

# The Pacific Post

Oceania's voice on campus.

To discover more about the topic, we encourage you to check out the Pacific women's feminist movements, mainly visible during Pacific Feminist Forums held each year. There, you can explore what it means to be a Pacific feminist, who identifies as such and what the key struggles are. Advocates and partners of the LGBTQIA+ communities across the islands, the movement fights for inclusivity of gender, background and ethnicity.



A court ruling has ended a months-long political crisis, allowing Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa (here in 2013) to become the first woman to lead Samoa.  
Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images

When zoomed out to a global scale, it's true that the Pacific island region holds the lowest levels of female representation with 13,4% of parliamentary seats being held by women, versus an alarming 17.8% (2014) for the Arab states.

01

Despite historically excluding women from leadership, the Pacific islands have brought international figures of female governance to the forefront: Jacinda Ardern (NZ), Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa (Samoa), Hilda Heine (Marshall Islands), Helen Clark (NZ), Julia Gillard (Australia) and Jenny Shipley (NZ).

02

Polynesian women are often unrecognised as global torchbearers for women's suffrage. This goes against the facts: the first votes cast on Pitcairn island in 1838 were by the white colonial descendants, and their Tahitian wives, here, 20 women voted. In 1893 New Zealand, women, as well as Māori women won the right to vote (though they were restricted to the Māori electorates, such as the men were since 1867), as well as in the Cook islands.

03

Māori women have a history as defining members of parliament: the first was Iriaka Rātana in 1949. We can also think of Nanaia Mahuta, Aotearoa's (NZ's) first Māori Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2020-2023 who was the first to wear the traditional *moko kauae* to Parliament (2016).



Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta in 2021.  
Photo / Mark Mitchell



Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia (1868-1920), circa 1890. Meri was a member of the Kotahitanga (Māori Parliament) movement.

04

It would be a mistake to imagine these women's suffrage as an overnight accomplishment. In Aotearoa, iconic figures such as Kate Shephard or Meri Te Tai Mangaka'hia (often forgotten), her Maori sister, were early-on activists throughout the 19th century.

05

There is a common misconception with Pacific women's right to vote. Academics long considered that "women of Pacific Island nations did not have to struggle for suffrage" (Penelope Schoeffel Meleisea). Follow on the next poster to see how we can debunk this myth. How in fact, their right to vote was a struggle and was not a mere consequence of decolonisation.



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When looking at the Pacific islands, we need to keep in mind the active role indigenous peoples played in their own rights. It would be a mistake of ours to imagine that women's rights naturally flowed in the islands after independence. Feminist struggles precede decolonisation in the region: women and activists did not wait for their national autonomy to claim their rights.

