

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Regional Intergenerational Dialogue

Waves of Change: Pacific Women in Politics Across Generations

30 September - 1 October 2025 | Nadi, Fiji



## ABOUT THE REGIONAL CONVENING

Under the umbrella of WYDE | Women's Leadership initiative, funded by the EU and in partnership with International IDEA, IPU, and UCLG, UN Women hosted the second of a series of intergenerational Regional Convenings during its second year of implementation. The convening served as a moment to gather women leaders and activists from the Pacific region to exchange knowledge, discuss challenges to women's participation and leadership in political and public life and build capacities in an intergenerational space.

The intergenerational dialogues are part of the WYDE | Women's Leadership strategy to promote and encourage more young women to enter public life and support efforts of women office holders in their efforts to advance the implementation of international and regional normative frameworks on gender equality and women's participation in political and public life.

This report, prepared by UN Women Fiji MCO and WYDE | Women's Leadership teams summarises the presentations and highlights key takeaways from the discussions which will inform not only the implementation of the WYDE | Women's Leadership programme but also further work on women's leadership and decision-making, in the region and beyond.

UN Women extends its gratitude to all the participants to this Convening.

## Opening Session and Setting the Scene on WYDE | Women's Leadership

**SESSION SUMMARY:** **Alison Davidian (Representative, UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office)** welcomed participants to the Pacific intergenerational dialogue, situating it within the WYDE | Women's Leadership Initiative. She highlighted Pacific women's underrepresentation despite progress, warned of fragile gains and urged cross-generational alliances to protect women's leadership amid global and local challenges.

**Eseta B. Nadakuitavuki (Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection Fiji)** stressed aligning national action with regional/global gender frameworks. She warned that parity in legislatures won't be reached until 2063 without stronger measures. She emphasised mentorship, youth leadership programs, and systemic reforms to remove structural barriers, calling men, chiefs, and faith leaders to actively support women's inclusion in decision-making.

**Carine Hanssens (First Counsellor, EU Delegation to the Pacific)** reaffirmed the EU's commitment to women's political participation referring to the EU Roadmap for Women's Rights adopted in March 2025. She highlighted the essential work of WYDE for women's leadership, the importance of gender-responsive policies, and the EU's role as a reliable partner in promoting equality and inclusive leadership globally.

**Rajan Murti (Programme Coordinator, International IDEA, Fiji)** framed women's leadership as transformative, targeting both underrepresentation of women and systemic male

dominance. He outlined WYDE activities led by International IDEA such as empowerment academies, media engagement, youth platforms, inclusive forums, and male allies' campaigns, stressing alignment with global frameworks like Beijing+30 and SDG 5.5 to accelerate change.

**Julie Ballington (Chief a.i., Leadership and Decision-Making Section, UN Women HQ)** positioned WYDE as part of the EU's flagship on women and youth democratic engagement; highlighted stalled progress in gender parity in politics; emphasized the need to transform social norms; and stressed intergenerational collaboration to ensure women's transformative participation and leadership across generations.



(from left to right). Eseta B. Nadakuitavuki, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, Fiji and Alison Davidian, Representative, UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office. Photo: UN Women/Maryann Lockington

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*“The problem is not that the Pacific lacks women leaders — what is missing are the systems, the political will, and the accountability to ensure that women’s leadership is recognized, respected, and represented.” - Alison Davidian, Representative, UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office*

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## Session 1: Panel discussion - 30 years of the Beijing Platform for Action and Pacific Platform for Action - Examining lessons learned and planning for the future

### MODERATOR:

**Alison Davidian**, Representative, UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office

### PANELLISTS:

**Akanesi Polotu Paunga**, Chief Executive Officer, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Tonga

**Elizabeth Kite**, Founder, Take the Lead, Tonga

**Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls**, Coordinator for Political Engagement, Pacific Women Mediators Network

