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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Reframing Suffrage Narratives: Pacific Women, Political Voice, and Collective Empowerment

SONIA PALMIERI , ELISE HOWARD,  AND KERRY N BAKER 

### ABSTRACT

Dominant narratives of women's suffrage have been shaped in ways that marginalize Pacific women's experiences. Such narratives have emphasized the struggles of Global North women to achieve individualized political empowerment, primarily through the right to vote, from the late 19th century. By measures of struggle, individual empowerment and temporality, Pacific women have been characterized as passive recipients of the vote in the late 20th century. In this article, we contest these narratives through foregrounding Pacific women's political contributions, and reconsidering how suffrage is defined in Global South contexts. By revisiting the Pacific women's suffrage story and highlighting activism that mirrors and extends the strategies adopted by suffragists around the world to claim political voice, we put forward a more comprehensive picture of women's franchise in the Pacific. In doing so, we uncover tensions between collective conceptualizations of political empowerment and the individual rights-centred approach favoured by dominant suffrage narratives.

**Key words:** Women, gender, suffrage, politics, activism, Pacific Islands, Oceania, revisionist history

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Suffrage has been traditionally defined as a historical struggle for women's political legitimacy within formal, masculinized institutions, centred on access to the vote. Arguments for women's franchise were based on competing notions of women being either 'equal to' or 'different from' men. Suffrage narratives have been shaped predominantly by scholars writing about Global North contexts,<sup>1</sup> although new revisionist and postcolonial approaches have sought to challenge this dominant framing of suffrage.<sup>2</sup>

A common suffrage narrative applied to the Pacific region is that it was generally a process easily won and uncontested as part of relatively peaceful transitions towards independence.<sup>3</sup> This narrative positions Pacific women as passive recipients of political rights. We argue that there are three reasons to question this narrative. First, it fails to recognize Pacific women's political legitimacy in pre-colonial decision-making. Second, it disregards regional trailblazers in the fight for the right to vote for women in the colonial era. Third, it denies Pacific women's active contribution towards nation building and self-determination movements in the colonial and post-colonial eras. Women in these movements sought – often at significant cost – to amplify women's political voice and to promote transformative political change both at the national and international level, in ways that have clear parallels to 'traditional' framings of suffrage and that, therefore, can be seen as extensions of the broader suffrage movement.

An underlying motivation in making these arguments is to broaden the disciplinary lens through which suffrage narratives are explored. While none of the authors fit neatly into one discipline alone, we are primarily political scientists with a longstanding interest in women's political participation and leadership in the Pacific. Our collective body of work is of a more contemporary nature, although

*(Acknowledgements continued)*

Hart and Pleasance Purser at the New Zealand Parliament for sharing information and cross-checking data on elected women to inform Table 1. Finally we are indebted to all the women who came before us in documenting the important stories of Pacific women's activism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

<sup>1</sup> This article defines the Global North as the countries of the world that have traditionally aligned with western metrics of socio-economic and political development. This definition is not restricted to geography and includes Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. We acknowledge this term is contested.

<sup>2</sup> Birgitta Bader-Zaar, 'Gender and Suffrage Politics: New Approaches to the History of Women's Political Emancipation', *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 208–18; see also James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> June Hannam, Mitzi Auchterlonie, and Katherine Holden, *International Encyclopedia of Women's Suffrage* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000); Penelope Schoeffel Meleisea, 'Women and Political Leadership in the Pacific Islands', in *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 107–23.

we have aimed consistently to expand definitions of participation and leadership both in the modern Pacific and in historical context.<sup>4</sup> In part, our contention is with the narrow focus evident in the discipline of political science, having limited the actors and historical time period relevant to its dominant narratives of women's suffrage. We suggest that the reframing of suffrage presented in this article will be useful for historians of the Pacific, both in terms of its outcomes and what a reframed suffrage might mean for our collective understanding of Pacific political agency, but also for scholars of women in politics more generally, in terms of our process of reframing, and how that might be more widely applied.

This article is structured as follows. First, we revisit the dominant narratives of suffrage and offer a broader definition that recognizes the missing role of political and socio-cultural context, as well as diverse objectives and forms of political action. Specifically, we suggest that suffrage could be better understood as *contextually relevant forms of political action that strengthen women's voice and contribute to meaningful political change*. We then set out our methods and approach, namely a re-reading of both historiographical and contemporary texts, including personal accounts of women's activism, that counter dominant narratives of suffrage. Given our objective is to illustrate how traditional framings of suffrage have eclipsed a more comprehensive understanding of women's franchise and political participation in the Pacific Islands, this methodology is instructive because it allows us to maximize our storytellers' authorship of their own narrative, although we acknowledge that the interpretation of those stories is ours.<sup>5</sup> Then, we use our expanded focus to retell the story of women's suffrage in the Pacific, and reframe actions that have enabled their political voice and empowerment in the context of nation building and self-determination movements in four parts of the region: Sāmoa, Vanuatu, Palau, and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Importantly, these contexts illustrate Pacific women's resistance against multiple oppressions of colonization and militarization. Reframing women's pro-independence activism through a suffrage lens complicates the traditional narratives of women's suffrage in the region as a simple (and largely externally driven) process, and offers new avenues for interpreting women's political engagement in the Global South. We conclude with a call for more inclusive understandings of suffrage that are mindful of the different experiences and interests of women both in the Global South, and more broadly.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kerryn Baker, 'Great Expectations: Gender and Political Representation in the Pacific Islands', *Government and Opposition* 53, no. 3 (2018): 542–68; Kerryn Baker and Sonia Palmieri, 'Can Women Dynasty Politicians Disrupt Social Norms of Political Leadership? A Proposed Typology of Normative Change', *International Political Science Review* 44, no. 1 (2023): 122–36; George Carter and Elise Howard, 'Pacific Women in Climate Change Negotiations', *Small States and Territories* 3, no. 2 (2020): 303–18; Sonia Palmieri and Diane Zetlin, 'Alternative Strategies to Support Women as Political Actors in the Pacific: Building the House of Peace', *Women's Studies International Forum* 82 (2020): 102404.