01

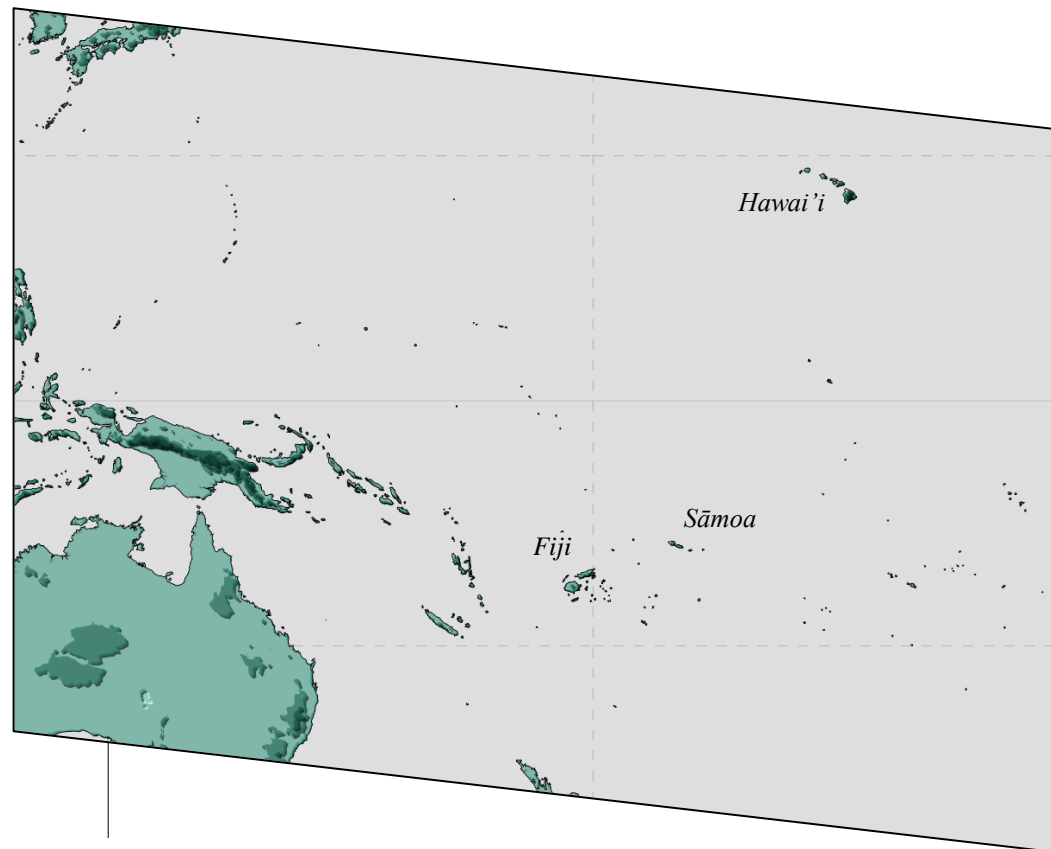
Women's political empowerment began long before decolonisation in the region. Fiji saw three women appointed or elected to the legislative council in 1966, four years before independence. In the Solomon Islands, Lily Oyatina Poznanski was elected in 1965 (through the electoral college) to the legislative assembly, two years before universal adult suffrage.

02

Women's participation in governance and leadership roles, did not begin under or after colonialism. According to Anne Dickson-Waiko, in the Pacific islands, the 'colonial state was itself gendered...constructed by excluding women from public life'. And this changed things in a lot of preexisting, pre-colonial societies.



Lily Oyatina Photographed in May 1965 for the monthly edition of the Pacific Islands Monthly Newspaper who wrote a short article on her election.



Map of the Pacific Islands, made on Graticule. Here labelled are the mentioned countries in the articles above.

Queen Salamāsina's rule was foundational in Sāmoan history. As we were unable to find a visual support to explain her further to you, we encourage you to go to YouTube, as many videos / mini documentaries were made to understand and celebrate the memory of this great, peaceful queen.



Signed photograph of Liliuokalani, the last sovereign of the Hawaiian kingdom. Gelatin silver print, sepia toned; sheet 38 x 29 cm. Notation on recto: "To the Hon. Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy, from Liliuokalani, Hawaii, October 1916."

03

Matrilineal societies, in Melanesia especially, saw women have greater social roles before colonisation rather than after. This is often argued to be the case in Hawai'i as the women part of the chiefly elite, used to participating in the decision-making House of Nobles, were excluded by the colonial white bourgeois American settlers.

04

Precolonial female power was not always so evident as in Hawai'i. In Sāmoa for instance, the concept of *feagaiga* attributes to women an indirect and "sisterly" role to masculine power.

05

In Sāmoa, gender was secondary in ascribing social rank, according to Penelope Schoeffel. Indeed, the figure of Salamāsina reflects this well. She was a 16<sup>th</sup> century became one of the highest ranking chieftains of the Western Sāmoan islands. Her reign is remembered as a 60 years peace, and a time of prosperity for the islands.



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Whina Cooper in Hamilton during the land march (Alexander Turnbull Library, PA7-15-18). Here she addresses a crowd after the Māori march to Parliament.

