



## Thematic Brief | Leadership and decision making for women and girls in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides information and analysis about leadership and decision making for women and girls in the Pacific Islands region. It has been developed by the Support Unit for Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*), connecting more than 170 gender equality initiatives supported by the Australian Government and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries.

*Pacific Women* is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. It partners with governments, local and international non-government organisations (NGOs), private sector, disabled people's organisations, coalitions and others to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women and to end violence against women and girls. The emphasis for *Pacific Women* is on partnerships and locally-driven development.

*Pacific Women* supported initiatives respond to the commitments in the 2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration, while also supporting Australia's Pacific Step-up and its Partnerships for Recovery approach of working together with Pacific partners to address COVID-19 impacts on women, girls and their communities.<sup>1 2 3</sup> In the 2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration, Pacific leaders committed to implementing the following gender-responsive government programs and policies to promote women's roles in leadership and decision making:

- Adopt measures, including temporary special measures (such as legislation to establish reserved seats for women and political party reforms), to accelerate women's full and equal participation in governance reform at all levels and women's leadership in all decision making.
- Advocate for increased representation of women in private sector and local level governance boards and committees (such as school boards and produce market committees).

### Five Key Messages

The following five key messages help explain the importance of working to increase women's participation in leadership and decision making, and why *Pacific Women* supports such initiatives. These messages are premised on a commitment to eliminate discriminatory social norms through generational change and the development of enabling environments that support women to be decision makers at all levels, including in families, communities, places of employment, business and local and national government.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a critical need for women's and girls' participation, leadership and decision making in all aspects of response planning and implementation. Women's participation and leadership is essential for an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for mobilising communities and health communications.

1. The Pacific region has the lowest level of women's political participation globally.
2. Temporary special measures have been introduced in the region to increase women's representation at the national and sub-national levels.
3. Working in Pacific Island countries requires an adaptive approach, to support a fair and better balance in women's and men's leadership roles and opportunities.
4. Supporting women's participation in all levels of decision making is key to reducing poverty, promoting the quality of economic growth, democracy, and increasing wellbeing of women, girls and their families.
5. Supporting women's leadership and decision making must occur at all levels. Just focusing on political representation at the national level is not enough.

## Message 1 The Pacific region has the lowest level of women’s political participation globally.

### Why?

Pacific scholars have attributed the continuing under-representation of women in politics in the region to a multitude of factors and barriers. These include systems of customary law that discriminate against women’s participation in decision making, the pervasiveness of political cultures that value confrontational and aggressive tactics, electoral systems that tend to favour men, the view that politics is ‘men’s work,’ and women’s lack of access to election campaign financing.<sup>4</sup>

### The evidence

Across the Pacific, women hold only a small minority of political seats at national and local levels.<sup>5</sup>

The following table shows the numbers of elected women at the national level in the 14 independent Pacific Island countries where *Pacific Women* works.

#### Number of women in Pacific parliaments and congress (as of October 2020)

Country	# seats	# women	%	Country	# seats	# women	%
The Cook Islands	24	6	25.0	Palau	29	4	13.8
Federated States of Micronesia	14	0	0.0	Papua New Guinea	111	0	0.0
Fiji	51	10	19.6	Samoa	50	5	10.0
Kiribati	46	4	8.7	Solomon Islands	50	3	6.0
Republic of the Marshall Islands	33	2	6.06	Tonga	26	3	11.5
Nauru	19	2	10.5	Tuvalu	15	1	6.7
Niue	20	5	25.0	Vanuatu	52	0	0.0

Source: Pacific Women in Politics website statistics from October 2020: <https://www.pacwip.org/women-mps/national-women-mps/>.

Women’s representation in parliaments and congress across the Pacific is stagnating. Women’s participation in national parliaments is 8.8 per cent in the Pacific, compared with a global average of around 25 per cent (May 2020 figures).<sup>6</sup> The Federated States of Micronesia has never had a woman member of Congress.

More women hold seats in local-level government; however, the regional average is still low at 14.8 per cent (2016 data).<sup>7</sup>

Many Pacific countries use the first-past-the-post or other plurality-majority systems that can be biased against women candidates.<sup>8</sup> Bias is often created by male-dominated party structures that tend not to select women as party candidates. Women’s movements in Pacific countries have organised to advocate for changes to these electoral and governance systems.

‘Pacific women reaffirm their rightful role as equal participants in their countries’ democratisation process and continue the process for women to claim their rightful place in national decision making.’

Fiji Women’s Forum.<sup>9</sup>

## Message 2 Temporary special measures have been introduced in the region to increase women’s representation at the national and sub-national levels.

### Why?

Statistical and anecdotal evidence demonstrates how historically entrenched bias and discrimination have consistently excluded women from the political arena. Quotas and other temporary special measures assist

in promoting equality for women and can help ensure that women's perspectives are sufficiently represented in leadership positions.