**Mereseini Rakuita**, Principal Strategic Lead, Pacific Women Lead, Pacific Community, Fiji

**SESSION SUMMARY:** The panel brought together women leaders from different generations to reflect on progress since 1995 and chart new pathways

toward gender parity in decision-making. Participants stressed that intergenerational solidarity must move beyond symbolism to genuine power-sharing and leadership continuity. They called for investment in youth leadership pipelines, including practice parliaments, and urged that regional and global commitments be backed by institutional reforms and resources. Panellists highlighted the importance of reclaiming culture and faith as assets for gender justice and reforming political systems and parties to open decision-making spaces. The discussion concluded with a call to create enabling environments for women in leadership, ensuring that gains toward equality are sustained and transformative.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE PANEL

- **Deepen intergenerational solidarity.** This is not simply symbolic, but a process of mediating power and ensuring continuity of leadership.
- **Invest in youth leadership pipelines.** Create spaces like practice parliaments that allow young women to lead, debate, and influence policy.
- **Reclaim culture and faith as assets.** Feminist reinterpretations of theology and custom can strengthen gender justice narratives in Pacific contexts.
- **Reform political systems and parties.** Recognize that power sits not only in parliaments but in political parties and informal decision-making arenas, and target these for change.
- **Support women in leadership roles.** Beyond increasing entry, build protective and enabling environments for those already navigating hostile or exclusionary systems.
- **Strengthen laws and policies.** All the above are important, but if the region wants to change the numbers, countries need to change laws.



## Session 2: Understanding social norms on political participation in the Pacific Region

**SESSION SUMMARY:** Led by **Jennifer Kalpokas Doan, Co-Executive Director, Balance of Power Kalpokas Doan**, the session on social norms examined how invisible cultural, religious, and community expectations determine the extent to which women's political leadership is accepted across the Pacific.

Drawing on concrete cultural and religious examples, Kalpokas Doan illustrated how these norms operate in daily life: whether women are permitted to speak in village meetings such as the *nakamal* in Vanuatu, hold chiefly titles, or own property; the differing interpretations of bride price as a symbolic gift or a transactional practice; and the gendered structures within churches, including women's auxiliary "wings" or restrictions on ordination. Such practices, she argued, form the cornerstones of political legitimacy and often reinforce double standards that disadvantage women. Presenting findings from Balance of

Power's research on the "Unspoken Rules of Politics" in Vanuatu, she highlighted the gendered moral scrutiny faced by women candidates. Women were frequently judged on their perceived morality, with voters often preferring widows or single women to avoid "husbands' jealousy." Allegations of extramarital affairs, she noted, could irreparably damage women's reputations, whereas similar rumours about men had little electoral consequence.

Turning to youth perspectives, Kalpokas Doan highlighted demographic and attitudinal shifts, noting that 61 per cent of Tonga's population is aged between 15 and 29. While parents and church leaders continue to exert strong influence over voting behaviour, surveys show encouraging trends: 62 per cent of youth believe they should support female candidates, and 51 per cent would vote for one. She described this as a promising generational shift that could gradually erode entrenched barriers.

### ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES IDENTIFIED THROUGH GROUP WORK ON SOCIAL NORM CHANGE IN THE PACIFIC CONTEXT:

1. **Start change at the family and home level.** Reshaping social norms begins with how children are raised. This includes replacing physical discipline with non-violent parenting, teaching gender equality from a young age, and modelling respectful relationships.
2. **Leverage education systems and youth engagement.** Schools and youth programs were highlighted as critical spaces for embedding gender equality and anti-violence messages early on, ensuring generational change.
3. **Reclaim culture and custom.** Emphasis was placed on going back to the stories of grandmothers and earlier generations to identify authentic forms of equality in Pacific traditions and distinguishing genuine custom from discriminatory practices.
4. **Engage faith leaders and male allies.** Identify men, particularly those in positions of influence within churches or traditional authority, who can champion gender equality in an informed and credible way.
5. **Amplify women's voices in media and community advocacy.** Using radio campaigns and community storytelling to frame violence and inequality in everyday terms (e.g., family budgeting disputes leading to violence) can make advocacy resonate more strongly at community level.
6. **Change laws and policies.** Reforms help shape what is publicly acceptable by defining problems, shifting incentives, expectations, and authority — they signal that certain roles and behaviours are normal, legitimate, and enforceable, accelerating norm change beyond what awareness-raising alone can achieve.

