



# Executive Summary

## State of the Art Paper **4**

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## Women's leadership in the Pacific

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This paper summarises the state of knowledge on women's leadership in the Pacific. It concentrates on three spheres: 1) formal politics, the main focus of the literature on women's empowerment; 2) the bureaucracy, an important employer of women; and 3) civil society, where Pacific women are particularly active. It highlights that Pacific women's prominent informal peacebuilding role has not always led to their participation in formal peacebuilding processes: opportunities to facilitate equitable social and political change have been missed. In relation to the limited evidence base, it notes that women's impact on governance and policy-making in the region has received little scrutiny. Further, although gender analyses carried out as part of donor-funded capacity development programmes contain much information on women's participation in Pacific bureaucracies, this material is rarely made public.

Within the spheres of politics, the bureaucracy, and civil society, the paper examines the literature in relation to: obstacles to women's participation, success factors, outcomes, and policy and donor approaches to supporting women's participation. The paper also highlights research gaps, and compares the Pacific experience with broader findings on women's participation in decision making.

Key search terms were: 'women'; 'leadership'; 'Pacific'; 'gender'; 'development'; 'political participation'; 'civil society'; 'public administration'; 'public service/public sector'; and, 'peacebuilding'. The literature survey focused on publications of the last five years, seminal works, articles in esteemed journals and policy literature from reputable institutions.

### Evidence gaps

The comparative literature on women's parliamentary participation in the Pacific is quite substantial, enabled by the existence of national-level data. But women's **impact on governance and policy-making** in the region has received little scrutiny.

There is limited evidence about the factors underpinning women's successful entry into parliament. We do not know if Pacific women legislate differently to men, nor how (or whether) they mobilise support for attention to issues of specific concern to women while in parliament.

Little published or **comparative analysis** considers women's participation in **public administration** in the Pacific, and there are few cross-country examinations of women's involvement in **peacebuilding**. This is probably because of a lack of reliable data on women's participation in public administration, and because of the strong tradition of anthropological and area studies work in the Pacific, which tends to privilege in-depth analysis of single cultural groupings over comparative research.

Scholarship on women's leadership in the Pacific focuses on Melanesia; little research has been done in **Polynesia** or **Micronesia**. A further gap is the lack of empirical evidence on the efficacy of the many existing **efforts to support women's leadership**.

### Key findings

Social organisation and gendered cultural beliefs and practices are significant hindrances to women's participation in all spheres. Donors wishing to support women's empowerment, often through travel to training and networking events, face challenges in minimising the potential harm that may arise from such support. When initiatives to empower individual women move at a faster pace than institutional and cultural change, enthusiastic women may return to their work places or communities to face increased discrimination and, sometimes, physical violence. This suggests a need to listen to local women's views about how empowerment can be achieved – views that often differ from those of donors.

### Women in formal politics

The Pacific has the world's lowest regional average of women in unicameral parliaments or the lower house of parliament. Across the region, parliament has been a male domain.

The 'double burden' of family and work, while significant, appears to be less of a hindrance to Pacific women seeking to enter formal politics than for women in other regions. This may reflect the extensive social support provided by kin networks – albeit counteracted by social obligations. Obstacles to women entering parliament also include male-female economic and educational disparities.

The greater attention paid to Pacific women's involvement in parliament than in public administration reflects global trends: there is more data available on women in parliaments.

Given the limited number of Pacific women in parliament, little research exists on the factors underpinning their success and the outcomes of their representation. The only exception is Corbett and Liki's examination of the experiences of women parliamentarians (2015). This suggests that many of these women are from political families or are the wives or daughters of prominent male chiefs, foreign nationals or businessmen. Such connections may influence women's success for two main reasons: access to wealth (and associated benefits like education), and access to the powerful networks required to mobilise support. Corbett and Liki (2015) also find that, consistent with global trends, women tend to enter politics at an older age than men, and typically have a civil service background.

### Women in public administration

Pacific women, like those elsewhere, are well represented in public service, yet under-represented in management roles. Most work in feminised sectors such as health and education.

In Melanesia in particular, long traditions of sex segregation still seem to have a major impact on women's experiences of working outside the home. Women experience not only family violence motivated by jealousy, but also suspicion and hostility from the wives and girlfriends of male colleagues.

The limited available evidence suggests that higher education, typically obtained through overseas scholarships, is the factor with the most influence on the career trajectories of female public servants in the region (Liki 2010; Zubrinich and Haley 2009).

### Women in civil society

A vibrant, largely indigenous literature shows the depth of women's participation in civil society, and the relative ease with which they can gain prominence as leaders within the less male dominated non-state realm. Yet the claim that participation in civil society provides women with a stepping stone to participation in state institutions is under-explored.

In civil society organisations, most evidently church organisations, women have challenged the status quo in quiet rather than overt ways to avoid alienating those resistant to change (Monson 2013; Paina 2000). They have also linked their concerns to global discourses to justify their right to

draw attention to specific issues, while broadening the range of issues under consideration (George 2014; Monson 2013).

Women's prominent informal peacebuilding role in the region's most significant violent conflicts (Bougainville and the Solomon Islands) has achieved significant short-term dividends, including the cessation of violence. In these conflicts, women successfully used metaphors of themselves as mothers of land and nation, drawing on matrilineal traditions to assert their involvement in formal peacebuilding processes (Monson 2013). Yet women's involvement in informal peacebuilding has not always led to their participation in *formal* peacebuilding processes. 'Tradition' supports an informal peacebuilding role for Pacific women, but not a formal one.

## Potential avenues for research

- A comparative analysis of agency and sector gender analyses (held largely by donors) to increase understanding of women in Pacific bureaucracies
- Examination of indigenous women's biographical accounts of leadership to extract information on the purported impacts of their participation in various spheres
- A review of global evaluations of donor-funded programmes with explicit gender empowerment objectives to extract lessons on promoting women's leadership
- Research into the factors underpinning the gap between Pacific women's high participation in informal peacebuilding and low participation in formal peacebuilding processes.

Given the limited information available on the impacts of women's participation, donor-funded programmes in the region could clearly state expected outcomes of women's increased participation in various spheres, and establish accompanying monitoring and evaluation systems.

## References

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