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TOWARDS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL JUSTICE PROCESSES

Dr. Carolyn Graydon

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Cover image: Women in the nakamal at Loltong Village, North Pentecost, Vanuatu. Photo credit: Holly Ewens

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Table of terms and acronyms

AP:	Authorised Person (Vanuatu)
CAVAW:	Committees Against Violence Against Women (Vanuatu)
CBO:	Community-based Organisation
CSO:	*Civil Society Organisation*
CST:	*Community Safety Team*
CIJ:	*Customary and Informal justice*
FPA:	*Family Protection Act 2008 (Vanuatu)*
FPA:	*Family Peace Act 2014 (Kiribati)*
GBV:	*Gender-based violence*
Kainga:	*Family clan Kiribati*
Kastom	Pidgin (Bislama and Tok Pisin) word to describe traditional culture and law
KWCSC:	*Kiribati Women and Children Support Centre*
LDS:	*Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (part of the Mormon Church).*
Malvatumari;	*Council of Chiefs* Vanuatu Whose role as an advisory body of chiefs is recognised in the Vanuatu constitution and under statute.
Maneaba:	Refers both to the community meeting place structure and the traditional Kiribati leadership system. Every village has at least one maneaba, which is used as a meeting place and to hold important social and cultural events. It is the largest building in a village, signifying its importance and central role in the I-Kiribati way of life.
Matai	Are the chiefs of Samoa responsible for maintaining the respect, traditions, and administration of the village.
MWYSSA:	Ministry for Women, Youth, Sport, and Social Affairs (Kiribati)
Nasara:	Refers to family level dispute resolution involving senior men from within the wider family. (Vanuatu)
Nakamal :	refers to chief-led community dispute resolution processes in Vanuatu commencing from the village level through multiple tiers to the Island and National Council of Chiefs. (Vanuatu)
Nofotane	Women who move into their husband's community upon marriage in Samoa who are seen to be of low status and required to serve and submit not only to their husbands but also to his family and others in the community.
PJSP:	Pacific Justice Sector Programme
PJSPV:	Policing and Justice Support Program Vanuatu
RAK:	Reita n Aine Kamatu, (Uniting Church, Kiribati)
R*VPF:*	*Royal Vanuatu Police Force*
SDA:	Seventh-day Adventist Church
SVSG*:*	Samoa Victim Support Group
Te unimane:	Council of male elders who make decisions for the village, resolve disputes, and distribute responsibilities and resources amongst families. (Kiribati)
Te unaine	Women council elders (Kiribati)
VWC:	*Vanuatu Women's Centre*
WCCC:	*Women and Children's Crisis Centre (Tonga)*

1. Introduction and background

This is the third study of a four-part series examining Pacific women's needs, participation and leadership in justice processes.

The first study focused on women in Pacific judiciaries. It mapped and analysed the experiences and feedback from the steadily increasing number of women who are judges, magistrates and lay judiciary members across Pacific courts and explored pathways for further expanding gender balance and gender equality in Pacific judiciaries.

The second study adopted the vantage point of Pacific women living in remote and rural locations to explore their most common legal needs and the kinds of justice processes and outcomes they aimed or hoped for when they sought help from state courts, local customary, or church-based justice processes. It identified a clear lack of alignment between women's justice needs and any of the justice options available to them and examined a range of approaches for creating greater responsiveness and relevance across justice systems, so they become more effective in meeting women's unmet justice needs. Aside from highlighting the need for increased access to targeted legal information, women also emphasised the difficulties they face navigating between justice systems, due to strong family and community pressure - including from customary and church leaders - not to involve state authorities or courts. When they did defy these risks and engaged with police or courts, they were often disappointed by the lack of reliability, responsiveness and support provided by police and courts to use the process.

Both studies reached overarching conclusions that addressing Pacific women's legal needs requires significant improvement in the local accessibility, reliability and gender competence of police and state court responses and the need for remedies that are relevant to women's justice goals, especially robust rehabilitation of family violence offenders. The research also concluded that rural women's protection and justice needs will only be met if state courts are willing to lead better understanding, coordination and clearer pathways between state courts and customary and church dispute resolution processes so that women can more freely choose and move between justice systems they consider best suited to address their particular problems and circumstances.

The first two studies also highlighted how women overwhelmingly feel more confident and emboldened to engage in justice processes when they see there are women involved in delivering the service, whether as judicial officers, court clerks, police, or as customary, church, or civil society community leaders. While Pacific countries all vary, the overall paucity of women involved in community-level justice processes across local-level state courts, customary and church-based justice processes, impedes Pacific women's access

to justice. Women emphasise that if they cannot access the service they seek from the village, or at most, from 'area' or 'municipal' levels, then for all intents and purposes those services are inaccessible to most women. Aside from lack of information and social/cultural pressures, the single biggest barrier to women's access to state justice in remote and rural areas is the cost of transportation to physically access a place where the justice service is provided.

This study flows on from these conclusions and focuses on approaches for increasing the presence and roles for women in delivering local justice processes at the village or municipal level, across local state courts, customary and church- based justice systems. Investigating this issue requires mapping and analysis of women's roles and exercise of power across each of these justice systems and in local communities more generally. This requires consideration not only of women's roles regarding what might be considered 'justice issues' but must contemplate the full spectrum of women's roles in family and community life. From this foundation, the study aims to identify all key opportunity pathways and approaches for increasing the presence and scope of roles for women in local-level justice processes and considers how courts, government and civil society actors can best integrate these approaches into what they are already doing to create space for women in local justice processes.

2. Key questions for this research component

1. Who are the decision makers in local justice processes; who performs other important roles within these processes and what data is available regarding the demographic profile of these actors?
2. How can we better understand Pacific women's leadership pathways and roles to identify potential pathways for more women to become local justice decision makers and to support women navigating local justice processes?
3. What are the key opportunities, pathways and approaches for increasing the presence and roles for women as providers or supporters (for women) in local-level justice processes?

3. Methodology

This paper draws on the annexed literature review undertaken at the outset of the research project, encompassing global and Pacific regional studies on women's access to justice in plural legal environments, as well as some additional studies examining the different forms and pathways of leadership taken by Pacific women.

It also draws upon the field research conducted for the first and second research studies and some additional interviews conducted in September and October 2024, involving in-person consultations through gender separated focus group discussions with women and men in community meetings, and interviews with village chiefs, other customary leaders, and church leaders. Based on in-person interviews conducted in Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tonga and the Solomon Islands, the views of other key actors on women's participation as providers in local justice processes were also canvased, including with women's organisations and family violence services, magistrates, lay justices, police (both specialised and general) and local level government service providers. Some additional interviews with conducted with *Te unaine,* women customary leaders in Kiribati, in January 2026. An overview of the consultations conducted are set out below:

- Women church leaders and committee members in rural Kiribati: 65 women
- Women community members in rural Vanuatu: 150 women
- Village chiefs and other customary leaders in rural Vanuatu: 63 men and Council of Chiefs (*malvatumaori*) (1 man).
- Women and men lay judiciary members and local court clerks in rural Kiribati, (22 women, 23 men), in rural Vanuatu (13 women, 27 men); in Solomon Islands (2 women, 7 men); and in PNG with the Village Court Secretariat (4 women, 3 men).
- Women and men magistrates in Kiribati, (12 women, 3 men); Vanuatu (7 women, 4 men); Tonga (3 women, 4 men) and Solomon Islands (7 women, 4 men); and magistrate court clerks in Solomon Islands (6 women, 6 men).
- Staff and volunteers from women, family violence reproductive health services, and civil society organisations in Kiribati, (4 women), Vanuatu, (6 women), Solomon Islands, (13 women) Tonga, (9 women), Samoa (2 women) and PNG (1 woman).
- Staff from government departments (justice, women, social affairs, local government) in Kiribati (4 women), in Vanuatu, 2 men.
- Police in Vanuatu (2 women from specialised unit), Kiribati (3 women from specialised unit and 8 regular police (5 men, 3 women), Tonga (1-man specialised unit).
- Women customary leaders in Kiribati, (*Te unaine)* (4 women).

In addition, two dedicated workshops were held in Vanuatu (12 women and 7 men) in October 2024, and in Kiribati (13 women and 17 men) in September 2024, involving a mix of community-based customary, faith-based and civil servant leaders, and court actors. The purpose of these was to conduct mappings and elicit the views of participants regarding different types of women's community-based leadership, and whether more women exercising local leadership functions could be further involved with local justice processes. The activities undertaken included examination of how women are involved in providing leadership and exercising authority or influence in local justice processes including via their wider family and community roles and identifying approaches and strategic entry-points for enhancing their participation in delivering state, customary and church-based local justice services.

4. Question 1: Who are the decision makers in local justice processes?

Vast diversity and variation exist across the Pacific regarding each country's local justice processes. Variation can be seen not only between Pacific countries but often also within Pacific countries and even at a micro level between neighbouring villages. Differences in ethnicities, tribal affiliations, variation in cultures, land systems, languages, matrilineal and patrilineal kinship systems and personalities of local leaders, all have major bearing on systems of local justice and governance. It is therefore very challenging and difficult to take to the 'Pacific' with a broad-brush regarding women's roles and representation in local governance and justice systems. This is especially when combined with the general lack of gender-disaggregated data and research available regarding women's roles in local authorities and community leadership roles.

With this caveat in mind, several overall observations are tentatively put forward.

- Most Pacific systems of local governance are comprised of at least three kinds of local authorities: state (local government, local judiciary); customary (often across several levels) and church-based authorities (including church leaders and church committee members)
- In many rural parts of the Pacific, customary and faith-based normative, cultural, and legal power greatly outweigh the exercise of formal powers of the state.
- The exercise of power by local authorities is typically blended, where one person may wear multiple 'hats' and exercise power sourced in a mix of state, customary and faith-based roots, with one often reinforcing the other.
- These sources of authority and the weight they carry as represented by the individuals who exercise local power and authority are in constant flux and may rise and fall according to many variables.

This study examines three different kinds or sources of local authorities exercised at the local level in rural locations to resolve disputes and help people to find solutions to their problems. These local authorities are:

1. Family heads/elders and customary authorities
2. Church authorities and
3. State authorities, comprising local police, local courts, and local government authorities.

A brief overview of each of these categories of authorities in their roles as decision makers is provided below alongside review of the available data and trends regarding their demographic composition.

4.1 Family heads

Interviewees confirmed findings from the available research that the dominant dispute resolution system in most Pacific countries is a customary justice system. This may be comprised of a range of different kinds of authorities that vary significantly between and within countries. The descriptions below focus on the similarities and differences in Vanuatu and Kiribati, where most of the study field work was completed.

