The position of Governor-General of Tuvalu has [only once been held by a woman](#), Teniku Talesi, from 2019 to 2021. No woman has ever been appointed as Governor General of Solomon Islands.

The British monarch is also the official head of state in the three non-Commonwealth PICTs within the Realm of New Zealand, including Tokelau, a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand, and the Cook Islands and Niue, which are self-governing states in free association with New Zealand. The King's Representative in the Cook Islands is [appointed by the monarch for a term of three years](#), with a possibility of reappointment for additional terms. A woman has never held this position. In Niue, there is no statutory position within the country for a representative of the British monarch. While the monarch is [historically represented in Niue by the Governor-General of New Zealand](#), in practice, the elected members of the Cabinet exercise executive authority within the country on the monarch's behalf.

In Tokelau, the position of Administrator, held by a senior public servant of New Zealand, has [technical responsibility for the administration of Tokelau's government](#). The Administrator is appointed by the New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs. While the role

of Administrator still exists, in practice, there has been a progressive transfer of authority in recent times, and Tokelau is now primarily self-governing. Since the creation of the position in 1926, [only one woman has been appointed Administrator of Tokelau](#), Linda te Puni, from 2015-2016.

The [Federated States of Micronesia, Palau](#), and the [Republic of the Marshall Islands](#) are self-governing states in free association with the United States. The United States has total security and defence responsibility for these three countries. US ambassadors are stationed in these three countries, although there are no US-appointed representatives within the relevant countries' governments.

Women in Parliament

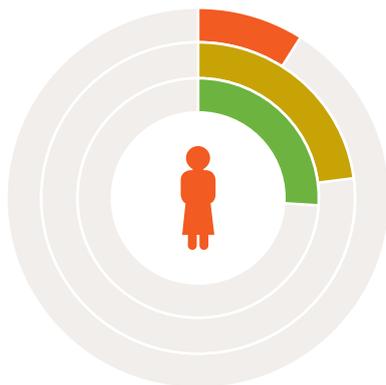
All analysed PICTs have universal suffrage, with a minimum voting age between 18 and 21. The legal voting age is 18 in the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu; 20 in Nauru; and 21 in Samoa and Tonga.¹

Since women were first elected to the legislatures of the 14 analysed PICTs in the 1960s, the number of women standing for and winning elections has increased significantly. Despite this, the representation of women in national parliaments is [lower in the Pacific Islands than in any other global region or sub-region](#). Across the 14 PICTs analysed in this brief, 42 of the 457 seats in national legislatures were held by women in September 2022, accounting for 9% of the total seats.

¹ Voting age data obtained from [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) country profiles. See also [Cook Islands Electoral Act 2004](#), [Niue Government and Political System](#), and [Tokelau National Election Rules 2013](#).

Women in Parliaments (January 2023)

Cook Islands	25%
FSM	7%
Fiji	11%
Kiribati	7%
Nauru	11%
Niue	15%
Palau	7%
RMI	6%
Samoa	11%
Solomon Islands	8%
Tokelau	18%
Tonga	4%
Tuvalu	7%
Vanuatu	2%



Total across 14 PICTs: 9%
Pacific Region average: 23%
Global average: 26%

Sources: [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), [Cook Islands Ministry of Finance and Economic Management](#), [Government of Niue](#), [Government of Tokelau](#) [Unpublished], [Pacific Women in Politics](#)

The highest proportion of female representation in legislature is in the Cook Islands, where [25% of MPs are women](#). Women also hold a relatively high proportion of seats in the national legislature in Tokelau (18%)² and [Niue](#) (15%). In the Federated States of Micronesia, where women hold 7% of seats in national legislature, a [woman was elected to Congress for the first time](#) in November 2021.

