

## 4. Asia and the Pacific

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## 4.1. Gender equality and the political empowerment of women in South and South-East Asia



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### Summary

This chapter analyses the experiences of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), their roles and the progress made in translating gender commitments into effective regional policies, legal instruments and mechanisms to foster gender equality and the political empowerment of women. It focuses on the need to foster stronger partnerships between the regional organizations, the United Nations, especially the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and civil society organizations, mainly women's and youth organizations, to give effect to Agenda 2030. The chapter discusses achievements and makes policy recommendations based on the challenges and opportunities facing the region.

### The Association of South East Asian Nations

Women's rights and the political empowerment of women were not a primary concern of ASEAN in its early years. Established at the height of the Cold War, ASEAN's primary concerns were stability and security. ASEAN's founding policy frameworks—the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Declaration—were written without particular sensitivity to gender. Over time, ASEAN's aims have expanded to include economic growth and social progress in addition to regional stability and conflict resolution (ASEAN 2008). The ASEAN Community was established in 2008. It comprises three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Each pillar has dedicated blueprints that outline the measures and actions to be undertaken within specific timelines to accelerate development and build peace and political and social security within the region.

### The Association of South East Asian Nations

ASEAN is a regional intergovernmental organization founded on 8 August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. These countries were later joined by Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. The combined population of its member states is over 622 million. The ASEAN economy is currently the seventh largest in the world. Its nominal GDP was USD 2.6 trillion in 2015.

<http://asean.org/>

The first attempts by ASEAN to engage with women's rights were somewhat paternalistic, treating women as a vulnerable and dependant group. ASEAN mainly addressed women's rights within a social and development context rather than a more general human rights framework. In the 1980s, however, women's rights became more prominent on ASEAN's agenda. A milestone in this new momentum was the Declaration of the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region, which was adopted on 5 July 1988. Since then, ASEAN has progressively adopted a normative gender framework and a set of monitoring mechanisms.

Despite these efforts, the slow progress among the 10 ASEAN member states has presented challenges for the political empowerment of women. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reports that the overall rate of female parliamentary participation in South East Asia is 18.9 per cent, one of the lowest in the world (IPU 2017). The Philippines, Laos and Viet Nam perform noticeably better than the rest of the region. Their respective rates of 29.5 per cent, 27.5 per cent and 26.7 per cent compare favourably with the corresponding figures in Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia, which at 4.8 per cent, 10.2 per cent and 10.4 per cent respectively remain alarmingly low.

To understand how ASEAN can better support the empowerment of ASEAN women in politics, this section provides a comprehensive review of the ASEAN Gender Normative and Monitoring Framework, and its efficiency in advancing women's empowerment and political empowerment. It then derives a set of policy recommendations from the interviews carried out for this study.

### Gender-normative framework

#### *Institutions on gender equality and political empowerment of women*

In the current ASEAN architecture, gender equality and women's issues fall under the scope of the ASCC, which meets twice a year. Its main functions are to: (a) ensure the implementation of the relevant decisions of the ASEAN Summit; (b) coordinate the work of the different sectors under its purview and on issues which cut across the other Community Councils; and (c) submit reports and recommendations to the ASEAN Summit on matters under its purview (ASEAN 2008, art. 9). The ASCC is therefore the primary body responsible for supervising gender policies in ASEAN.

The second most important gender body in ASEAN is the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW), which was set up in 1976. Originally the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Women (ASW), it was renamed the ASEAN Women's Programme in 1981 and the ASEAN Committee on Women in 2002. It is the primary body that coordinates and monitors ASEAN activities and facilitates cooperation on women's issues. It comprises the gender machineries of the ASEAN member states, and in particular the national ministers and government representatives, who meet annually. The ACW's first mission is to monitor and



evaluate implementation of the ASEAN Declaration of the Advancement of Women. The ACW publishes a status report every three years, which analyses the state of women's participation in the political spheres as well as how well incorporated women's concerns are into national plans and programmes. It is also responsible for facilitating, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. Finally, the ACW is responsible for collaborating with and building the capacity of national governments, developing policies, exchanging best practices and organizing study visits.

The third most important gender body is the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), which was set up in 2010 pursuant to the Vientiane Action Program, 2004–2010 (ASEAN 2005a) to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and children in ASEAN. It does this in two ways. First, it acts as a bridge between the international human rights system and individual member states and supports ASEAN member states with their policies on women's rights and women's political empowerment. Each member state appoints two representatives to the ACWC: one for women's rights and one for children's rights. Both serve on a voluntary and part-time basis. The ACWC meets at least twice a year and can convene additional meetings if necessary. As an intergovernmental body, its decision-making is based on consultation and consensus. The ACWC reports to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development.

Second, and more particularly, the ACWC supports the ASEAN member states in their relations with the various international human rights monitoring committees and procedures on women's rights. It frequently engages with UN agencies, in particular UN Women, promotes the adoption and implementation of international, ASEAN and other instruments related to the rights of women and helps members states to prepare periodic reports on the monitoring and implementation of CEDAW.

In addition, it develops national policies, strategies and programmes, builds the capacities of relevant stakeholders, provides technical support with the organization of initiatives and workshops, promotes research on the situation of women and facilitates the sharing of experience and good practices between member states. Finally, it promotes public awareness and education about women's rights and advocates on behalf of women. The ACWC has been found to be complementary to the ACW. Its composition is more mixed and includes NGO practitioners and experts. It also takes more of a rights-based approach than the ACW, which takes more of a welfare approach (Gutierrez 2015b).

The most recent addition, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW), which was set up in 2011, also plays an important role in relation to women's empowerment. The AMMW works in conjunction with the ACW and the ACWC to institutionalize gender mainstreaming within ASEAN and promote the status of women at the regional level. As part of the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community it meets annually to provide executive leadership and consultation on gender matters.

While the ACW, the ACWC and the AMMW, under the supervision of the ACSS, are the core bodies leading ASEAN's operational work on gender equality and women's political empowerment, two other bodies also play a role. Of particular interest to women's political empowerment is Women Parliamentarians of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (WAIPA), which was established in 1998 as a branch of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA 1978). The AIPA is a regional parliamentary organization that facilitates communication and the exchange of information between ASEAN parliamentarians. WAIPA is its women's branch, which essentially aims to enhance participation by and the

representation of women in AIPA and more generally to increase the representation of women in the parliaments of the ASEAN countries. It meets annually in conjunction with the AIPA's General Assembly. WAIPA has adopted a number of resolutions, five of which are directly related to women in decision-making and politics, and women's leadership.

Finally, the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organizations (ACWO), established in 1981, is an institutional framework that brings together women's voluntary organizations and civil society actors in ASEAN to work towards the full integration of women in development. It has the status of a CSO Regional Entity accredited to ASEAN. It comprises the National Council of Women's Organizations in each ASEAN member state. ACWO regularly participates in ASEAN and Regional Conferences to provide input from women's organizations on the topics under discussion. It has organized 17 General Assemblies and Conferences, most notably one on 'Enhancing Women's Effective Participation towards a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable ASEAN'.

### Gender-related policy and legal instruments

In comparison with other regions of the world, ASEAN has been a late adopter of gender-related policy and legal instruments. In recent years, however, ASEAN institutions have been more gender-responsive and have developed a number of specific work plans on women's empowerment and the promotion of gender mainstreaming.

Of crucial importance for women's rights in ASEAN is the Declaration of the Advancement of Women in ASEAN. This was the first commitment made by ASEAN member states to improve the status of women, including in the political sphere. It states that each member state shall endeavour 'to promote and implement the equitable and effective participation of women whenever possible in all fields and at various levels of the political [...] life of society at the national, regional and international levels' (ASEAN 1988, article 1).

In 2005 this overarching Declaration was operationalized in the Work Plan for Women's Advancement and Gender Equality, 2005–2010 and later into the Work Plan of the ASEAN Committee on Women, 2011–2015 and 2016–2020. The 2005 plan focused on 'promot[ing] equitable participation of women in the development process by eliminating all forms of discrimination against them' (ASEAN 2005b) and outlined a number of activities. The most notable of these were: (a) the promotion of gender mainstreaming; (b) the documentation of best practices/innovative strategies undertaken by member states to mainstream gender; (c) the identification of collaboration opportunities with ACWO; (d) improving research capacity; and (e) the increased participation of women in all aspects of ASEAN activities. The 2011 plan pursued and reinforced the objective of influencing all the pillars of the ASEAN Community and all member states to undertake credible and strong gender mainstreaming in their policies, programmes and processes. It outlined the implementation of two projects directly related to women's political empowerment in Cambodia and Singapore. The most recent work plan recognizes the 'promotion of women's leadership' as one of its six priorities and focuses on engaging all stakeholders in society 'to make greater headway in promoting the interests of women in the region' (ASEAN 2016c). This latter document is yet to be published.

ASEAN adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region in 2004, in which ASEAN member states expressed a common resolve to eliminate violence against women. This Declaration was operationalized in the Work Plan to Operationalize the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 2006–2010, which more recently was merged with the Work Plan for Women's Advancement and Gender Equality into the Work plans of the ASEAN Committee on Women.



From an operational point of view, the ASEAN Commission for the Protection of Women and Children's Rights Work Plans 2012–2016 and 2016–2020 are also crucial instruments. Although a thematic area was explicitly dedicated to 'Women's participation in politics and decision making, governance and democracy', a specific project in this area is yet to be deployed. Having considered 'activities to promote temporary special measures to promote women's participation in decision making', the identification of 'concrete, doable and impactful actions' by the Commission is said to be 'pending'. As a result, this thematic area will be 'revisited by the ACWC in due course' (ASEAN 2012b). The most recent work plan has not yet been published.