The dominant actors involved in resolving problems at first instance, especially those arising within and between families, are family heads and elders from both disputing parties. In Vanuatu, these senior family authorities are called *nasara*, and in Kiribati, *kainga*. If the case is considered more serious or sensitive, it may at first instance, 'leapfrog' the family-level process and proceed straight to the village chief or village council level to be heard in the *nakamal* in Vanuatu, or in the *maneaba* in Kiribati. There is often overlap in decision-making actors between the 'family level' and the 'village level'.

If the case is not resolved at the village level or if the parties do not comply with the resolution outcomes, then the case can usually be escalated to a further level or two levels up, in some countries right up to a national council of chiefs or similar body, which may have constitutional recognition, such as the *malvatumaori* in Vanuatu.[1]

All of those involved as decision makers in these processes are recognised by communities as holding customary power, giving them the legitimacy to mediate or in some places, arbitrate disputes and provide binding resolutions. Outcomes typically revolve around payment of compensation and reconciliation of the parties, with closure of the dispute between the parties often marked by a feast or other ceremony.

The demographic composition of family heads who lead these processes is almost exclusively men, mainly older men. In some communities, there may also be female elders, however they generally play secondary roles. Pacific societies are predominantly patriarchal with men the recognised family heads in almost all Pacific societies. While there are significant parts of the Pacific that follow matrilineal customary practices, where land or other inheritance passes through the female line, this does not necessarily translate into matriarchal societal structures or exercise of female power across wider community roles - although there are some Pacific locations where studies have identified matrilineal systems that have tended towards matriarchal structures, in which women may be family heads and exercise power over decisions relating to land.[2]

Thus, when women in the Pacific seek protection or justice for spousal violence or for child maintenance if their marriage breaks down, or seek to resolve issues with her husband's family, in the vast majority of instances her case will be heard and decided exclusively by male family heads and family elders.

4.2 Customary authorities

If a woman or her family pursues her case through the customary law system to the village chief or village council level, she will most likely find herself again, before an exclusively older male panel of decision makers. In some places, she will also be prohibited from being present or speaking to present her case and is most often represented by a male relative.[3]

[1] See s 29 of the Vanuatu Constitution.

[2] See 'Matriarchal Studies' in the Tropiand Islands of Milne Province in Papua New Guinea, in Hawaii and in Samoa. See https://matriarchalstudies.com/i-studies-of-recent-and-extant-matriarchal-societies/pacific-islands/.

[3] As was discussed in greater detail in Part 2 of the research, especially in relation to Vanuatu, where in some locations women are not permitted to enter or speak in the Nakamal, and in most locations women must rely on male relatives to represent them due to cultural constraints on them speaking for themselves.

Regarding customary leaders, while customary women leaders are more likely to be found in matrilineal, rather than patrilineal communities, as the later analysis shows, they remain small in number and even where women retain customary power, they are rarely involved in village councils or as decision makers in dispute resolution processes, as their customary power or authority is more likely directed to other kinds of customary responsibilities and community roles.[4]

Women's exercise of customary power in Pacific societies has generally declined over time due to a range of factors that have privileged men's roles and diminished women's roles, including patriarchal ideology imported with colonisation and church theology. Compounding these, women have faced marginalisation in the cash economy and through commercialisation of land diluting customary land management processes. Academics observe that women in some Melanesian societies were likely to have had 'higher status' than they do today had their customary roles been preserved.[5] This trend can also be observed in locations where customary systems are matrilineal, which have historically offered greater opportunities for women to exercise roles as customary authorities, especially over land.[6] As explained in the seminal research on matrilineal societies in the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu: [7]

> Women have always taken a keen interest in land issues but today their roles in land matters have become invisible. Even when they are present or represented in the different decision-making structures (whether traditional, contemporary or faith based), women's views and decisions may not receive priority.[8]

Regarding the Solomon Islands in particular, Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard observes a major decline in women's customary roles:

> …in the distant past, within the traditional setup of our 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 the colonial era, our status has dropped dramatically in comparison to that of our men.[9]

Ruth Maetala analyses the causes of this decline in matrilineal parts of Guadalcanal, Makira, and Isabel Provinces, agreeing with Pollard that patriarchal ideologies aligned across colonial structures and church theology, also causing women's subordination in the cash economy.

> Matrilineal land tenure has eroded in Solomon Islands and there are signs that this is continuing. The trend began with the introduction of the mission in Solomon Islands and continued under the establishment of the protectorate of the Solomon Islands in 1878. It

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[4] As discussed further below, for example in relation to Samoan women matai, who are rarely matai within the village fono but more likely to be recognised as *matai* for other qualities. Thus they do not often 'have a seat at the table' in village decision making processes, which include local justice processes of dispute resolution.

[5] Schoeffel Meleisea, 'Women and Political Leadership in the Pacific Islands', 116, in Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives, ed. Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

[6] Stege, K.E, Maetala, R, Naupa, A, Simo, J. 'Land and Women: The Matrilineal Factor. The cases of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu', p viii. https://rmicourts.org/wp-content/uploads/PIFS-Land-and-Women.pdf.

[7] Ibid, p43.

[8] Ibid

[9] Pollard, A.A (2000). 'Givers of Wisdom, Labourers Without Gain: Essays on Women in the Solomon Islands', p39.

> has increased with people's more frequent movement between islands and the growing influence of the cash economy. The effect of the church was compounded by that of colonialism. As Pollard writes, "The patriarchal theology of the Christian missionaries harmonised neatly with the patriarchal power structure of the colonial government and the two together formed an effective ideological basis for women's subordination, submission and exclusion from the public decision-making process."[10]

The case of the matrilineal Marshall Islands underlines this point regarding the impacts of commercialisation of land, highlighting how women's customary roles in land management have been heavily eroded in the capital Majuro due to commercialisation, rapid urbanisation, immigration, and overpopulation. In contrast, in rural locations women's customary land management roles remain largely intact through systems of delegated power from female chiefs to male relatives.

> Female chiefs did not traditionally exercise the direct power wielded by a paramount chief, or *iroojlaplap*. Rather, these duties were left to junior male relatives. Similarly, at the commoner level, the *alap* headship of a lineage generally fell to a man. Male lineage heads, nevertheless, were expected to consult with their senior female relatives on decisions affecting land and family.[11]

However, Traditional Rights Court Judge Claire Loeak observes a trend in the cases before her that women customary leaders in the Marshall Islands are increasingly retaining and exercising their powers and roles directly, rather than delegating them to male relatives, as is the custom. Women are increasingly intervening in land decisions when they have concerns about how their male relative delegate is taking these decisions and re-asserting their customary authority within the matrilineal land system.

Stege et al also observe a similar pattern.

> More women chose to fulfil the duties of lineage head themselves rather than defer the responsibility to a male relative. Land provides Marshallese women with a critical power base in a modern political environment dominated by men. At the family and community level, women participate directly in land-related decisions. **The continuing challenge is translating this empowerment at the local level into representation and a voice in land development issues on the national stage**.[12] [Emphasis added]

Stege highlights a direct example of how this 'crossover' from women's customary power occurred in 2005 in the Marshall Islands. Following a High Court decision recognising the role of female 'Alap', two male senators introduced into the Parliament Bill 82, proposing to restrict the role of 'Alap' to men, by defining them as uncle, a male elder, or the eldest male member of a lineage.[13] Women from all backgrounds across the country, banded together to defeat the Bill.

> Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) led the effort to defeat Bill 84. A nongovernmental organisation that serves as an umbrella institution for women's groups throughout the nation, WUTMI ensured that women's voices, particularly those of female chiefs, were heard on this issue – in newspapers and on radio (including regional stations such as Radio Australia), through community-wide petition drives targeting elected representatives, at a public hearing held by the Nitijela parliament, and by appeals to members of the Council of Irooj as the government watchdogs of custom. The ultimate

[10] Stege, K.E, Maetala, R, Naupa, A, Simo, J. loc. cit. p 42-43.
[11] Ibid, p 6.
[12] Ibid, p 6-7.
[13] Ibid, p 19.

> success of the campaign demonstrates, on the one hand, the extent to which female authority in the Marshall Islands is deeply rooted in the landed traditions: many of the women protesting the bill saw themselves not as radicals but as traditionalists determined to protect Marshallese *manit* (custom). At the same time, the very public, media savvy campaign against the bill showcased the ways that women today are asserting their traditional authority over land in innovative and effective ways.[14]

In matrilineal Bougainville, women whose leadership is grounded in customary land management roles, proved pivotal to building peace and have succeeded in 'crossing over' into representative roles in preparation for independence, highlighting how Bougainville women leaders have been able to make this transition via their customary roles as peace builders in a conflict context. As explained by Bougainville leader Usuala Racova:

> We have women elected in all those regions and women reps already there. Does not stop women standing in their own municipal seats. more than 10 women stood for constituency seats.[15]

While patrilineal systems dominate Papua New Guinea, there are some matrilineal parts, such as in New Ireland, where women customary leaders retain authority and power in their roles in managing land and have been able to use this positioning to 'cross over' into a wider range of community-based leadership roles.

Customary chief Janet Roland Sios describes how her mother was a customary chief and how upon her mother's passing, she automatically assumed the role. She explained how in her current role, she wields significant customary power as she must be consulted in relation to any decisions regarding the clan's extensive customary lands, which has crossed over into wider community power. She also explains the division of roles between men and women as follows:

> New Island Province is matrilineal society. So, women play a leading role in decision making to do with the clan and certain events. But the men are still the heads of individual families and support the clan, but in terms of making major decisions the women make them, and the men carry them out… there is no need for negotiation as men know their place in society. The chief of the clan is a woman. She must make sure there is harmony in the clan. Making sure for a feast, she goes early and tells each clan member what to do, what to bring. The men have to go and do certain work like cleaning burial grounds and women bring the food.[16]

In Vanuatu, for over 100 years, researchers, writers and anthropologists agreed that there are no female chiefs in Vanuatu.[17] However research conducted in 2016 in Maewo, Penema Province, found that there were female chiefs, but who self-identify as *notari*, a local vernacular word which they translated as 'female cultural leaders', as they felt the term 'chief' must be reserved for men only.[18] The research team also met with Chief Doreen Leona, a woman who does identify herself as a 'chief' from Pentecost, who clarified that while women may hold a chiefly rank, their functions as chiefs were different from those

[14] Ibid.

[15] ABC Radio National, Sistas, let's talk: Women Chiefs and Traditional Power, 25 October 2023 available at https://mediacore-live- production.akamaized.net/audio/01/ng/Z/at.mp3?source=web&content_id=103004556.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Island Life Magazine, 'The Search for the Elusive Female Chiefs of Vanuatu', 15 May 2018, available here: https://www.sista.com.vu/the-search-for-the-elusive-female-chiefs-of-vanuatu-island-life-mag/.

[18] Ibid.

performed by men. She also shared her view that the presence of a significant proportion of women with chiefly titles in a community does strengthen women's rights and have a protective effect from family violence.

