



## Governance and Leadership in the Pacific: Options to Increase Female Participation

**Carly Stephan, Senior Project Officer**  
*The Foundation for Development Cooperation*

### Summary

*Despite a large amount of funding and numerous programs dedicated to improving governance in the Pacific region, the female parliamentary participation rate within the Pacific currently stands at 4.2% - the lowest in the world. Between the years of 1995-2008, Arab states (female participation rate 8.8%) and Sub-Saharan African states (female participation rate 18.6%) increased their female parliamentary participation rates by 5.3 per cent and 7.5 per cent respectively, while Pacific participation rates increased by just 1.7 per cent. Addressing the issue of low female parliamentary participation is a complex task, and should involve a multi-layered approach. This briefing note examines: the implications of a lack of commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the Pacific region; the introduction of temporary special measures; the importance of support networks; and, the need for male champions to help increase female participation. There have also been some positive trends in female local government participation, which has encouraging implications for efforts to improve women's national participation rates.*

### Introduction

Achieving gender equality in governance and political decision-making is a fundamentally basic notion of democracy. Derived from Greek, the word democracy simply means 'rule by the people'. Therefore it stands to reason that such 'people' should be made up of a fair representation of the population they are serving. Currently, examining the gender make up of Pacific parliaments as a representation of the larger population, 'the people' are made up of 95.8 percent men and 4.2 percent women. The rationale behind encouraging more women in to elected decision-making positions has been

emphasised by existing literature enumerable times; and the fact that there is a growing body of literature dedicated to 'convincing' the people of the importance of women's participation should be a concern – action needs to be taken. The undeniable fact remains that without female participation, the notion of democracy loses its credence and *raison d'être*. A country/province/community needs broad and diverse groups of leaders at the helm of a nation, to ensure that public policies and political decisions are as highly responsive and representative of a population's needs as possible.

Rwanda holds the mantle of the highest number of female parliamentarians, at 56.3 percent. It is the first country in the world to hold a female majority in parliament. Rwandan President Paul Kagame has spoken of women's rights as human rights. Kagame has been quoted as saying that Rwanda's development is simply not possible while half of the population are left behind<sup>1</sup>. Development, if it is to succeed, will not yield its full benefit if the inputs, opinions and perspectives of women are not taken into account at all levels of governance, beginning in the home – through to the houses of parliament. Women's rights are indeed human rights, and while the Pacific remains behind in this arena, we will continue to witness discouraging progress in development efforts. UNDP recently released the Asia-Pacific Human Development Report, outlining the gloomy status of gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region. The message of the document stands out loud and clear: gender equality sorely lags behind the region's economic successes, and may even jeopardise future economic growth. Upon the report's release, UNDP Administrator, former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark and an eminent female leader said: "Empowering women is vital for achieving development goals overall and for boosting economic growth and sustainable development"<sup>2</sup>.

### Increasing Pacific women's awareness of governance and leadership issues

With goals to increase women's leadership skills and familiarity with governance issues, and subsequently increase women's political representation and participation, the Foundation for Development Cooperation is nearing the completion of a two year project entitled the "Bottom-up Governance Leadership Program for Women in the Pacific"<sup>3</sup>. With funding from the United Nations



Democracy Fund (UNDEF), BGLP sought to address the yawning gap between female parliamentary participation rates in the Pacific and those of the world average, which lie at 4.2 per cent and 19 per cent respectively<sup>4</sup>. The approach underpinning BGLP was to address two of the specific problems facing Pacific women who want to enter politics, namely: a lack of confidence in assuming leadership positions within a strongly male-dominated field, and a lack of access and opportunity to receive relevant information and training. BGLP delivered its three module training course via an e-learning platform, with in-country affiliates in each target country (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga) to assist with on the ground support and guidance to participants.

### Comparing Participation Rates

Female participation rates in the Pacific are the lowest in the world, lagging behind the Arab states at 8.8 percent and Sub-Saharan Africa at 18.6 per cent<sup>5</sup>. A statistic that is even more concerning is that between the years of 1995-2008, whilst the Arab states and Sub-Saharan African states increased their participation rates by 5.3 per cent and 7.5 per cent respectively, the Pacific participation rates increased by only 1.7 per cent, to be at 4.2 per cent at the end of 2008<sup>6</sup>. These figures, released yearly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) are very disheartening when one considers the amount of money directed towards governance in the Pacific region. OECD figures indicate that USD \$368 million in government and civil society related ODA was disbursed to the Pacific in 2008<sup>7</sup>. With so much aid money directed towards improving governance in the Pacific, the question must be asked: why has the Pacific seen the lowest increase of women's participation rates across all sub groupings examined by the IPU?