Vanuatu has the lowest level of female representation among the 14 PICTs. One female MP was elected in an October 2022 snap general election, resulting in 2% representation of women in national legislature. Prior

to the October 2022 election, Vanuatu had no female representation in national legislature and was [ranked joint last in the September 2022 global ranking of women in parliament](#), alongside Yemen. There were [no women in the Vanuatu national Parliament between 2012 and 2022](#), and only five women had held seats in the country's national legislature since independence in 1980. Seven women contested the October 2022 general election, down from 19 in 2020.

The [national legislature in Tonga](#) is a constitutional monarchy consisting of 17 People's Representatives who are voted for by the general population in a first-past-the-post electoral system and nine noble members who are elected to represent the 33 hereditary nobles of Tonga. The Prime Minister may additionally appoint up to four unelected Cabinet members, with the legislature comprising between 26 and 30 members. Women are [not eligible for election to any of the nine noble seats](#) as the required aristocratic titles can only be inherited by men. In the most recent national elections in November 2021, [16% of the candidates were women](#). Despite this, [no women were elected](#), a decline from two elected women during the previous two elections. The Prime Minister subsequently appointed one non-elected member, a woman, as Minister of Foreign Affairs; this resulted in a legislative assembly consisting of one woman and 26 men.

In Samoa, five of the 51 successful candidates in the April 2021 election were women. Several elected MPs resigned following election petitions, and additional female MPs were appointed in line with Samoa's national [10% TSM for women in the Legislative Assembly](#). As of January 2023, there are six female MPs in the 53-strong Legislative Assembly (11%).

As of January 2023, record levels of female representation in national governance are also observed in the most recent election cycles in the Cook Islands, the [Federated States of Micronesia](#), [Nauru](#), and [Solomon Islands](#).

Levels of representation of women in the legislature can be susceptible to large fluctuations in small PICTs where the overall number of seats available in parliaments is small. The smallest parliaments in the region are in the [Federated States of Micronesia](#) (consisting of 14 Senators), [Tuvalu](#) (16 MPs), and [Nauru](#) (19 MPs). Small changes in the overall number of women elected can

therefore lead to significant changes in the proportion of women in the legislature. In Nauru's 2016 elections, two women were elected, compared to just one woman at the previous elections in 2013; this one additional female MP resulted in the percentage of women in parliament increasing from 5% to 11%, placing Nauru above the 9% representation observed across the 14 PICTs. The same level of representation was maintained after the 2019 and 2022 elections in Nauru. While the representation has not decreased, it is a point of concern that the level of representation is not increasing, and that the loss of one single female MP could lead to a significant reduction in the overall level of representation.

According to the [2021 Women's Power Index](#), produced by the Council on Foreign Relations, Fiji ranked highest among the 11 Pacific Island countries included in the Index for political parity, an aggregate measure of the representation of women in government.³ Fiji's high score compared to other Pacific Island countries was driven by higher comparable rates of ministerial positions held by women and a higher proportion of female candidates in national elections compared to other PICTs; in Fiji's 2018 national elections, 24% of candidates were women, compared to an average of 13% across the seven PICTs for which data on the most recent elections was available.⁴ However, the percentage of female candidates dropped from 24% in Fiji's 2018 elections to [16% in the 2022 elections](#), with 56 women standing for election out of a total 342 candidates.

The lowest parity scores were observed in Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Vanuatu, driven by the low levels of women in national legislature and in ministerial positions.

Women in Local Governance

Data on Commonwealth countries, published in April 2018 by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, indicates a variety of levels of participation of women in local governance across PICTs, from 1% in [Tonga](#), 2% in [Solomon Islands](#), and 3% in [Kiribati](#), to 13% in both [Vanuatu](#) and [Fiji](#).⁵

Local governance in Tonga consists of district and town officers, who are elected for a three-year term. In the 2016 district and town officer elections, [4% of candidates](#)

[were women](#). Women were elected to one of the 23 district officer seats (4%) and one of the 156 town officer seats (1%), resulting in a 1% total representation for women in local governance.