> I am a female chief, with chiefly insignia including the circular pig's tusk of the pig I killed. About 25 percent or more of the women of northern Pentecost have chiefly rank. We do not have jurisdiction over civil, criminal or land disputes, but we do instruct young people in custom and traditional matters. And I think that the fact that women of north Pentecost are recognized and respected as female custom chiefs by men, means that the rate of domestic violence against women is lower there than elsewhere.[19]

Chief Doreen Leona's mother, Chief Lolowei Musero, further explains the sophisticated and nuanced ranks within the chiefly system and their availability to men and women.

> My rank and Doreen's chiefly rank is 'Motari' – this is different from the Maewo term 'Notari.'" She added, "On north Pentecost we have three active ranks of female chiefs that perform the pig-killing ceremony: Mwei (the lowest), Motari (second) and Sal (the highest). The male chiefs in the area also use these same three ranks as the first tier of their system. Then above those three ranks, the men have five additional grades that women cannot earn. These are (starting at the lowest): Tari, Livus, Fera, Bofudolua, and Vera. My husband, brother and father all achieved the Bofudolua level, for which they had to kill 100 pigs.[20]

Further investigation of female chiefs in Vanuatu led researchers to interview Chief Phoebe John, from Pele Island just off the north coast of Efate. Following the death of her chief husband, she became the next chief and performed the full range of male chiefly functions.

> For four years I was a female chief of my village of Piliura, with all the powers of a male chief. This came about because my husband was the village chief, but he died in 2010. I was given the sacred mat that was used as a shroud under his body as a symbol of my new authority and rank. But I did not kill a pig in this ceremony. His rank and mine was 'Meserie,' which is the highest rank in a ten-rank system of chiefs.

There is no doubt much more to be learned about women chiefs and women customary leaders across the Pacific. It would be enormously useful for further sociocultural research to be conducted to 'unearth' the many forms of customary leadership women continue to provide across the Pacific and to assess the extent to which women customary leaders are involved in customary dispute resolution processes. It would also be useful to investigate whether the presence of women with status in customary systems helps to ground women's customary identity and the ways this may increase their social power more generally. It would be fruitful to investigate this linkage, including examining the correlation observed by Chief Doreen Leona between lower rates of family violence in locations where women retain powerful customary roles. Making visible any connections to emerge from such investigations may also provide valuable leads for approaches to empower women customary leaders in efforts to shift norms that tolerate family violence in Pacific communities.

Chief Phoebe John's experience also highlights a pattern observed in this research and elsewhere, where widows or daughters of male leaders have assumed the responsibilities of their deceased husbands or fathers, as their pathway to leadership. In some instances, women have assumed a role where their husband has either been removed from office or otherwise incapacitated. This 'inheritance' of varied roles by female relatives has been

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

documented in different Pacific countries, not only in relation to customary roles, such as in Chief Phoebe John's experience, but also in parliamentary roles and church leadership roles. For example, it is reported that in Samoa, the three serving women MPs in 2016 had originally 'inherited' their electoral base from close male family members who held the seats before them.[21] In 2022, three of the four women in the Solomon Islands parliament had taken over the role after their husbands had been removed from office.[22] In relation to church leadership roles, Papua New Guinea Pastor Susan Kingal describes how she became a pastor following her husband's death.

> In the 1990s, Joseph and Susan Kingal from Papua New Guinea's Western Highlands started The Word, The Spirit and The Cross evangelistic ministries in Lae. Mr Kingal became PNG's first tele-evangelist, and their ministry attracted thousands of worshippers. But in 2010, Mr Kingal died in a car accident and Susan was faced with a difficult choice. "I call myself a pastor by circumstance, because my husband died suddenly and there was no one to take over the ministry," she said. "It wasn't a church network like COC or AOG or Lutheran or something like that. It was a ministry we initiated... so when my husband died, suddenly there was no one to take over... I had to take the place of the pastor."[23]

It would be fruitful to document other instances of where women have assumed leadership roles following the deaths or incapacitation of their male relatives, as this may also be an important and relatively common but understudied pathway for women to achieve acceptance in leadership roles women do not commonly occupy. Women performing these roles can provide valuable demonstrations of women's competence as leaders and help to normalise women occupying positions of community leadership and authority. On the other hand, if women are not properly supported when they hold such roles, including protected from the barrage of sexism and disproportionate scrutiny they often receive, detractors may use their cases as evidence that women are not 'up to' the job. Thus, understanding the need for targeted support to women when leadership opportunities are thrust upon them in such circumstances, is crucial.

4.3 Church authorities

Church authorities most frequently involved in dispute resolution processes hold positions as pastors, ministers, and priests. While other Church leaders play important roles in church affairs, including organising activities and sitting on various church committees, interviewees and other studies indicate that dispute resolution processes including relating to family violence or other family matters, are mainly the preserve of ordained leaders and not other categories of church leaders.

Most Pacific pastors, ministers and priests are men, often older men, with a tiny but steadily growing minority of women pastors and ministers in some churches, mainly in protestant and evangelical churches. For example, there are 22 ordained women in the Anglican Church's Diocese of Polynesia, a little less than half the number of ordained men. In the

[21] National University of Samoa (N.U.S.) Centre for Samoan Studies 'Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa' 2016, p.18, https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/samoa-overcoming-barriers- womens-participation-local-government-final-report.pdf.

[22] Howes, S, 'Time for action at the Forum on female political representation in the Pacific',Devpolicyblog, 8 July 2022 available at: https://devpolicy.org/time-for-action-at-forum-on-female-political-representation-in-pacific-20220708/.

[23] Wayne, H., Lester, K., Lucas, R., Smith, D., Women have historically been excluded from church leadership — but in the Pacific, that's changing', Sistas, Let's Talk, 18 May 2023, available at: https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/pacific-women-taking-on-church-leadership-roles/102352034.

Church of the Latter-Day Saints, women pastors account for just 3% in the Papua New Guinea Union Mission and 4% in the Trans Pacific Union Mission, with others also employed as departmental directors and administrators.[24] Reverend Sereima Lomaloma from Fiji was the first Indigenous woman in the Pacific to become a priest. As she says:

> '…there are clear benefits to having women in leadership positions in the church. We do bring different perspectives, you know, to the church. That's why it was very important that women are also in leadership positions because we look through different lenses and that's what's needed in society. The church is no different. When women come into leadership positions, they bring a different perspective, but also their leadership style is different. I think it's more inclusive. Because you are part of a gender that is often denied leadership or because … you come across victim survivors of violence … you bring that with your role as a clergywoman. And so, you minister differently from your brother clergyman.[25]

A Uniting Church Minister interviewed in Kiritimati, Kiribati shared how her community had initially found it strange to have a woman minister but once she demonstrated her abilities, she was fully embraced by the whole church community. She added that people do not even notice she is a woman anymore, even though she has a young baby. She expressed deep concern about the levels of violence against women within families in her community and how she used her Sunday sermons to urge all members of her congregation to think carefully about how they treat their family members and to reflect upon how they choose to spend their time and money, as God would ultimately hold each of them accountable for their choices and behaviour.

To accelerate the pace women's ordination, some Pacific Churches have developed specialised programs to promote women into study of theology and ordination.[26] In addition to gradually ordaining more women, Pacific churches are increasingly recognising the contributions of women in building churches[27] and drawing on theological doctrine to challenge traditional understandings of women's assumed submissive roles within the Church and the family, creating and maintaining tolerance of violence against women.[28]

Despite these encouraging signs, when Pacific women bring their cases seeking help for family violence or other family issues to their church, or when men ask their church leaders to facilitate reconciliation with their wives, it is almost always male church leaders involved in these processes. Very often these leaders do hold conservative theological views on the duties of women to serve and obey their husbands and excuse husbands for their violence. As per the outcomes of the second study, most women participants felt church leaders did not help to solve family violence as their husbands were not held to account but rather, they

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[24] Currow, S. , Schubert, D. 'Why the SPD is committed to support women in ministry' (Seventh Day Adventists), 23 November 2018, available at: https://record.adventistchurch.com/2018/11/23/why-the-spd-is-committed-to-support-women-in-ministry/.

[25] ABC Radio National, 'Sistas, let's talk:, Women as priests and ministers', 19 May 2023, with Hilda Wayne, available at: https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/pacific-women-taking-on-church-leadership-roles/102352034

[26] Uniting Word News, Project Updates, 'Women in Ministry Supporter Update, April 2024, available at: https://www.unitingworld.org.au/tag/pacific/.

[27] See "Voices of Latter-day Saint Women in the Pacific and Asia" a book documenting the contributions of women to developing the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. See: https://chpac.byuh.edu/voices-of-latter-day-saint-women-in-the-pacific-and-asia

[28] See the Uniting Church's publication 'Promoting gender justice in and through faith communities in Oceania: stories and lessons about what is working and why', 2024 available at: https://www.unitingworld.org.au/projects/partnering-women-for-change/. See also at the same link a terrific range of posters carrying messages of women's equality in the Church and right to freedom from violence including in the family.

were both required to forgive and take mutual responsibility for the marriage problems.

4.4 Local court justices and clerks

A further category of community leaders involved in local adjudication of family violence and family dispute cases are local court justices. They form the lay (non-law trained) judiciary at the community rung of the state justice system presiding at the over summary criminal, civil and customary land cases, usually applying a blend of state and customary law and procedure. These positions are very strategic as in the case of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, local or island court justices have to hear applications for temporary family protection orders.[29] In Kiribati, the lay judiciary sit on panels as outer island Magistrates and also hear family protection cases.[30] Local level courts are highly relevant to the legal needs of rural women, as they are often the only practically accessible court and also deal with other family law issues, like child and family support claims.

Justices who sit on these local state courts are typically selected from local communities based on their high standing and reputation of integrity in the community and in some instances, also based on their knowledge of customary law. They are appointed through a state judicial appointment process. Most justices who sit in these courts also 'wear other hats' as local community leaders, with many village chiefs or church leaders appointed, as well as ex civil servants or other community leaders. [31]

An earlier study in this series undertook the first ever Pacific region mapping of magistrates and lay judicial officers, including identifying the proportion of women judicial officers. It found that only 6.7% of local court justices across the Pacific are women, compared to 44% of magistrates and 21% of superior court judges, highlighting a real lack of women appointees in local level state courts.

Table 1: Numbers and % of women justices in Pacific local courts (updated Oct 2026)

Country	Cook Is	FSM	Fiji	Kiribati	RMI	Nauru	Niue	Palau
No. women	7/20	2/8	N/A	66/158	1/19	2/3	6/13	N/A
%	35	25	N/A	39	5	66	46	N/A

Country	PNG	Samoa	Solomon Is	Tokelau	Tonga	Tuvalu	Vanuatu
No. women	900/15000	2/25	4/221	No data	N/A	No data	93/346
%	6	8	2	No data	N/A	No data	27

With 27% of Island Court Justices in Vanuatu being women, this is 3-4 times higher than the regional average of 7%. Notably, the actual number of women justices has almost doubled over the past two years, due to new recruitment methods used by the court, as discussed

[29] See Family Protection Act 2008 (Vanuatu) and Family Protection Act 2014, (Solomon Islands).
[30] See Family Peace Act 2014 (Kiribati).
[31] For further information on women's representatioon in Pacific local level courts see Graydon, C. 'Towards Gender Balance and Equality in Pacific Judiciaries', 2024, p36-38, MFAT, available at: https://www.iawj.org/content.aspx?page_id=2507&club_id=882224&item_id=5268.

further below.

