



Gender Equality:

Where do we stand?



SPC
Secretariat
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Community



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*In 2011 the Government of the Cook Islands adopted the **National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (NPGewe)**, which aimed to end inequalities between men and women in six key priority areas.¹ With the country celebrating 50 years of self-governance in 2015, it is important to assess what has been achieved in promoting equal opportunities and responsibilities between men and women. What steps can be taken to accelerate progress towards achieving equality outcomes while sustaining the achievements already made?²*



¹ The implementation of the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (NPGewe) is overseen by the Gender and Development Division, within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in coordination with six taskforces led by relevant ministries.

² Except where otherwise stated, all statistical information is from the Cook Islands 2012 Gender Profile, January 2015.

Women and men in decision-making and governance

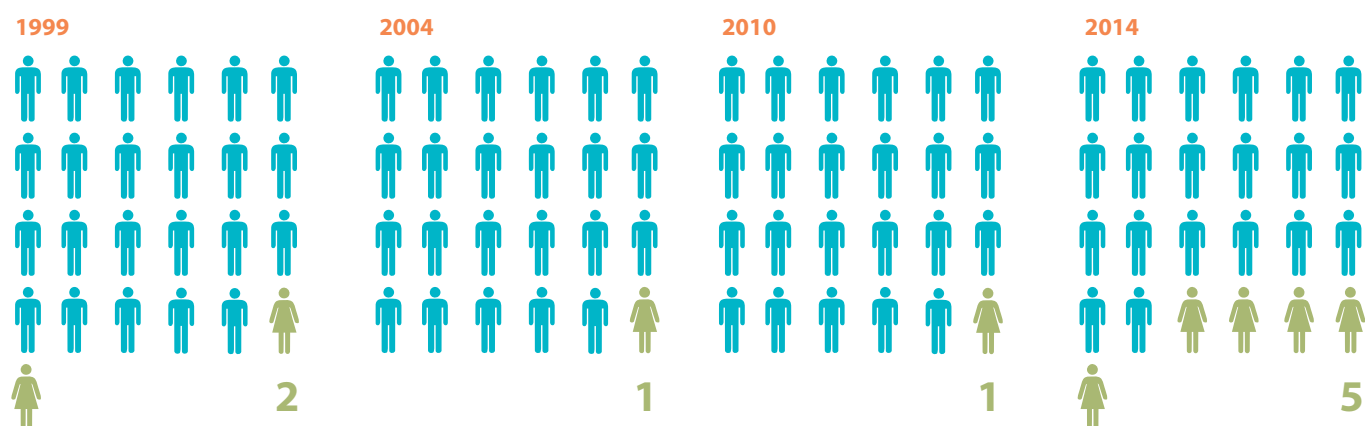
In 2015 we are seeing efforts paying off. **An increasing number of women are involved in political affairs and decision-making**, as shown by the steady increase in the number of women candidates in national elections, an increase in the proportion of women parliamentarians, and more women in senior positions in the public service and Crown agencies

The number of women parliamentarians is now at its highest ever, with four women members of parliament elected in 2014. The Speaker of Parliament – a female political figure – was appointed from outside of parliament, thus bringing the proportion of women in parliament to five, representing 20% of parliamentarians. This is still some way off the international benchmark of 30% women in national decision-making. The Deputy Speaker, appointed in her first term in parliament, is also a woman. **Six out of 16 ministries are presently headed by women.**

Numerous initiatives provide capacity building and support for women candidates in both national and island council elections. For example, in 2014 PPSEAWA Cook Islands (Inc.) carried out an advocacy campaign and training workshops, and produced educational pamphlets in both English and Cook Island Maori. The Cook Islands National Council of Women (CINCW) has a long history of providing individual mentoring for women candidates for national and island council elections.

Proposals to reform in electoral processes, and to introduce temporary special measures, such as reserved seats to increase the number of women elected officials, are ongoing, lively debates that are yet to be resolved.

Women's representation in parliament: 1999– 2014 (Speaker included)



Women's and men's participation in economic development

A large proportion of both women and men are engaged in economic activity. The 2011 Census found that just over 7 out of 10 women (71%) either had a job or would work if there was a job available, while the figure for men was 8 in 10. This level of economic activity for both women and men is high among Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs).