In Solomon Islands, [local government comprises of nine Provincial Assemblies as well as one City Council](#), Honiara City Council. Provincial politics is male dominated; following elections in 2021, four of the 172 elected Members of Provincial Assemblies are women, while Honiara City Council has one female Elected Councillor out of 12 Elected Councillors and one female Appointed Councillor out of four Appointed Councillors.⁶ Therefore, following the 2021 elections, female representation in local governance marginally increased from 2% to 3%. While the overall representation of women is low, there has been some progress; Hon Rhoda Sikilabu of Isabel Province became the first female Deputy Premier of a Provincial Assembly in 2011, and subsequently was declared the [first female Premier of a Provincial Assembly](#) in March 2022.

In Vanuatu, the local government structure [consists of six Provincial and three Municipal Councils](#). As of 2018, women held [26% of Municipal Council seats](#), including six out of 17 seats on the Port Vila Municipal Council and five out of 13 seats on the Luganville Municipal Council. All 13 councillors of the Lanakel Municipal Council, in which members are appointed by the Minister of Internal Affairs rather than elected, were men. Women held 7% of Provincial Council seats in 2018. Most Provincial Council members are directly elected every four years, with some appointed by the Minister of Internal Affairs to represent groups such as women and youth. Of the seven female Provincial councillors in 2018, one was directly elected, while six were appointed as women's representatives.

In the Federated States of Micronesia, each of the four states has a State Congress, with a total of 85 Senators and Delegates across the four states, as well as a local municipal government for each of the 82 municipalities. Following the 2020 State Congress elections, [five of the 85 members \(6%\) of state legislatures were women](#). As of 2022 there are [nine women elected to local municipal councils](#), with women therefore holding 1% of seats in local government.

Not all PICTs have a local government that is run by

³ The territories of the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau are not included within the Index.

⁴ Average calculated using data from the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu.

⁵ Fiji data are from Fiji's most recent local council elections in 2005.

⁶ Advice from the Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening, 2022.

elected representatives. Nauru, which is comprised of a single island with an area of just 20 km², has had [no system of local government since the dissolution of the Nauru Island Council in 1999](#).

In Samoa, the local governance system is [enacted by traditional leaders, matais](#), and is based on local customs and traditions. *Matais* represent the families of a village, and [form village councils \(fono\)](#) which are supported by other village level committees, including women's committees (*Mafutaga Tina* or *komiti o Tina*). In 2019, [22% of registered matais in Samoa were women](#), up from 13% in 2015. In 2015, 70% of traditional villages and sub-villages had one village-wide women's committee, while a further 28% had more than one women's committee. *Sui o le Nu'u* (village male representatives) and *Sui o tama'ita'i* (village women representatives) work closely with the government on community development initiatives.

The highest level of female participation in local governance is observed in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Female clan heads (*alaps*) [participate in community meetings](#), and female chiefs (*lerojj*) serve alongside male chiefs (*iroij*) on the Council of Iroij. The Council of Iroij is an advisory body to the national parliament, functioning like an upper house of a bicameral parliament, and has significant influence on legislative matters affecting customary and traditional practices. As of 2019, [two of the 12 chiefs](#) (17%) that constitute the Council of Iroij were women. The Council has previously consisted of [up to 42% female chiefs](#). Female chiefs, however, [rarely exercise as much exclusive power and direct authority as their male counterparts](#), and it is common for a younger male relative to assume the duties of leadership on behalf of a senior female relative with a titular leadership role.

Women in the Public and Private Sectors

In 2019, 14 of the 124 judges (11%) who served across the Pacific Islands countries of Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu were women. Since independence across these nine countries, [30 women have served as judges, 18 of whom \(60%\) were foreign](#). There is a comparatively high level of representation of women in the judiciary in Palau, where [36% of judges were women in 2020](#).