Forty-two women justices were interviewed as part of this research from Vanuatu, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, and Cook Islands. One important observation drawn from both the data and the interviews, is that smaller Pacific jurisdictions are much more likely to have a higher - even a majority or a dominant - proportion of women lay judicial officers, than in larger countries. Most of these countries are smaller Polynesian and Micronesian countries, which have higher levels of matrilineal and matrilocal descent systems. [32] Some anthropologists say this may be due to them being in more isolated parts of the Pacific where men were often involved in long distance voyaging and more likely to be absent or lost at sea, therefore matrilineal systems were necessary to ensure the stability of community function.

> In matrilineal societies paternity is not an overriding issue. It matters little who the father is, since only women continue the lineage. In the Micronesian and larger Oceanic context, if husbands and fathers were lost (always a possibility in seafaring) they could be readily replaced by other men, Papuan as well as Oceanic.[33]

Across patrilineal Melanesian countries, which are also the most populous, we generally see lower levels of women appointed to local courts, with the exception being Vanuatu. In countries where women justices formed a significant proportion of justices, they did not report experiencing the same types or levels of discrimination or resistance to them performing their roles. It is intuitive that where it is more normalised to see women in these decision-making roles, their exercise of power is considered less contentious, compared to environments where women form a tiny minority of total justices and are more likely to be working within acutely patriarchal cultures.

Some of the main challenges reported by women justices in Vanuatu included discrimination by fellow male panelists who were not accustomed to women participating in decision-making roles and more likely to take charge and assign then traditional female roles, like note taking, cleaning the court or providing refreshments. Women justices faced being overlooked for selection on panels due to the greater difficulty arranging for their transportation, as women were less likely to be able to provide their own transport and the court lacked resources to do so. Some women justices also reported security risks not faced by men from community members who did not accept or understand the equal role of women to participate as decision makers, or because they were seen as a 'soft target.' Some women had regretfully resigned from their roles as justices as they lacked support from their husbands to continue in the role as their husbands were concerned they would be distracted from their homemaker roles or that it could 'cause trouble' for the family to be perceived to improperly interfere in other people's business.

These challenges highlight a need for proactive strategies to support women's recruitment, capacity development and retention in their justice panel roles. Creating more enabling environments for women justice's work, including by requiring all justices to commit to working alongside women justices as equals and providing community information about the role of women in local courts, would assist. At the same time, many women justices reported positive experiences working with their male colleagues, including those who

[32] Hage, P. Marck, J. 'Matrilineality and the Melanesian Origin of Polynesian Y Chromosomes' in 'Matrilocal Residence and Matrilineal Descent in ProtoOceanic Society', Current Anthropology Volume 44, Number S 5 December 2003.
[33] Ibid, p s123.

were chiefs, where they recognised the value and legitimacy of women's contributions to the process. While women's numbers as local justice leaders remain relatively low, there is a lot of potential to build support for their roles and to increase their numbers and influence within local court processes.

4.5 Local government authorities

Pacific women are under-represented at provincial and municipal levels of local government, as they are at national levels.[34]

Table 2: Percentage of women hold seats Pacific National Parliaments and Local Governments

Country	Nat. Parl.% Women 2023	Ministers % women 2023	Local Govt % women 2010	Local Govt Chair/heads % women 2010
Cook Islands :*10 Outer Island Local Governments*	16.6	No info	7.7	10
FSM: *4 State Governments*	7	25		
Fiji: *12 Municipalities (2005 elections)*	11	5	14.5	0
Kiribati: *20 Island &3 Urban Councils*	7	7	2.3	0
Marshall Is: 14 *Village Councils*	6	11	4.3	8.7
Nauru: *national parliament*	11	0	N/A	N/A
Palau: *16 state governments*	6	13	No info	25
PNG: *National Capital District Council* *20 Provl Assemblies* *26 Urban LLGs* *287 Rural LLGs*	2	0	0 0 0 .5	0
Samoa: *286 local councils*	13	31	No info	No info
Tonga: *Town and District Officers*	7	10	.6	0
Tuvalu: *8 Kaupule Councils*	6	0	8.3	No info
Vanuatu: *2 Municipalities,6 Provinces*	2	0	7.7, 5.1[35]	0

When women secure office at the municipal or local government level, they often report facing similar patterns of discrimination from male colleagues, who do not accept women's participation as leaders and do not treat them as equals, as highlighted in Vanuatu:

> When CEDAW was adapted in 2013 to ensure that women were represented at a municipal level, five women were elected to councils in both Port Vila and Santo. Both towns now have

[34] Unfortunately there is incomplete data on women in local government for all Pacific countries, but that available is from 2023 through UN Women (source https://localgov.unwomen.org/) and from UNDP, UNWomen, CLGF & UCLG (2011) 'Women's Representation in Local Government in Asia Pacific Status – Report 2010.

[35] The provincial and municipal level elections for the 2018-2021 term resulted in the election of 11 municipal female councilors (accounting for 25.6% of all municipal councilors) and seven provincial female councilors (7.1% of all provincial councilors). No female mayors were elected, but some female deputy mayors were elected. At the September 2019 municipal election, six female councilors were voted into Luganville Municipal Council. There were more than 15 female candidates at the 2020 general elections, but none won their seats. See UN Women 'Gender Equality Brief for Vanuatu', March 2022, available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/UN_WOMEN_VANUATU.pdf.

> female deputy Lord Mayors. Yet it is well known that these women are not fully accepted among their peers with reports of them being excluded from council meetings and being openly accused of having a 'free ride.' An insider from the Department of Women's Affairs reveals female councillors are often expected to perform traditional gender roles such as secretarial work or preparing rooms for meetings.[36]

There is however some progress in Vanuatu locally elected bodies. The Municipalities (Amendment) Act No. 11 of 2013 of Vanuatu was passed in 2014 and instituted the first rollout of Temporary Special Measures (TSMs), where each ward has one Reserved Seat for a woman. However, some municipalities are doing better than this. Voters in Sanma Province made history in November 2023 by electing the most diverse council ever seen in the country. With a record-breaking 29% of female candidates, the polls delivered a near balanced result, with six female and seven male councilors winning seats. Luganville, Vanuatu's second-largest town, has five reserved seats for women on the town council, filled by the highest-polling women candidates in each ward.[37] The Parliament of Vanuatu passed the Electoral Act in December 2023, ensuring that TSMs will become permanent, with one reserved seat at the municipal level for women.[38]

With no Pacific country having more than 14.5% of female local representatives and some yet to achieve 1%, with most hovering between 2-8%, women are yet to make significant headway in securing local representation. While this is not surprising, especially as views regarding women's roles are generally more conservative in rural areas, it does highlight the importance of initiatives aimed at achieving a significant proportion of women elected to local government and not merely a tiny minority, creating great challenges for women to then make their best contribution.

Returning to the issues of women's experiences in local justice systems, while local government authorities are not usually involved directly in individual cases in need of dispute resolution, this data highlights a continuing pattern of women struggling to hold leadership roles across all facets of local governance systems: state, customary and church.

4.6 Local police

Data is limited regarding the proportion of women police in the Pacific, including regarding the spread and seniority of their roles. The available data is set out below:

Table 3: Number and proportion of women in Pacific police forces

Country	Data year	No. % women	Seniority/notes
Solomon Islands	2019	365/1520, 24%[39]	13% of commissioned officers across ranks: Deputy Commissioner, Chief Superintendent, Superintendent, Inspector, Senior Sergeant, and Sergeant
Tonga	2016	102/419,	Two Deputy Commissioners; 11 female commissioned officers, 13 at Sergeant rank; 66 at Constable rank; 12 in

[36] Pacific Women in Politics, 'The Fight For Women To Be Heard In Vanuatu' 5th July 2016, available at: https://www.pacwip.org/resources/news/the-fight-for-women-to-be-heard-in-vanuatu/.
[37] Baker, K 'The 'Samoan model' offers hope to female politicians in the Pacific', 2019, International Centre for Democratic Partnerships, available at: https://www.icdp.com.au/2019/08/26/the-samoan-model-offers-hope-to-female-politicians-in-the-pacific/.
[38] UNDP 'Vanuatu Has the Most Gender Balanced Governing Body in its History', March 28, 2024, available at: https://www.undp.org/pacific/stories/vanuatu-has-most-gender-balanced-governing-body-its-h.
[39] Watson, D., Howes, L., Dinnen, S., Bull, M., Amin, S.N. 'Policing in the Pacific Islands' 2023, p.156, Palgrave Macmillan.

		24%[40]	administrative roles
Tuvalu	2017	7/100, 7%[41]	Six constables, one senior constable
PNG	2024	740/6000, 12%[42]	No information regarding rank, aiming for 2,000 women out of 10,000 (20%) by 2030.
Kiribati	2015	32/572, 5.6% [43]	Measures taken to increase female officer intake, 50% of the graduation cohort were women in 2017
Fiji	2019	Approx 20%[44]	No further information provided
Samoa	2022	22%[45]	More than half women recruits reported in May 2020 28/44[46]
Vanuatu	2023	154/597, 26%[47]	In 2016, 1st woman promoted to Police Inspector;[48]16 women police graduated;[49] 6 senior policewomen listed, gender equality measures reported; [50] See article for discussion of women police role.[51]
Cook Isl.	2021	25% [52]	40% of the total police staff women
Nauru		No info	Data on gender composition not available 'although women are known to be well represented within specific agencies of the police force.'[53]

There is no available data regarding the proportion of women police officers stationed at rural police stations in each country. Based on observation across seven Pacific countries in rural locations travelled, women form a low proportion of officers staffing rural police stations, estimated to be less than 10%.