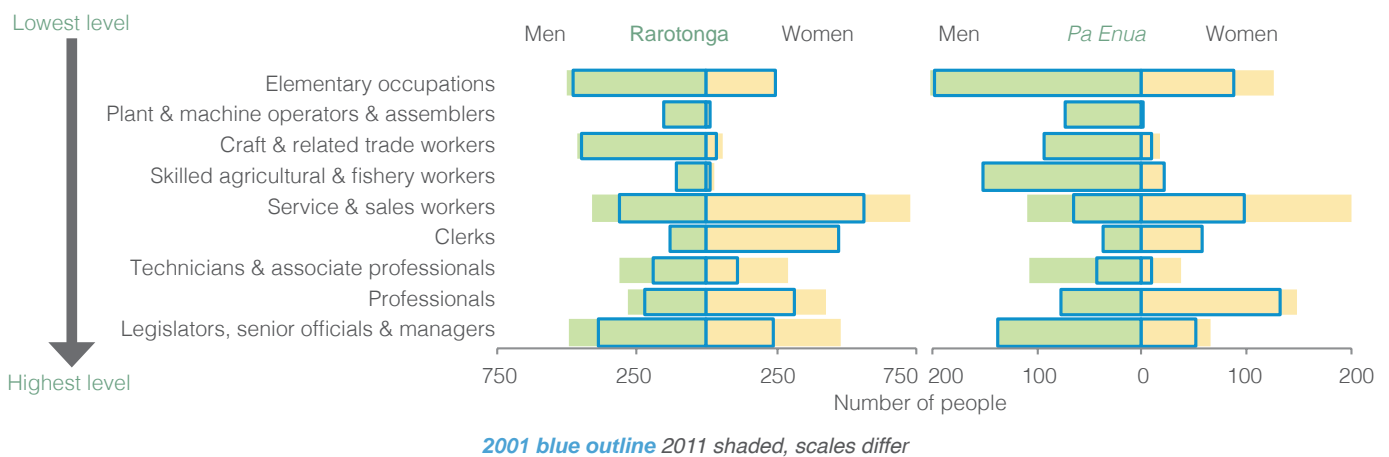
Employment and income Census data reveal that men and women in Cook Islands families tend to combine full-time and part-time formal work (public or private sector) with small business and agricultural or marine food production activities.

Women are making progress towards achieving equal access to jobs with the same remuneration, status and social benefits as men, with the

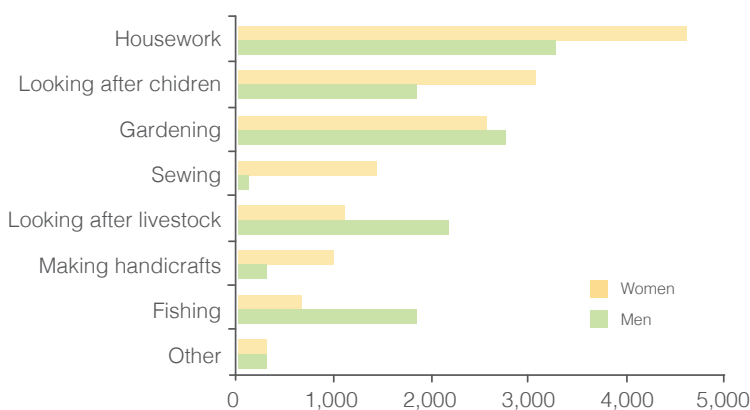
proportion of women among senior officials and managers, technicians and professionals increasing over the past 10 years.

From 2013 the government extended paid maternity leave benefits to women employed in the private sector – an achievement that enables more Cook Islands women to combine work and career development with their family life.

Men's and women's occupations: 2001-2011



Number of men and women involved in unpaid activities in the last 4 weeks: 2011



Almost universally, **women tend to do more unpaid work in the home compared to men**, in their role as primary family care givers. These responsibilities impact on women's capacity to engage in productive, income-earning activities. Research is being coordinated by the government's Gender and Development Division (GADD) to identify ways to increase women's economic empowerment, through access to credit as well as improving their financial and business literacy.

Women's contribution to climate change adaptation

*Climate change is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is evident in sudden and extremely violent natural hazards (storms, cyclones, tsunamis, landslides, floods, etc.), as well as in longer-term environmental impacts, such as decreasing ground water supplies, sea level rise, sea temperature warming, prolonged droughts, coral reef bleaching, and so on. In addition to the general impacts on human life and livelihoods, these **climate change-related phenomena also impact men and women differentially, through specific hardships based on the different roles of women and men in family livelihoods and food production.** For example, women are more likely than men to derive an income from making and selling handicrafts from natural products, so any degradation of the environment affecting natural resources will affect them disproportionately.*

In the face of the impacts of climatic changes, some Cook Islands families have migrated to other islands or overseas, many have found their work burdens have increased due to the greater effort required to produce food, while others have had lost their businesses and other sources of cash income. Very little research has been undertaken about how Cook Islands people are specifically adapting to climate stresses, or about how natural hazards impact on other human dimensions, such as health and education, and food and economic security.