<sup>5</sup> See Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

## DEFINING SUFFRAGE

Women's suffrage commonly refers to the right to vote in political elections, 'and thus participate in political decisions'.<sup>6</sup> In many parts of the Global North, these rights were fought for through a series of acts – some violent, many non-violent – including the signing of petitions, public speaking, lobbying public figures, organizing and unionizing (nationally and internationally), marching, and protesting.<sup>7</sup> The term 'suffrage' originally meant 'prayers', its later political usage drawing on the notion of 'seeking divine help or intercession'.<sup>8</sup> Suffrage has been described as the first of successive waves of the women's/feminist movement in which women sought to contest their exclusion from the political sphere, and to claim their political rights as individual subjects.<sup>9</sup>

In these definitions, we identify three common characterizations of women's global suffrage: first, that women's franchise was secured through political contestation and struggle; second, that the franchise was won (universally) for individual empowerment; and third, that women fell into a 'trough of inactivity after 1918'.<sup>10</sup> Without wishing to deny the critical importance of women's protracted and difficult fights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we agree with an emergent body of literature that considers these characterizations are unrepresentative of suffrage claims around the world, and therefore limit a more dynamic understanding of women's suffrage that can legitimately move beyond the study of 'how the vote was won'.<sup>11</sup> We note specifically that the well-documented struggles at the turn of the century mostly campaigned for the franchise for white women only;<sup>12</sup> that a more universal franchise resulted from pro-independence, decolonization movements

<sup>6</sup> Gabriele Griffin, 'Suffrage', *A Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001>.

<sup>7</sup> June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton, eds, *Votes for Women* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Laura Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, 'Suffrage', *A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 867–8.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Joan Sangster, 'Suffragists after Suffrage: Continuing Waves of Feminism', *Canadian Issues* 10 (2016): 14.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan, 'International Feminist Perspectives on Suffrage: An Introduction', in *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 13. See also Hannam, Auchterlonie, and Holden, *International Encyclopedia of Women's Suffrage*, Irma Sulkunen, Seija-Leena Nevala-Nurmi, and Pirjo Markkola, *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship: International Perspectives on Parliamentary Reforms* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); Pamela Marie Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> See Keating, *Distant Sisters*.

in the Global South and transnational campaigns for democratization; and that despite these gains, the fight for women's political rights continues – certainly in the Pacific region, but also elsewhere.

In this article we propose a broader narrative of women's suffrage as *contextually relevant forms of political action that strengthen women's voice and contribute to meaningful political change*. This more expansive framing of suffrage continues to value the strategies deployed by suffragists but widens both the political objectives of that activism and the context in which that action took place. We do this for three reasons. First, as Ruth Davidson has argued, there is a need to privilege the context in which women have sought (and continue to seek) political rights.<sup>13</sup> Context shapes the choices women can make and situates campaigns within broader political developments. In the Pacific, the institutions within which political rights are claimed must be situated within layered legacies of colonization, including the relationship that women have to institutions that were introduced by colonial powers. We draw on Teresia Teaiwa's framing of Pacific women's 'double oppression' – being subject, that is, to both colonialism and male chauvinism – to make this argument.<sup>14</sup>

Second, a broader framing allows us to contribute further to arguments that have linked suffrage to grassroots movement building and calls for 'fresh perspectives' on 'the complexity of the movement'.<sup>15</sup> June Purvis and June Hannam note that exploring the stories of 'less well known' activists adds to our 'knowledge of the diversity of experience', but also understands this experience as both non-linear and 'messy', while still uncovering patterns of similarity with mainstream narratives.<sup>16</sup> We do not seek to romanticize women's agency outside of formal politics as a substitute for women's lack of political representation across the region, as this remains a significant barrier to women's voice in decision-making.<sup>17</sup> Rather, we aim to illustrate women's political activism in contexts and issues that Pacific women themselves have identified as meaningful to their lives, and their resistance to structures that have traditionally constrained their participation. Importantly, understanding women's suffrage through this lens highlights their political efficacy and counters the damaging

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Davidson, 'A Local Perspective: The Women's Movement and Citizenship, Croydon 1890s–1939', *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (2020): 1016–33.

<sup>14</sup> Teresia Teaiwa, 'Microwomen: US Colonialism and Micronesian Women Activists', in *Sweat and Salt Water: Selected Works*, ed. Katerina Teaiwa, April K. Henderson, and Terence Wesley-Smith (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021), 98.

<sup>15</sup> June Purvis and June Hannam, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: New Perspectives', *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (2020): 911–12. See also Patricia F. Dolton, 'Women's Suffrage Movement', *The Alert Collector* 54, no. 2 (2014): 31.

<sup>16</sup> Purvis and Hannam, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland', 912. See also Linda Martz, "'That Splendid Body of Women": Nursing, Professional Registration, and Suffragette Militancy', *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (2020): 1000–15.

<sup>17</sup> Kerryn Baker, *Pacific Women in Politics: Gender Quota Campaigns in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

‘deficit narrative’ of Pacific women in politics.<sup>18</sup> Along with women’s leadership and lived experience more generally in the colonial and early postcolonial eras, these suffrage stories have been understudied and largely unexamined.<sup>19</sup>

Third, building on both the importance of context and its contribution to movement building, we suggest there remain open questions about Pacific women’s claims for suffrage. In this, we take inspiration from the work of other scholars who continue to identify stories of suffrage; indeed, Sandra Holton has suggested there is unlikely ever to be a ‘last word’ on the history of the women’s suffrage movement.<sup>20</sup> Rendering ourselves open to new accounts and interpretations of suffrage means questioning its beginning and end dates. In a Pacific context, reconsidering the temporality of suffrage allows us to capture Pacific women’s sustained resistance to multiple pressures of colonization and militarization. Defining suffrage as a ‘long-term project’ supports a richer analysis of actions in the Pacific Islands in which the emergence of women’s political voice has not been focused exclusively on securing the vote. It supports an understanding of women’s political empowerment in the Pacific as being in a continuous phase of development, itself an unfinished project.