Two other important policy instruments for women's empowerment are the Hanoi Plan of Action, 1999–2004 and the Vientiane Action Programme, 2004–2010. In the former, member states agreed to work towards the full implementation of CEDAW and other international commitments regarding women. In particular, member states committed to 'adopt concrete measures to enhance women's capacity and promote women's participation in decision-making and leadership in all fields and at all levels' (ASEAN 2012c, article 4). In the latter, specific commitments were made to promote human rights. In particular, member states committed to 'promote equitable participation of women in the development process by eliminating all forms of discrimination' (ASEAN 2005a, 3.1.3.8.).

Looking forward, the roadmap for ASEAN Community building over the next decade, ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, commits ASEAN member states to realize 'an inclusive community that promotes [...] equitable access to opportunities for all and promotes and protects human rights of women [...]' (ASEAN 2015, B.2.i). In contrast to the ASEAN Charter, which does not mention women at all, this explicit mention is encouraging.

Finally, in an effort to ensure concrete actions are taken to achieve its objectives, the ASCC has adopted two ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprints—one for 2009–2015 and one for 2016–2020. These blueprints outline the implementation of specific actions to empower women in all fields, including politics, and to promote gender equality. In the blueprint for 2016–2025, the ASCC commits to work 'towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls' (ASEAN 2016b: 6). Specific strategic measures on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment are set out as part of the promotion of 'equitable access for all'. However, neither blueprint sets out specific actions or measures specifically focused on the advancement of women in politics.

### Regional initiatives

ASEAN carries out a number of regional initiatives to advance women's empowerment, including political empowerment. First and foremost, it produces reports on the advancement of women in ASEAN to assess the situation of women in the region and help actors plan their actions accordingly. Three such reports have been produced: in 1996, 2001 and 2007. The third focused on 'women and economic integration', however, and did not address women's political empowerment (ASEAN 2007).

ASEAN bodies have also organized a number of ad hoc activities. The ACW regularly organizes workshops, seminars, training sessions and consultative meetings that provide platforms for ASEAN actors such as government officials, civil society organizations, professionals and other stakeholders to exchange views, share information and build common understanding and commitments. Prominent examples include the ASEAN High Level Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming within the Context of CEDAW, BPFA and the MDGs (November 2006), which led to the adoption of a joint statement on and a commitment to implement gender mainstreaming; the ASEAN High-Level Meeting on Good Practices in



CEDAW Reporting and Follow-up (January 2008), where actors renewed their commitment to pursue and enhance the implementation and monitoring of and reporting on CEDAW, and encouraged member states to revoke their reservations on CEDAW and adopt its Optional Protocol; and the ASEAN Workshop on Gender Equality Legislation (February 2008), where actors developed joint recommendations to implement gender equality legislation in the ASEAN region;

The ACWC has carried out similar activities, such as a regional workshop on ‘Promoting the Rights of ASEAN Women and Children through Effective Implementation of the Common Issues in CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) Concluding Observations with ‘Focus on Girl Child’ (August 2013).

Other valuable initiatives are the Regional Meeting on Promoting Women’s Leadership and Political Participation in ASEAN, co-organized by the AIPA and UN Women in October 2014. This meeting resulted in the adoption of a number of regional recommendations on fostering South-South Dialogue, conducting research on financing for women’s political participation, strengthening mechanisms for transparency in elections-related and political spending, strengthening the AIPA’s women’s caucus, and WAIPA capacity-building.

In 2015 the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation hosted two workshops in the Philippines: on Strengthening Women’s Participation in Peace Processes and the Plight of Women and Children in Conflict Situations. These workshops helped to develop agendas and networks, which put women’s political empowerment at the forefront of subsequent peace and security discussions (Verzora 2016).

#### Assessment of ASEAN’s Gender Framework

A frequent and striking assertion in the interviews conducted for this chapter with various actors working on women’s empowerment in ASEAN was the lack of ‘any proper ASEAN policy or mechanism in place for advancing women’s political empowerment’. Also striking was the claim that national governments do not circulate information on ASEAN policy instruments, which was made by local and international NGOs as often as international institutions working in the region. Most actors refer to, and base their work on, international instruments rather than the ASEAN normative framework. Foremost among these instruments are CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals. The interviews indicate that CEDAW, not the ASEAN normative framework, is the reference for the development of indicators to monitor and evaluate national efforts in advancing women’s rights (representative of UN Women Vietnam 2017).

This is most likely due to the weakness of ASEAN’s gender policy framework, which means that it is of little relevance to regional actors. The long-standing policy of non-interference and the consensus rule that prevails in ASEAN decision-making processes challenge the organization’s capacity to legislate consistently on gender issues. In addition, because ASEAN acts according to the principle of ‘non-interference in internal affairs’ (ASEAN 2008), each member state voluntarily chooses whether to comply with ASEAN’s policies. ASEAN is not in a position to exercise monitoring powers independently or to sanction a member state for failing to implement a measure. As a result, implementation remains exclusively a matter of domestic jurisdiction.

The ACWC’s effectiveness is particularly hampered in this regard. Compared to similar regional bodies across the world—for instance, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Inter-American Commission of Women and the Steering Committee for Equality Between Women and Men of the Council of Europe—the ACWC resembles a



‘special rapporteur’ rather than a Human Rights Commission (Pisano 2016). The ACWC cannot exercise investigative and monitoring powers. It can only submit an annual report on the promotion and protection of women’s rights, whereas similar institutions elsewhere in the world are able to collect information and documents, make recommendations, submit reports, receive communications from civil society, and deploy investigative powers and request information regarding the implementation of human rights. Victims can neither lodge a complaint nor seek redress. Furthermore, because the ACWC is an intergovernmental body and its members do not serve in a personal capacity, it is unable to come to a decision in the absence of consensus. In practice, this means important gender issues such as reproductive health and Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender rights go unaddressed because of the conflicting views of member states (Gutierrez 2015b). Finally, the ACWC’s work plan deals exclusively with the protection of women’s rights rather than with their empowerment.

The same goes for WAIPA. As one of the most important bodies for the advancement of democracy and women’s rights in ASEAN, there should be potential for WAIPA to play a significant role. However, it is not currently an integral part of the ASEAN institutional structure but an ‘entity associated with ASEAN along with business associations or civil society organisations’. Its resolutions are non-binding and it does not vote on the ASEAN budget. WAIPA is currently a consultative body with little influence over ASEAN’s gender policies.

Even more importantly, ASEAN gender bodies lack the funding to carry out their duties properly. Because the ACWC is funded by ASEAN member states on a voluntary basis, the pace of contributions can vary, with no nation compelled to donate at any given time. Despite a contribution pegged only at USD 40,000, the ACWC was still missing contributions from two member states close to the deadline in 2015. Because all member states had to pledge in order for the ACWC to start receiving funds, the ACWC’s capacity to deliver its first work plan (2012–2016) has been comprised. This issue reached a point where it could not complete half the projects it was meant to carry out (Gutierrez 2015a). WAIPA, together with AIPA, is also said to be lacking funding for its basic administration and operations (SS, Hamid and Ramli 2015).

A further challenge to the efficiency of ASEAN’s gender policy framework is the limited mainstreaming across ASEAN’s three pillars. ASEAN’s early engagement with gender was conceived through the lens of economic and social development. This approach continues today (Davies 2016). As a result, women’s issues in ASEAN have been confined to socio-cultural and economic policy areas, and fall under the Socio-Cultural Pillar. This explains why most ASEAN gender policies are concerned with women’s economic or social status and not with their participation in politics. In the few cases where women’s issues are dealt with in the Political-Security Pillar, they are framed in terms of protection rather than empowerment (Davies et al. 2014). Davies explains this phenomenon by the fact ASEAN elites’ conservative understanding is of women as a separate apolitical category that needs to be dealt with outside of political concerns (Davies 2016). Furthermore, while the principle of fighting violence against women and improving their economic situation has achieved consensus among ASEAN member states, commitments to support women’s political empowerment are a greater and more controversial step that member states are hesitant to take (Representative of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom 2017).

At the same time, however, there are also some successful and promising features of ASEAN’s normative framework that deserve acknowledgement. In particular, according to an interviewee from SILAKA (the host organization of the Committee to Promote Women in Politics), the ACWO, WAIPA and their resolutions and action plans are seen as



particularly effective efforts in advancing women's political empowerment in the region (representative of SILAKA 2017). WAIPA, through AIPA, has successfully brought together female and male parliamentarians to discuss how to improve the performance and participation of women parliamentarians in particular, and of women in decision-making positions more generally. If WAIPA and the ACWO were to be given more chance to engage in ASEAN meetings and summits, and to make recommendations on the empowerment of women in politics, further progress would probably be achieved.

### Recommendations

ASEAN could significantly expand its impact by communicating information about its gender policies and ensuring that all actors feel responsible for them (women's rights activist based in Jakarta 2017). All actors, but first and foremost national government officials and parliamentarians, should be aware of ASEAN gender policies so that they can naturally refer to them and incorporate them into their work on women's political empowerment. There is room for ASEAN to organize regular events or workshops where government officials and the relevant civil society stakeholders could be taught about ASEAN policies, the latest developments, and their implementation and practicalities. More generally, there is room for ASEAN to initiate greater interaction with national actors to help them understand and implement ASEAN gender policies.

Furthermore, the efficiency of the ASEAN gender framework could be significantly improved if it were made more inclusive and more independent. When legislating on women's empowerment, ASEAN should systematically engage with NGOs and the civil society. ASEAN could, for instance, make the adoption of any legislative act conditional on consultation or at least the organization of a discussion with NGOs and civil society (representative of the Women's League of Burma 2017). The ACWC in particular would stand to gain from becoming more inclusive and working more closely with NGOs. Because they have better knowledge of national/local issues, NGOs could add significant value to the ACWC by providing assessments on the ground. Finally, to unleash the ACWC's efficiency in decision-making, its members need to be more independent and to serve in a personal capacity.