Often resources simply do not allow for provision of police stationed proximately to remote communities. Such communities need to be more self-sufficient in managing their own

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Sources; Women in PNG's Police Force, July 2024, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFScZQZoCNo., data on total no of police: Royal PNG Constabulary website see https://rpngc.gov.pg/about-rpngc/ e.
[43]UN Women, 'Gender Equality Brief Kiribati' p.3, March 2022, available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UN-WOMEN-KIRIBATI_0.pdf.
[44] Watson, D., Howes, L., Dinnen, S., Bull, M., Amin, S.N. 'Policing in the Pacific Islands' 2023, p.156, Palgrave Macmillan.
[45] Samoa Observer, 'Role of women policing acknowledged during celebration', 13 March 2022, available at: https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/samoa/97519.
[46] RNZ, 'More women than men among Samoa Police recruits' 30 May 2020, available at: https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/417937/more-women-than-men-among-samoa-police-recruits.
[47] Not including maritime or military policing units. Data provided directly by Vanuatu Australia Police and Justice Program, 16.12.2024. Email exchange held on file.
[48] UN Women 'Gender Equality Brief Vanuatu, March 2022, p4, loc. cit. n 30.
[49] Vanuatu Daily Post, 'More female police officers recruited', 29 July 2022, available at: https://www.sista.com.vu/more-female-police-officers-recruited/.
[50] Vanuatu Daily Post, 'Police Commissioner Recognised for Advancing Gender Equality', 9 October 2023, Available at: https://www.sista.com.vu/police-commissioner-recognised-for-advancing-gender-equality/.
[51] Bull, M. 'Policing Gender Violence in Vanuatu', December 2021, International Journal for Crime Justice and Social Democracy 10(4):239-261, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356688691_Policing_Gender_Violence_in_Vanuatu
[52] UN Women. Gender Equality Brief Cook Islands, March 2022, p4. available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/UNWOMEN-COOK-ISLANDS-FINAL-FEB-2023.pdf.
[53] UN Women. Gender Equality Brief Cook Islands, March 2022, p4. available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/UN_WOMEN_NAURU.pdf.

security. To address this gap, some countries have established voluntary community safety teams or 'special constable' roles, appointed to provide village chiefs with informal policing support. In Vanuatu, members of community safety teams are selected by the village chief, trained by police and provided with uniforms, giving them the appearance of having formal or legal authority, despite not having so. Aside from the lack of clarity around the mandate and accountability issues with these structures, the research found few women being included in these committees or processes, further marginalising women in the local security space. Family violence and sexual violence is the dominant security issue faced by most local communities and it is a lost opportunity to not include a significant proportion of women, including young women, in these new bodies to increase their accessibility and relevance to women and girls who need protection and support from family and sexual violence.

Police also play significant informal roles in resolving family violence complaints made to them. Again, it is important to note that police are not legally authorised to undertake informal resolution or mediation of such complaints. To the contrary, Family Protection Acts across the region create statutory obligations for police to receive and investigate complaints and bring charges against suspects supported by evidence, in all instances. Some countries' laws, including a police 'duty to prosecute' and state that police failure to comply constitutes a disciplinary offence.[54] Some laws also have 'no drop' policies preventing complainants from withdrawing their complaints at the police level and allowing discontinuation only under the supervision of a court.[55]

The second study in this research found that police frequently fail to register complaints of family violence and frequently send victims home to deal with cases themselves or continue to mediate complaints directly, despite their lack of mandate. Records may not be kept of these processes or the file may be closed, leading to no further investigation or action on the complaint. Several women interviewed in Vanuatu described these kinds of experiences with police, some alleging that police had colluded with perpetrators, by informing perpetrators their wife had come to the station to make a report against them, or by acceding to requests from the perpetrator, their family member or representative, to 'pull' the police complaint and cease the investigation.

Perhaps the most egregious example of police stepping outside their mandate and protecting perpetrators from accountability related to a case arising in Pentecost during the study, where witnesses shared that police had provided 'security' at a nakamal process to informally settle an incest and physical assault case against a child, without investigation or referral to the state justice system. Witnesses shared that during the nakamal session the father admitted to incest against his daughter as well as assault when she had tried to escape from him, and that the village chief oversaw a 'reconciliation' ceremony, all in the presence of police. This case highlights that police require clear guidance on what kinds of involvement and presence they can have in nakamal processes and which they cannot. These complexities in policing decisions and behaviours protecting perpetrators emerge as continuing issues not only in Vanuatu but in other Pacific countries too.

[54] See s 30(4) of the Family Peace Act 2014 (Kiribati).

[55] See 'Kiribati Police Service Domestic Violence and Sexual Offences Standing Orders and Procedures', June 2019, Available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2019/09/Booklet_Kiribati%20Police%20SDVRP_v6b-3Sept_Final%20to%20print.pdf.

4.7 Roles of others (non-decision makers) across all local justice systems

When it comes to local justice systems, it has been shown that women are rarely in a decision-making role in state, customary or religious led processes. It is therefore important to capture and explore other ways that women may influence or be involved in local justice decision making, even when they are not the authorised decision maker.

Identifying the backgrounds and roles of women involved in helping other women navigate local justice processes, whether as informal advisors, advocates, or by accompanying and supporting women throughout the process, highlights the broad spectrum of women who can help and highlights a need to support building their capacities in performing these important other roles. This pool of local women may also represent the 'talent pool' from which future women local justice decision makers could be drawn, such as through their appointment as justices to local courts.

4.7.1 Women and other family members

As was discussed in the second study, women experiencing family violence, family conflict or in need of child support, most often turn to other women in their families when they are initially trying to work out how to best address their problem. This may be their sisters, aunties, mothers, grandmothers, or trusted female friends. In some Pacific cultures, aunties and uncles have specialised customary roles and responsibilities towards their nieces, such as in Vanuatu, and likely in other Pacific countries also. In thinking about strategies for involving more community members to support women suffering family violence, it is necessary to analyse who might be allies to vulnerable women and girls within the relevant kinship system, which may offer levers for highlighting the cultural obligations of other relatives, including male relatives, to support their female relatives to live in safety and to be respected.

4.7.2 Wives of customary and other decision makers

AS noted above, it is important to identify and capture all the different ways that women, especially those living in strongly patriarchal cultures, may accrue influence and exercise social power, even when they are not the direct holder of authority themselves.

In community consultation meetings with women, a significant number introduced themselves also as being the wife of a chief, area administrator, pastor, local council member, or police commander. They were clearly seen by members of the community as having a particular status and occupying a role through being proximate to authority and having an indirect role through their spousal relationship. These discussions highlighted how the degree to which women could exercise power or influence via their proximity to power, was highly dependent on multiple variables. These emerged as being her own leadership qualities as well as the willingness of their husbands/male relatives to listen and take on board their perspectives and advice or to allow them to assume a public role or not.

One participant who identified herself as the wife of a chief in Vanuatu explained that her and other wives of chiefs would sometimes be privately approached by women from their villages seeking help with family violence. Sometimes these women sought physical protection in the chief's house but most often wanted to explain their story to her so she could pass it on to her husband prior to the Nakamal sitting to decide her case. This avenue

was especially important in locations where women are either culturally prohibited from attending or speaking for themselves during the Nakamal process.

> As women often cannot speak in the Nakamal or may be shy, I can make sure my husband understands the woman's side before the meeting so he can ask questions of the men.[56]

Being heard via the chief's wife was also highly relevant in the common situation where women were worried their male relatives speaking on their behalf in the Nakamal would do so without understanding their perspective or would not advocate for the outcomes they sought, instead pursuing their own interests as the family head, such as a compensation payment made to them. The chief's wife also shared that after the Nakamal process, women parties sometimes kept her informed about what was going on and whether the husband was complying with the decision or not, providing further opportunities for a diligent chief to follow up.

In the workshop conducted with community leaders in Kiribati, one woman shared a story where a chief's daughter had been able to have considerable influence over the chief's decision, requiring a man to pay regular child support to his children via produce from his land in circumstances whereas the chief had previously considered responsibility for the children to rest with the wife's family after relationship breakdown.

Thus, the wives and other female relatives of chiefs and other male leaders, can provide an important backchannel for women to communicate their needs or situation to their local chief and may have some influence over the way the chief exercises his power, to achieve better outcomes for women.

4.7.3 Women church committee members

The interviews conducted and existing research indicate that some women turn to trusted women members of Church committees for help, who can sometimes provide a similarly important backchannel between the woman and the priest, minister or pastor conducting the couple counselling sessions and wider supportive or mediating roles.

> We listen to her and explain to the pastor what is going on and what is the problem. It is hard for the women to tell this herself in front of her husband and the pastor. She may also tell us if the problem keeps going and we can tell the pastor it is not solved and suggest what he could do. [57]

Women church committee members can thereby help ensure the woman's side of the story is communicated to the decision maker, either in advance or during the counselling session where the committee members attend with the woman as a support person. Committee members can also keep pastors updated on whether the situation has improved since the counselling and whether further follow up from the pastor with the perpetrator is needed. Again, having this backchannel with the pastor via the women's committee member, helps to overcome the barriers women face reporting this directly to their pastor.

4.7.4 Rural networks of national women's/victim's organisations

In some countries, there may be networks of women committees attached to women's rights organisations who can provide local support to women going through local justice processes dealing with family and sexual violence. For example, the Committee Against Violence Against Women (CAVAWs) are part of the Vanuatu Women's Centre (VWC) in Vanuatu. Similarly, the Samoa Victim Support Group (SVSG), has built Village

[56] Interview on file.

[57] Interview with woman church committee member Kiritimati, Kiribati.

Representative Committees across the country which provide the backbone of referrals and assistance, as noted by the SVSG leadership:

> The strength of SVSG's community prevention program and response to GBV lies in its network of SVSG village representatives. They have been trained as first responders, as counsellors, as local researchers, necessary for their roles and responsibilities.[58]

Local, volunteer, women's advocates, trained by national women's organisations provide sometimes life-saving support and more regular support to women in communities, accompanying them through all kinds of local justice system processes, whether with families, customary hearings, church-mediated processes or involving state actors such as courts, police, and local government. Women interviewed from both the VWC, the SVSG and from Femili PNG, provided many examples of how these accompaniment models supported women throughout whichever pathway they were taking to secure protection and justice. The researcher also had the opportunity to observe firsthand how members of CAVAWs responded to cases of family and sexual violence arising during the field research and witnessed the crucial role they play in empowering victims or even evacuating them in emergencies and helping them to 'bridge worlds' between the various processes they interact with, to give them the best chance of achieving outcomes that are helpful in their lives.

4.7.5 Women local court clerks

While unfortunately there is no data to confirm this, through ten years of working in Pacific Courts, the research has observed that women form the majority of court clerks working across all levels of Pacific Courts, in superior courts, magistrate courts and local-level courts.

Women's high level of participation as court clerks and in other court staff roles is strategically important, especially given the instances where new judicial officers have been drawn from the ranks of upskilled experienced court clerks. This has also provided a more accessible entry point for women to become judicial officers, as it did in Kiribati where experienced court clerks who completed Certificates and Diplomas of Justice became eligible for Magistrate roles, contributing to the current situation where 67% of single magistrates in Kiribati are women.

The presence of women as local court clerks is also strategically important as court clerks are highly visible community members with unique knowledge and thus can play a range of crucial community justice roles. They provide legal information and outreach regarding court services and processes. Women consistently said that find the court more approachable when they see a woman clerk. Women court clerks are therefore ideally positioned to share their knowledge with women regarding their options for resolving their disputes and to help them access the court or police or to navigate other justice systems where needed. In addition, court clerks often have a higher level of education and legal knowledge than the justices sitting on the local courts. The clerks provide advice and support to the justices regarding legal and procedural issues and sometimes also draft the judgements. They play highly influential and substantive roles in relation to the decision-making process.