### *Method and approach*

Having made the case for a more inclusive approach to the concept of suffrage, we propose a reconsideration of the context and relevance of specific acts of women’s political activism not previously understood as struggles for suffrage in the Pacific Islands. We note that a number of revisionist histories of suffrage have resulted from methodological developments in the field. As identified by Birgitta Bader-Zaar, these include new approaches to capturing the biographies of ‘ordinary suffragists’, as well as changing narratives of postcolonialism.<sup>21</sup> While the former has led to the inclusion of herstories and new voices,<sup>22</sup> the latter have very much sought to

<sup>18</sup> On ‘deficit narratives’, see Kerry Baker, Roannie Ng Shiu, and Jack Corbett, ‘Gender, Politics and Development in the Small States of the Pacific’, *Small States and Territories* 3, no. 2 (2020): 261–6.

<sup>19</sup> Teresia Teaiwa, ‘What Makes Fiji Women Soldiers? Context, Context, Context’, *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 37 (2015): paragraph 6. See also Anne Dickson-Waiko, ‘Taking Over, of What from Whom? Women and Independence, the PNG Experience’, *Alfred Deakin Research Institute Working Paper* 10 (2010): 1–10; Anne Dickson-Waiko, ‘Women, Nation and Decolonisation in Papua New Guinea’, *Journal of Pacific History* (hereinafter *JPH*) 48, no. 2 (2013): 177–93.

<sup>20</sup> Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (London: Routledge, 1996), 249.

<sup>21</sup> Bader-Zaar, ‘Gender and Suffrage Politics’, 208–9.

<sup>22</sup> On the need to consider the story of suffrage from diverse perspectives, June Purvis and June Hannam have helpfully noted, ‘In recent years historians have moved beyond the most well-known leaders to focus on women who were less well known and this has added to our knowledge of the diversity of experience.’ See Purvis and Hannam, ‘The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland’, 912.



challenge the dominant focus of suffrage as having been achieved exclusively through the struggles of women in the Global North. In this context, we review dominant narratives through existing accounts in Pacific literature with the intention of ‘bringing fresh perspectives to bear on the writing of history’.<sup>23</sup> We have sought out sources that illustrate specific experiences, acts, and contributions by women to broader social change movements. These sources include previous historical and political scholarship, biographies and autobiographies, documentaries (including a radio programme), political manifestos, and an author interview. While not generalizable across the very diverse Pacific, the experiences, acts, and contributions of women presented are drawn from countries in each of its three sub-regions (Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia), indicating, at the very least, that women’s resistance to political oppression and marginalization was widespread across the region. Taken together, these stories begin to form a richer and more nuanced narrative that we hope Pacific historians might take up with more extensive archival or oral history research in the future.

With the objective of expanding traditional narratives of suffrage, our approach has been to revisit and amplify the voices of a diverse cohort of Pacific women activists operating both prior to and after formal decolonization. In these texts, we looked for points of comparison with Global North suffragists in terms of activist strategies and motivations for change. Where they can be discerned, we are interested in whether similarities in strategy and motivation imply a shared understanding of political efficacy and desired outcome. Yet, it is equally important to note that Pacific women’s political struggles were (and continue to be) defined by very different contexts and circumstances to those of women in the Global North. Our presentation of ‘suffrage acts’ in the Pacific therefore takes both strategy and context into account. In this process, we found the overall picture of women’s participation in politics in the pre-independence period difficult to ascertain. In part this is due to a lack of gender disaggregated data on voting and political representation, but also due to the ‘colonial gaze’ through which stories have been told.<sup>24</sup> While the critical work of scholars such as Robert Nicole and Margaret Mishra on Fiji has presented alternative accounts of women’s agency during the colonial period,<sup>25</sup> there remains considerable scope to continue uncovering the active, political roles historically played by diverse women across the region.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Brittenham, ‘What Should a Revisionist History Look Like?’, *JAC* 21, no. 4 (2001): 860.

<sup>24</sup> Dickson-Waiko, ‘Taking Over, of What from Whom?’, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Nicole, *Disturbing History: Resistance in Early Colonial Fiji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011); Margaret Mishra, ‘Women’s Activism in Fiji: 1900–2010’, *Journal of Women’s History* 24 (2012): 115–43; Margaret Mishra, ‘Your Woman Is a Very Bad Woman: Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 67–78.

<sup>26</sup> Dickson-Waiko, ‘Taking Over, of What from Whom?’, Samantha Rose, ‘Women’s Whispers: Indigenous Women’s Participation in Decolonising Oceania’, paper presented to the Social Change in the 21st Century Conference, Brisbane, October 2006.



## RETELLING THE STORY OF PACIFIC WOMEN'S EARLY SUFFRAGE

Polynesian women, while commonly unrecognized as such, were very much torch-bearers of the global women's suffrage movement. For example, when a local government was established in Pitcairn Island in 1838 – where the population was made up of descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and the Tahitian women who travelled with them to Pitcairn – women were allowed to vote. In the first elections, around 20 women cast a vote.<sup>27</sup> When the population was resettled to Norfolk Island in 1856 due to over-crowding, Pitcairn women retained their voting rights.<sup>28</sup> Later in the century, suffrage was granted to women – including Māori women – in Aotearoa New Zealand,<sup>29</sup> as well as in the Cook Islands, in 1893.<sup>30</sup>

In these cases, suffrage was not a passive act, but was actively sought by Pacific Islands women. In Pitcairn Island, women pushed for the right to vote in recognition of their contributions to the establishment and sustainability of the settlement: 'without the women of the *Bounty* to look after Pitcairn it probably would have failed'.<sup>31</sup> In the Cook Islands, gaining the vote should be seen in the context of rapidly changing gender roles, which saw women begin to assume chiefly roles and assert political leadership for the first time from the 19th century, including Makea Takau, a prominent high chief and influential political figure during the period the franchise was obtained.<sup>32</sup> In Aotearoa New Zealand, while white women – notably Kate Sheppard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) – were seen as the most vocal leaders of the suffrage campaign, Māori women were active in the WCTU and beyond. Perhaps the most well-known Māori suffrage activist is Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia, who fought for women's franchise and representation not in the New Zealand colonial parliament but in Te Kotahitanga, a separate Māori parliament, modelled on

<sup>27</sup> Dateline Pacific, 'Pitcairn Celebrates 175 Years of Women's Suffrage', *Radio New Zealand*, December 6, 2013, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/2578895/pipitcai-celebrates-175-years-of-women's-suffrage> (accessed August 17, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Marian Sawer and Marian Simms, *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Māori men had been enfranchised in 1867, although they were restricted to voting in the four Māori electorates. These electorates meant Māori men were represented in parliament, although on a per capita basis they were significantly under-represented compared with their European counterparts. When Māori women won the vote in 1893, they were also restricted to voting in the Māori electorates. The first Māori woman MP, Iriaka Rātana, was elected in a Māori electorate in 1949.