Capacity-building for the officials of ASEAN and its member states will also be crucial in strengthening the efficiency of ASEAN's actions on women's empowerment. Most of the ASEAN political elites are unfamiliar with the international agreements on women's empowerment and other relevant international human rights, labour rights, or socio-economic, political and civil rights instruments such as the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) and Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). The conservative elite perception that places women outside of political concerns must be recast. Member states' officials should receive gender-sensitive capacity-building and be made aware of the benefits of expanding women's participation in politics. Such capacity-building also needs to address wider prejudices about women's leadership. This would be a relevant starting point for gender issues to be mainstreamed across the three pillars of ASEAN. Furthermore, appointees to the ASEAN gender bodies and in particular the ACWC should receive training before taking on their responsibilities. There is space for NGOs, as topic experts, to be in charge of such training (representative of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom 2017).

Actors within ASEAN have regularly called for more information sharing across the region and in particular for more platforms for the exchange of good practices. ASEAN bodies have already held a number of regional workshops of this kind but there is a widespread aspiration for ASEAN-wide workshops and consultations to take place on a regular basis. Through such



consultations, all stakeholders could share experience on how different policies are implemented on the ground. There could be room for the Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism to extend its scope and play a role in facilitating this exchange of information at the regional level (representative of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom 2017). These working groups should focus on involvement rather than simple observation.

The adoption of a regional action plan exclusively dedicated to women's political empowerment would be a good starting point for specifically advancing women's political empowerment (representative of the Women's League of Burma 2017). Such a plan could, for instance, impose on ASEAN member states a compulsory quota of at least 30 per cent female membership of national legislative bodies. In addition, interviewees envisaged an online (social media) mobilization of civil society around the benefits of women's empowerment for national governments and the population (representative of UNDP Cambodia 2017). To be effective, such a plan would require member states to develop national strategies for meeting their regional commitments.

On the specific question of adopting a regional measure on quotas, however, the opinions of key informants were mixed. Many agreed, nonetheless, that quotas are a step in the right direction for fostering women's participation in politics and represent a helpful stopgap (representative of Oxfam Vietnam 2017). In fact, gender quota measures have been widely applied since the 1990s and these have been effective at improving women's political participation. Within ASEAN, the Philippines, Laos and Vietnam are the three countries that currently have the highest proportion of women in national parliaments (IPU 2017). All three countries have applied gender quota measures. In contrast, none of the lowest performing countries—Brunei, Myanmar and Thailand—have applied such measures.

Female politicians not only need more opportunities to meet face to face in formal settings such as WAIPA's annual meetings, they also need more informal, remote opportunities to network and interact across ASEAN. Social networks provide useful platforms for such initiatives. Additional online meetings and/or interactions would enable women candidates or parliamentarians to build and nurture their networks more regularly and more deeply across the region. Equally importantly, women parliamentarians could exchange ideas or mentor each other without geographical barriers. Online platforms and interactions improve women's access to information, in particular regarding capacity-building opportunities. Finally, simply being part of such a network and interacting regularly can help women candidates improve their self-confidence. There is room for ASEAN to facilitate this type of initiative.

Moreover, there is a need to fight gender bias in politics by redefining the image of women leaders in the national and regional ASEAN mass media. The perception that women do not perform as leaders as well as men comes from social and gender norms sustained by Confucianism across the ASEAN nations (representative of Oxfam Vietnam 2017). For a long time, Confucian notions of femininity and masculinity have negatively influenced women's participation in politics because femininity is associated with 'uncertainty', 'subordination', 'dependence' and 'indecisiveness' while masculinity is associated with 'power', 'independence', 'decisiveness' and 'certainty'. Redefining the image of women leaders in national mass media channels across ASEAN would be a good starting point for recasting this perception. At present, women leaders are negatively depicted and presented as bad mothers who do not have the time to take care of their families. This unequal depiction of political leaders is particularly striking in Vietnam, where successful female politicians are often presented as 'losers' in the domestic sphere while male politicians are often

complimented as ‘heroes’ regardless of their family situation. Here again, there is room for ASEAN to facilitate this type of initiative.

Finally, there is potential for the ACWC rather than the ACW to play a greater role in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of regional and international gender policy commitments. The consultative and intergovernmental nature of the ACWC and the fact that it is comprised of representatives of ASEAN’s member states should be an advantage. The members of the ACWC can use their leverage to urge their governments to promote gender equality and women’s participation in politics. In particular, the ACWC’s five-year work plan, 2016–2020, which includes projects to promote women’s participation in politics, constitutes a solid basis on which to assess the impact of ASEAN policy and legal instruments (representative of SILAKA 2017). Moreover, because it already facilitates relations between ASEAN member states and the various international human rights monitoring committees, the ACWC is in a privileged position to assess ASEAN’s compliance with global commitments and in particular with the SDGs relating to women’s political empowerment. By exploiting this strategic position, the ACWC could bring considerable value to the monitoring of regional and global commitments.

## The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation

South Asia is home to one-fifth of the world’s women. It has seen a larger number of influential female political figures than any other region. Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka have all been led by women as prime ministers, and many South Asian countries have seen influential female ministers and heads of regional government. Nonetheless, women’s participation in politics today is at a record low in the member states of SAARC). There are only 472 female members of parliament (MPs) in the lower or single chambers of SAARC member states, out of a total of 2424 MPs (19.39 per cent). This is lower than the world average of 23 per cent (Trabelsi 2015). It also marks a decline for many South Asian countries in female political participation in recent years. For instance, while the percentage of women elected to the Lok Sabha, the Indian lower chamber, was at 17.2 per cent in 1999, it was only 11.3 per cent in 2014. Similarly, only 3.4 per cent of women candidates were elected to general, unreserved parliamentary seats in the Pakistani national elections of 2013, which is a steep decline compared to the 12.8 per cent of women who had been elected to these seats during the previous elections in 2008 (Manchanda 2014). On average, females make up only about six to eight percent of the members in South Asian political parties (Omvedt 2005).

### The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

SAARC was founded in 1985 as a regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of the states of South Asia. Its member states were initially Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. Its permanent Secretariat is located in Kathmandu, Nepal, and it is led by a Secretary General and a Director from each member state (Sahasrabudde 2010).

<<http://www.saarc-sec.org>>

This negative trend is in sharp contrast to developments in other world regions, where many countries continued to increase the number of women in their legislative bodies over



the same period (Rai 2011). At the same time, the governments of the SAARC member states have repeatedly proved that they are aware of the importance of encouraging women to stand for election, at both the local and the national level. A number of South Asian countries, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, have introduced some form of quota system that reserves seats in either local or national legislative bodies for women. However, quota policy measures are often criticized as a superficial solution to the complex challenges facing women in the patriarchal cultures of SAARC member states. It is true that many women nominated by political parties under such quota systems either have close relationships with male stakeholders in political parties or have dedicated years to building up influence in these parties (Panday 2009). This often excludes women with low incomes or socio-economic status, as well as women living in rural areas, and puts women from affluent influential families at an advantage.

Other obstacles to women taking an active part in both local and national politics are the limited access to education and the resulting lack of political awareness, as well as the persistently negative attitudes to women in the public sphere found in all SAARC member states, where kinship structures are still mostly patrilineal (Kelkar 2005). Thus, women living within such structures can be socialized and intimidated into accepting their position within society as naturally prescribed, something that can lead them to support the existing patriarchal structures without wishing to challenge them by entering politics. Moreover, especially in lower income households, women lack control over financial resources and are attributed the role of the primary care provider in their families.

Pursuing a political career is both costly and time-consuming. Therefore, even if South Asian women are interested at a young age in becoming politically active, many of them cannot do this without the support of their male relatives, which often restricts them from starting their political engagement until after their children have left home. This represents a disadvantage compared with male politicians, who at their age have already had the opportunity to accumulate years of experience within a political party and are thus seen as more qualified candidates. Furthermore, the highly competitive internal party politics in SAARC member states are still marked by the notion that senior positions in elected bodies are supposed to be for life, making it harder still for women to enter from the outside.

However, even where women are elected to a decision-making position, either via allotted spots due to a quota system or (more rarely) regular party nominations, they are often not attributed specific responsibilities or viewed separately from their identity as women, leaving them without much influence in the political process (True et al. 2014). In addition, many female politicians are regularly confronted by harassment, character assassination and occasionally violence, which can further marginalize them. Such threats to the well-being of female politicians and candidates normally stem from the persistent assumption in patriarchal societies that women should not be active in the public sphere, which is found in both rural and urban areas and among all educational backgrounds alike (SARSWP 2013).

It is therefore clear that, despite the introduction of policies such as quotas by many South Asian governments, the reality for South Asian women wanting to enter the political process is still one filled with various obstacles and challenges that are currently not being sufficiently addressed. In this context, as a regional organization, SAARC could, with the help of international organizations, NGOs and civil society stakeholders, act as a supporter and advancer of meaningful policy reform. However, this would be conditional on its member states being willing not only to accept and implement such reform, but also to commit themselves to a more active engagement with the organization itself in order to build its capacities in the field of regional social development.

### Gender normative framework

The stated objectives of SAARC are the acceleration of economic growth, cultural development and social progress within the South Asia region, as well as the advancement of cooperation between the governments of member states in these areas and the strengthening of their 'collective self-reliance'. Decisions within SAARC are always taken unanimously, which means that contentious and bilateral issues are not discussed in its meetings. Furthermore, article IV of the SAARC Charter indicates that regional cooperation is seen as complementary to bilateral cooperation in South Asia (Tuladhar 2013).