Drawing this struggle into a wider context, we can see how, today, indigenous women have played key roles in political activism. For example, since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political movements advocating for indigenous rights saw at its head a wave of ecofeminist artists and activists.

01

As the Māori rights movement bloomed in the 1960s, advocating for linguistic, legal and educational equality. The recognition of Māori land rights was also a key struggle and brought environmental issues to the forefront of public debate. Here, in lead of the movement were women such as Whina Cooper.

02

Cooper lead the 1975 march to Parliament to try “to dramatise a national Māori determination not to lose any further land to Pākehā ownership”. Defining the march as sacred, Whina attributes a spiritual and almost religious importance to the land.

03

Often considered as a perfect example of *mana wahine*, she embodies the “authority, influence, power, prestige” of *mana* (Reed, 2001), as a *wahine*, woman or rather “wife, woman, female, bride” (Reed 2001). Hence, the *mana wāhine* movement celebrates the political and simultaneously spiritual battles of charismatic women, like Cooper.



Carving in Macrocarpa wood, Ken Blum and Woody Woodward, 6 ton sculpture.

04

The link between women and land in Māori is made evident by the language. The term *whenua* indeed simultaneously refers to “land” and “placenta”, linked by their life-giving properties.

05

In Māori cosmology, the role of mother Papatūānuku (the earth) and father Rangī (the sky) is made clear in the familial network that makes up life on earth. Through their tight embrace, their children could not see light, until Tane (god of trees, birds, insects and men) pushed them apart: in the open environment, life flourished, which highlights the idea of the universe as an extended family. With Papatūānuku at the foundation of it. “Papa”, also present in *whakapapa* (genealogy) locates Papatūānuku at the centre of identity in Aotearoa.

Here, we have highlighted the resounding themes between modern-day political activism and centuries-old cosmological mythologies. Although we only focused on New Zealand, similar myths exist across the Pacific: in Hawai’i, Tonga, the Cook Islands and more.

Insight into these myths is also insight into the philosophy and world-view of indigenous societies like the Māori. Arguments like these participate to ecofeminist narratives and discourses today.



Mana Wahine Maori, KAHUKIWA, Robyn, 1993, Printer maker's proof from limited edition print, rives paper, 545 x 440mm



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01

In this final poster, we will explore the Pacific Feminist Forum. First held in 2016 in Fiji, the forum welcomed hundreds of feminist activists and groups from the Pacific islands for a 3-day event. The main challenge targeted was the prominent socio-economic and geographical divide, which makes activist enterprise and collaboration difficult across the islands. Hence, the forum acts as a space for feminists to reconnect, create new networks and work together towards common goals.

02

The 2016 Forum was exceptional in nature as it concluded in the creation of a Charter of Feminist Principles for Pacific Feminists. The first part, *Defending Ourselves as Feminists* defines the “Pacific Feminist” identity. The Charter then clarifies *Our Points as Feminists*, mainly focusing on an egalitarian and intersectional approach. Finally, the Charter gives shape to the Forum itself, in its functioning and purpose.

03

Continuing in 2019, the second edition welcomed 150 activists. Joelene Brown Matele gave the keynote speech to open the forum, she stresses the interconnected nature between LGBTQIA+ rights, Trans rights and feminist struggles. She reaffirms the theme of the 2019 forum, grounded in *Solidarity, Resistance and Revolution*.

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The third Forum was held after the Covid-19 crisis, in May 2023. This time, the theme of the annual conference was *Embracing the Collective Power of our Movements*.

05

The key takeaway from this 2023 forum was the intense solidarity proven by the presence of all the activists in Fiji, especially under the Covid-19 crisis. Present this year was Tonga, the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Solomon Islands, Sāmoa, Fiji, Vanuatu and West Papua.



A group of schoolgirls accompany their professor from Tonga to the May 2023 Pacific Feminist Forum.

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