<sup>30</sup> Dick Scott, *Years of the Pooh-Bah: A Cook Islands History* (Rarotonga: Cook Islands Trading Corporation, 1991), 59; Daley and Nolan, 'International Feminist Perspectives on Suffrage'.

<sup>31</sup> Meralda Warren quoted in Dateline Pacific, 'Pitcairn Celebrates 175 Years of Women's Suffrage'.

<sup>32</sup> See Scott, *Years of the Pooh-Bah*; Joanna Cobley, 'Remembering Makea Takau Ariki, the Queen of Rarotonga, 1871–1911', *New Zealand Journal of Public History* 6, no. 1 (2018): 46–55; Hannah Cutting-Jones, "'The Conscience of the Community": The *Au Vaine* of Rarotonga', *JPH* 55, no. 1 (2020): 58–79.

Westminster traditions but seeking greater recognition of Māori political interests than in the existing white-dominated political institutions.<sup>33</sup>

Despite these early cases, suffrage in the Pacific has been described as something that was bestowed upon, and passively received by, women (and men) through the decolonization process. In her history of Pacific women's suffrage, Penelope Schoeffel Meleisea wrote:

The women of Pacific Island nations did not have to struggle for suffrage; political independence for most of the island states was negotiated in the last quarter of the twentieth century when women's suffrage was an established element in modern democracy.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, even before independence, there are examples of women's political empowerment in the region: three women were elected or appointed to the legislative council in Fiji in 1966, four years prior to independence; in Solomon Islands, the first woman member of the legislative assembly, Lily Ogatina Poznanski, was elected in 1965 through an electoral college vote two years before universal adult suffrage was introduced. A comprehensive account of Pacific women's suffrage is presented at Table 1, indicated by year of independence, the year women were granted the right to vote and stand for election, the first year a woman was either elected or appointed, and the total number of women elected or appointed, by country/territory.<sup>35</sup>

While we do not dispute that suffrage was formalized in the decolonization process, there is cause to question the passivity of women's suffrage claims more broadly given that colonial powers (including missionaries) deliberately chose to ignore women's 'pre-contact' political power evident in diverse Pacific societies.<sup>36</sup> As Anne Dickson-Waiko writes, in the Pacific the 'colonial state was itself gendered ... constructed by excluding women from public life'; pertinently, these were women who had often previously played a deliberative role in governance.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Maria Bargh, 'Lessons from the Māori Parliament', in *Māori and Parliament: Diverse Strategies and Compromises*, ed. Maria Bargh (Wellington: Huia, 2010), 17–30; Angela Ballara, 'Wāhine Rangātira: Māori Women of Rank and Their Role in the Women's Kotahitanga Movement of the 1980s', *New Zealand Journal of History* 27, no. 2 (1993): 127–39; Charlotte Macdonald, 'Suffrage, Gender and Sovereignty in New Zealand', in *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship: International Perspectives on Parliamentary Reforms*, ed. Irma Sulkunen, Seija-Leena Nevala-Nurmi, and Pirjo Markkola (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 14–33.

<sup>34</sup> Schoeffel Meleisea, 'Women and Political Leadership in the Pacific Islands', 107.

<sup>35</sup> A comprehensive reference list pertaining to women's suffrage in Oceania is accessible here <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2023.2247348>.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, 'Settler Anxieties, Indigenous Peoples and Women's Suffrage in the Colonies of Australia, New Zealand and Hawai'i, 1888 to 1902', in *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, ed. Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (London: Routledge Curzon, 2012), 220–39.

<sup>37</sup> Dickson-Waiko, 'Taking Over, of What from Whom?', 5.

TABLE 1: Women’s suffrage in Oceania.

	Year of Independence/ Federation/ Dominion	Year women granted right to vote	Year women granted right to stand for election	Year first woman elected	Total number of women elected (E) or appointed (A) to national legislature <sup>1</sup>
Aotearoa New Zealand	1907	1893	1919	1933	175 (E)
Australia	1901	1902/ 1962 <sup>2</sup>	1902/1962	1943	237 (E)
Solomon Islands	1978	1967	1967	1965 <sup>3</sup>	7 (E)
Fiji	1970	1963	1963	1966	36 <sup>4</sup> (E), 8 (A)
Samoa <sup>5</sup>	1962	1990	n/a	1970	17 (E), 2 (A)
Kiribati	1979	1967	1967	1971	13 (E)
Papua New Guinea (PNG)	1975	1964	1964	1973	9 (E), 2 (A) <sup>6</sup>
Tonga <sup>7</sup>	1970	1951	1951	1975	7 (E), 6 (A)
Nauru	1968	1951	1951	1986	4 (E)
Marshall Islands	1991	1965	1965	1987	6 (E)
Vanuatu	1980	1979	1979	1987	7 (E)
Tuvalu	1978	1967	1967	1989	3 (E)
Palau	1994	1965	1965	1990	8 (E)
Micronesia (FSM)	1991	1965	1965	2021	2 (E)

Note: Table is current as at March 2023. Year of suffrage and counts of women elected or appointed to national legislatures are based on author calculations, drawing on data from parliamentary, academic, and historical media reports. While clear data are available on most countries from the early 2000s onwards, there are incomplete or inconsistent data available on the women who served in legislative assemblies prior to independence from the 1960s. We acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Wendy Hart and Pleasance Purser at the New Zealand Parliament for sharing information and cross-checking data on elected women. Notes are in the supplemental data.