This is an echo of the persistent conflicts between SAARC member states, most notably the ongoing border dispute between India and Pakistan, that still need to be resolved through bilateral efforts. These conflicts often pose an obstacle to deepening multilateral cooperation in the region, and have frequently led to the delay or cancellation of SAARC summits and meetings. Nonetheless, SAARC does put an emphasis on the strengthening of social cohesion among member states with the goal of developing a South Asian identity that takes into account the diverse religious, linguistic and ethno-cultural groups in the region. An example of this is the SAARC Social Charter signed in 2004, which addresses a range of social issues including the empowerment of women (Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2008).

In fact, SAARC attributed importance to women's issues at the earliest stages of its existence, by establishing a Technical Committee on Women and Development in 1986 under the Integrated Programme of Action. The Committee was tasked with the implementation, coordination and evaluation of programmes, the organization of ministerial-level meetings and SAARC's engagement at the national policy level on topics related to gender and development. It published a number of documents, such as a SAARC Women's Journal and a Guidebook for Women in Development, and conducted meetings and workshops to advance the female voice in development in South Asia.

Gender equality was officially integrated into the SAARC agenda at the sixth SAARC Summit in 1991, the same year as the organization, together with UNICEF, proclaimed the 'Decade of the Girl Child, 1991–2010' and formulated a National Plan of Action to Promote the Rights of Girls in its member states. Nonetheless, women's groups have been critical that the initial, development-centred approach taken by SAARC did not sufficiently address gender-based power hierarchies and stereotypes. Therefore, while this approach made viable attempts to integrate women into the development and poverty reduction framework, it failed to promote national policies that would advance gender equality in the context of social processes (Tuladhar 2013).

In fact, SAARC only began to address the lack of meaningful political engagement by women in the South Asian political sphere in 2007, when it launched the SAARC Development Goals, 2007–2012—Goal 8 of which was to ensure the effective participation of the poor and women in anti-poverty policies and programmes. Before this, SAARC had continued primarily to focus on women as subjects rather than agents in the development framework. In January 2000, the Technical Committee on Women in Development, having held 13 meetings since its creation in 1986, was merged with the Technical Committee on Social Development. After only one meeting, however, this became the Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children under the Regional Integrated Programme of Action of 2004. Since then, there have been seven meetings, the most recent of which took place in Islamabad in July 2015. Its meetings are focused on both gender and children's and youth issues.

SAARC and UNIFEM, which was merged into UN Women in 2011, signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2001. This was renewed in both 2007 and 2014 for a





period of six years. The Memorandum provides for cooperation between UN Women and SAARC member states in the pursuit of gender equality linked to international agreements such as the Beijing Plus Five Outcomes Document, the SAARC Sustainable Development Goals (2007–2012) and the MDGs and SDGs. Most notably, this cooperation led to the creation of the SAARC Gender Information Base (SGIB), which serves as a repository for both qualitative and quantitative data on gender-related issues and women's empowerment in South Asia. The SGIB collects data on three key issues: violence against women, the feminization of poverty and women's overall health. It works directly with line ministries at the SAARC member state level, which makes its organizational structure different to other SAARC programmes. The SGIB is subject to regular reviews, the last of which took place in Islamabad in 2014 (UN Women SASRO and SAARC 2012). SAARC also developed a Standard Operating Procedure with regard to fighting human trafficking and prostitution after it adopted the Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking Women and Children for Prostitution in 2002.

In 2011 the Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children agreed at its Fifth Meeting that the goal of gender equality and female empowerment in South Asia needed to be addressed through a new programme that ensured that the UN MDGs and later SDGs would be effectively addressed. Hence, at the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, an Intergovernmental Expert Group Meeting was convened to discuss the establishment of a new regional mechanism in this area. At the end of this meeting, the Expert Group recommended the creation of a Gender Policy Advocacy Group (SAARC-GPAG), which, according to the Terms of Reference recommended by the Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children, should meet once a year. The first meeting of the SAARC-GPAG was held in Islamabad in July 2015. It was decided that a three-year action plan would be developed in collaboration with UN Women and a Gender Expert specifically hired for this purpose.

The key priorities to be featured in the action plan are: women in leadership and decision-making, the economic empowerment of women, violence against women and girls, and women's health issues. The action plan has been developed and, as of March 2017, was awaiting approval for implementation by the SAARC member states as well as the SAARC GCPAG. Once endorsed, countries will be asked to align their national gender development plans with the goals proposed in the action plan. Although the text of the three-year action plan is not publicly available, the SAARC Secretary General, Arjun Bahadur Thapa, has already announced some of the action points included in the plan:

- Organization of dialogue and meetings with different political parties and parliamentarians regarding the political participation of women in the region;
- Conducting systematic and institutionalized leadership skills training for women in the SAARC region (e.g. at the South Asian University);
- Production of publications and reports on, methodologies and tools for as well as examples of good practices from the region on women's leadership and political participation, including mechanisms and good practices that promote women's role in decision-making;
- Work with activists and experts, including the media, to develop and implement awareness creation and advocacy programmes for the general public, party leaders and parliamentarians to build their commitment to inclusive representation of women and



take action to ensure that at least one-third of all parliamentary seats are allocated to women;

- Develop/adapt guidelines on leadership and capacity development to encourage women to engage politically and increase their representation in political parties and decision-making bodies at all levels;
- The launch of a SAARC region-wide campaign to combat violence against women in politics;
- Collection of information and data to develop an evidence-based campaign (via social and traditional media) on the issues related to the political participation of women, for inclusive representation in politics, and to ensure women's fair access to the political sphere.

The SAARC Secretariat has announced that the Government of the Maldives intends to host a Ministerial Meeting on Women's Issues in either 2017 or early 2018. This would be the first meeting of its kind since 1995.

### Assessment of SAARC's Gender Framework

Due to the lack of modalities and mechanisms, the reinforcement of declared policies within member states and follow-up evaluation are among the main challenges facing SAARC in many areas—and its ineffectiveness concerning gender equality is one of the most striking examples in this regard. Despite its declared goals of forging a regional identity and fostering cooperation between its member states, SAARC has struggled with regional and interstate conflict throughout its existence, and the inability to move past these disagreements has undermined its stated intentions (Shifau 2012). Because it has so few means to enforce its policies, in the past SAARC has often only been able to act as a substantive political platform through the praxis of informal corridor talks during summits, which are often used to tackle bilateral tensions and conflicts.

SAARC declarations do not have any binding force or involve any mandatory financial commitment, and are completely dependent on voluntary contributions from its member states. The limited capacity of SAARC as an enforcement body and the unlikelihood of this to change must be acknowledged and taken into consideration during the development and implementation of its projects and initiatives. Instead of trying to implement 'hard policies', SAARC and its partners will be more successful when implementing grassroots projects that aim to strengthen its civil society and raise general awareness of the importance of women's political participation.

Only four of the SAARC ministerial meetings have been centred on women's issues, and the last one took place in 1995. This highlights the difficulty around the lack of political will in the region to make women's issues a high priority, other than through declarations and technical committees with a low level of influence on the implementation of the policies they develop on the ground.

The principle of unanimity makes the implementation of effective mechanisms extremely difficult, given that not all the SAARC member states pursue the issue of gender equality with an equal amount of vigour. The Maldives still currently excludes women from holding the office of President and Vice President. Moreover, Pakistan and Bangladesh have only ratified CEDAW with reservations. In Sri Lanka, 52 percent of the country's formal laws are either totally non-compliant or only partially compliant with the CEDAW benchmarks, according to a review on gender equality published by UNDP. A Women's Rights Bill was



abandoned by the Sri Lankan Government because it was viewed as promoting ‘Western values that contradict local culture and traditions’.

The difficulties encountered by member states regarding the implementation of international standards on gender equality are reflected at the SAARC level. Thus far, attempts to create a viable working group on women’s issues have been abandoned after only a few meetings. This was the case with the SAARC Autonomous Advocacy Group of Prominent Women Personalities, which was convened in 2004 to negotiate its terms of reference but abandoned without any further meetings. In this regard, the recently created Gender Policy Advocacy Group might be a more viable option for integrating women’s issues into regular SAARC operations. How successful the Group will be, however, remains to be seen. It is also worth noting that SAARC has created the post of gender specialist to provide advice to the SAARC Director of Social Affairs (Tuladhar 2013), but this post is yet to be permanently filled, and a temporary gender specialist was hired through UN Women during the development process of the terms of reference for the Gender Policy Advocacy Group.

Similarly, the SAARC Gender InfoBase has not yet reached its full potential as a single hub for gender disaggregated data. This is mainly due to the lack of a defined results-based framework and of long-term planning. The role of the key stakeholders involved with the InfoBase (SAARC, member states and UN Women) has not been clearly defined. Initially, the SGIB was set up without a comprehensive assessment of the information and inputs that member states require to make effective use of it. Furthermore, the focus of the SGIB remained primarily on being a web-based InfoBase. This, while listing the advancement of gender perspectives in governance and gender mainstreaming, led to a lack of monitoring mechanisms and technical inputs to further develop the project (UN Women SASRO and SAARC 2012). Advocacy with national governments based on the data in the InfoBase has therefore not yet taken place, despite the fact that government representatives have expressed the need for this during review meetings. Moreover, the project has not been subject to any change of strategy so far, such as changes in the budget allocated to it in order to better address the needs revealed by the data collected.

### Recommendations

Among the most important challenges that SAARC must tackle if it wants to take a stronger stance on enforcing female political participation and gender equality within its member states are its lack of policy enforcement mechanisms and the current non-committal position it takes on these issues. A technical obstacle to the full implementation of the SDG Agenda, and Goal 5 in particular, is the large amount of resources required, which is currently estimated at 10–20 per cent of South Asian GDP until 2030. The region’s low tax-to-GDP ratios pose a challenge for national governments to raise these necessary funds, but this could partly be addressed by SAARC through increased regional cooperation. Cross-border listings and the development of regional bond markets could create access to cheaper capital for South Asian companies. Furthermore, it has already been recommended that the SAARC Development Fund be transformed into a South Asian Development Bank to better fund projects related to Agenda 2030 (UNESCAP 2015).