## Session 3: Building political will and strengthening networks and coalitions as countervailing powers

**MODERATOR:** **Audrey Manu**, Programme Coordinator, UN Women, Solomon Islands

### PANELLISTS:

**Fay Volatabu**, Executive Director, Femlink Pacific

**Sophia Anna Teio**, Founder of Young Leaders Alliance, Papua New Guinea

**Olivia Baro**, Youth Programme Coordinator, Pacific Council of Churches

**Mata'afa Faatino Utumapu**, Disability Rights Advocate, General Manager of Nuanua O Le Alofa, Samoa

**SESSION SUMMARY:** This session explored how to build political will and collective advocacy to counter resistance to gender equality and transform social norms limiting women's leadership. Speakers from across the Pacific — spanning media, youth, faith, and disability movements — emphasized that political change begins in communities where women's informal leadership already thrives. Participants highlighted how storytelling, radio, and

social media can reshape narratives, while faith institutions can reinterpret theology to model inclusion and justice.

Collective and intergenerational leadership emerged as central: one woman's action may spark change, but solidarity sustains it. Pacific values of service, respect, and community can ground new narratives that normalise women's leadership rather than treat it as exceptional. Speakers called for engaging men and faith leaders as genuine allies, translating advocacy into local and faith-based languages, and investing in early education to transform gender norms.

Inclusion was framed as the foundation of democracy itself, a test of sincerity in advancing equality. Participants urged that accountability be visible in laws, budgets, and political commitments that make women's rights tangible. Across discussions, solidarity, storytelling, and inclusion were affirmed as the driving forces for women's leadership and democratic renewal in the Pacific.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Political will is built collectively** through everyday acts of leadership, storytelling, coalition-building, and advocacy across media, faith, youth, and disability movements.
- **Women already hold the tools for change; political will grows when those tools are used intentionally.** There is a need to move beyond declarations and use every available space, resource, and platform to advance women's equal participation and representation, grounded in Pacific values.
- **Social norms that position politics as a male domain remain a structural barrier**, but can be challenged through narrative change, mentorship, and collective visibility.
- **Media advocacy** is a powerful strategy for transforming mindsets: storytelling and public dialogue can normalise women's leadership and generate public demand for reform.
- **Youth-led coalitions and intergenerational alliances** create countervailing power by linking individual leadership to mutual support systems and collective advocacy, leveraging diverse knowledge and skills.
- **Faith institutions, when engaged critically, can shift social norms** from within by aligning theology with justice and modelling equality in their governance and leadership.
- **Inclusion** is both a test and a measure of genuine political will: participation must be accessible, representative, and embedded in all electoral and policy processes.

## Session 4: Promoting gender parity in leadership through legal frameworks and special measures

**MODERATOR:** Julie Ballington, Chief a.i, Leadership and Decision-Making, UN Women HQ

### PANELLISTS:

**Hon. Cathy Launa Nori**, Minister for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, Member of Parliament, Solomon Islands

**Hon. Ali'imailemanu Alofa Tuuau**, Former Member of Parliament, Samoa

**Hon. Dulcie Elaine Tei**, Member of Parliament, Tonga

**Jennifer Kausei**, Municipal Counsellor, Freshwota Ward, Vanuatu

**SESSION SUMMARY:** The session explored progress and enduring barriers to women's equal political participation in the Pacific, framed within evolving global norms on gender parity. Moderator Julie Ballington, Chief a.i, Leadership and Decision-Making, UN Women HQ, traced the historical evolution of targets for women's representation—from the outdated 30% benchmark of the 1990s to the current 50/50 parity standard endorsed by the

Commission on the Status of Women (2021) and reaffirmed in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 (2024). She noted that parity is now established as a universal norm, requiring concrete legislative and policy measures. Despite this global shift, the Pacific remains the region furthest from achieving parity, with women comprising only 8–10% of MPs and 9% of ministers, and limited uptake of special measures. Only Samoa and Solomon Islands have national quotas, while Vanuatu and Bougainville have local-level reserved seats.