In some matrilineal societies, female authority was actively and regularly exercised in the pre-colonial era.<sup>38</sup> On the basis of Klaus Neumann’s work, Schoeffel Meleisea notes that women in some Melanesian societies were likely to have had ‘higher status’ than they do today.<sup>39</sup> In Hawai’i, claims for women’s suffrage – that

<sup>38</sup> See Debra McDougall, “‘Tired for Nothing’? Women, Chiefs, and the Domestication of Customary Authority in Solomon Islands’, in *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Hyaeweol Choi and Margaret Jolly (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 199–224.

<sup>39</sup> Schoeffel Meleisea, ‘Women and Political Leadership in the Pacific Islands’, 116. See reference to Klaus Neumann, ‘Tradition and Identity in Papua New Guinea: Some Observations Regarding Tami and Tolai’, *Oceania* 62, no. 4 (1992): 311.

would have continued to support Hawaiian women's cultural and political capital – were actively rejected by American 'elite white men' on the racially discriminatory grounds that 'doubling the Hawaiian vote' would potentially destroy a burgeoning American-styled economy.<sup>40</sup> Denying the vote to Hawaiian women in this way ignored and dismissed the history of women's political voice, notably through the involvement of women from Hawai'i's chiefly elite in decision-making as members of the House of Nobles.<sup>41</sup>

In other parts of the Pacific, women's political standing in the pre-colonial era was less prominent. In Sāmoa, for example, where under the concept of *feagaiga* 'the brother role of "making the power" [is] under the guidance of the "sister" role', women's influence was indirect.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the powerful positions of prominent female figures in Pacific history including Salamāsina, who around the 16th century consolidated the paramount chiefly titles and became the highest-ranking figure in the western islands of Sāmoa, indicate that 'gender is a secondary principle in ascribing social rank'.<sup>43</sup>

These expressions of female voice and power, both overt and covert, were restricted through expanding contact with European models of both domestic and public life. Teresia Teaiwa specifically points to the detrimental impact of US colonizers identifying Micronesian men as the 'power holders' and cementing their own preference in engaging with, and encouraging, a 'native-male dominance of colonially constructed political institutions that had begun with contact'.<sup>44</sup> This was not unique to the US empire, as reflected in Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard's work on Solomon Islands, in which she cited an unnamed 'Are'are woman:

In the distant past, within the traditional setup of 'Are'are society, we women were on an equal footing with men. We participated equally in feasts and brideprice transactions and we participated equally with men in the decision-making processes ... But just in the last hundred years, during the second world war and colonial era, our status has dropped dramatically in comparison with that of our men.<sup>45</sup>

In supporting this argument, Schoeffel Meleisea notes colonizers' preferences in dealing with men was reflective of the 'cultural attitudes of Europe at the time',

<sup>40</sup> Grimshaw, 'Settler Anxieties', 233.

<sup>41</sup> Judith R. Gething, 'Christianity and Coverture: Impact on the Legal Status of Women in Hawai'i, 1820–1920', *Hawaiian Journal of History* 11 (1997): 197.

<sup>42</sup> Serge Tcherkézoff, 'Are the *Matai* "Out of Time"? Tradition and Democracy: Contemporary Ambiguities and Historical Transformations of the Concept of Chief', in *Governance in Samoa: Pulega i Sāmoa*, ed. Elise Huffer and Asofou So'o (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2000), 128n9.

<sup>43</sup> Penelope Schoeffel, 'Rank, Gender and Politics in Ancient Samoa: The Genealogy of Salamāsina O Le Tafaiā', *JPH* 22, no. 4 (1987): 174.

<sup>44</sup> Teaiwa, 'Microwomen', 100.

<sup>45</sup> Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard, *Givers of Wisdom, Labourers without Gain: Essays on Women in Solomon Islands* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2000), 39.

rather than gender relations among Indigenous populations.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, masculinist colonial understandings of political entitlement drove legislative changes in other aspects of the social order, including rules of inheritance and land ownership, which disenfranchised women further still.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, even across different Pacific societies, the political rights eventually ‘bestowed’ upon women through decolonization had been actively denied to them decades earlier. Further, as we show in the next section, reclaiming those rights – and indeed, extending political rights to women more broadly in the Pacific – was supported by an under-recognized current of women’s activism.<sup>48</sup>

## REFRAMING SUFFRAGE AS NATION BUILDING ACTIVISM

As demonstrated in the previous section, some Pacific women were able to access status and respect in traditional forms of governance and politics prior to colonization, and were accustomed to social hierarchies that were shaped not only by gender but also by birth rights, land relationships, kinship ties, and age. Their opportunities and motivations for change – indeed, their change objectives – were shaped by these dynamics. The struggle by prominent activists was first for decolonization, and then for individual rights within new political arenas. These goals were not uncomplicated, and indeed not uncontested; in some cases women have remained ambivalent or outright concerned about the extent to which these introduced institutions have devalued their roles and status.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, women’s activism across the Pacific has long been a driving force for political change. Our proposed definition of suffrage, with its focus on ‘contextually relevant forms of action’ and ‘meaningful political change’, allows us to cast a wider net in the search for suffrage acts. We now briefly present four examples of women’s activism towards nation building and self-determination movements in the Pacific. These cases highlight the vibrancy and diversity of suffrage activism in the region, but also underscore the need for closer historical research to further develop our understanding of women’s mobilizations around these issues.

<sup>46</sup> Schoeffel Meleisea, ‘Women and Political Leadership in the Pacific Islands’, 116.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>48</sup> Again, our point here is not that women were inactive – indeed, the collective work of Margaret Mishra, Nicole George, and Robert Nicole in Fiji explicitly counters this – see Mishra, ‘Your Woman Is a Very Bad Woman’; Mishra, ‘Women’s Activism in Fiji’; Nicole George, *Situating Women: Gender Politics and Circumstance in Fiji* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012); Nicole, *Disturbing History*. Rather, we suggest that women’s activism was not considered in the mainstream suffrage discourses of the region. See, for example, Vanessa Griffen, *Women Speak Out! A Report of the Pacific Women’s Conference, October 27–November 2 1975* (Suva: Fiji Times, 1975).