### Challenges facing women in the Pacific

Women in the Pacific face a particularly difficult time in both entering and staying in the field of politics, and unique challenges are presented to them. Although circumstances most certainly vary by country, they can include: a traditional patriarchal system of leadership and rule, male dominated political parties, religious beliefs - some of which discourage females from taking political leadership roles, a shortage of women advocacy networks to support women parliamentary candidates (including a lack of ongoing support once elected), endemic corruption, electoral fraud, intimidation of female

candidates, and a general lack of governmental motivation to implement policies which would encourage an increase in female participation<sup>8</sup>. These factors combined serve to reinforce that institutional politics in the Pacific should ostensibly remain 'men's business', and experienced by women in a passive mode, rather than in their role as agents for change<sup>9</sup>.

Speaking with participants from BGLP, FDC found that women talk about governance and political issues in the home, most often with female friends and family, but are shy or intimidated to make their opinions heard in an outside forum. Often times the threat of domestic violence and oppression in the home can cause women to suppress their opinions to keep the peace. When village meetings are held, women are often present but silent. One participant suggested that women seem to be 'stuck' in tradition and whilst they like to value and respect their culture, women's participation at higher decision-making levels needs to happen in order for the Pacific to move forward. The importance of visible female leaders to set an example was also highlighted by BGLP participants, who said that having such women to look to as role models will encourage women to say to themselves: "If she can do it, why can't I?" It should be acknowledged at this point that having women as leaders within some Pacific societies is not a foreign notion, nor is it entirely contradictory to 'tradition'. In Fiji, women hold chiefly titles (and have done for hundreds of years) through the hereditary chiefly system. Indeed it appears that women have had the most difficulty gaining access to modern forms of parliamentary governance. This suggests ongoing programs of assistance in this area are needed. A program such as BGLP and others which seeks to empower women at the grass roots level needs to be augmented by support from national governments, local governments and civil society, forming a multi-layered approach which is more likely to gain traction and achieve tangible results.

### Improving participation rates

Most Pacific country governments have become signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which stipulates in article seven that a signatory shall:

'take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of



the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; and
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organisations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country<sup>10</sup>.

However, clear and practical steps to address these issues in Pacific countries have been weak, or non-existent. The only Pacific countries which have not signed up to CEDAW are Tonga, Palau and Niue – thus every other Pacific state should be actively implementing the principles enshrined in the convention they are signatory to.

Temporary special measures (TSMs) such as implementing quotas for women's participation in parliament are slowly gaining traction within the region. There has been success with the small but significant quota put in place by the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, which has allocated three reserved seats for women and is a trailblazer in the Pacific, being the first parliament in the Pacific to adopt such measures in their constitution<sup>11</sup>. More recently we have seen a renewed commitment by the Government of Papua New Guinea to revisit the proposed legislation for reserved seats for women in national parliament, thanks largely to the tireless efforts of Dame Carol Kidu, the country's only female MP. By the July session of Parliament this year, the proposed Bill will go through its first reading, debate and vote<sup>12</sup>. Should the legislation be passed, 22 seats or 17 per cent of seats in PNG's national parliament will be guaranteed for women<sup>13</sup>.

New Caledonia has also had success with legislative measures to increase women's participation rates. The French-administered territory adopted a French 'Law on Parity' in 2000 which required political parties to adopt a list proportional representation system. This system ensures that women and men are listed alternately on party voting lists and equal numbers of women and men are fielded by parties for election<sup>15</sup>. This move saw the levels of female participation rise in New Caledonia from 99 in 2000, to 286 by 2005<sup>16</sup>. Research conducted by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community found that the

law gave women the encouragement they needed to take up politics. As a result of the law, there had also been a reassessment of 'traditional' male-oriented political practices, women reported a gain in respect from male colleagues, and women were empowered to speak out against nepotism and chauvinism in politics<sup>17</sup>. It must be noted however that a stable party structure is important for the effective use of gender based quotas. Thus, in the right political environment, legislative measures such as TSMs can be effective in raising female participation rates and also assist in challenging the notion that politics in the Pacific is a man's domain.