Speakers from across the region agreed that achieving gender balance in political decision-making demands a combination of legislative reform, institutional action, and values-based advocacy. Discussions emphasized that legal frameworks, community mobilization, and strategic communication are key to reframing special measures as tools of fairness and shared responsibility and service — moving from commitments to real, systemic change.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Promote parity as the benchmark.** It is imperative to shift from 30 per cent to 50/50 representation to meet international normative standards and underscore that equality is a right, not an aspiration, and that quotas are a corrective measure, not preferential treatment.
- **Establish a working group or observatory on gender parity.** This could harmonize advocacy, share expertise and lessons learned, and strengthen accountability
- **Find anchors for gender parity in national laws and constitutions.** Legal reform remains central to progress but face significant resistance. Legal analysis of domestic laws and Pacific examples of successful reforms can guard against backlash that frames gender parity in politics as a foreign or externally imposed agenda.
- **Promote public understanding of TSMs and early investment in women's leadership.** Community education and mentorship create the foundation for change by building legitimacy and a pipeline of future candidates.
- **Use evidence and language strategically to cultivate acceptance.** Comparative analysis of women's representation and development outcomes can strengthen arguments for reform and resource allocation, while framing quotas around fairness, unity, service, shared leadership and other Pacific values broadens support.
- **Engage political parties as critical actors.** In Pacific countries with party systems, quotas within party candidate lists and reform of party structures are necessary to ensure women's access to winnable seats.

## Session 5: Advancing young women's political leadership through intergenerational collaboration

**MODERATOR:** **Kristina Zaduku Sogavare**, Vice President, National Council of Women, Solomon Islands

**PANELLISTS:**

**Mary Keqa Vasaro**, Chairlady of the Young Women's Parliamentary Group, Solomon Islands

**Hon. Ruta Babo Nemta**, Member of Parliament and Deputy Speaker, Kiribati

**Hon. Rhonda Tiakia**, Member of Parliament, Niue

**Hon. Marie Louise Paulette Milne**, Member of Parliament, Vanuatu

**SESSION SUMMARY:** The session explored how intergenerational collaboration can strengthen young women's political leadership across the Pacific, framed as both a cultural and political imperative for building resilient and representative leadership. Moderator emphasized that Pacific leadership traditions—while rooted in hierarchy and continuity—must evolve to meet emerging

challenges that demand inclusive and innovative governance. Panellists shared personal accounts of mentorship shaping their journeys—from family influence and community guidance to women's parliamentary networks and municipal councils. They agreed that mentorship must begin early, in homes, schools, churches, and villages, ensuring young women are not only encouraged to run but supported to lead.

Discussions underscored mentorship as both transformation and continuity to sustain women's leadership across generations. Speakers highlighted that intergenerational collaboration should be intentionally built into political and movement spaces, not left to chance and that leadership pathways differ—with some grounded in family legacy, others in nurturing environments such as the Parliamentary Groups, underscoring the need for inclusive spaces for those without traditional networks.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Mentorship and intergenerational collaboration** form a core pathway for advancing women's political leadership in the Pacific. Leadership should be viewed as a collective responsibility that uplifts others and multiplies opportunities rather than concentrating power.
- **Creating formal and informal leadership spaces for young women** without family or political networks remains critical. Embedding mentorship and intergenerational collaboration within political parties and governance structures such as parliaments connects communities, institutions, and generations.
- **Respect for elders and cultural protocols can operate as a political resource.** Pacific leadership rests on dialogue between tradition and change, balancing reverence with reform to maintain continuity and legitimacy.