<sup>49</sup> Claire Slatter, ‘Gender and Custom in the South Pacific’, *Yearbook of New Zealand Jurisprudence* 13–14 (2012): 89–111.

*Sāmoa: collective action for sovereignty*

The Mau movement, initiated in 1926 as a protest movement against New Zealand control of Sāmoa, was initially led by men but sustained by women.<sup>50</sup> Despite facing criticism by local religious leaders who refused to support women's political participation, as well as intimidation, threats, and violence from police, women were active in asserting Samoan sovereignty. Women's activism included rallies, fundraising, protest songs, petitions, and written representations to the New Zealand Prime Minister. In 1929, two thousand women marched in Apia in response to the death of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, a leader of the Mau movement, and ten others, who were killed by New Zealand police in a shooting now known as Black Saturday.<sup>51</sup> By 1930, the women's Mau movement had eight thousand members, the importance of which was noted at the time by Ta'isi Olaf Frederick Nelson, a leading figure in anti-colonial resistance in Sāmoa.<sup>52</sup> Nelson sent a telegram to Harry Holland, the leader of the New Zealand Labour Party, which read: 'Samoan women active organizing new movement unparalleled in Samoan history'.<sup>53</sup> A change of government in New Zealand with the election of Labour in 1935 led to recognition of the Mau movement as a legitimate political organization and the move towards decolonization began.<sup>54</sup> However, progress was slow and independence would not be achieved until 1962.

As evidenced in other examples throughout the Pacific, women's leadership in the decolonization movement in Sāmoa was considered more as a collective effort to protect Samoan identity and sovereignty rather than holding positions of individualized authority. It is within this context that women (and men) in 1961 voted to endorse an electoral and political system that significantly restricted women's suffrage. The writers of the Samoan constitution sought to restrict suffrage to *matai*, or 'chiefs', the head of an extended family who is chosen by consensus.<sup>55</sup> This was seen as an important means of upholding traditional culture, hierarchy, and

<sup>50</sup> Lisa Macquoid, 'The Women's Mau: Female Peace Warriors in Western Samoa' (MA thesis, University of Hawai'i, 1995).

<sup>51</sup> Robin Morgan, 'The Pacific Islands (Oceania)', in *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Open Road Media, 2016), n.p.; Brian Alofaituli, 'Indigenous Protest in Colonial Samoa: The Mau Movements and the Response of the London Missionary Society, 1900–1935' (PhD thesis, University of Hawai'i, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Patricia O'Brien, *Tautai: Sāmoa, World History, and the Life of Ta'isi O. F. Nelson* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Macquoid, 'The Women's Mau', 27. On Harry Holland's involvement in Samoan affairs, see Nicholas Hoare, 'Harry Holland's "Samoan Complex"', *JPH* 49, no. 2 (2014): 151–69.

<sup>54</sup> J.W. Davidson, 'Political Development in Western Samoa', *Pacific Affairs* 21, no. 2 (1948): 136–49.

<sup>55</sup> In theory, women have equal rights and access to *matai* titles, yet in practice title bestowal is heavily skewed towards men. The 2016 Samoan census showed that only one in every ten *matai* living in Sāmoa is a woman. Yet, a majority of Samoan voters in 1961, including women, appeared to support *matai*-only suffrage.

Samoan identity,<sup>56</sup> and a way to maintain a link between new national political institutions and traditional governance, in which only *matai* are entitled to sit on a village council. In a 1961 UN-supervised referendum, held under universal adult suffrage, the proposed constitution was endorsed by 83 per cent of voters.<sup>57</sup> While women were instrumental in achieving the Mau movement's aims of decolonization and greater political rights for Samoans, the level of support for *matai*-only franchise demonstrates that the individual vote was certainly not seen as the most important political goal.

*Vanuatu: working through transnational liberation networks*

Women, including prominent leader Motarilavao Hilda Lini, were also active in Vanuatu's independence movement. Lini, the sister of Vanuatu's first Prime Minister Father Walter Lini, went on to become the first woman elected to the Parliament of Vanuatu in 1987. She described forging transnational links that motivated her pro-independence activism:

In 1976 the liberation movement came to Port Vila. I was running the [movement's] newsletter. I was on a speaking tour to Australia and New Zealand and New Caledonia when I met Indigenous people like [Australian First Nations leader] Cheryl Buchanan. We were meeting with churches, student unions, the Australian Labor Party. Students were very, very active. They were so full of energy, and we were inspired.<sup>58</sup>

As part of the independence movement, Lini spearheaded different initiatives including the women's wing of her political party, and the first Women's National Congress on 'Custom, Church and Society'. At Lini's request, the first woman graduate of the University of the South Pacific, Grace Mera Molisa, spoke to the congress. Molisa, another prominent ni-Vanuatu woman, was vocal on the status of women in both the independence struggle and in post-independence society. In her poem 'Colonised People', Molisa highlighted the contrast between the strong anti-colonial movement in Vanuatu and the limited attention paid to women's rights: 'Vanuatu/Womenfolk/half/the population/remain/colonised/by/the Free men/of Vanuatu'.<sup>59</sup> Women have been severely under-represented in formal politics throughout Vanuatu's

<sup>56</sup> Asofou So'o, *Democracy and Custom in Samoa: An Uneasy Alliance* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, restricted suffrage was not enshrined in the constitution, but introduced through ordinary legislation. Universal suffrage was eventually introduced in 1990.

<sup>58</sup> Motarilavao Hilda Lini, in discussion with the author, February 2018. For more on transnational activism on decolonization in and across the Pacific, see Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Grace Mera Molisa, *Colonised People: Poems* (Port Vila: Black Stone, 1987), 9.



post-independence history: as of March 2023, Lini remains one of only seven women to have been elected in the country since independence in 1980.<sup>60</sup>

Lini's impact, however, was not restricted to her pro-independence activism or her parliamentary career. She was recognized internationally for her contribution to the women's movement in Vanuatu and the Pacific more broadly, having served as the chief of the women's bureau of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. She helped to develop and foster transnational networks of women activists, building connections across the Pacific region. In 2005, she was awarded the Nuclear-Free Future Award for her association with the nuclear-free Pacific movement, Indigenous rights, and environmental issues. Recognizing Lini's domestic and transnational activism – a key strategy employed by white women suffrage activists of the 20th century in Australia and New Zealand with sisters in the United Kingdom and the United States – is integral to our argument for a more holistic understanding of women's suffrage in the Pacific.