That said, SAARC as an organization also needs to become aware of the areas in which national politics and the stated importance of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘culture’ hinder the effective implementation of formulated policy objectives, and find the tools to work towards these objectives through a bottom-up approach that withstands the interests of political party elites as well as the results of interstate conflict. Considering the vastly different socio-economic and political realities within and among the SAARC member states, it is also crucial that all

initiatives launched by the organization are adjusted to these realities before being implemented.

In the past, working groups and projects were often set up with ambitious policy goals only to be abandoned later on or stall in development. SAARC needs mechanisms that will be consistently monitored, advanced and improved over a longer period of time. The Women's Policy Advocacy Group offers an opportunity to act as just such a coordinating body for these mechanisms. However, in order to succeed, the proposed three-year action plan should be approved as soon as possible by the SAARC member states. An implementation charter that includes clear time frames, goals and indicators for each member state, as well as sanctions for the members that breach the mutually agreed policies, should therefore be developed.

Moreover, member states should agree to mutually support each other to attain the goals formulated in the three-year action plan. For instance, those member states that are more advanced on certain of the issues addressed in the plan should use their resources and experience to benefit the whole region. An example for such support is India's financial declaration on supporting humanitarian programmes within the SAARC region (Tuladhar 2013).

In the long term, it is crucial that the Gender Policy Advocacy Group acts as an independent and strong mechanism with significant impact regarding the advancement of women's issues in the region even after the completion of the action plan. The current intention is for the group meet once annually. To increase its impact and the continuity of its projects, meetings should be held twice a year. It is also important that the Group forms sustainable partnerships with the governments of the SAARC member states, as well as civil society organizations and gender experts, from both South Asia and the international community.

Furthermore, SAARC should invest in a gender focal point permanently appointed by the Secretariat. Currently, gender issues are mainly addressed by the Director for Social Development. However, women's advancement should be given a more prominent position within SAARC government structures. Appointing someone whose work focuses exclusively on gender issues would be an important step forward for SAARC in acknowledging the importance of women's affairs.

In this regard, it is important that a Women's Affairs Office within SAARC focus not on superficial cures for gender discrimination, but on its deep-rooted causes. A gender focal point could work closely with the Women's Policy Advocacy Group to address the underlying issues that currently prevent women in South Asia from entering the political sphere. As part of these measures, SAARC would also need to push for a more prominent and frequent public dialogue with government figures among its member states. Currently, the competitive nature of and elitist networks within South Asian political parties pose a significant barrier to women entering politics. Party officials need to be involved in any potential campaign for change to be led by SAARC, in order to enable them to become active mentors for South Asian women aspiring to enter politics.

Furthermore, where such measures have not yet been put in place, discussions on affirmative action and quotas for public office and the candidate nomination process at the local and national levels need to be revived. Clearly, and as shown above in cases such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, quotas cannot be the sole solution to the lack of female political representation in councils, ministries and parliaments. The mere reservation of seats does not necessarily lead to empowerment. However, the implementation of quotas and affirmative action legislation creates the basis on which other measures to advance female political participation can be implemented (Das 2008).



It is also crucial that quotas apply to all levels of policymaking, because in both rural areas and national parliaments women in South Asia lack political empowerment. In small and rural communities, women could then be given greater responsibility in the management of resources such as land, water and forests, thereby improving their financial independence (Omvedt 2005). However, it must be acknowledged by both SAARC and its member states that quotas can only ever be a gateway to female political empowerment, and that they need to be combined with long-term projects for capacity-building and skills development, again at all state levels and in both rural and urban areas.

SAARC should thus also advise its member state governments on how to create more inclusive legislative bodies once quotas have been implemented. Too often, if elected to public office, women are delegated to fields that either carry very little responsibility or are seen as particularly suited to women, such as committees on cultural or family affairs. While these tasks are undoubtedly important and in need of strengthening, making them 'women-only' will lead to the formation of exclusively female institutions, while other areas will consequently continue to be dominated by men.

SAARC and the Gender Policy Advocacy Group (alongside a possible Office of Women's Affairs) should also advance their cooperation with parliamentary women's groups from SAARC member states, and possibly form a parliamentary women's caucus. SAARC's women parliamentarians have met previously as a 'Women's Committee of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians', but the caucus has not been thoroughly developed by SAARC and is not named as one of its gender initiatives. Past experience in other regions, such as of the regional women's parliamentary caucus of the Southern African Development Community, has shown that these mechanisms can play an important role in strengthening the movement for women's political representation (SARSWP 2013). Women parliamentarians from different SAARC member states who exchange best practices on women's political empowerment could build an important network as a counterpart to the established male networks currently found in South Asian political parties. Such initiatives have already taken place at the bilateral level in the SAARC region, such as between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The management of the SGIB as the main platform to provide data on gender issues within SAARC should be improved and accompanied by a thoroughly defined monitoring mechanism to track the progress of the project. The database should also be made more visible and accessible to its target users, in order to create a more centralized and reliable system of information on gender inequality within the region.

Furthermore, capacity-building through advanced access to education and leadership skills training for women from both rural and urban backgrounds needs to be seen as a crucial way of informing these women of the importance and benefits of their potential political engagement. Given the limited capacities of SAARC to operate in the field, such processes would need to be implemented through the numerous civil society organizations and NGO networks in the organization's member states (Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2008). The SAARC Gender Policy Advocacy Group and other SAARC departments linked to women's issues should actively pursue their policies with the assistance of these civil society stakeholders, as they are the ones that will eventually monitor and assess the consequences of these policies in the field.

Another important avenue for action that has only recently emerged, but which has been mastered by many NGOs and civil society stakeholders, is social media. Campaigns promoted by civil society on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have the potential to be more far-reaching than traditional campaigning methods, and SAARC could use this potential to increase the visibility of its gender-related initiatives.

However, in order to truly combat the root causes of the lack of female political involvement in its member states, SAARC also needs to foster awareness of gender equality and women's rights among its population. This includes tackling stereotypes and patriarchal structures, as well as the persistent violence and harassment faced by many South Asian women in their daily lives, especially if they do not conform to traditional roles in society. In order to achieve this, SAARC should support national governments and civil society in altering educational curriculums at all levels to not only abandon material that advances gender stereotypes but also include material containing diverse gender perspectives (Das 2014). This is especially crucial in order to raise awareness among boys and young men. Too often, education on female empowerment only reaches women, when men also need to understand its importance.

Lastly, SAARC should support—or better even lead—a campaign to end gender-based violence in South Asia, as announced in the Action Plan of the Gender Policy Advocacy Group. Such a campaign should target violence and harassment committed against women at all levels of society, and put particular emphasis on ending violence against women who dare to speak their mind on politics. Male political party members who are known to have harassed their colleagues or rivals in councils or parliaments should be reprimanded and sanctioned (True et al. 2014). The continued silence in many SAARC countries regarding such behaviour further perpetuates the notion that the political sphere is no place for women.

## Conclusion

Although ASEAN has taken significant steps to establish and operate gender institutions, adopting a number of gender-related policy and legal instruments and carrying out regional activities to advance women's political empowerment, results have not been forthcoming at an equivalent pace or to the same extent. A critical shortcoming for ASEAN is the weakness of its gender institutions, which have neither the legal means nor sufficient financial resources to enforce legislation against the will of ASEAN member states. In the same vein, ASEAN lacks an effective regional mechanism for properly monitoring and evaluating national efforts to advance women's political participation. Finally, the glaring lack of gender mainstreaming across all three pillars of ASEAN results in gender issues being treated as primarily economic and social rather than political.

In the light of the above, ASEAN would gain by further consolidating and strengthening its decision-making, implementation processes, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, first and foremost the ACWC and WAIPA, to advance gender equality in general and women's empowerment in politics in particular. Gender-sensitive capacity-building, greater information sharing at the regional level, a regional action plan dedicated to women's political empowerment, measures on regional gender quotas, improved informal and remote networking among women in politics and fighting against negative prejudices on women's leadership all constitute valuable steps that ASEAN could undertake in the near future.

It is undeniable that the SAARC member states are still a long way from ensuring gender equality and sufficient women's political participation, even though, in terms of socio-economic and human development, the entire region would benefit from the achievement of both. SAARC as a regional organization possesses only limited capacity when it comes to the implementation of policies, as it was always intended to be merely a body to strengthen cooperation between its member states. Nonetheless, SAARC could and should play an important role in the advancement of female political participation at all levels in South Asia. This, however, can only be achieved by improving the coherence and the long-term sustainability of its groups and projects, which in turn is highly dependent on the political





will of its member states. It remains to be seen whether the Gender Policy Advocacy Group and the SGIB will yield significant results. The continued involvement of international partners such as UN Women will be crucial to ensure efficient planning and monitoring.

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## 4.2. The role of the Pacific Islands Forum in promoting gender equality and the political empowerment of women

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### Introduction

The Pacific Islands region is regularly cited as having some of the lowest rates of female representation in political institutions in the world. In recent times, however, there have been some notable developments. Hilda Heine was elected President of the Marshall Islands in January 2016, becoming the first female head of government of a Pacific Islands country. In addition, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa became the first female Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa in March 2016. In late 2014, Dame Meg Taylor of Papua New Guinea was selected by the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)—the political community of 16 independent and self-governing states in the Pacific Islands region—to be its Secretary General, becoming the first woman to be appointed to this role.