## Session 6: Youth-led insights and perspectives on engaging men and masculinities to transform social norms and advance women's political participation

**MODERATOR:** **Hosanna Kabakoro**, Young Leader, Co-Founder of South Pacific Foundation, Fiji

### PANELLISTS:

**'Ofa Likiliki-Guttenbeil**, Feminist Researcher and Activist, Tonga

**Hon. Ruth Cross Kwansing**, Member of Parliament, Kiribati

**Luna-Rossa Lomitusi-Ape**, Vice President, Samoa Women Agricultural Growers

**Dr Mercy Masta**, Research Fellow, Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University

### SESSION SUMMARY:

This dialogue explored how masculinities shape women's leadership and gender equality across the Pacific, bringing together youth leaders, parliamentarians, and feminist scholars to reimagine men's roles in advancing women's participation. Speakers emphasized that engaging men is not a concession but a return to Pacific traditions of relational leadership grounded in care, respect, and cooperation. They argued that redefining masculinities through these values is

essential for inclusive governance and sustainable social transformation. Discussions also highlighted the need for men and women alike to unlearn internalized hierarchies, beginning in the home, where shared decision-making and responsibility can model equality for future generations.

Dr. Mercy Masta's research underscored that masculinities are socially constructed through culture, religion, and history—and that Pacific men often face emotional costs from restrictive gender roles. She proposed five strategies for engaging men as partners in gender justice: start transformation in households; create culturally grounded reflective spaces; ensure accountability to women's movements; reframe narratives around shared goals; and engage respected role models and families. Her findings and the plenary discussion converged on a core message: transforming gender relations requires rebalancing, not replacing, power—restoring leadership as a shared, relational practice rooted in Pacific values of care and reciprocity.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Masculinities must be redefined, not rejected.** Pacific men, too, experience social and emotional vulnerabilities; transforming masculinities means restoring *va tapuia* — the sacred relational space of respect and accountability.
- **Men's engagement must be safe and accountable.** Reflection spaces for men — in churches, kava circles, or sports clubs — should be grounded in Pacific values and remain accountable to women's movement.
- **Families are the first sites of transformation.** Gender roles are learned early; boys and girls must both be taught that leadership and care are shared responsibilities.
- **Internalized patriarchy must be addressed.** Transforming how women perceive their own power is as critical as changing men's attitudes.
- **Grassroots women are leading cultural change.** From Tonga's Women's Fono to Samoa's women farmers' networks, community-based organizing engages chiefs, pastors, and male youth in new conversations on gender partnership.

- **Language and framing shape impact.** “Fairness,” “balance,” and “shared responsibility” resonate more deeply with Pacific cultural and faith values than abstract equality rhetoric.

## Breakout session: Challenging pushback and shifting social norms

Participants were divided into four groups to craft social media messages to challenge pushback and shift social norms. Participants identified and presented creative communication strategies such as social media and radio campaigns, partnerships with faith leaders, use of art and music, podcasts, storytelling, and promoting male allyship to normalize women’s leadership and counter resistance.

### KEY IDEAS:

- **Shared and inclusive leadership:** Leadership should be seen as collective.
- **Complementarity and family values:** Men and women bring different strengths that complement each other; equality should reflect family unity and shared purpose.
- **Equality starts at home:** Early education and parenting shape gender norms; campaigns should emphasize raising boys and girls with mutual respect and equal opportunity.
- **Male allyship:** Engage male leaders, musicians, and influencers to promote women’s empowerment through campaigns like a Pacific version of *HeForShe*.
- **Faith and cultural alignment:** Frame messages in ways that resonate with church and community contexts, using inclusive language that reflects local dialects and traditions.
- **Storytelling and media engagement:** Use social media, podcasts, and radio to share women’s stories and highlight role models; tailor platforms to different age groups (e.g., TikTok for youth, Facebook for broader audiences).