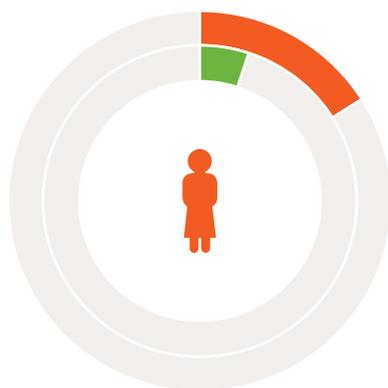
There is a lack of data on women in the police forces of PICTs, although existing data indicates that women are significantly outnumbered by men. In Samoa, [25% of the police force are female](#), with all units having female staff. Some 29% of Senior Management of Samoa's police force were women as of 2022, and Samoa appointed its first female Deputy Police Commissioner in 2019. Women [comprise 20% of the police force in Fiji as of 2017](#), and [2% of frontline police officers in Cook Islands as of 2021](#).

The [Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative \(PSDI\)](#) analysed women in business leadership in the Pacific in 2021 and found that an estimated 16% of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) roles were held by women across 13 of the 14 PICTS analysed in this brief, with no analysis conducted in Tokelau.⁷ The global average is [estimated to be 5% as of 2021](#). The highest proportion of CEO roles held by women in PSDI's 2021 analysis were found in Kiribati, Palau, and Tuvalu, all at 29%. Comparatively high levels were also found in the Cook Islands (27%) and Samoa (25%). The lowest nonzero percentage was in Solomon Islands (7%), while Nauru and the Republic of the Marshall Islands had no female CEOs within the organisations analysed by the PSDI.

⁷ PSDI analysed a variety of organisations including industry organisation (e.g. chambers of commerce), publicly listed companies, regional private sector organisation, other private sector organisations, non-listed companies, and state owned enterprises.

Female CEOs of PICTs Organisations (2021)

Cook Islands	27%
FSM	13%
Fiji	10%
Kiribati	29%
Nauru	0%
Niue	11%
Palau	29%
RMI	0%
Samoa	25%
Solomon Islands	7%
Tokelau	Data not available
Tonga	18%
Tuvalu	29%
Vanuatu	15%



Regional average: 16%
Global average: 5%

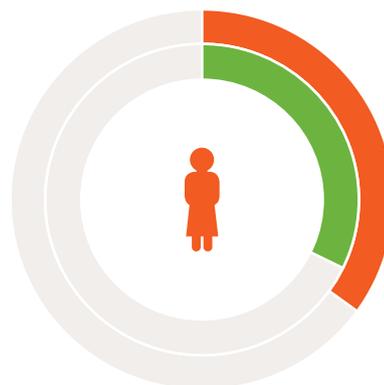
Source: [Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative \(PSDI\)](#), Deloitte

As noted by PSDI, this relatively high proportion of women in CEO positions compared to the global average indicates the significant commitment by women and by businesses in the Pacific to overcome the barriers women face in achieving leadership positions. Further analysis on this appears lacking and requires attention.

According to the [latest ILO data](#), women hold an estimated average of 35% of management positions in the analysed PICTs. In the 14 PICTs, the highest proportion of managerial roles held by women is found in the Cook Islands (56% in 2019), while the lowest was found in the Federated States of Micronesia (18% in 2014).

Proportion of Women in Senior and Middle Management Latest available year

Cook Islands (2019)	56%
FSM (2014)	18%
Fiji (2016)	39%
Kiribati (2019)	39%
Nauru (2013)	37%
Niue	Date not available
Palau (2014)	36%
RMI (2019)	25%
Samoa (2017)	43%
Solomon Islands (2013)	25%
Tokelau	Data not available
Tonga (2018)	40%
Tuvalu (2016)	37%
Vanuatu (2019)	23%



PICTs average: 35%
Global average: 32%

Source: [ILOSTAT](#)

Women Leaders in Governing Bodies

According to the [PSDI analysis of women in business leadership](#) in 2021, an estimated 22% of Directors on boards across the 13 analysed PICTs were women.⁸ In the Pacific region, female Directors were most common on the boards of industry associations (35% female representation) and publicly listed companies (23% female representation), and women were least well represented on the boards of state-owned enterprises.