[58] SVSG Facebook page available at: https://www.facebook.com/samoavictimsupportgroup/?locale=en_GB&paipv=0&eav=AfbHpeYE4vNyhmSkN9ZkcNTsbiloEyy5isr6lNFU5QGGDciBmsovQODuA5fqll372Us&_rdr.

At the same time, the work of local court clerks can be very physically taxing and involves significant personal risk, as in many locations they need to solo captain and re-fuel boats, ride motorbikes in rough terrain or hike up and down mountains to access remote communities. While some women local court clerks embrace these aspects of their roles, others say these factors and the lack of support more generally for local courts, deter some women from these roles, explaining why women clerks are more likely to be concentrated in magistrate or superior court clerks sitting in provincial or national capitals. Nonetheless, there remain significant numbers of women who face into these challenges. For example, in Kiribati, of the 24 Outer Island Magistrate Court Clerks, 22 of them are women. In Vanuatu, four of the ten Island Court Clerks are women, as well as the Secretary of the Island Court in Efate. In the Solomon Islands, eight out of ten Local Court Clerks are women.

The existence of three-year rotations of clerks between local courts was another challenge raised by clerks, who said it disproportionately impacted on women because they have less power in family decisions about moving post, resulting in more of them being separated from their spouses and children. They also highlighted that this policy was especially tough on single parents, who may lack a support network or the income to pay for services in their new posting to enable them to juggle work/family commitments.

Nonetheless despite these challenges, it is important to highlight the significant numbers of women local court clerks in the region and the contributions they already make in increasing the accessibility of local courts to women.

4.7.6 Women civil servants

Public services are the largest employers of women across the Pacific,[59] with women most commonly employed as teachers, nurses, other health workers, or social service providers. At a village level, educated women, many of whom are employed as civil servants or in local businesses, often automatically acquire a kind of leadership status amongst women in the community and may be more likely to speak up and can have greater influence in events occurring within the village.

Women who are teachers or nurses are also often in a position to know through disclosure or observation that a particular woman or a particular child may be suffering from family violence or other family problems. As educated, trusted local women, they are in a good position to assist victims by providing information, advice, accompaniment and in some instances, they may also be subject to mandatory reporting requirements under child protection laws.

Women civil servants in villages are also an important group to bear in mind when thinking about the potential for increased participation of women actors in local justice processes, either for potential appointment as local court justice decision makers, or whether through their wider community engagement and support roles, which could also be a focus for further development.

4.8 Conclusion regarding question 1

Few women are currently involved as decision makers in local justice processes across the

[59] See Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, 'Thematic Brief: Leadership and decision making for women and girls in the Pacific' p. 5, available at https://pacific-data.sprep.org/dataset/thematic-brief-leadership-and-decision-making-women-and-girls-pacific.

Pacific, whether in dispute resolution processes involving family heads, elders, customary authorities, church leaders, local police, courts, or governments. Women are more likely to be found in roles surrounding the decision-making roles, providing women seeking justice or protection with advice, support, refuge, accompaniment, advocacy and more generally helping women to navigate between different local justice systems, bridging between the highly localised family, customary and church-based actors and step-removed state actors, including local police and courts.

As women are largely absent as decision makers in Pacific local justice processes, this research now takes a 'deeper dive' into understanding women's local leadership opportunities and pathways, as a way of identifying a wider pool of women who could potentially move into decision making roles across different local justice systems or contribute to expanding the ranks of women playing important non-decision making roles in supporting women in their journeys for local justice and protection.

5. Question 2: How can we better understand Pacific women's leadership pathways and roles to identify potential pathways for more women to become local justice decision makers?

This section considers the broader question around how women exercise power, influence, and authority in local settings across all spheres of community life including political, economic, familial roles, as well as building on the previous discussion regarding building women's leadership roles within churches, custom and state institutions including the public service as well as the local courts.

5.1 Women's political leadership

A significant focus of research has been on the reasons for why Pacific women's representation in national parliaments is persistently amongst the lowest in the world.[60]

> Moreover, whatever progress has been made is much too slow. The increases in Palau and Marshall Islands are of just one female MP. In Nauru it is two. In Solomon Islands, it is four, but three of these were elected when their husbands were removed from office.[61]

Yet outside of national politics, Pacific women are often visible as leaders across diverse

[60] Fewer than 7% of Pacific politicians are women, compared with 27% globally. The absence of women's voices in political decision-making has been consistently raised in regional forums, although progress has been slow. Yet, in November 2022, a milestone was reached: for the first time, there was at least one elected woman in every Pacific parliament. See Baker, K 'Increasing women's representation in Pacific politics: 'give it time' is not the answer' https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/increasing-womens-representation-in-pacific-politics-give-it-time-is-not- the-answer/.

[61] Howes, S, 'Time for action at the Forum on female political representation in the Pacific', Devpolicyblog, 8 July 2022 available at: https://devpolicy.org/time-for-action-at-forum-on-female-political-representation-in-pacific-20220708/.

fields including local government, civil service, private business, and civil society, with their leadership roles frequently intertwining and crossing-over into multiple spheres. It is therefore no surprise that analysts emphasise the importance of building women's leadership across all spheres of life, to also feed into pathways and opportunities for women to assume national political roles.

> Women's leadership in their communities or the business sector has often created pathways to political leadership positions. These women typically have strong community connections and have demonstrated their commitment in a variety of settings. Women who run for political office also tend to be well-educated, have strong male backers and come from high-profile families. Developing pathways for a wider range of women to become leaders and make women's leadership more inclusive and widespread requires working from the ground up in multiple settings.
>
> However, moving women into political leadership is not the sole goal of gender equality in leadership. Women can be leaders and decision makers in many ways that bring positive change and economic benefit to their families and countries. There is evidence of this in civil society and faith-based organisations and in the private sector and the public services of many Pacific Island countries.[62]

This latter point is why this investigation is significant, not only for enhancing women's participation in local justice systems, but for contributing to knowledge about how to build women's leadership at the local level across all sectors and areas of life.

5.1.1 Links between women's local and national representation

When considering women's power, status and authority within a local community, many relevant factors emerge as relevant including the woman's family history, customary roles and connections, marital status, age, and educational status. A study of women's political representation and empowerment in Samoa[63] analysed the backgrounds of women who stood as electoral candidates in Samoa, who must hold the customary title of matai, to be eligible to run for office.

> Education is an important factor affecting whether women stand for election. Most of the women matai (both those who won seats and those that did not) had attained post-secondary levels of education and had a background in government or business. The majority held ali'i rather than tulafale titles. All were of a 'mature' age (over 40). The three currently serving women MPs had, in effect, originally 'inherited' their electoral base from close family members who held the seats before them.[64]

Samoa is an interesting case study as it is the only Pacific country to have a minimum number of seats reserved for women members of Parliament, which is set at 10%.[65] However with only a small proportion of *matai* being women,[66] this acts as a formal barrier

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[62] Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, 'Thematic Brief: Leadership and decision making for women and girls in the Pacific' p. 5, available at https://pacific-data.sprep.org/dataset/thematic-brief-leadership-and-decision-making-women-and-girls-pacific.

[63] National University of Samoa (N.U.S.) Centre for Samoan Studies 'Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa' 2016, p.18, https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/samoa-overcoming-barriers- womens-participation-local-government-final-report.pdf.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Notably, while not a sovereign nation yet, in Bougainville, three seats are reserved for women in the House of Representatives and one in cabinet.
one in cabinet

[66] National University of Samoa (N.U.S.) Centre for Samoan Studies 'Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa' 2016. However, according to the 2020 Samoa Voluntary National Review (VNR), 22

to women's participation even as candidates in national elections or even to achieve the quota of women parliamentarians.

> Almost all village-based matai are older men, with 92.5% over 40. In terms of profession, the largest proportion (36%) of matai are farmers, with the next largest proportion (21%) having 'no occupation, indicating they are elderly.[67]

In addition, in a significant number of Samoan villages, women are either banned from holding *matai* titles at all or despite holding *matai* titles, women are still excluded from village councils.

> Out of 240 traditional villages 41 do not confer matai titles to women. In addition, 34 villages do not allow resident female matai to participate in village council meetings or fono (Centre for Samoan Studies 2015). The Village Fono Act 1990 was legislated to give state recognition of the importance of the village fono to local governance. Overall, less than 10% of the matai population in Samoa were women in 2011 (Sāmoa Bureau of Statistics 2015). These figures revealed the essence of two major impediments. Firstly, the authority of local government curtailed extended families from selecting women leaders and furthermore confined women heirs' access to family titles they belong to. Secondly, this discrimination hinders opportunities for women matai to become national leaders.[68]

Thus, women's lack of representation in village councils (*fono*) is clearly linked to women's struggles to secure a greater portion of seat in the national parliament, as highlighted by the Speaker of the House in Samoa.

> …Speaker Papalii Lio Masipau made a bold statement about why he thinks gender inequality exists in politics. He views the matai system and customs as prohibiting women from traditional governance impacting their chances to run for office.[69]

In addition, different sub-categories of matai are also heavily gendered, and these directly link to the kind of power that matai women may wield at the village level. Referring to a 2016 study by the National University of Samoa:

> The findings stated that women were most likely to be given a title in recognition of high educational or career attainments or because they had rendered particular service to the family with generous financial support. Bestowing a title upon women honours her, **but it does not necessarily carry the expectations that she will become a leader in her ancestral village. In effect, many women matai hold their titles on an honorary basis; they may or may not have authority in the extended family but typically have limited opportunity to exercise authority in the village.[70]** [Emphasis added]

Beyond the formal requirements relating to *matai* title in Samoa, the example of Samoa provides insights into the limits on the kind of power that even high-status matai women may hold, and how women's lack of village-based power despite their matai status, also acts as a primary constraint on the ability of women to advance their political representation at a national level. This again harks back to the importance of building

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per cent of registered matai in Samoa are women. (Ref Editorial 'The matai system and women in politics', 22 July 2024, Samoa Observer.

[67] National University of Samoa (N.U.S.) Centre for Samoan Studies 'Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa' 2016, p 23.

[68] Silia Pa'usisi Finau, 'The Future of Women's Leadership in Samoa', National University of Samoa p2 available at: https://www.toksavepacificgender.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Finau-2021_The-Future-of-Womens-Leadership-in-Samoa.pdf.

[69] Editorial 'The matai system and women in politics', 22 July 2024, Samoa Observer.

[70] National University of Samoa (N.U.S.) Centre for Samoan Studies 'Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa' 2016.

women's leadership at local levels across all areas of community life.