*Palau: establishing culture and land and political rights*

Resistance to the nuclear threat was also evident in Micronesia, demonstrating a different focus of Pacific women's activism. Women, and particularly the Otil a Belaud (translated as Anchor of the Land) movement, are credited with playing a substantive role in the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement and secured Palau's status as the first country in the world to ratify a nuclear-free constitution. An overwhelming 92 per cent of citizens voted in favour of the constitution in 1979. Despite this strong support, the nuclear-free clause in the constitution was fiercely opposed by the United States in negotiations for a compact of free association and was eventually overturned in 1994. Throughout this period, women claimed their rights to live in a nuclear-free environment not only through campaigning against their own government, but also drawing on international networks to resist pressure from the US government. In this activism, women grounded their campaigns in issues and beliefs that were most relevant to their lives and raised concerns about the influence of contemporary structures on their traditional political status. Isabella Sumang, a key member of Otil a Belaud, asserted that women's focus was not on political representation per se, but rather political participation that was an extension of women's roles as land custodians in matrilineal Palau:

Belau is an ancient matrilineal culture where women traditionally select the chief. When a Western form of government was introduced, women lost their traditional right to participate in decision-making. But when the US wanted to establish military bases with

<sup>60</sup> While in parliament, Lini was Minister for Rural Water Supply and Health (1991–5), Acting Minister for External Affairs and Tourism (1993), and Minister for Justice, Culture, and Women's Affairs (1996). Her ministerial career ended in 1996, with her removal from cabinet and her portfolio taken over by her brother.

nuclear weapons upon them, women's strength was required to stop them.<sup>61</sup>

Following ratification of the nuclear-free constitution, the US government devised a number of strategies and incentives for the Palau government to agree to a Compact that would dismantle the nuclear-free status and enable the United States to claim land within Palau under the justification of national interest.<sup>62</sup> Yet, it took 11 plebiscites and a constitutional amendment for the Compact of Free Association to be ratified. Prior to 1987, the Palau constitution required a 75 per cent majority to be able to pass any constitutional amendments; however, a bill was then introduced to reduce this to a simple majority. Women through Otil a Belaud and led by Mirair Gabriela Ngirmang took the government to court over this, despite intimidation and violence.<sup>63</sup> In later years, the government managed to pass the legislation, and finally achieved the majority it needed to ratify the compact with the United States.

Otil a Belaud's advocacy for a nuclear-free territory was situated within their broader focus on maintaining culture and land rights. The strategies women used to maintain their campaign included environmental education, grassroots-based consciousness raising, collective action, monitoring the national congress, and mounting petitions against legislation that threatened the environment.<sup>64</sup> While women's traditional authority as chiefs had been devalued by US government officials, they were still able to use those positions in their communities to advocate for change.<sup>65</sup> In the face of considerable, sustained resistance, Ngirmang led Otil a Belaud for 50 years and her work continues under the leadership of her daughter Elicita Morei.

### *Bougainville: building new institutions for independence*

Pacific women's activism has also transformed formal political institutions. Bougainville – geographically part of the Solomon Islands archipelago, but politically part of Papua New Guinea – was the site of a protracted and violent secessionist struggle in the late 20th century. A peace agreement signed in 2001 allowed for new autonomous institutions, as well as a deferred referendum on self-determination, ultimately held in

<sup>61</sup> Isabella Sumang and Elicita Morei quoted in Frances Connelly, 'Women for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific', *Off Our Backs* 27, no. 1 (1997): 13.

<sup>62</sup> Zohl dē Ishtar, *Daughters of the Pacific* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1994); Elicita Morei, 'Working for Change in Belau', *Tok blong SPPF: A Quarterly of News and Views on the Pacific Islands* (Canada: South Pacific Peoples Foundation of Canada, 1992).

<sup>63</sup> Isabella Sumang, 'The World's First Nuclear Free Constitution', in *Pacific Women Speak Out for Independence and Denuclearisation*, ed. Zohl dē Ishtar (Christchurch: Raven Press, 1998), 70–4.

<sup>64</sup> Morei, 'Working for Change in Belau'; Lyn Wilson, *Speaking to Power: Gender and Politics in the Western Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> A pro-constitution lawyer, Roman Bedor, noted at the time that when the US government 'offered jobs and other incentives to all the male chiefs', it left 'women chiefs in the villages free to organise', cited in 'Women Get Their Work Done', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Dec. 1990, 14.

2019, in which 97 per cent of voters chose independence from Papua New Guinea.<sup>66</sup> Women's activism within the secessionist movement led to formalized structures for women's participation within new political institutions.

Bougainvillean women played a strong role in the pro-independence movement before, during, and after the conflict. Resistance to large-scale mining, centred on the Panguna mine, was at the heart of early independence claims and women were key players in this struggle. In the 1960s and 1970s, women were involved in anti-mining protests and often met with violent police responses.<sup>67</sup> The conflict, which began in the late 1980s, prompted the establishment of a vibrant and active women-led civil society movement to advocate women's and human rights. Women in Bougainville played a well-recognized role in bringing about the end of the decade-long conflict through local, regional, and national peace-making efforts.<sup>68</sup> Josephine Tankunani Sirivi, a founder of Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom, described how women drew on maternal narratives to push for peace:

Our mothering instinct, to nurture and protect human life, saw us calling for no more deaths. While we were one with our leaders in the struggle for our destiny, we also cajoled them not to lead Bougainville in the way of destruction. We said, 'We do not carry guns like you men in the jungle, but we are the ones who cry over our dead. The pain we feel for our land is like the pain we feel when we give birth. But we have no more tears left! Please find another way to restore our dignity and save our society.'<sup>69</sup>

As the conflict came to an end, women agitated for space at the decision-making table in new political institutions.<sup>70</sup> Activists used women's visibility as peacemakers in bringing an end to the conflict, as well as traditions of complementarity in decision-making in the largely matrilineal communities of Bougainville, to push for reserved seats for women. These seats were seen as both a reward for women for their formative role in the peace process, and an acknowledgement of the 'sense of partnership in decision-making that flows through our history'.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, three seats were reserved for women in the Bougainville House of Representatives, and one in cabinet. According to some key activists, however, this does not constitute a

<sup>66</sup> Anthony J. Regan, Kerry Baker, and Thiago Cintra Opperman, 'The 2019 Bougainville Referendum and the Question of Independence: From Conflict to Consensus', *JPH* 57, no. 1 (2022): 58–88.

