

Background

Historically, the Pacific Island¹ states have one of the lowest rates of female representation. The Pacific Islands continue to be the one of the most challenging regions for inclusion of women. As of 2017, only 5.7% of parliamentary positions in the Pacific Islands are held by women. The gender inequality exhibited in the parliaments of the Pacific Islands is not a function of women's performance in education or high level positions in the civil service, as women have made strong advances in such sectors in recent decades. Pacific Island parliaments remain largely male-controlled due to institutional, political, cultural and socio-economic factors. However, these attitudes are being challenged and there is cause for optimism. The Pacific Islands have supported a Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality which contains the goal to achieve "full participation of women and political and public decision making" with a specific objective of "increase[ing] the number of women appointed and elected to public office."

Gains

- New Caledonia and French Polynesia enacted a parity law, and as a result, both countries parliaments now have close to 50% women representation.
- The 1999 Fralekaupule Act in Tuvalu provided speaking rights to local customary assemblies, where women have become highly involved.
- Samoa passed a bill in 2013 that provides women five "floating" reserved seats, where the number of seats awarded to women depends on the number of women elected outright. If no woman is elected outright, 5 seats are added; if one woman is elected, 4 seats are added, and so on.
- Trade union involvement in Fiji has enabled women to be elected as representatives.
- National councils of women (NCW) in many Pacific Island countries work closely with government agencies for women on key aspect of gender policy.
- NCWs have banded together to form the Pacific Foundation for the Advancement of Women, a regional network that aims to highlight the benefits of women political empowerment.

Challenges

- Institutional factors such as unequal access to land and titles continue to discriminate against women and the national institutions created to address the promotion of women has been ineffective.
- Conservative and patriarchal Pacific Island contemporary culture is a hindrance to achieving equality, as there has been a reluctance to change the existing male status quo.
- Momentum from the women's regional networks has stalled, with little evidence of targets having been met.
- The scarcity of women parliamentarians in the Pacific Islands means that those women in political office have limited resources, hindering their ability to promote transformative political agendas.
- "Big man" style of politics in the region, where political candidates demonstrate their capacity for political office through personal achievement, clan-based exchange, and material accumulation, disadvantages women as they tend lack the required wealth and status perceived as necessary to represent constituents effectively in parliament.

Key Takeaway

The parity laws enacted in New Caledonia and French Polynesia have been the most effective strategy in increasing the representation of women in national politics in the Pacific Islands. The law requires that political parties include 50% women on their lists of candidates in one round elections. The law further requires the lists to alternate one man and woman from top to bottom of the list. As a result of the parity laws, the percentage of parliament members that are women in New Caledonia increased from 17% to 46% and the percentage of parliament members that are women in French Polynesia increased from 12% to 48%. The parity laws were also a catalyst for women to pursue a political career and enter politics, as it was a mechanism for women to transfer from existing community leadership roles to national political roles.²

¹ Comprised of Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam , Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis & Futuna.

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Women's Political Participation in Asia and the Pacific, Jacqui True, et al., Social Science Research Council, 2014

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