> There exists strong women leadership in some villages, the traditional village system includes the local government councils, church leadership, school management, and community-based organisations.[71]

In other Pacific countries similar lesson can be drawn as there are few women village chiefs or women who are responsible for managing day-to-day village governance and participating in dispute resolution processes from the customary side. In Vanuatu, the researcher had the opportunity to interview a senior representative from the *malvatumaori*, or the Council of Chiefs, which has constitution roles and a vast national network of village chiefs and other village focal points to assist with different issues at the village level. Out of the five national lists – each comprised of around 91 or 92 local chiefs and focal points broken down into portfolios for 'justice and discipline', 'administration', 'land disputes', 'family welfare' and 'council' members, totally more than 450 people – not a single woman is on the list, not even for the 'family welfare' portfolio. The *malvatumaori* representative mentioned that there were two women village chiefs from Epi and the Council was still deciding how to engage with them, as women are not normally allowed to attend Council of Chiefs meetings. This highlights the vast dominance of men in the world of village governance and highlights the great challenge involved in increasing the participation of women in local justice delivery.

5.2 Women leadership in nationalist collective struggles

Pacific women's activism long been a driving force for political change in Pacific countries as seen in the significant contributions of women in nationalist struggles against colonialism in the birth of new Pacific states[72] and women's resistance to continuing colonial movements including using their roles as matrilineal custodians of land. In the campaign for Constitutional recognition of Palau's nuclear-free status, [73] Isabella Sumang, a key member of Otil a Belaud reflected on women's roles in the struggle:

> 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 nuclear weapons upon them, women's strength was required to stop them. [74]

For some women, their entry to leadership roles has arisen from their roles as peace makers and keepers emerging from situations of armed conflict. Women leaders and decision makers were notably key architects of the peace and reconciliation processes in Bougainville, using the strategies of adopting customary and traditional methods and emphasising women's roles, to bring an end to long standing political conflict. In the words of Josephine Tankunani Sirivi, a founder of Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom:

> 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

[71] Editorial, 'The matai system and women in politics', 22 July 2024, The Samoan Observer, https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/editorial/110227.

[72] See Palmieri, S., Howard E. & Baker, K. 'Reframing Suffrage Narratives: Pacific Women, Political Voice, and Collective Empowerment', 2023,The Journal of Pacific History, 58:4, at p .392-411.

[73] Which was eventually overturned in 1994 with the signing of the Compact of Free Association.

[74] Isabella Sumang quoted in Palmieri, S., Howard E. & Baker, K. 'Reframing Suffrage Narratives: Pacific Women, Political Voice, and Collective Empowerment', 2023,The Journal of Pacific History, 58:4, at p 406.

> 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.[75]

A peace agreement signed in 2001 allowed for new autonomous institutions, as well as a deferred referendum on self-determination, ultimately held in 2019, in which 97 per cent of voters chose independence from Papua New Guinea. Women's activism within the secessionist movement led to formalized structures for women's participation within new political institutions.

> When asked to share key lessons from her grassroots peacebuilding journey to inspire other women peacebuilders, Rose [Pihei] says, "Get more women into decision-making roles." Rose believes that if they focus on local community peacebuilding and local government capacity development, more women can participate in decision-making roles.
>
> "Women in leadership roles are more inclusive in terms of their services and advocacy. Women are aware of everyone's needs and hold a level of trust in communities and citizens…The strength that you find working with grassroot levels is that it's real. It gives you a competitive advantage as a leader because you have engaged with people, on the ground. This would mean that you have felt their pain, heard their voices, seen their suffering, that you normally wouldn't hear at the national level."
>
> She believes this makes them the right people to advocate for law reforms and economic empowerment because they have interacted with the people and understand their needs.[76]

5.3 Women's leadership in public administration

As alluded to earlier, another important area not to be overlooked where Pacific women are strongly represented and also demonstrate strong leadership is in public administration, as the largest single employer of women across the region[77] with women particularly well represented as teachers, nurses and providers of other social services at the community level.

There are also significant numbers of women in senior public sector roles who may be able to contribute to local governance issues including on justice. For example in Samoa and Fiji, women hold 44 per cent of senior roles in the public service and in Tonga the figure is 38 percent and in Tuvalu, 32 percent.[78] So we can see that women have been able to access

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[75] 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. Tankunani Sirivi, J. and Taleo Havini, M. (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), 175.

[76] Yusuf, S. 'Instinctive and intuitive paths to peace: Rose Pihei's authentic approaches towards Bougainville's healing', 1 August 2024, https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/rose-pihei-bougainville/?location=&theme=women-peace-security.

[77] Ibid, p. 6 referring to Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2016). Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration Trend Assessment Report 2012–2016, p.11 at http://www.aidsdatahub.org/sites/default/files/publication/Pacific_Leaders_Gender_Equality_Declaration_2016.pdf .

[78] Ibid, p6, referring to Haley, N. and Zubrinich, K. (2016). Women's political and administrative leadership in the Pacific. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia, Australian National University. https://www.pacwip.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Womens-political-and-administrative-leadership-in-the-Pacific.pdf.

public administration and then progress in seniority to a point where they may soon achieve parity with men. A range of strategies have been applied to achieve this progress including for example through the establishment of gender focal points in the public service, supported by strong public administration leaders and political commitment as has been the case in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.[79]

The presence of this 'cadre' of public service women working in their communities may offer important opportunities to involve more of them in local justice decision making processes.

5.4 Women's leadership in building economic empowerment

There are many women organisations and small micro-level women's groups working to empower and mobilise rural women to take leadership via the strategy of increasing women's economic empowerment based on growing recognition among governments, development actors and the private sector globally that investing in women and girls has a powerful effect on poverty reduction, productivity and growth.[80] Higher income for women and increased control over income leads to greater sustained poverty reduction, with evidence showing that women with money invest more in family and community well-being than men.[81] Regional-led economic empowerment approaches are supported by a Pacific Women Lead strategy.[82]

In some instances economic empowerment programs are also aimed explicitly at addressing and preventing gender-based violence, such as Voices For Change programs in Papua New Guinea or the Samoa Victim Support Group (SVSG), which have over time developed significant expertise in designing and implementing income generating programs to support vulnerable women as part of a violence prevention strategy.

SVSG research identified that one of the key protective factors from family violence was building economic independence for family violence victims, as economic insecurity sits at the heart of women's vulnerability to family violence and inability to take action to escape from it. SVSG's programs work to create sustainable livelihoods for survivor-victims so that they can live independently from their husbands and families if needed and to build social protection for vulnerable *nofotane*[83] women, helping women to set up businesses, strengthen their small and micro-business business skills. This includes focusing on product quality, marketing and financial literacy for managing their finances and sustaining their businesses, aiming to transition the program into a social enterprise structure to ensure ongoing sustainability.

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[79] UNDP, 'Charting the Advancement of Women's Leadership in the Public Sector in Asia Pacific', 15 May 2024, available at: https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/blog/charting-advancement-womens-leadership-public-sector-asia-pacific.

[80] See for example Shagazatova, M., FitzGerald, I., Moriarty, A., 'Six Ways to Count Her In: Economically Empowering Women in the Pacific', Asia Development Bank, available at: https://blogs.adb.org/blog/six-ways-count-her-economically-empowering-women-pacific.

[81] Pacific Women Lead, 'Thematic Brief: Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific' 20 February 2023, p 3. available at: https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pwl-thematic-brief-women-s-economic-empowerment-in-the-pacific.

[82] Pacific Women Lead, 'Thematic Brief: Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific' 20 February 2023, available at: https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pwl-thematic-brief-women-s-economic-empowerment-in-the-pacific.

[83] Meaning 'she who lives in her husband's home', 'in the village of her husband'. See Del Valle, T. (1993). *Gendered anthropology*. London: Routledge.

In Vanuatu, similar programs include Woman Toktok Tugeta women-led Initiatives supported by ActionAid established in some areas on Efate, Erromango, Malekula, Malo and Tanna.

From these initiatives, typically delivered at the local village level, women leaders are emerging and developing a whole range of skills and knowledge of how economic empowerment is linked to being safe from violence and creating space for exercising choice and autonomy in women's lives. The skills these women are developing are also highly relevant to them playing larger roles in local justice systems, whether as decision makers, or in supporting and empowering other women.

5.5 Understanding different pathways and kinds of women's leadership

The *Pacific Women's Leadership Scoping Study*[84] from 2013 focused on women's leadership in Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Samoa. It examined spaces other than national political representation, both formal and informal, where women exercise power and perform leadership roles, such as in local government, as civil servants, in civil society organisations, in the private sector and in the church. An important finding from the study was that:

> Leadership in Pacific women's lives does not fit nicely into one category. Few women in the study were only leaders in local government or in business. For most of the women in the study, leadership began at an early age and continues to be expressed across many areas of their lives, for example within their extended family or in their church. These spaces and women's roles within them need to be considered when planning initiatives to support Pacific women leaders.[85]

A later study in 2021 reached similar conclusions emphasising the importance of building broad bases of women's leadership and their participation in decision-making across all spheres of life.

> Support for women's leadership should target multiple spheres, including government, civil society, private sector, communities, faith-based organisations and traditional hierarchies. Having more women as decision makers at all levels increases civic awareness of women's skills, knowledge and abilities to address issues in multiple sectors.
>
> Supporting women's wider participation in decision making – in families, communities, employment and traditional or faith-based governing bodies – can help to generate demand for change. Seeing women in these roles can simultaneously demonstrate the positive benefits of gender equality in multiple decision-making forums.[86]

The personal histories of women leaders from across the four countries participating in the earlier mentioned 2013 scoping study, highlight a wide range of structural and personal factors that influence the diverse pathways Pacific women take as they forge their own journeys to assume leadership roles that commonly crisscross across different fields,

[84] I.L. Quay, Pacific Women's Leadership Scoping study, 2013, https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pwl-pacific-women-s-leadership-scopingstudy.
[85] Ibid, p 35.
[86] Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, 'Thematic Brief: Leadership and decision making for women and girls in the Pacific' p. 5, available at https://pacific-data.sprep.org/dataset/thematic-brief-leadership-and-decision-making-women-and-girls-pacific.

sectors and aspects of life in their families, churches, civil society organisations and shifting from the private to the public sector and back again:

> *'You have to move like a river,'* said Sister Lorraine when we visited her work with the safe houses in Chabaixvii. The pathways to positions of women's leadership are diverse and each woman's story is unique…All of the women we spoke to had leadership roles across different areas: the church was one common area of women's leadership. School and youth activities too played an important role in these women's lives. Yet others combined careers in the civil service with periods working in the private sector.[87]

Many Pacific women in the study:

> …have not waited for power to be given to them but rather that have taken and created opportunities for themselves often in difficult times. These women's leadership life stories echo the triple role theory of Caroline Moser (1993) that women's lives comprise different roles across productive, reproductive and community management roles. These roles are not seen as discrete silos but rather a way of separating out the complex strands of women's responsibilities.[88]