<sup>67</sup> John Braithwaite et al., *Reconciliation and Architectures of Commitment: Sequencing Peace in Bougainville* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Josephine Tankunani Sirivi, 'Reconciliation and Renewing the Vision', in *As Mothers of the Land: The Birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom*, ed. Josephine Tankunani Sirivi and Marilyn Taleo Havini (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), 175.

<sup>70</sup> Baker, *Pacific Women in Politics*.

<sup>71</sup> Bougainville Constitutional Commission, *Report on the Third and Final Draft of the Bougainville Constitution* (Arawa: Bougainville Constitutional Commission, 2004), 159.

step forward, but rather the dilution of women's political voice through co-option in westernized institutions. Ruth Saovana-Spriggs has argued that 'the establishment of a western system of government in Bougainville unfortunately set in an irreversible tide against the matrilineal system, weakening women's position of power and authority'.<sup>72</sup>

These stories show that in their struggle to assert sovereignty – or the collective empowerment of their countries and people – women in Sāmoa, Vanuatu, Palau, and Bougainville drew on similar activist strategies of the suffragists half a decade before them. Pacific women rallied and marched, staged protests, filed petitions to parliaments, and made written submissions, often meeting with violent threats and resistance. They established transnational networks to inspire and embolden their claims. They may not have had the singular intent of securing the vote – indeed, in all cases outlined above, the rights claimed are clearly focused on broader articulations of 'the political' and, we suggest, support a wider definition of suffrage politics as advanced in this article – but their methods and motivations were driven by a desire for transformative political change and influence on decision-making. Their actions were directed towards 'meaningful change' that was directly relevant to their lives and their contexts. In these locations, women sought political voice and agency through campaigning for independence and shaping the directions of new nations and political institutions. Their participation in these movements was often the subject of resistance from men. Facing the 'double oppression' of colonial and patriarchal control, their activism was often fought on multiple fronts.<sup>73</sup> The ultimate goals of this activism however were largely not considered to be gendered because nationalist – that is, collectivist – goals took precedence over their individual empowerment as women.<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have illustrated Pacific women's influence, political action, and contribution to political change beyond the bounds of legislatures, highlighting the need to reassess, and to reframe, how we apply the lens of suffrage to contexts outside the Global North. While women remain significantly under-represented in national legislatures across the Pacific, they continue to contribute to important political movements. We have shown that women in the Pacific have always been at the forefront of collectivist, nation-building struggles and have had to navigate a 'double oppression', inequality constructed through global power relations in addition to domestic politics. Indeed, as we have shown, Pacific women's trailblazing

<sup>72</sup> Ruth Saovana-Spriggs, 'Women's Contributions to Bougainville's Past, Present and Future', in *Growing Bougainville's Future: Choices for an Islands and Its Peoples*, ed. Christina Hill and Luke Fletcher (Sydney: Jubilee Australia Research Centre, 2018), 26.

<sup>73</sup> Teaiwa, 'Microwomen', 98.

<sup>74</sup> See Haunani-Kay Trask, 'Feminism and Indigenous Hawai'ian Nationalism', *Signs* 21, no. 4 (1996): 906–16.

status in political spaces – demonstrated in Polynesian women’s franchise in the late 1800s, and women’s activism in pro-independence movements – has gone largely unrecognized in the suffrage literature.

We have also uncovered parallels with the early suffragists: like their Global North counterparts, Pacific women rallied, raised funds, sang in protest, filed petitions, and made representations to male elites; developed transnational activist networks; and were subjected to violence, intimidation, and strong criticism from those who believed women should not participate in politics. And yet, there are also clear differences in the purpose and contexts of suffrage in the Pacific. Suffrage in this region has not sought to equate women with men because in many Pacific cultures, women’s difference – and complementarity with men – has brought them legitimacy and influence. While women’s activism in independence and self-determination movements in the Pacific has increased their political voice and agency, it is directed towards collective goals that benefit whole nations, communities, and movements, rather than women as a distinct group. The question is whether women’s agency outside of political structures risks cementing women at the margins of contemporary institutions that have endured in spite of their resistance.

This calls for a more inclusive re-reading of suffrage – both in the Pacific Islands and globally. There is scope to reframe the purpose and context of suffrage so as to render visible that which has hitherto been hidden: women’s constant struggle against multiple forms of oppression. This is closely related to calls for a broader understanding of political participation, particularly politics that sits outside of formal settings,<sup>75</sup> in addition to more inter-disciplinary approaches to this subject. We have aimed to argue the merits of pushing disciplinary methodological and conceptual boundaries: for historians, this includes extending research beyond state-based archives, for example, and for political scientists, taking a much more inclusive lens to define key political concepts. Using this broader reconceptualization, we can see women’s activism in contemporary decolonization and environmental movements as part of the story of suffrage as well.<sup>76</sup> Reframing suffrage to encompass political action that expands and strengthens women’s voice and agency extends our understanding beyond formal and westernized political institutions and into the contexts and forums where Pacific women were and are active, prominent, and influential contributors to political change.

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<sup>75</sup> Kerry Baker and Julien Barbara, ‘Revisiting the Concept of Political Participation in the Pacific’, *Pacific Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2020): 135–56.

<sup>76</sup> Brianna Fruean, Speech to the Opening Ceremony of the World Leaders Summit at COP26, Glasgow, November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ahG5gur7m0> (accessed July 12, 2023); Carter and Howard, ‘Pacific Women in Climate Change Negotiations’.

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