

- The Nuclear Legacy
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- Women's Political Representation in Solomon Islands

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“Only we humans make waste that nature can’t digest.”
~ **Captain Charles J Moore, oceanographer, who first brought the world’s attention to the Great Garbage Patch**



Photo by Naja Bertolt-Jensen on Unsplash

REDUCING PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE PACIFIC

Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) have an average waste generation of about 2.5kg per day, which is significantly higher than the global average of 1.55kg per day. Also, the Pacific Island countries are significantly affected by the pieces of plastic pollution floating in the ocean.

“Samoa, like all Small Islands Developing States, is grappling with escalating levels of waste and in response is supporting an initiative geared towards transitioning to a circular economy¹. A key focus on these efforts is on combatting plastic waste which constitutes a significant portion of our waste output,” said Hon. Toeolesulusulu Cedric Schuster, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment of the Government of Samoa. He was speaking with regard to the declaration for Sustainable 3R [Reduce, Reuse and Recycle] and Circular Economy Goals for Achieving Resource Efficient, Clean, Resilient, Sound Material Cycle and Low-Carbon Society in Asia and the Pacific (2024-2034). This declaration will be formalised at the 12th Regional 3R and Circular Economy Forum in Asia and the Pacific later this year.

¹ A circular economy is an economic system based on the reuse and regeneration of materials or products, as a means of continuing production in a sustainable or environmentally friendly way.

Vanuatu is a small Pacific Island nation which has dramatically cut plastic pollution. In 2018 it was the first nation in the world to ban plastic straws. Most people are using reusable bags rather than single-use plastic bags and takeaway food is usually wrapped in banana leaves, rather than put in polystyrene boxes. Single-use plastic cutlery and plates are banned, as well as artificial plastic flowers, and banned items, which used to make up to 35% of Vanuatu's waste, now make up less than 2%. And the government says it plans to introduce a plastic bottle deposit scheme and recycle that plastic. However, much of the plastic waste come from imported food packaging, and few Pacific Island countries have adequate recycling or waste management facilities.

In 2022 175 member states endorsed an historic resolution at the UN Environment Assembly to End Plastic Pollution and forge an international legally binding agreement by 2024. The resolution has a mandate to promote sustainable production and consumption of plastics and address the full lifecycle of plastic. This includes the initial extraction of fossil fuels for plastic production to the end-of-life disposal of plastic waste. The final meeting to reach agreement on the treaty is to be held in Buzan, Korea at the end of November this year.

At the fourth round of treaty negotiations, held in Ottawa, Canada at the end of April 2024, Pacific delegates remained steadfast in their resolve to have a key regional aspiration on the sustainable production of primary plastic polymer to be included in the treaty text. There is a divergence of views among member states on the issue of the production of primary plastic polymers. Pacific SIDS are disproportionately affected by global plastic pollution and addressing the issue of unsustainable production is essential for the achievement of the mandate of ending plastic pollution.

“Members are still divided on many aspects, which for us is quite concerning. We cannot afford to indulge the interests of a select few because they have nothing to lose, and we have everything to lose,” said Dr Sivendra Michael, Fiji's Permanent Secretary for Environment and Climate Change.

Fiji, along with 14 Pacific SIDS, is supporting the obligation to prevent and minimise impacts from the production and consumption of primary plastic polymers, including information on imports and exports.

Primary plastic polymers are ‘plastic materials made of synthetic and semi-synthetic polymers that are used for the first time to create plastic products in any form’. This includes plastics made from both bio-based and fossil-based feedstocks. According to research by the Scientists' Coalition, plastic pollution will continue to escalate if there is not legislation to reduce production of primary plastics polymers.

Plastic production soared from 2 million tonnes in 1950 to 348 million tonnes in 2017, becoming a global industry valued at US\$522.6 billion, and it is expected to double in capacity by 2040. Some 11 million tonnes of plastic waste flow annually into oceans, and this may triple by 2040.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) a shift to a circular economy can reduce the flow of plastics entering oceans by over 80% by 2040; reduce virgin plastic production by 55%; reduce greenhouse gases by 25%, as well as create jobs.

Sources: 'How the small Pacific island nation of Vanuatu drastically cut plastic pollution' by Prianka Srinivasan, 20 June 2024, The Guardian; 'Magnifying Pacific issues in a global declaration on waste', 16 May 2024, SPREP (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme); 'Pacific delegates advocate for a key regional aspiration to be included in the plastic treaty text', 30 April 2024, SPREP; 'Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty (2024), Primary Plastic Polymers: Urgently needed upstream reduction'; 'Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to develop a legally binding agreement', 2 March 2022, United Nations Environment Programme.

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THE NUCLEAR LEGACY

From 1946 to 1996, the Pacific region was subjected to hundreds of nuclear tests. Between 1946 and 1958, 67 known nuclear tests were carried out by the United States (US) in the Marshall Islands whilst they were under the United Nations trusteeship. Initial tests led to the displacement of communities from Bikini Atoll, and there on 1 March, 1954, the US conducted its largest nuclear test, Castle Bravo, which was 1,000 times stronger than the Hiroshima bomb in 1945.