These individual cases can be seen in the context of increasing engagement by political leaders in the region on the issue of gender equality in general and women's participation in political institutions in particular. Perhaps the most significant demonstration of this engagement was the adoption by PIF leaders in 2012 of the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED 2012). Through the PLGED, leaders recognized that 'improved gender equality will make a significant contribution to creating a prosperous, stable and secure Pacific for all current and future generations' and expressed their 'determination and invigorated commitment to efforts to lift the status of women in the Pacific and empower them to be active participants in economic, political and social life'.

This chapter examines how the PIF has worked as a regional political institution to support the promotion of gender equality and how regional advocacy and action in support of gender equality can be influenced by the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, which was endorsed by PIF leaders in 2014 as a new approach to stimulating a higher level of ambition for regionalism. With its emphasis on inclusivity and transparency in regional priority setting, a key innovation of the Framework is that anyone in the Pacific can contribute

proposals for regional action. In its inaugural year of operation, a number of submissions sought a greater role for regional action to promote human rights, including gender equality.

### The Pacific Islands Forum

The members of the Pacific Islands Forum are Australia, Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Forum Observers include Wallis and Futuna, the Commonwealth, the United Nations, the Asian Development Bank, Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, the World Bank, the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, American Samoa, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas. East Timor (Timor Leste) has been recognized as a Special Observer since 2002.

<http://www.forumsec.org>

## Gender inequality in the Pacific: a regional snapshot

Many different actors—including international and other regional organizations and national and regional NGOs—have been active in raising awareness about gender inequality in the Pacific and have pushed important reforms at the national level through their advocacy and provision of technical assistance. This chapter does not claim to track the efforts of all the actors in the region, but focuses specifically on the contribution of the PIF, as a regional political institution, to broaden efforts to promote gender equality in the Pacific.

The PIF encompasses a region that is geographically large and politically, economically and socially diverse. Notwithstanding the many points of diversity among its member countries, there are marked commonalities in women's experience of gender inequality, such as the high level of exposure to domestic and sexual violence and systemic exclusion from economic and political life. It is worthwhile noting that these experiences exist in a region where most countries have ratified the UN Convention against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)—the exceptions being Palau, which signed CEDAW on 20 September 2011 but has not ratified it; and the Kingdom of Tonga, which has not signed CEDAW—and most countries have a bill of rights in their constitution with provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex.

Between 2010 and 2015, the PIF documented its members' experiences of and progress with achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 2015 edition of the *Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report* (PIFS 2015) provides a snapshot of different aspects of gender equality in PIF island countries (i.e. all the members of the Forum except Australia and New Zealand).

For example, the report indicates that: (a) most Forum island countries have achieved gender parity (target 3A of MDG3) in primary and secondary education, with the exception of Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands; (b) men outnumber women in paid employment outside the agricultural sector; (c) baseline studies for Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu report that over 60 per cent of women have experienced physical and sexual violence; but (d) the increased participation of young women in higher education is not directly leading to better employment outcomes. The report notes



that the latter is due to ‘gender barriers in labour markets, gendered stereotypes about suitable occupations for women and traditional expectations about women’s unpaid domestic and caring work’. On a more positive note, there is evidence of increasing representation of women in mid-level and senior positions in the public services in a number of countries.

### Women’s representation in parliament

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world average for female representation among elected members of parliament is 22.8 per cent (IPU 2017). In the Pacific region, however, the proportion of women in the lower chamber is 13.5 per cent. If Australia and New Zealand are excluded, this falls to 6.2 per cent, following the most recent elections in Samoa. As the 2015 PIF Secretariat’s Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report observes: ‘Women’s representation in parliament in the Pacific is the lowest of any region in the world. The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau and Vanuatu currently have no women in their national parliaments, while FSM remains one of the three countries in the world that have never elected a woman’ (PIFS 2015: 24). This low level of representation is influenced by many factors. As Elise Huffer (2006) notes in a study commissioned by the PIF Secretariat:

There is a prevailing view in the region that women have an equal chance to run for office and to participate in decision-making on the grounds that they are constitutionally protected from discrimination but in fact this is not accurate. There are institutional factors, such as unequal access to land and titles and outdated laws, which continue to discriminate against women. In addition, national governmental machinery designed to address the promotion of women in all spheres of public life continues to be weak in most FICs.

Huffer identifies additional factors constraining women’s political participation, such as: a prevailing culture that is ‘conservative and patriarchal, reflecting a colonial and missionary heritage as well as a reluctance to change a status quo which favours men politically and administratively’; women’s limited access to economic opportunities, ‘which directly impacts on their ability to participate in politics’; and the ‘closed, male-dominated and frequently hostile nature of politics in the region’. These observations have found corroboration in a wide range of studies undertaken by many different actors in the region.

The Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Reports consistently highlight the key challenge faced by women in decision making across the region: the traditional view that leadership is for men continues to influence electorates. This builds a strong case for the introduction of temporary special measures such as reserve seats for women in parliament, local government and other decision making bodies—as well as in regional intergovernmental institutions.

### The emergence of gender equality as a Forum priority

The PLGED was adopted at the PIF meeting hosted by the Government of Cook Islands in 2012. At the same meeting in which Leaders adopted the Declaration, Australia announced the Pacific Gender Equality Initiative, its commitment of AUD 320 million over 10 years to support Forum island countries’ implementation of the objectives set out in the Declaration.

A review of the PIF’s highest-level statements—typically referred to as Communiqués (which document the outcomes of PIF Leaders’ meetings) or Declarations (which are published on specific issues)—over the course of its history since 1971 shows that gender equality emerged slowly as a regional political priority. Momentum has only really been



generated in recent years. A scan of references in Leaders' Communiqués to 'women', 'girls' or 'gender' indicates that:

- The first time Leaders considered a proposal that specifically addressed women was in 1989. On that occasion, Forum Leaders endorsed a proposal by Australia to hold a regional seminar on CEDAW.
- The next occasion on which Forum Leaders referred to women was in paragraph 13 of the Forum Communiqué of 1993, in the context of a discussion about sustainability in the lead up to the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. Leaders noted that 'population programmes should be addressed in the context of wider development issues, such as economic growth rates, good health and improvement in the social and economic status of women'.
- The Biketawa Declaration, which was adopted by Forum Leaders in 2000, articulated a number of principles for promoting security and preventing conflict, and set out various courses of action by which the Forum could seek to address regional crises. The principles or values to which Leaders declared their commitment included 'belief in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief and in the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political process in framing the society in which he or she lives'.
- The Waiheke Declaration on Economic Sustainable Growth adopted by Leaders in 2011 called for increased opportunities for women to participate in the formal labour market and as entrepreneurs.

Following these early and largely incidental references to women and gender, and prior to the adoption of the 2012 PLGED, Forum Leaders' consideration of women was focused primarily on three areas: women's participation in political decision-making; addressing the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by women; and, more recently, women's economic empowerment in the region. Two of these issues were identified as relevant concerns by a review of the Forum conducted in 2003 by an 'Eminent Persons Group', at the request of the Chair of the Forum, Helen Clark, the then Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The review concluded that there is a view within the region that Pacific institutions and processes are not as gender sensitive as they should be. In the context of a general recommendation that the Forum should have a greater 'focus on people', the Eminent Persons Group specifically recommended that the Forum: 'address the low participation of women in all levels of decision-making processes and structures, as well as the reduction and elimination of domestic violence, and the improvement of women's literacy and health status' (PIFS 2004).

This recommendation was accepted by Forum Leaders in 2004, in addition to a suite of other recommendations relating to the structure and composition of the Forum, its modalities for decision-making and its policy focus. A key outcome of the Review was the endorsement of the Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration (PIF Secretariat 2005), a regional strategy to achieve the four overarching goals of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security for the region.

'Improved gender equality' was established as a cross-cutting strategic objective of the Pacific Plan. In addition, under the Good Governance Pillar the Plan identified enhancing women's participation 'in decision-making processes and institutions, and in particular



parliamentary processes' as a regional priority. As the then Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Greg Urwin, who oversaw the initial development and implementation of the Pacific Plan, observed: 'There is a real need for a more coordinated and strategic approach to address the gross under-representation of women in all parliaments of Pacific Island Countries. This is not just a matter of women's rights. Increased balance between the sexes in decision-making goes hand in hand with good governance as it ensures consideration of a diversity of perspectives and directs attention to issues that may otherwise be overlooked' (PIF Secretariat 2006).

In the 2011 Forum Leaders' Communiqué, the issue was given greater prominence when Leaders directly highlighted 'the importance of gender equality and agree[d] to intensify efforts to promote women's equal role in decision-making at all levels, and to continue to improve advocacy for women's leadership and the empowerment of women as leaders' (para. 27). Leaders also 'committed to increase the representation of women in legislatures'. However, no specific form of tracking or accountability was specified in relation to this commitment.

The issue of sexual and gender-based violence first featured in the Forum Leaders' Communiqué in 2009, when they: 'acknowledge[d] the prevalence of sexual and gender based violence in the Pacific and the risk that it poses to human security and as a potential destabilizing factor for communities and societies alike. . . . [and committed themselves] to eradicate sexual and gender based violence and to ensure all individuals have equal protection of the law and equal access to justice' (para. 64).

Forum Leaders subsequently endorsed the establishment of a Forum Reference Group on Sexual and Gender Based Violence as a mechanism for enabling information exchange and peer support in the development of national level responses to sexual and gender-based violence, including legislative and policy reforms. Comprising representatives from member countries, civil society, and regional and international organizations, the Reference Group has undertaken visits to Forum member countries to meet with as wide a range of stakeholders as possible and ascertain the level of progress being made in eradicating sexual and gender-based violence and improving individuals' access to legal protection.