Strengthening the Resilience of our Islands and our Communities to Climate Change Programme is an initiative of the Climate Change Coordination Unit of the Office of the Prime Minister, established in 2012. The programme has focal points in each *Pa Enua*, and works closely with local council members and communities. Women are actively involved in most of the project activities, including a number of sustainable livelihoods projects in *Pa Enua* productive sectors targeting the elderly and youth.

As a way to maintain adequate water and sanitation in the context of more frequent droughts, the government undertakes to provide 6,000 litre-capacity water tanks to all households in the Cook Islands (with the costs of water pumps or connections borne by the household). However, this capacity is insufficient during prolonged periods of drought, such as that those repeatedly experienced in the Northern Group.



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Women's capacity to address health issues

The Cook Islands has a good track record in promoting maternal health, with virtually all pregnant women receiving antenatal care and being cared for by skilled personnel.

Considerable progress has been made in reducing teenage fertility, from 82 births per thousand in 1996 to 51 per thousand in 2011.³

The figure remains high, with one teenage girl in 20 having a child each year. The Cook Islands is among the few Pacific Island countries and territories taking proactive measures to ensure that teenage mothers are able to continue their education and have access to youth-friendly reproductive health services.

Each year, one female adolescent in 20 has a child



Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the main cause of illness and death for both women and men in the Cook Islands,⁴ accounting for over 75% of all cases seen in the health system, with the number of new cases increasing by about 2% each year. More men are diagnosed with NCD-related illnesses than women, but the number of women with long-term, mostly chronic, conditions is significant. Many of these patients must go to New Zealand for long-term treatment and care. From 2006 to 2012, six out of every 10 new cancer cases were women.⁵



6 new cancer patients
out of 10 are women

According to the 2011 Census, women live, on average, six years longer than men, with a life expectancy at birth of 78 years. An increasing proportion of the population is aged above 65 years, while the proportion of youth and children is falling, due to fewer babies being born and increasing emigration. The Cook Islands is experiencing the phenomena of an 'ageing population', and the country must ensure that older persons have access to appropriate health care services and mobility aids, that they are economically secure, and that they have appropriate access to in-home care – from either family members, the community or other care providers. In recognition of the needs of the increasing number of older persons, from 2015, those aged over 70 will be entitled to apply for a pension of NZD 640 per month.

Two important questions are:

- How are women taking care of their own health needs, while taking responsibility for caring for family members, in the context of the rising prevalence of NCDs for Cook Islands people?
- What should be done to help women to cope with the additional burden caused by increasing NCDs?

Research by the Ministry of Health, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and GADD – planned to begin in February 2015 – will examine the relationship between the increased prevalence of NCDs and women's responsibilities for caring for family members.

³ 'Teenage' refers to adolescent women aged between 15 and 19. Source: Cook Islands Demographic Profile 2006-2011.

⁴ NCDs consist of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases (e.g. asthma).

⁵ Statistical Bulletin 2012, Ministry of Health.

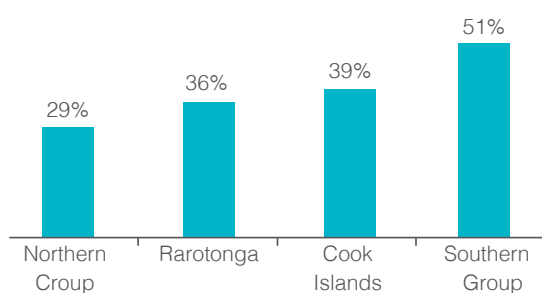
Eliminating violence against women

Cook Island women have always been prominent in working with communities, families and government agencies to reduce domestic violence. **Over the past decade, access to services, such as the police and counselling, has improved, particularly with the establishment of the Domestic Violence Police Unit in 2007, and its 'No drop' policy, whereby each report of domestic violence must be followed up, even where a victim withdraws their claim.** The quality of services has also improved, while police procedures follow strict protocols to ensure that victims are treated with respect and professionalism. Support services and counselling for both women and men are more widely available in Rarotonga, but still lag in the rest of the country.

Domestic violence is everybody's business, and more victims, relatives and neighbours are now reporting domestic violence incidents to the police, which indicates that advocacy and awareness campaigns have had an impact. Programmes have been implemented to encourage men to examine their assumptions about gender roles and masculinity, and to encourage them to become 'agents for change', as well as positive, non-violent role models in their communities. Such programmes should be made more accessible, especially in the *Pa Enua*, along with appropriate information and education, to raise awareness about the issues around prevention of violence against women.