8 No data available for Tokelau.

Of the PICTs, the highest levels of female representation on boards were in Palau (38%), Samoa (33%), and the Cook Islands (32%). The lowest levels of female representation on boards were in Solomon Islands (11%) and Nauru (12%).

Female Directors 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	Data not available
Tonga	19%
Tuvalu	29%
Vanuatu	18%



Average across 13 PICTs: 22%

Source: [Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative \(PSDI\)](#), Deloitte

The Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM) [analysed gender equality and diversity on Fiji government-controlled boards](#) in 2020 and found that several entities whose decisions can have a significant impact on the lives of women, such as the Legal Aid Commission and the Fiji Sports Council, had no women on their boards.

Both FWRM and PSDI note in their analysis that the number of women holding board member positions may be lower than it initially seems since the same women can often hold multiple board positions across different organisations.

Barriers to Women’s Participation in Public Life

As noted in the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), barriers to women’s participation in public life come from all levels of society, from personal to highly public. Examples of barriers to participation in public life identified within the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action include discriminatory attitudes and practices, caregiving responsibilities, and the financial cost of running for election and holding public office.

In a 2017 [report](#) by the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM) on the participation of young women in local government, numerous barriers to young women’s full participation in politics were identified, including traditional and cultural beliefs that reinforce male dominance and harmful gender stereotypes; age prejudice; lack of intergenerational solidarity and support; lack of knowledge about relevant government politics and administration; lack of suitable governance networks and political support groups; difficulty balancing work and family life; low self-confidence; and financial constraints.

Lack of Access for Women

No laws in the 14 PICTs explicitly prohibit or restrict women’s political participation. However, as noted above, several cultural and political factors may combine to result in lower levels of political participation among women than their male counterparts.

In Samoa, women are disproportionately affected by rules which state that only individuals who hold *matai* titles can contest national elections since just [22% of registered *matais* were women in 2020](#). Women are [not permitted to hold *matai* titles in an estimated 10-16 villages](#) in Samoa as of 2015. Similarly, the requirement for individuals elected to the nine noble seats in Tonga’s legislature to [hold aristocratic titles which cannot be inherited by women](#) effectively excludes women from full participation within the country’s national legislature.

While other PICTs may not have formal rules requiring political candidates to have a particular title or status to contest elections, in many locations women with familial and political ties typically experience higher levels of

acceptance and reduced stigma when entering politics.

Women elected to leadership positions in PICTs are [often the wives, widows, or daughters of male politicians](#), and this may be an avenue that some women can utilise to enter politics and prove themselves as individuals. For example, in Solomon Islands, Hon Lanelle Tanangada was elected in a 2018 by-election after her husband vacated the seat. Observers from Australia National University noted that in the 2018 by-election many voters viewed Hon Lanelle Tanangada as a proxy for her husband. When observers returned in 2019, however, they noted that [Hon Tanangada had earned the respect of her constituents as an effective MP](#).

Women with overlapping marginalised identities, for example women with disabilities or from under-represented ethnic groups as well as women with diverse sexual orientation or gender identity and expression face additional challenges when engaging in governance and public life. Previous research has shown that [very few persons with disabilities are in decision-making positions in PICTs](#), resulting in a lack of empowerment. In recent years, Samoa (2021) and Fiji (2022) have seen their first transgender/Fa’afafine candidates run for election to national parliament.

Violence Against Women and Girls

The high prevalence of gender-based violence within societies [acts as a barrier to increased participation of women in governance](#); violence within families reinforces social norms in which men are viewed as leaders under whom women should be submissive, and violent and controlling behaviour within the home can actively obstruct women’s access to leadership roles and political processes.