Networks have an important role to play in fostering the progress of any sector. Women's networks in the Pacific, such as the Pacific Women's Information Network (PACWIN) play a very important role in promoting awareness of gender issues and encouraging a sense of support and camaraderie amongst women in the region. However, it is evident that activities in the area of women's political representation within the Pacific are not occurring in a manner which allows knowledge sharing and dissemination of lessons learned<sup>18</sup>. Increasing the levels of exchange and support amongst the various programs and projects to ensure they have a collective impact on levels of female parliamentary participation, requires the cultivation of dedicated networks. More networks are also needed to support women who are currently in governance/decision-making positions and those who are seeking election or appointment to such positions. Women in the Pacific should be well aware of how they can access support, mentoring and encouragement in this area, if they decide that a position of leadership in government is a goal they wish to pursue.

Acceptance and encouragement by male colleagues within governance structures is of paramount importance in ensuring women have both the opportunity and the ability to gain these positions and stay in them. Male champions of gender equity in parliamentary participation do exist in the Pacific, but more support of this type needs to be encouraged. Recognising the importance of women's voices and their contributions can only come about through the gradual shifting of attitudes. This process can be assisted by men who have accepted the need for gender equity in decision-making, and these men can lead by example. Currently, obstructionist behaviour and intimidation from male opposition and counterparts are experienced by some women in the arena of government within the Pacific (and arguably within other arenas as well).



### Female participation in local government

Despite the less than favourable situation women find themselves in when aiming to become members of national parliament, there are encouraging figures for female participation at local government levels in the Pacific. This is an aspect of female participation which the IPU numbers do not recognise, and the numbers are steadily growing<sup>19</sup>. Across the Pacific, on average there is a higher representation of women in elected and appointed decision making decisions at a local/provincial level than at a national level<sup>20</sup>. Strong female leaders can be found in relative abundance in local government roles such as city councillors and special administrators through to chief executive officers, town clerks and other council management staff. The large volume of positions in local government creates a far greater number of opportunities for women to take up leadership and decision-making positions. These positive numbers should be more widely monitored and disseminated by national governments as well as regional and international monitoring bodies, as clearly the whole picture of female participation rates is not currently being captured effectively. The only comprehensive data gathering on women's political participation at the sub-national level in the Pacific is being championed by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) Pacific Project. CLGF is currently working in partnership with the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat to compile a database on women's participation in local level governments. The task is proving difficult however, as national agencies do not comprehensively collect data at these levels.

Participation in local government is an extremely effective way for women to affect real change and have a hand in addressing critically important local issues such as: basic service delivery, physical planning, community infrastructure, transportation, public health and safety, economic development and urban poverty<sup>21</sup>. This level of government is also closest to the community and grassroots levels, allowing a closer interaction with the day-to-day lives of women in the home, in the marketplace, and in community groups. A lot of positive awareness raising of gender issues can be done from this platform and should not only be strongly encouraged, but recognised in official participation figures.

Yet women's political participation should not begin and end at this level. Women have a lot to contribute to the

political process and should be equally involved in decision-making at all levels of government and indeed throughout all spheres of society. A stronger focus should be placed on the merits of female participation at all levels of governance, from the bottom-up, rather than the tendency to lean on national parliament participation rates as all-encompassing and representative of the overall female participation rate of a nation.

During a year which sees Tonga, Solomon Islands, Nauru, the Cook Islands, and Tuvalu go to the polls for elections; it is a timely reminder that the Pacific still has a lot of work to do to achieve a gender balance in its national parliaments. However, acknowledging that women are involved in and affecting change in other areas of government is necessary, and a heartening encouragement for the challenging road ahead.

### Recommendations

- The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) should be more effectively mainstreamed into all Pacific signatories' legislation, and the countries which are yet to sign (Tonga, Palau, Niue) should be lobbied to do so;
- Reserved seats for women need to be urgently considered by governments in Pacific countries that have strong and stable party structures, looking to proximal examples such as those in Bougainville and New Caledonia;
- This must also be supported by civil society efforts to increase women's political representation to produce strong female candidates and consistently support them throughout their terms;
- Male champions of female participation are encouraged to continue their efforts to support more women in government; and
- Data collection of Pacific women's participation rates in city councils and local governments should be strengthened and given more exposure, as these are governance arenas within which women can affect change and have a positive influence, as well as providing a good field of candidates for future national representation.



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