- **Music and songs:** Engage musicians and singers as music can support disseminating equality messages, as seen in the Solomon Islands.
- **Coalitions and collaboration:** Build alliances between women’s organizations, youth groups, and faith institutions to amplify messages and sustain change.

### EXAMPLES OF MESSAGES:

- “Pacific leadership should be like singing in harmony — when men, women, and diverse voices blend together, the song is stronger.”
- “Equality starts at home.”
- “Women’s voices belong in every room where decisions are made.”
- “Leadership is not a solo journey — it’s a woven mat of support and sharing.”
- “When women rise, communities rise.”
- “Democracy works best when it’s inclusive.”
- “Gender equality isn’t just a women’s issue, it’s everyone’s issue.”
- “Equality in leadership is not optional — it’s essential.”

### MENTORING SESSION

The convening also offered informal spaces for networking, such as a welcoming dinner and a dedicated mentoring session.

The mentoring session brought participants together in small groups, each pairing one or two experienced parliamentarians or civil society leaders with young emerging leaders. The objective was to encourage informal and personal exchanges while sharing for one hour what mentoring activities could look like and would entail. Using guiding

questions on career paths, life experiences, challenges encountered, and coping strategies, participants engaged in lively discussions that extended beyond the scheduled time. Participants' feedback from the session reinforced a key

## Wrap up/Closing session

### SPEAKERS:

**Julie Ballington**, Chief a.i., Leadership and Decision-Making Section, UN Women HQ

**Lisa Kindervater**, Policy Specialist, Women's Political Participation, UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office

### PLENARY SESSION SUMMARY

Participants called for deeper intergenerational solidarity — power-sharing and sustained youth leadership pipelines through platforms like Young Women Parliamentary Groups, faith networks, and disability organizations. They agreed that women in office need continuous mentoring, institutional support, and protection from political pressures, and that reform must extend beyond parliaments to political parties and informal gatekeeping networks. Across sessions, they emphasized reclaiming culture and faith as allies through feminist reinterpretations of theology and custom and insisted that change begins in families and must be communicated with reference to cultural values. Special measures were reframed as corrective mechanisms, not privileges, and participants rejected the “myth of merit” in unequal systems. The convening concluded with some consensus that achieving gender parity demands coalitions across generations, engagement of male allies, and new maps for gender parity built from Pacific realities.

The Pacific's challenges were framed as part of a global trend of stalled progress on women's political participation, underscoring the need for renewed momentum and collective effort.

TSMs emerged as a significant theme. Two decades after initial resistance in the region, quotas are now

takeaway from the convening: the importance of fostering intergenerational connections among women leaders to promote the transmission of knowledge, experience, and mentorship across the region.

widely understood not as privileges but as corrective mechanisms essential to addressing systemic exclusion. There is also a need to ensure special measures are enshrined in laws. Comparative experience shows that when such measures are removed, women's representation declines rapidly. Concerns were raised about the weakening of national women's machineries, with the number of dedicated ministries globally declining from around 85 to 62. Strengthening and resourcing these institutions was identified as critical to sustaining gender equality agendas.

**Julie Ballington**, Chief a.i., Leadership and Decision-Making Section, UN Women HQ expressed that the meeting was one of the most heartfelt and practical convenings in recent years, marked by engaged, honest dialogue and a shared determination to act differently to accelerate gender parity in the Pacific. She emphasized the importance of building “pathways to power” by strengthening leadership pipelines and promoting intergenerational mentoring — a defining principle of the WYDE programme. She reaffirmed UN Women's commitment to supporting legal reform, advocacy on social norms, and leadership development through training, mentoring, and induction programmes for women at both local and parliamentary levels.

The session concluded with a call to sustain collective advocacy and partnership, using the evidence, strategies, and solidarity shared during

#### Articles on the Convening:

- UN Women Asia-Pacific UN Women Asia-Pacific, [Feature Story- Waves of Change](#)
- EU Capacity4Dev: [Read Story](#)

the meeting to make gender parity a reality within this generation.