Female political candidates and politicians risk experiencing both online and offline violence, including character assassinations, defamatory accusations of a sexual nature, and sexist comments. Although both male and female politicians can experience political violence, violence against women in politics is distinct from the political violence experienced by men. It typically [targets women specifically for their gender](#) and can have a potentially widespread impact in which it acts as a discouraging factor for engagement in political activity

for all women, not just for the individual targets of the violence. In a [2021 report](#), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found that, while male politicians in Fiji received an overall higher proportion of problematic comments on their social media, the vast majority (83%) of problematic comments on female politicians’ pages were of ‘sexist’ nature. For male politicians, a majority of problematic comments were personal, non-sexist attacks.

Women often lack the resources to campaign for elections and to engage in politics compared to their male counterparts. In Vanuatu, for example, [incentives are often used by candidates to secure votes](#). Candidates who have proven experience in the provision of material goods and are in possession of the contacts and skills to negotiate deals for financial resources are therefore advantaged, and it is often men who can more easily draw on their relevant experience and resources in this regard. In Samoa, *matai* regularly make financial or material contributions to their village, known as *monotaga*, and [evidence of this is required in order for a matai to stand for election](#). Women who are providing *monotaga* often have the added burden of supporting family expenses without the same fundraising support as their male counterparts.

Cultural Barriers and Expectations

The public’s expectations of female political candidates are often higher than those of their male counterparts. Following her election as the country’s first female Senator in 2021, the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia [described Dr Perpetua Konman as](#) ‘the most educated person to be elected as a Senator in the FSM Congress, both contemporarily and historically’. Dr Hilda Heine, the first female Head of the Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and of any Pacific Islands nation, was also the [first Marshallese person to be awarded a doctorate](#). These highly educated and qualified women are worthy role models. However, women should be held to the same standards as their male counterparts and should not need to be record-breaking individuals to gain access to male-dominated levels of political leadership.

Women do [significantly more unpaid care work than men](#), and elected female politicians are often required to [juggle responsibilities to their electorates and their families](#). Article 11 of [CEDAW](#) requires State Parties to encourage the

provision of supporting social services that will allow parents to fulfil family obligations while fulfilling work responsibilities and participating in public life.

It is often expected that it is [female voters who would or should vote for women](#). Prioritising gender identity in this manner can create the perception that women are only viable candidates for female voters, and can also lead to the framing of women in politics as a homogenous group; this may prevent the recognition of the [intersecting and overlapping identities](#) such as class, race, cultural heritage, political beliefs and party affiliation, age, and kinship ties that women experience in their private and political lives.

Women who are successfully elected into leadership roles are often expected to act as a representative [not only for the constituents who voted for them but for all women](#). Although women are not a homogenous group, the structural inequalities experienced by women result in a shared social status that can allow female representatives to provide a unique contribution to political debates. So while the ability to relate to female constituents and to address issues faced by women is an essential benefit to the participation of women in political leadership roles, it is nonetheless important to note that these expectations can result in an increased burden on female politicians and potentially in an increased level of dissatisfaction, if either politicians or constituents feel like these expectations are not being met. In Solomon Islands, the National Council of Women [expressed frustration in April 2022](#) regarding a perceived lack of engagement from their elected female MPs in advancing women's issues at the national level.

Legislative and Policy Support

[Temporary Special Measures \(TSMs\)](#) are a form of affirmative action measures which aim to reduce gender disparities and promote gender equality and women's empowerment. The motivation for using TSMs derives from the understanding that time alone will not automatically lead to the achievement of gender equality and that direct action is required to make meaningful progress towards gender equality in male-dominated systems and structures.

[CEDAW](#) promotes using TSMs to accelerate *de facto* equality between men and women and states that such measures shall not be considered discriminatory. In the context of TSMs, the term 'temporary' means that such measures should be discontinued once the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.

Samoa is the only one of the 14 PICTs to have introduced TSMs for their national legislature. The [Constitution Amendment Act of 2013](#) introduced a 10% quota for female representation in the Legislative Assembly. Under the Amendment, if the gender quota is not directly realised through election results, then the highest polling unsuccessful female candidates are elected to additional seats in the Assembly until the 10% quota is met.