A region-wide initiative to promote greater accountability of national security institutions culminated in the development of Security Sector Governance Principles, which were endorsed by Forum Leaders in their 2014 communiqué (para. 24). These principles contained recognition that 'Security services should recognize and be responsive to the different security needs of men and women by promoting gender equality and protecting vulnerable sectors of the community'. The issue of women, peace and security was elevated within the Forum through the adoption by the Forum Regional Security Council of the Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2012. It provided a framework at the regional level to guide national action on promoting women's decision-making and participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. An interagency and member-based reference group was established to provide technical guidance and monitor progress in this area. Following a review of the Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the reference group was dissolved and the action plan is no longer operative. The review's recommendations will guide the next phase of the women, peace and security agenda.

There is no committee or standing meeting specifically focused on gender equality issues in the Forum's decision-making machinery. Instead, consideration of gender equality issues is progressed through other thematic Forum committees or meetings, such as the Regional Security Committee, the Disabilities Ministers' meeting or the Education Ministers' meeting. Since 2012, the Economic Ministers' meeting has annually reviewed progress on regional action plans to improve women's economic empowerment across the region.

**Table 6.1. Gender representation in Pacific Islands Forum decision-making committees and bodies**

Decision-making body	No. of members	No. of men	No. of women	Percentage of women in decision-making body
Pacific Eminent Persons Group 2004	5 (chaired by Rt Hon Sir Julius Chan)	5	0	0%
Reflection Group Members 2004	12	7	5	42%
Pacific Eminent Persons Group 2013 Pacific Plan Review	6 (chaired by RT Hon Mekere Marautu)	5	1	17%
Sub Specialist Committee on the Framework for Pacific Regionalism	7	5	2	28%

With the exception of the Reflection Group, which was set up to provide specialist advice to the Eminent Persons Group, the representation of women in the Forum's high-level political bodies is far below the 30 per cent minimum global quota promoted by the United Nations (see Table 6.1). While there has been a gradual increase in women's representation, it remains low. There are two women on the Specialist Subcommittee, one of whom is the current Secretary General. In accordance with the PLGED, which calls for the adoption of temporary special measures to put women on decision-making bodies, a 50 per cent quota can be applied to forum bodies. This would set regional standards that could influence national implementation of the PLGED.

The PIF celebrated ten years of its elections observation programme and its special relationship with the Biketawa Declaration in 2011 (Invarature: 2012: 3). Since the PIF first observed elections, in Solomon Islands in 2001, 17 election observation missions have been deployed, including one in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. This number has increased following recent elections. Forum observer groups have included officials from the Elections Office, which has been dominated by men, and the level of women's involvement has been very low. Some observer missions have included women and gender experts from civil society organizations. In Solomon Islands, for example, a female civil society representative from Tonga and a gender expert formed part of the Commonwealth Observer Group. The absence of agreed regional guidelines on elections monitoring that address gender equality can make getting women on observer missions a real challenge. The 2016 Forum Regional Security Meeting discussed the composition of observer teams and a PIF refocus on elections. This will present opportunities for greater inclusion of women and gender issues in the PIF elections observation programme.

### Gender equality as a regional priority

As noted above, the PLGED represents a significant development in the Forum's recognition of the issue of gender equality. The Framework for Pacific Regionalism also demonstrates a heightened commitment to the principle of gender equality and arguably offers new opportunities for gender issues to be advanced on the regional political agenda.

#### Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration

The PLGED represents the most comprehensive statement to date of Forum Leaders' commitment to enhancing the status of women in the Pacific across the economic, political



and social sectors. The Declaration records PIF leaders' commitment to renewed energy to implement the gender equality actions of a suite of international and regional instruments, most notably CEDAW and the MDGs. It also records their commitment to undertake specific policy actions at the national level in gender responsive government programmes and policies; decision making; economic empowerment; ending violence against women; and health and education. Finally, it documents PIF leaders' agreement that progress on the economic, political and social position of women should be reported at each Forum Leaders' meeting.

Leaders also called on development partners to work in a coordinated, consultative and harmonized way to support national efforts to address gender inequality across the region, and to increase their financial and technical support for gender equality and women's empowerment programmes. Given this chapter's specific focus on women's political empowerment, it is worth noting that the specific actions identified in relation to the priority area of decision making are: to 'adopt measures, including temporary special measures [such as legislation to establish reserved seats for women and political party reforms], to accelerate women's full and equal participation in governance reform at all levels and women's leadership in all decision making'; and to 'advocate for increased representation of women in private sector and local level governance boards and committees (e.g. school boards and produce market committees)'.

#### Tracking progress under the Declaration

As directed by Forum Leaders, the PIF Secretariat has documented member countries' progress with the commitments made in the PLGED in annual Pacific Regional MDG Tracking Reports. Four indicators were identified in relation to the commitment to adopt measures to accelerate women's participation in all decision-making: (a) seats held by women in national parliaments; (b) seats held by women in local government; (c) women's representation in senior management roles in the public sector; and (d) women's representation on state-owned boards. The Tracking Reports record progress against each of these four indicators. Specific developments highlighted in the 2015 Report were:

- The appointment of a female Speaker by Fiji's national parliament, as well as the introduction of gender inclusive parliamentary committees, policies and procedures;
- The introduction of temporary special measures in local government systems in Australia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, which have resulted in an increase in the number of women represented in local government bodies; and
- An increased number of women candidates contesting elections in Tonga, the Marshall Islands and the Solomon Islands.

The introduction of temporary special measures is identified in various regional instruments, such as the Pacific Plan and the PLGED, as a way of improving women's representation in national legislatures. However, this approach has not gained widespread traction at the national level. As a way to encourage members to consider the option of temporary special measures, the PIF Secretariat initiated regional dialogues in 2008 and 2015 between members and UNDP, UN Women and key partners. This partnership supported wider advocacy on the issue through women's mock parliaments, now referred to as the Women's Practice Parliament, and policy materials on reserve seats.

Proposals to introduce reserved seats for women have been debated in the parliaments of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, but have not resulted in changes to the law. Samoa is an exception. The Samoan Constitution was amended in 2013 to reserve five seats for women in Samoa's national parliament, representing 10 per cent of the seats. Samoa's first elections under the new system took place in March 2016 and a record number of women stood as candidates. Three incumbent female members and one new member won their constituencies outright and a fifth woman, who came second in her constituency, entered parliament based on the quota. In January 2016, nine women among the 261 candidates had contested the election but none had been elected. By DATE Vanuatu had had no women in parliament for the previous 10 years. This led to the introduction of a Bill to amend the constitution to reserve a certain number of seats for women in parliament. A number of positive steps have been taken towards quotas for women in local government in Australia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Vanuatu over the years.

The PLGED focuses on promoting gender equality at the national level. Although a regional instrument, it does not include consideration of how women's participation in decision-making can be enhanced in decision-making at the regional level. The potential to address this gap is discussed below.

### The Framework for Pacific Regionalism

Although not specifically directed towards advancing gender equality, the Framework for Pacific Regionalism could be regarded as an important reform for the Forum more generally, with the potential to increase women's participation in regional priority setting and encourage the development of new regional initiatives for promoting gender equality.

The Framework was endorsed by Forum Leaders in 2014 in response to the recommendations made by a 2013 review of the Pacific Plan led by Sir Mekere Moruata, a former Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea. Drawing on its extensive consultations across the Pacific region, the Review found that while regionalism had brought substantive benefits in the past, it had failed to deliver on expectations in recent years. However, it also considered that: 'there is an inherently compelling argument for regionalism: these (mostly) tiny economies, with small populations and tax-bases on which to draw, need to do all they can to leverage voice, influence and competitiveness, and to overcome their inherent geographical and demographic disadvantages' (PIF Secretariat 2013: 11). The review further considered that the Pacific region was 'at a crossroads and needed regionalism more than ever before' (PIF Secretariat 2013).

Sir Mekere and his team identified key obstacles to the successful prosecution of regionalism: (a) the dominance of technically focused initiatives on the regional agenda and an absence of ambitious 'game-changing' regional initiatives; (b) the limited opportunity for leaders to engage in high-level and forward-thinking political dialogue; and (c) the limited opportunities available for the private sector and civil society to contribute to the regional agenda. To address these issues, the team proposed a number of changes to the Forum's approach to priority setting, which in turn informed the development of the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.



Endorsed by Leaders in 2014, the Framework represents a high-level commitment to pursue deeper regionalism and establishes a process for developing and prioritizing regional public policy. The Framework:

- articulates a regional vision and a set of Pacific regional values to guide all regional policymaking and implementation;
- recognizes different forms of regionalism as relevant to achieving the four principal objectives covering sustainable development, economic growth, governance and security; and
- describes the process by which major regional initiatives will be prioritized for Leaders' oversight, and outlines the principles and process for monitoring the progress of regional initiatives.

Gender equality and the principles of equity and inclusivity clearly feature in the regional values articulated in the Framework: 'We embrace good governance, the full observance of democratic values, the rule of law, the defence and promotion of all human rights, gender equality and commitment to just societies'; and 'We support full inclusivity, equity and equality for all people in the Pacific'.

#### Public participation in the Forum's policy agenda

A key innovation of the Framework is that anyone in the Pacific can contribute proposals for regional action. It also establishes a specialist advisory body—known as the Specialist Sub-Committee on Regionalism—to evaluate these proposals and make recommendations on which warrant consideration by Forum Leaders. This new body is made up of representatives of different geopolitical subregions of the Forum's membership as well as representatives of the private sector and civil society. These features mark a fundamental shift away from previous practice, whereby priorities were largely determined by officials or regional agencies with very little consultation with the wider public.

#### The profile of gender in the first year of the Framework

The first public call for proposals under the new Framework was initiated in 2015. Sixty-eight proposals were submitted by individuals, NGOs, academic institutions, governments, and international and regional organizations. This indicates the keen interest of the broader public in contributing to and influencing political debate on regional priorities. Issues related to women and gender equality featured among the broad array of issues on which regional action was proposed.