However, quotas are only successful when strategies are put in place to ensure women in these positions represent a wide cross-section of all women in society, including women with disabilities. Over time, when the playing field has been levelled, and women no longer face discrimination, special measures can be removed.

### The evidence

Quotas are not common in the Pacific and, where they do exist, they are fairly recent. Monitoring and evaluation over time will be required to assess how effective they are at changing social perceptions about women's ability to be political leaders.

Samoa is the only Pacific Island country that has legislated and implemented special measures to reserve seats for women and promote gender balance at the national level. A minimum of 10 per cent of seats (the equivalent of five seats) are reserved for women Members of Parliament. Papua New Guinea legislated seats for women in 2011 but implementation required changes to Papua New Guinea's Organic Laws. These changes have been repeatedly blocked.<sup>10</sup> The Solomon Islands *Political Integrity Act 2014* specifies a requirement for quotas in the candidate rosters of political parties; however, there are no sanctions for failing to meet the quotas.<sup>11</sup>

Tonga's Women in Leadership Coalition submitted a private bill to parliament in August 2017, proposing temporary special measures to guarantee women's political representation in the country. This has not yet been passed.

In the French territories (French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna), the number of women in parliament significantly increased with the introduction of the French *Parity Act No. 2000-493* in 2000.<sup>12</sup> The rate of women in parliament rose from 12 per cent to 53 per cent in French Polynesia and from 17 per cent to 44 per cent in New Caledonia (2019 figures).

There has been greater success at introducing quotas at the sub-national level:

- The Autonomous Region of Bougainville has three reserved seats for women and equal numbers of women and men are required in local level government. There are now 424 women and 424 men ward councillors.
- Vanuatu reserves one seat in every ward for women.
- Samoa requires a woman representative on every village council.

Even where there are clear processes to improve women's engagement in decision making, there has been a lack of long-term, well-resourced and coordinated engagement with women and men to support efforts to improve women's participation. Without quotas or special measures in the Pacific today, women will continue to struggle for opportunities to prove how capable they are in decision making venues.

Women with disabilities face additional barriers to equal participation in decision making. They are often isolated and experience educational, social, cultural and economic disadvantages, making it more difficult for them to take part in community life and take on leadership roles.

**Message 3** Working in Pacific Island countries requires an adaptive approach to support a fair and better balance in women's and men's leadership roles and opportunities.

### Why?

After decades of investment, women's empowerment in the Pacific is progressing, but efforts to improve women's political leadership have not resulted in the gains expected or desired. There has been limited

change in negative social norms and people's perceptions of women in leadership positions,<sup>13</sup> particularly political leadership.

Learning from what has led women to become successful as decision makers and leaders can help inform more effective and targeted interventions. However, promoting gender equality by focusing solely on women can be problematic. Approaches need to facilitate change for men and involve women and men community leaders as an integral component to drive social norms change.

Approaches that may reinforce perceptions of gender equality as a 'zero sum' game – women win, men lose – often fail to gain traction or to foster broad-based buy-in, given they typically underestimate the importance of leveraging supportive power bases. It should be recognised and acknowledged that in most Pacific communities, men hold power, so programs need to think and work politically to start to influence, shape and potentially shift social norms.

### The evidence

Deeply entrenched norms, attitudes and perceptions around concepts of gender equality, the roles and legitimacy of women and men across social, economic and political spheres, are the primary barriers to improving women's participation and voice. Without a shift in these norms – among both women and men – and the engagement of norm-influencing agents, women in the Pacific will continue to struggle to achieve agency and equality in all areas, particularly around leadership and decision making.

Social norms are connected with culture, religion and tradition making them a profoundly sensitive issue. This sensitivity means that programs like *Pacific Women's Balance of Power*, rolling-out in Tonga and Vanuatu, and soon Solomon Islands, should provide space for local actors to lead and drive interventions for any social norms change.

There is also a need to build greater cohesion of women's agency and leadership efforts across agencies and actors. This should take into account comparative strengths, experiences and the need to be innovative, moving beyond the traditional gender mainstreaming approaches and beyond individual/organisational agendas, toward a focus on collective action.

**Message 4** Supporting women's participation in all levels of decision making is key to reducing poverty, promoting the quality of economic growth and democracy and increasing wellbeing of women, girls and their families.

### Why?

Women constitute half of society, yet they remain largely excluded or under-represented from senior leadership roles and community decision making, particularly in the Pacific region.<sup>14</sup>

Enhanced representation of women in all levels of decision making can influence political agendas to respond to the needs of all and raise awareness of and support for more gender-responsive legal frameworks.<sup>15</sup> Without women in leadership and decision making roles, many issues that directly affect the wellbeing of women and their communities are left off the agenda.<sup>16</sup> Women's leadership can be fostered at all levels: families, churches, civil society and employment.