Events following the 2021 elections in Samoa demonstrate the difficulties countries can face when attempting to introduce and implement TSMs to reduce gender disparities and accelerate equality. TSMs in Samoa were successfully implemented during the 2016 national elections. In 2021 elections, however, the Amendment and its implications were extensively debated; the 10% quota had not been met in the initial voting and, as the two main political parties in the country were unable to secure a majority, the appointment of additional women in line with the gender quota could determine which party would win the majority. The Amendment, initially written when the Assembly consisted of 49 members, stated that the Assembly should consist of a minimum of 10% women, 'which for the avoidance of doubt is presently five'. In a [2019 Constitutional Amendment Act](#), the number of members was changed to 51. Following decisions by the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal, it was ruled that, with the now-larger Assembly, [six women were required to meet the 10% quota](#).

Solomon Islands introduced a minimum quota for elections in 2014, under which at least 10% of each political party's election candidates must be women for that party to contest an election. The [Political Parties Integrity Act 2014](#) does, however, state that this obligation does not bind political parties if they do not receive a sufficient number of applications from female candidates.

In Vanuatu, the [Municipalities \(Amendment\) Act](#) of 2013 established a quota under which one seat in each ward must be reserved for a female councillor. Under the Act, a female candidate standing for election to a Municipal Council must declare whether she is contesting for a reserved seat or a general seat on the council and cannot contest for both. The Act applies to the Municipal Councils in Luganville and Port Vila but does not apply to the municipality of Lenakel, where the [Minister of Internal Affairs appoints councillors](#). There are nine wards across the [Port Vila](#) and [Luganville](#) Councils, each containing between two and five councillors. Therefore, the Municipalities (Amendment) Act 2013 guarantees that women hold at least 30% of the 30 elected council seats at any time. In 2011, 7% of Municipal councillors, including councillors from Lenakel municipality, were women. Following the introduction of the 2013 Amendment Act, 23% of Municipal councillors were women in 2015, increasing to 26% in 2018. Five women were elected in reserved seats in Port Vila in 2022, and four women were elected in reserved seats in Luganville in 2019.⁹

The introduction of a quota for female representation at a local level in Vanuatu was adopted [to gradually improve women's representation, spreading from local to national government](#). Vanuatu's case illustrates the necessity of implementing measures at all levels of government to bring about timely change: the quota system introduced in 2013 has proven successful in improving the representation of women in local governance. Almost a decade later, however, the level of female representation in Vanuatu's national parliament is still among the lowest in the world.

Female members of parliament may find peer support from across the political spectrum through involvement with the Women's Parliamentarians Caucuses. Fiji, Niue, Samoa and the Cook Islands [have formal Women Parliamentarians Caucus or Commonwealth Women's Parliamentary Groups](#) to provide such support. In June 2022, the [Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders Meeting](#) convened for the first time.

Conclusion

While significant milestones have been achieved in recent years, including the election of the first two female Heads of Government in the Pacific region, progress in some areas has stalled. Although not without difficulty in their implementation, the introduction of binding TSMs in Samoa's national parliament and a quota for female representation on local council seats in Vanuatu illustrates how PICTs can utilise special measures to accelerate the achievement of *de facto* equality.

Women and girls continue to experience significant barriers to full and active participation in governance and public life in the Pacific region. While current levels of participation vary throughout the region, women across the many cultures of the 14 analysed PICTs continue to face similar issues, including discriminatory attitudes, cultural norms and caregiving responsibilities, gender-based violence, financial constraints, and lack of access to relevant support, knowledge and training. [Efforts to address low levels of female participation in governance should include](#) advocacy and civic education for women to build knowledge about how government works, gender sensitisation programs within communities, and mentorship and leadership programmes for young women as well as women with disabilities in politics.

⁹ Government of Vanuatu [Unpublished]