

# Meet Freda Soraicomua, Solomon Islands Minister for Rural Development

Solomon Islands

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“I am the only woman in Parliament right now. I was asked to become Minister for Women but I decided not to because I wanted to work in rural development and use my experience and expertise to improve the lives of people in rural areas. My Ministry is responsible for administrating the highest budget out of the all the 22 ministries, for 50 constituencies”.

~ Minister Freda Soraicomua

At the third Pacific Women’s Parliamentary Partnerships forum, Pacific Women had the opportunity to meet with many of the Pacific women parliamentarians gathered for the three-day forum to discuss ways to address gender equality.

Minister Freda Soraicomua shares her experience of campaigning for national elections in the Solomon Islands and how her constituency, which traditionally only promote male leadership, supported her to become the only woman Minister in Parliament.

Tell us a little bit about yourself...

I was elected as Minister for Rural Development on 19 November, 2014. Prior to that, I had my own business and had been part of the logging industry for 16 years. There a lot of things you can learn and do when you’re part of the private sector.

What motivated you take part in the elections?

It is not easy to become a Parliament member in our community. It took two years for me to build a solid foundation, to build good relationships with my people that enabled me to be successful – only through their support this was possible.

It was in 2012, that I was asked by my constituency to represent them at the national level. I come from the constituency of VATTU[1] from the Temotu Province, which is in the eastern part of Solomon Islands. It's a very remote area, far from the capital city and we have never had a very good leader in the past to represent our people. Despite Government's assistance, people were still struggling to make their way out.

Our community has a mixture of Melanesian and the Polynesian people. I come from the Polynesian community. We have a very strong culture and women from our community are traditionally not allowed to become leaders.

So it was a surprise to me when the traditional leaders of my constituency, all men, asked me to stand for elections. They said they had a lot of confidence in me due to my experience of working in the private sector and because they appreciated how I have always supported people from my community when they come to Honiara to access medical services, raise money for their children's school fees, etc.

I said to them: "I don't think people will like me because I am a woman and in our culture we are not allowed to be leaders". I was really surprised when the right-hand man of the chief said to me: "The chief told me to inform you that if you run in this election, everything will be fine. We have confidence in you." So I thought to myself, I will give it a try. I then joined the People's Alliance Party to become a running candidate. Since I was new to politics, with experience only in the business sector, I contacted women who undertake training for women wanting to take part in politics. After I did these trainings from 2013-2014 and become more empowered about politics, I told my constituency that I was ready and they supported me through my whole campaign. We worked very closely.

During my campaign I was always being asked by the people: "What are you going to do?" "What kind of leadership will you emphasise in the constituency or in the community?" "Are you going to take care of us?" I always told them that I hope to support them in many ways depending on the funds available in Government and if they put me into power by voting for me.

It was very tough to campaign from island to island and be part of discussions with men voters. They asked what we would do for them when we come into power. Sometimes the way they asked these questions, it felt like they were trying to provoke me or intimidate me. I never gave up. I didn't say anything negative when I was asked provocative questions. We campaigned and then we waited for the outcome. Finally the result was announced on 22 November 2014 – I got the seat!

I was very happy because I had never thought that one day I would become a leader. I was crying. During the election, the Foreign Affairs Minister in the previous Government and I were campaigning for the same seat. He wasn't very happy when he lost and is now taking up a petition against me.

When we got elected, we joined a coalition and I was very happy when the Prime Minister gave me a portfolio. I am the only woman in Parliament right now. I was asked to become Minister for Women but I decided not to because I wanted to work in rural development and use my experience and expertise to improve the lives of people in rural areas. My Ministry is responsible for administering the highest budget out of all the 22 ministries, for 50 constituencies.

Tell us about your experience being part of the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnership forum...

This is my first forum and the first time for me to learn more about the status of violence against women in the Pacific. This is why I was hesitant to take up the Ministry of Women portfolio because I did not know much about gender inequality and violence against women. I have learnt a lot in my three days here.

Any words of encouragement for other women running for elections?

I encourage other women in Solomon Islands and other Melanesians country to fight for their right in the national level by winning seats in the Parliament. Go for it. In order to achieve national leadership as [part of the] decision making body you have to cooperate, work closely and stand together with the people in your community, to understand their need and assist them with their immediate need. Power come from the people and not from yourself.