

Cook Islands

'The nation is like a child that needs both parents to nurture it. And then we go into the House of Parliament and we completely go out of balance! I think we need to make it happen. Enough thinking! [...] I was reluctant [to become Speaker of the House] at first because it's to do with politics, but I think if you're serious about making a difference in your country then you accept the opportunities that come.'

Ms Niki Rattle, Speaker of the Cook Islands Parliament (Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships Project, 2014).¹

Over the years, women in the Cook Islands have seen improvements in their status. An increasing number of women are involved in political affairs and decision making, economic activity, accessing police and counselling services and there have been improvements in maternal health² and gender parity in primary and secondary level education.³ Since 2014, the focus of the Cook Islands National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2011-2016) has been on ending violence against women and improving women's economic empowerment.⁴ The Family Protection and Support Bill was passed in July 2017, providing additional measures to protect families and children from family violence.

But there is still work to do. There is significant income disparity between women and men, with no change recorded in 2011 when compared to the 2006 census.⁵ More women than men are in the lowest-income bracket and more men than women are among the highest income earners. Women's responsibilities have also expanded as the primary health caregivers, and often with dispersed extended family due to migration. There are still significant challenges for women on the outer islands (known as the *Pa Enua*) where gender roles are stricter and their relative isolation and dependence on natural resources makes them more vulnerable.⁶

Leadership and Decision Making

In 2014, four women were elected to the National Parliament, taking the total number of women in Parliament to five including the Speaker of the House. This is the highest ever number of women in Parliament for Cook Islands at 17 per cent.⁷ Cook Islands also has the highest rate in the Pacific for women in senior management roles in the public sector (48 per cent),⁸ with women heading six of the 13 ministries. The representation of women on State-Owned Enterprises remains steady with around one-fifth of seats held by women. Men still outnumber women in jobs with status, power and authority, however the proportion of women in these types of roles has increased to near equality. Women are more involved at the island government level in the outer islands than in the past, but the participation rate remains low.⁹

Economic Empowerment

Female labour force participation increased steadily between 2001 and 2011 and is one of the highest rates in the Pacific at 65 per cent, comparable to Australia and New Zealand – note this figure does not include subsistence work undertaken by women and men.¹⁰ Despite strong labour force participation and the gender pay gap¹¹ narrowing from 71 in 2001 to 80 in 2011,¹² women tend to earn less than men when measured by hourly wage. There is also variation in the female labour force participation rate between Rarotonga and the outer islands.¹³

Measures have been put in place to support women's economic empowerment including training and mentoring for women, the introduction of paid maternity leave legislation, and the appointment of Women's Development Officers throughout Cook Islands.

Ending Violence Against Women

Domestic and sexual violence remain sensitive issues with a traditionally high level of acceptance of male violence against women. The 2014 Cook Islands Family Health and Safety survey shows that nearly one in every three women (33 per cent) has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. There is a belief that this figure is understated, particularly for women in the outer islands. By region, 43.6 per cent of women in the Southern Group, 30.3 per cent in Rarotonga, and 23.6 per cent in the Northern Group reported experiencing physical and/or sexual partner violence at some point in their lives. Alcohol abuse is considered to be a key contributing factor to the high rates of physical violence.¹⁴ Since 2013, there has been progress in this area with the development of coordinated referral services and work to improve administrative data collection in key government ministries and NGOs. The Family Protection and Support Bill was passed unanimously by Parliament in July 2017, which contains a number of measures aimed at preventing violence against women and domestic violence, and aims to establish comprehensive response services.¹⁵

Enhancing Agency

The Cook Islands Government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2006 and has established a gender policy called the [National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Strategic Plan of Action 2011-2016](#). In addition, the National Sustainable Development Plan 2007-2010 notes the intention to integrate gender equality policies into government sectoral strategies. The Gender Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for supporting implementation of CEDAW and leads on coordination to implement the Cook Islands Gender Policy. Despite several successful initiatives to address gender equality, the Policy is not yet systematically integrated into the policies and programs of central and local government. The Cook Islands National Council of Women is responsible for coordinating implementation of the Gender Policy with civil society organisations, however civil society in Cook Islands remains weak.

Key Statistics

Leadership and Decision Making

- **17 per cent** of Cook Islands National Parliament is comprised of women (5 out of 24 members including Speaker of the House).¹⁶
- **48 per cent** of management and decision making positions are held by women.¹⁷

Economic Empowerment

- **65 per cent** of women participate in the labour force (not including subsistence work).
- **12 per cent** gender gap in the labour force participation rate (male to female).

Ending Violence Against Women

- **33 per cent** of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partner in their lifetime.

Enhancing Agency

- Cook Islands has ratified CEDAW.
- **46.1 per cent** is the contraceptive prevalence rate of women aged between 15-49.
- **122** is the Gender Parity Index for secondary school enrolment (gross) in 2014 – for every 100 boys enrolled, there were 122 girls enrolled.

Note: Statistics in this section are from the [Asian Development Bank \(2016\) Gender Statistics: The Pacific and Timor Leste](#) report unless otherwise stated.

Partnership with *Pacific Women*

Through *Pacific Women*, the Australian Government will spend approximately AU\$3.9 million over ten years (2012-2022) on initiatives supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in Cook Islands. Approximately AU\$410,000 has been spent delivering activities in-country (FY2012-2013 to FY2015-2016). More information on the partnership and nature of support is included in the [Pacific Women's Cook Islands Country Plan Summary 2013-2015](#) valued at AU\$780,000. Details on activities currently underway in-country with various partners is available via our [interactive map](#). The list of program partners can be found [here](#). Cook Islands is also supported by *Pacific Women's* regional program, details of which can be viewed on the interactive map under regional activities.

Stories of Change

1. [Cook Islands using smart infographics to explain gender statistics](#)

2. [Extending the reach of family welfare services](#)

Further Information

- [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat \(2013\) Cook Islands Gender Profile](#)
- [SPC Stocktake of the Gender Mainstreaming Capacity of Pacific Island Governments \(2012\) Cook Islands](#)
- [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat \(2016\) Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Trend Assessment Report 2012-2016](#)
- [United Nations Statistics Division, Minimum Set of Gender Indicators](#)

¹ [Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development \(2015\) First Progress Report 2012-2015](#)

² SPC (2014) Gender equality: Where do we stand? Cook Islands

³ [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat \(2016\) Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Trend Assessment Report 2012-2016](#)

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ *Pacific Women's* Cook Islands Country Plan 2013-2015

⁷ [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat \(2016\) Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Trend Assessment Report 2012-2016](#)

⁸ [Asian Development Bank \(2015\) The Cook Islands: Stronger Investment Climate for Sustainable Growth](#)

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ The gender pay gap is the difference between women's and men's average weekly full-time equivalent earnings, expressed as a percentage of men's earnings.

¹² [SPC \(2015\) Cook Islands 2012 Gender Profile](#)

¹³ [Asian Development Bank \(2015b\) The Cook Islands: Stronger Investment Climate for Sustainable Growth](#)

¹⁴ [Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study \(2014\)](#)

¹⁵ [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat \(2016\) Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Trend Assessment Report 2012-2016](#)

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ Managerial positions include politicians, senior government officials, and corporate and general managers in the public and private sector.