The fallout extended over 18,000 square kilometres and caused widespread radioactive contamination, exposing people from neighbouring atolls and beyond to radioactive ashes that caused immediate and long-term health and environmental effects. In the following decades US scientists studied the effect of radiation on the Marshallese people without their knowledge or consent. The Marshallese people were also resettled by the US on atolls but had to be re-evacuated in the 1970s and 1980s due to exposure to high levels of radiation. Today, there are islands which remain too radioactive to be safely inhabited, so communities are still displaced.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) experts have stated that not only did the testing create “impairments for the people who were exposed to nuclear radiation and waste at the time, with a disproportionate impact on women and girls, but continues to negatively impact the human rights of present and future generations.” The toxic nuclear waste, nuclear radiation and contamination continues to have an adverse impact on the people of the Marshall Islands, including to their rights to health, adequate food, housing, water and sanitation, participation in cultural life and a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

The Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau were formerly US territories and came under the direct control and administration of the US during World War II. After World War II the US military displaced thousands of people in the Marshall Islands to allow for nuclear weapons testing and other military activities. The US nuclear test explosions in the Marshall Islands totalled the equivalent of 7,000 Hiroshimas. The fallout from the tests caused noticeable harm at the time – hair loss, vomiting, diarrhea and burning of the skin, and there was a highly elevated longer-term cancer risk. The Bikini and Enewetak atolls experienced the most severe devastation, and over 60 years later land, lagoons and coral reefs remain contaminated. The Runit Dome, a radioactive waste disposal site on Enewetak Atoll, is leaking.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands became self-governing in 1986, under the Compact of Free Association (COFA). The Compact ended the US Trusteeship Agreement with the Marshall Islands, giving the nation the right to exercise self-determination, and the US remained responsible for the defence of the region. In return, the US was granted the continued use of the Kwajalein Atoll for military purposes. The Marshall Islands also received US\$150 million in nuclear compensation under the COFA in 1986. But COFA also established a Nuclear Claims Tribunal in 1986, which eventually determined that the actual damages amounted to US\$2.3 billion. The US has fallen very short in paying this amount determined by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, and which the Marshall Islands has been seeking.

In September 2022, the Marshall Islands suspended major discussions with the United States because of concerns, stretching back 70 years, about nuclear testing on the atolls. And the Marshall Islands refused to continue discussions unless Washington addressed the persistent health, environment, and economic difficulties caused by the US nuclear testing from 1946 to 1958. In October 2023 the Marshall Islands accepted a COFA agreement, but the funding lacks the nuclear compensation, which the Nuclear Claims Tribunal determined as fair.

Sources: ‘The Unseen Battle: Addressing the Nuclear Legacy in Pacific Island Countries, 24 May 2024, United Nations Micronesia; ‘US nuclear tests still impact Marshall Island, OHCHR finds’, 8 March 2024, Island Times; ‘Another Funding Delay in Congress that Thwarts US Strategy in the Pacific: the Marshall Islands’ by Camilla Pohle, 4 March 2024, Just Security.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

The 12th Solomon Islands national general elections were held on 17 April 2024. For the first time, joint elections were held, with most provincial assemblies and the Honiara City Council also going to the polls. Eight women were elected — three to the national parliament, two to Honiara City Council and three to provincial assemblies.

Women's representation remains low, and measures to promote women's engagement in politics have seen limited success. Before the election, there were four women incumbents in the 50-seat parliament. Two, Freda Tuki Soriacomua and Lillian Maefai, contested the 2024 elections. The other two, Lanelle Tanangada and Ethel Vokia, did not contest, with their husbands, both former members of parliament, contesting in their stead. A common pathway to politics for women is through association with a male spouse or relative who is a politician. The decision of half of women members of parliament to step aside so that their husbands could contest is significant when women are under-represented. Of the 334 candidates only 20 were women.

Three women were elected at the national level. Soriacomua, an Ownership Unity Responsibility Party candidate, was re-elected in Temotu Vatud, while Choylin Yim Douglas and Cathy Launa Nori, both independent candidates, won the seats of Ngella and Maringe/Kokota, respectively. Douglas and Nori are new to parliament, but both have contested before. Douglas contested Ngella in 2019, coming second with 22% of the vote. Nori had contested Maringe/Kokota twice previously, coming third in 2014 (with 13% of the vote) and second in 2019 (with 33% of the vote). Strategies that span multiple electoral cycles are [key](#) in electoral success in the Pacific. Douglas and Nori's successes clearly build on their previous electoral experience.

In [Solomon Islands](#), there is a legislative mandate for parties to include at least 10% women candidates on their rosters, but loopholes greatly limit this. In 2024, 13 parties contested the election. Of these, six endorsed no women at all. Four parties met the 10% threshold — the Green Party (one out of two candidates), the People's Liberal Democratic Party (five out of 30 candidates), the Solomon Islands People's First Party (two out of seven candidates) and the Solomon Islands Party for Rural Advancement (two out of 17 candidates).

The joint elections, with voting for Honiara City Council and seven of nine provincial assemblies held concurrently with the national parliamentary elections, show a stark contrast in women's representation. Following the 2024 elections, women make up 6% of the national parliament — with three out of 50 seats — and 17% of Honiara City Council — two out of 12 seats. In the provincial seats, women made up fewer than 5% of provincial candidates and won just three out of the 123 provincial seats contested in the 2024 joint elections.

Prior to the 2024 election, the Solomon Islands Cabinet endorsed a proposal to amend electoral legislation to allow for reserved seats for women in provincial assemblies. Women's organisations in Solomon Islands have been [working tirelessly](#) for years on this issue. The low number of women elected in 2024 highlights the urgent need for such measures.

Source: This is an edited version of ['Women's political representation in Solomon Islands'](#) by Kerry Baker, which was first published on [East Asia Forum](#), and appeared on [Devpolicy](#) on 1 July 2024, published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University.

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