Research conducted by the CINCW in 2013 has produced the first comprehensive data about violence against women in the Cook Islands. This research shows that **one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partner at some point in their lives.**⁶

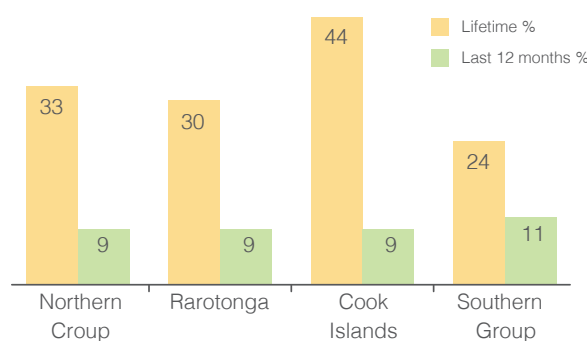
Physical violence by persons other than intimate partner since age 15 (%)



Challenges remain, with high rates of physical violence against women and girls by persons other than intimate partners – mostly by immediate family members, especially by mothers and stepmothers.⁷ The research suggests that this kind of physical violence is mainly related to child discipline, and may not be violence that is primarily gender-related. However, physical violence is never an acceptable form of discipline. We need to know more about whether this physical violence affects boys and girls in the same way, and to advocate strongly for non-violent child discipline.

More preventive action is needed to reduce all forms of violence, whether perpetrated by men or women. The Family Law Bill, which will shortly be tabled in parliament, contains a number of measures aimed at preventing violence against women and domestic violence, and aims to establish services to comprehensively address the social, economic and legal needs of women and children affected by various forms of violence.

Lifetime and current prevalence of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence



6 Cook Islands National Council of Women. 2014. Te Ata O Te Ngakau. The Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study, 2012-2013.

7 Ibid.

Gender-responsive government programmes and policies

All public policies and programmes should consider and promote equal access of men and women to all services, with the objective of achieving gender equality. Striving for gender equality also involves reviewing and revising laws for consistency with the government's responsibilities under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), including that laws provide equal rights to women and men and promote gender equality.

The CEDAW Law Reform Programme began in 2008, and revisions to a number of acts have been recommended, notably to the Marriage Act and the Crimes Act. However, progress has been slow in presenting the amendments to parliament. An implementation budget is being prepared for the Family Law Bill, which should be tabled in parliament in mid-2015. The Employment Relations Act (2012) provides maternity leave benefits for women working in the private sector, and includes provisions for the prevention of sexual harassment and new protections from discrimination based on gender and pregnancy.



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Civil society and government partnerships

The partnership between the Cook Islands Government and civil society is active and strong in all six key priority areas. The introduction of the government's Social Impact Fund for NGOs provides funding opportunities for civil society organisations working towards gender equality, youth participation and disability issues. **Civil society and women's groups play an essential role in monitoring the country's progress towards achieving gender equality**, and coordinating some of the activities of the various entities responsible for implementing the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

Over the next two years the government's efforts to ensure that men's and women's needs are reflected in all public activities will include training for public officials, the appointment of focal points among senior ministry officials to serve as catalysts for gender-sensitive processes, and regular public communication about progress made in implementing the National Policy on Gender Equality.

The government's Gender and Development Division, which is responsible for overseeing progress under the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, requires more staff, and a bigger budget, to effectively drive the country's efforts to ensure that public policies, programmes and services adequately address the needs of Cook Islands men, women, boys and girls.

Proportion of government recurrent budget allocated to Gender and Development Division (%), by financial year

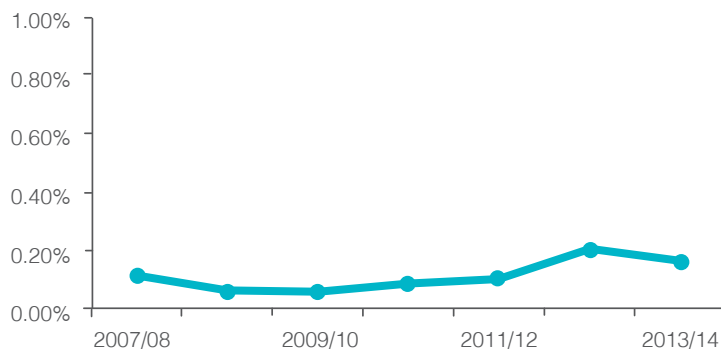


Photo: Cook Islands National Council of Women