Of the five issues that were ultimately referred to Leaders, one was of direct relevance to women—a proposal for regional action to address cervical cancer. A decision was taken to defer consideration of specific regional cooperation on the issue pending further consultation, but Leaders publicly acknowledged 'the substantial burden that cervical cancer places on women and girls in the Pacific region as well as the insufficient response to address it across the region' (2015 Forum Leaders' Communiqué, para. 14).

Two of the 68 submissions proposed greater regional cooperation on gender issues. One of these proposals proposed the establishment of a standing group within the Forum for women parliamentarians to oversee implementation of international human rights treaties. The other proposed the establishment of a regional human rights mechanism to encourage, among other things, greater awareness of and compliance with CEDAW. Although these submissions were not referred to Forum Leaders, the broader issue of how the promotion and



protection of human rights can be supported through regional dialogue and cooperation was identified as warranting further analysis and discussion.

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre was one of the coalition of NGOs to propose that Forum Leaders take regional political action to address human rights violations in West Papua. The issue of West Papua featured on the agenda of the Forum Leaders' meeting and Leaders expressed concern about alleged human rights violations there, requesting the Forum Chair to seek Indonesia's agreement to a Forum fact-finding mission.

In 2016, 47 submissions were received of which two focused on improving women's representation by enhancing women's decision-making on human security and conflict and the establishment of a Pacific Women's Caucus.

## Recommendations

In the process of describing the ways that the Forum has engaged with the issue of gender equality and women's political participation, the authors have identified a number of opportunities for these issues to be given greater prominence. The authors have focused on the opportunities offered by existing Forum mechanisms and instruments, rather than proposing entirely new modalities.

### 1. Ensure more equal participation by women in Forum mechanisms

The PLGED focuses on promoting gender equality at the national level. Although a regional instrument, it omits consideration of how women's representation and participation in regional-level decision-making could be enhanced. However, a range of mechanisms within the Forum present opportunities for greater participation by women.

- **The Specialist Sub-Committee on Regionalism** was established in 2015 as part of the new approach to regional public policy development established under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. Its role is to assess proposals submitted by the public for new regional initiatives and make recommendations to Forum Leaders. The committee is made up of representatives of different geopolitical subregions of the Forum's membership and representatives of the private sector and civil society. Of the eight members of the committee, currently only one is female.
- **Forum election observation missions.** The Forum has undertaken election observation missions in its member countries since 2001. These missions serve a number of purposes. An observer mission can act as an independent source of analysis of the conduct and integrity of a Forum member's election process, ensure the confidence of voters and other participants and offer expert recommendations on how the electoral process might be improved. More generally, the Forum's involvement in observing elections provides a practical demonstration of its support for good governance and human rights at both the political and the community level, and creates opportunities for valuable sharing of expertise among Forum members.
- **Eminent Persons Groups.** At different times, the Forum has established Eminent Persons Groups to conduct high-level reviews on significant issues. For example, and as noted above, an Eminent Persons Group was established in 2003 to undertake a review of the Pacific Islands Forum's role, functions and Secretariat. Eminent Persons Groups were also established in 2002 and 2006 in response to the political situation



in the Solomon Islands and Fiji respectively. On the basis of available records, no Eminent Persons Group has yet included a woman among its membership.

- **Ad hoc Ministerial Committees or Action Groups.** Forum Ministerial Committees have been established on specific issues, for example, to consider the Forum's engagement with the French territories, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The Biketawa Declaration specifically identifies Ministerial Action Groups as a mechanism for the Forum to respond to regional security crises.

Noting the range of mechanisms that currently exist within the Forum architecture, the Forum could commit to a policy of ensuring greater women's participation in them than has been the case to date. There are different ways of achieving this. For example, a commitment to having a minimum of one woman on any of the above-mentioned bodies would in effect be a form of reserved seat or temporary special measure. Alternatively, there could be a greater commitment to equal representation in these bodies. While a Leaders' level commitment along these lines would be significant, these measures could also be given effect as a matter of practice in the absence of a political directive.

### 2. Broaden the scope of accountability of the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration

The PLGED records Leaders' expectations that development partners will work in a coordinated, consultative and harmonized way to support actions to address gender inequality across the region, and to increase their financial and technical support for gender equality and women's empowerment programmes. However, this political call arguably lacks teeth, in that there is no mechanism to formally enlist commitments by development partners and track those commitments. There is therefore scope for strengthening the Declaration by including such a mechanism, which would assist in generating greater alignment by development partners with the Leaders' stated priorities in the field of gender equality.

### 3. Enhance the Forum's advocacy on gender issues

The Framework's conception of regionalism includes the establishment of shared norms or standards, or common positions on an issue, reflecting the strong support of Sir Mekere and his team for the Forum's normative and advocacy roles: 'The championing of common norms and standards on such things as gender, education, audit and trade has exemplified the sort of benefits to be derived from an integrated regional approach' (PIF Secretariat 2013: 15).

The PLGED has provided an important statement of the Forum's shared commitment to enhancing the status of women in the Pacific across the economic, political and social sectors. It has provided a reference point through which a wide range of stakeholders can advocate for the implementation of its specific commitments, and has served as a common policy document to support Forum advocacy in various forums, not least the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

However, as a general observation, the Forum's approach to advocating its common aspirations in relation to gender equality is not as coordinated as in other areas, such as in relation to the management and safeguarding of the Pacific Ocean. Forum advocacy on this issue has been supported in recent years by the appointment of a Pacific Oceans Commissioner (currently the Secretary General of the Forum), whose political profile and networks can support high-level advocacy of regional concerns and priorities regarding the

Ocean. As such, there is a precedent for the appointment of an eminent person as a Forum spokesperson or ‘ambassador’ for gender equality issues.

#### 4. Ensure that gender considerations are incorporated into all regional policies developed through the Forum

The Framework for Pacific Regionalism articulates a set of Pacific regional values to guide all regional policymaking and implementation. These values specifically reference gender equality as well as a commitment to equality and inclusivity more generally.

These regional values have been identified as something that the Specialist Sub-Committee on Regionalism must take into account when considering proposals for regional initiatives received through the new open process established under the Framework. However, the values of the Framework are intended to apply across the full gamut of the work of the Forum, and are not confined to proposals submitted by the public. The challenge for the Forum is how to ensure that all the regional policies, positions and measures that are developed through the Forum are consistent with its stated values. Obviously, the establishment of clear processes that mainstream gender considerations into regional policy development would support this goal. However, technical solutions, such as procedural requirements for identifying the gender implications of proposed regional measures, are not sufficient and the realization of regional values requires conscious political engagement by member countries.

## Conclusions

The profile of gender equality on the political agenda of the Pacific Islands Forum has increased significantly in recent years and there is now a clear commitment by Forum Leaders to gender equality, including the promotion of greater participation by women in political decision-making. To date, the focus of regional commitments has been on undertaking reforms at the national level. This is undeniably appropriate. However, there is also a strong case for promoting reforms within the Pacific Islands Forum itself, as a regional political organization, to ensure greater participation by women in the Forum’s political deliberations.

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## 4.3. Recommendations from the Asian consultation



During the Asian consultation, held in Bali on 9–10 December 2016, participants discussed some of the possible solutions and directions governments, civil society, local and regional organizations should take to promote gender equality and women’s political participation. They produced the following set of recommendations.

1. Achieving gender equality must begin with efforts to ensure with equitable access to social protection, as well as developing and implementing frameworks, guidelines and mechanisms to eliminate all forms of discrimination. This includes passing legislation, amending constitutions, and repealing all laws that limit women’s rights and prevent them from participating in all aspects of society.
2. Working to eliminate gender-based stereotypes is fundamental in promoting women’s rights and empowerment in the Asian region. Widely held beliefs that women are more suited toward child-rearing and maintaining the household prevent women from entering politics, which is instead seen as a male space.
3. Men must play a role in dispelling gender-based stereotypes and promoting women’s participation in politics. Men in all sectors of society—politicians, religious leaders, security officials, businessmen, and the media—are key to eliminating traditional mindsets towards women and convincing others of the important role women play in the public sphere. While awaiting broader cultural transformation, in the short term, in these patriarchal societies, endorsement of or praise for a woman candidate for office may significantly increase her chance of getting elected.
4. Political parties are one of the key instruments to implementing change in the political arena. Research has shown that traditional political party leadership is one of the primary obstacles to women’s participation. There must be a shift in traditional political party thinking and behavior with parties that actively promote women’s participation and leadership.
5. Enforcement of international conventions and treaties would result in a significant increase in the number of women in politics. CEDAW has had a clear impact in several countries in formulating gender equality policies. Advocacy by international



and non-governmental organizations, along with strong monitoring and oversight, can transform international commitments into laws and constitutional amendments prohibiting gender discrimination.

6. Temporary special measures like gender quotas have spread across the region. However reserved seats provisions have tended to ensure only a small percentage of women in parliament, while legislated quotas vary greatly in their impact on the numbers of women elected. Making legislated quotas more effective requires mandating that women be placed in 'electable' positions, for example through placement mandates, as well as imposing sanctions for non-compliance, like refusal to register a political party that has not complied with the quota law or reduction in public financing of political parties proportionate to the gap. With such provisions, parties are less likely to nominate and elect more women.
7. For the most effective results, electoral gender quotas should be accompanied by a range of other measures in order to further women's participation in politics, including:
  - Equitable media coverage for female candidates for office, and media (both traditional and social) that moves beyond gender stereotypes when it interacts with women MPs;
  - Advocacy campaigning, lobbying and support from women's organizations and civil society for women running for office;
  - Capacity development programs for women interested in entering politics;
  - Campaign finance support for female candidates; and
  - Monitoring and accountability mechanisms for gender equality, along with legal and policy frameworks that impose penalties for non-compliance.