For an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, women's participation and leadership is essential particularly for mobilising communities and health communications. As governments focus increasingly on long-term planning, it will be important that ministries and departments representing women are directly involved in all social and economic planning and are not relegated to advising on gender-based violence only. Women civil society groups and their leadership are also critical and have been playing a strong role in COVID-19 response.

## The evidence

Greater gender equality in leadership and decision making improves economic circumstances at household and national levels. It can support more inclusive economic, health and education policies, enhanced social safety nets and more inclusive service provision.<sup>17</sup>

Global studies show that women are less involved in bribery and are less likely to condone bribe taking. Multi-country data shows that corruption is less severe where women hold a larger share of parliamentary seats and senior positions in the government bureaucracy and when they comprise a larger share of the labour force.<sup>18</sup>

The actual impact women leaders can make depends on a number of variables, including the economic and political context in which governments function; the background, experience and number of women who are on local councils or in parliament; and the rules of the 'parliamentary game'.<sup>19</sup> This is why it is not only crucial to support women's advocacy and leadership across levels but also to work toward the creation of a more enabling environment.

Women's leadership and decision-making is critical within national responses to COVID-19. In previous health crisis outbreaks, women have been largely excluded from decision making. This led to the loss of valuable opportunities for limiting the spread of disease.<sup>20</sup>

'Among the many strategies adopted to enhance the capacity of women elected in the Pacific, change is also required in the workplace culture and infrastructure of Pacific parliaments. Increasing the gender sensitivity of men and women in the parliament will improve the environment for all.'

Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships project.<sup>21</sup>

## **Message 5** Supporting women's leadership and decision making must occur at all levels. Just focusing on political representation at the national level is not enough.

### Why?

Support for women's leadership should target multiple spheres, including government, civil society, private sector, communities, faith-based organisations and traditional hierarchies. Having more women as decision makers at all levels increases civic awareness of women's skills, knowledge and abilities to address issues in multiple sectors.<sup>22</sup>

Supporting women's wider participation in decision making – in families, communities, employment and traditional or faith-based governing bodies – can help to generate demand for change. Seeing women in these roles can simultaneously demonstrate the positive benefits of gender equality in multiple decision-making forums.<sup>23</sup>

## The evidence

Women's leadership in their communities or the business sector has often created pathways to political leadership positions. These women typically have strong community connections and have demonstrated their commitment in a variety of settings. Women who run for political office also tend to be well-educated, have strong male backers and come from high-profile families.<sup>24</sup> Developing pathways for a wider range of women to become leaders and make women's leadership more inclusive and widespread requires working from the ground up in multiple settings.

However, moving women into political leadership is not the sole goal of gender equality in leadership. Women can be leaders and decision makers in many different ways that bring positive change and economic benefit to their families and countries. There is evidence of this in civil society and faith-based organisations and in the private sector and the public services of many Pacific Island countries.

Public administration offers an important opportunity for women to demonstrate leadership skills, particularly as the public sector is the largest single employer of women across the region.<sup>25</sup> While women are still underrepresented in national parliaments, there is a higher participation of women in senior management in the public sector:

- The regional average of women in the public service increased from 11.3 per cent in 2012 to 14.8 per cent in 2016.
- In Samoa and Fiji, women hold 44 per cent of senior roles in the public service.
- In Tonga and Tuvalu, women hold 38 per cent and 32 per cent of senior government positions respectively.<sup>26</sup>

## What can be done?

The Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration and regional research recommend that interventions to accelerate and increase women's representation in leadership and decision making include programs at all levels and with multiple types of organisations. The Leaders' Declaration also supports the introduction of temporary special measures, including reserved seats for women politicians.

Increasing women's agency and creating networks and coalitions of women and men who understand the benefits of gender equality in leadership will generate demand for more equity-oriented approaches to representational decision making. The goal of *Pacific Women's* Balance of Power program is for women to be more culturally, socially and politically accepted as leaders at all levels, including being legitimate political leaders and decision makers across the Pacific Islands region. The program is rolling out in Tonga and Vanuatu, with plans to roll out in Solomon Islands next and with some elements to be implemented across the region.

Civic education is needed to increase women's and men's awareness about the value and specific benefits of engaging women in decision making. Often mainstream definitions of political leadership limit people's understanding and acceptance of women's involvement in the political sphere, revealing a need to broaden people's understanding of political leadership and leadership in other domains.

There is a need to increase the gender sensitivity of women and men who are elected and who work within governance structures, to support the creation of more equitable processes and enabling environments for decision making. Additionally, supporting women to be elected leaders requires more than facilitating women to obtain a leadership position, it requires ongoing support.

The Leaders' Declaration also advocates for increased representation of women in the private sector and local-level governance boards and committees, where women may need similar ongoing support. Scholarships and professional mentoring have been shown to have positive results in advancing women in administrative leadership positions.<sup>27</sup>

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