Women's power in Pacific communities is not only exercised through what might be recognised as 'leadership' roles. In fact, many Pacific women who exercise functions of leadership do not see themselves as 'leaders' at all:

> Amongst the women participating in the focus group and interviews there was a striking reluctance to apply the term women's leaders to themselves. Generally, leadership seemed to be reserved for those who had high status derived from their work especially in politics, or to those who had important traditional leadership roles, or finally was something that might come with age.[89]

As explained by Haley and Zubrinich in their 2016 study on Pacific women's political and administrative leadership:

> What continues to be needed is a multifaceted approach supporting women's leadership at the local, sub-national and national levels and across the public, private, and civil society sectors. This is especially significant because …women leaders often wear multiple hats and have leadership roles across a number of different areas "these roles are not seen as discrete silos but rather a way of separating out the complex strands of women's responsibilities." Furthermore, Quay also found, "leadership began at an early age and continues to be expressed across many areas of their lives, for example within their extended family or in their church."[90]

Similarly, in the words of Ella Kauhue, the Vice President of the Solomon Islands National Council of Women, "Being a leader is what you do," as opposed to what you are.[91]

Women's leadership in the Pacific takes many different courses and pathways including through roles in making and keeping community peace, roles in the family, church,

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[87] I L Quay, Pacific Women's Leadership Scoping study, 2013, p. 20 available at https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pwl-pacific-women-s-leadership-scopingstudy.
[88] Ibid, p 20.
[89] Ibid, p 13.
[90] Haley, N. and Zubrinich, K. (2016). Women's political and administrative leadership in the Pacific. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia, p. 3, Australian National University. https://www.pacwip.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Womens-political-and-administrative-leadership-in-the-Pacific.pdf.
[91] Ibid.

business and civil service, as well as importantly, in local women's groups that focus on building economic empowerment through micro credit or small business cooperatives or which focus on skills development and providing support to vulnerable community members.

Based on this conclusion, this research looks beyond labels of who is considered a 'leader' and takes a functional approach to exploring the widest possible spectrum of ways that Pacific women exercise power and provide leadership in their communities. This approach helps to identify a broad base of local women who demonstrate qualities of leadership across various community roles, such as through the voluminous help they provide to communities and vulnerable people via their church work and the many other social contributions women make by organising together, including to strengthen the economic status of their families and their communities. There is also the crucial sphere of women's roles in family life, their ability to influence community affairs and outcomes, both directly and indirectly through being at the centre of family life in their roles as wives, mothers, grandmothers, aunties, sisters.

By making visible the varied ways that women lead, participate in decision making and exercise influence across all their different roles, it then becomes possible to identify opportunities to involve more women in very male dominated field of the provision of local justice, whether as decision maker, advisors and supporters of other women needing protection or justice at the local level when they have needs relating to family and sexual violence, child and family maintenance, being the core areas of legal need for Pacific women.

6. Question 3: What are the key opportunities, pathways, and approaches for increasing the presence and roles for women as providers or supporters (for women) in local-level justice processes?

Question 3 is answered through a description and analysis of the responses of community leader participants in workshops in Kiribati and Vanuatu, while also drawing on some of the key research findings on women's leadership pathways from question 2.

6.1 Results of workshops conducted with community leaders in Vanuatu and in Kiribati

Many of the points discussed above were confirmed and validated in two workshops conducted with community leaders in Vanuatu (12 women and 7 men) and Kiribati (13 women and 17 men) involving a mix of community-based customary, faith-based and civil servant leaders, and court actors. The purpose of these workshops was to conduct mappings and elicit the views of participants regarding different types of women's community-based leadership, and whether more women exercising local leadership functions could be further involved with local justice processes.

The activities undertaken included examination of how women are involved in providing leadership and exercising authority or influence in local justice processes including via their wider family and community roles and identifying approaches and strategic entry-points for enhancing their participation in delivering state, customary and church-based local justice services.

6.2 'Where do we find women participating in community activities?'

Participants in both workshops were both asked, 'Where do we find women participating in community activities?'

6.2.1 Vanuatu participant responses:

Vanuatu participants agreed on the following key areas of life and organisations where women work in their communities:

- Church committees, some play leadership roles, supporting vulnerable community members, supporting Church events etc.
- Local savings groups and loan schemes (local microcredit, started World Vision, some now initiated by women themselves, involving all categories of women)
- Craft and traditional handicraft and weaving groups
- Markets stall and small street stalls, selling any excess produce from own home: mainly fruit and vegetables
- CAVAW (Committees Against Violence Against Women (Vanuatu Women's Centre)
- Mothers Unions
- Civil servants: some school principals, more commonly teachers, nurses, administration
- There is also a women's representative at the Area Council level and at the Provincial Government level
- Other women led movements. For example, there is the Woman I Toktok Tugeta Initiatives supported by ActionAid. These women led initiatives are found in some areas on Efate, Erromango, Malekula, Malo and Tanna.

6.2.2 Kiribati participant responses:

Kiribati workshop participants identified the following settings where Kiribati women organise and work together in communities:

- Predominantly in Church committees and activities organised through each denomination including campaigns for house and village cleanliness, festivals, handicrafts, and cooking classes for women and undertake church fund raising activities, services for vulnerable groups such as widows and people with disabilities, contributing to pre-marriage classes for couples and counselling for couples having marital problems.
- Women's small scale agricultural cooperative projects and individual sellers at markets or from own houses
- Women's centres: such as the one in Kiritimati that was being renovated, for conducting craft and cooking classes and providing a meeting place for women.
- Civil servants: significant numbers of teachers, nurses and school principals are

women and women are often involved in MWYSSA services for social protection.
- Bingo: key social event in Kiribati where many women come together. Some have created 'syndicates' to share their winnings to invest in micro agriculture projects together.

6.3 Where do we find local women exercising 'authority'?

6.3.1 Vanuatu participant responses:

Vanuatu participants concluded that overall, there are very few women 'authorities' at the village or area level in Vanuatu, with the notable exception of Island Court Justices and Clerks. In addition, they reported a small number of women:

- Village/council of chiefs (Maewo, and Pentecost both in Penama Province identified in particular), however noting that the *malvatumaori* representative identified women chiefs in Efi and Pele (both in Shefa Province).
- One in four Island Court Justices, a total of 53 and four out of ten Island Court Clerks. Women Justices present in all 11 Island Courts except in the Tongoa and Sherperds Island Court
- Small number women municipal councils due to introduction of a special quota for women (30-34%) in 2014 enabling more women to contest local government elections, but no reserved seats for women in the Decentralization Act [CAP 230] for provincial government regions.
- Small number of women police in rural areas, noting that the overall number of women police in Vanuatu is 26%, one of the highest in the Pacific. Noting also efforts undertaken by Commissioner Iavro to appoint more women to senior roles, with 6 listed, increase the overall number of women police and to increase the number of police stationed in remote locations.[92]
- Small number of women Church ministers and pastors. No data could be found.
- Noting that sometimes women's pathway into these authority leadership roles is via taking over from a male relative who passes away, often the husband of the woman.

6.3.2 Kiribati participant responses:

The Kiribati workshop group reached a similar conclusion with small numbers of women exercising authority in the following areas:

- No women chiefs or members of *Te unimane* were identified by workshop participants across the country.
- However, during a separate visit to Tarawa in January 2026, women members of *Te Unaine*, (elder women), were identified in South Tarawa and North Tarawa and several interviewed. They explained women had been included in an 'outer circle' *Te Uniname* council since around 2014 when the male leaders recognised they needed to hear from women on some decisions. They explained they are mainly consulted on issues concerning women and children in the community and that they can also raise issues on behalf of other women brought to them from the community. While they are not part of the inner *Te Unimane,* which makes decisions about specific cases and remains all men, they can provide input informally beforehand. They shared their backgrounds as members of women's Church Committees selected by the community to be *Te Unaine* within the *Te Unimane*. There are around a total of 40 *Te Unaine* in South Tarawa and more in North Tarawa,

[92] Vanuatu Daily Post, 'Police Commissioner Recognised for Advancing Gender Equality', 9 October 2023, Available at: https://www.sista.com.vu/police-commissioner-recognised-for-advancing-gender-equality/.

although the interviewees were not aware of the number.

- 39% of Outer Island Magistrates are women (71/183) as are 92% (22/24) Outer Island Court Clerks.
- Small numbers of women police: 5.6%, according to latest available data.
- Small number of women ministers and pastors: Uniting Church Minister in Poland. No data available.
- Small number of local council representatives: 2.3% according to 'Women's Representation in Local Government in Asia Pacific Status – Report 2010.

6.3.3 Key finding common to both countries:

Local court justices and court clerks emerge overwhelming as the most populous category of woman actor who exercises a form of 'authority' in the local/village-level community environment.

This is a significant finding and underlines the importance of building support for this category of women actors at the local level, as they are the only kind of role where women exercise formal forms of authority as decision makers.

6.4 Where do we find local women able to influence male decision makers?

Even where women are not represented or do not directly hold a position of leadership or authority, both workshop groups agreed that women can exercise influence over decisions taken by male decision makers through their central family roles or when they are required to fulfil the role of an absent male family member. As participant responses to this question were so similar for both countries, they have been addressed together:

6.4.1 Participant responses from both countries:

- **Widows:** may be appointed into the shoes of their deceased husbands and exercise direct authority in the role, not only influence.
- **Wives/daughters:** sometimes women are appointed to positions when their husbands/father are removed or otherwise incapacitated to continue in the position. More generally, wives and daughters may be able to influence their male relatives as leaders and authorities, depending on the attitudes and personalities of both the women and men involved and variations in local culture. Women's influence may evolve into a more public aspect, for example, through wives of chiefs receiving, listening to and assisting, women victims of violence and conveying 'the woman's side of the story' to the chief prior to considering the case in the Nakamal.
- **Mothers:** Women are the primary educators of girls and boys, sit at the centre of family life and are the primary organisers of the family economy. These roles offer ongoing influence, to varying degrees, over the behaviour of husband, children, including adult children, in the family.
- **Aunties**: Aunties (and uncles) have cultural responsibilities in both Vanuatu and Kiribati through which they can exercise influence over things happening in families and can be called upon to play more active roles in supporting vulnerable women and girl family members.

- **Grandmothers**: Vanuatu and Kiribati cultures (as with many other Pacific cultures) hold elderly people in very high respect. Due to their seniority, older women can sometimes 'step out' of traditional roles and exercise wider influence in community life with reduced risk of backlash. In family life, older women can exercise influence as grandmothers, great grandmothers regarding things occurring within families and between families and can wield significant influence in seeking to protect or advocate for vulnerable female relatives. Some older women are also customary authorities in their own right and can exercise power and influence through these roles also.

In conclusion, women are often able to exert significant influence over the approaches taken by male decision makers to their roles, through their roles as wives and mothers, but also in other kinship and extended family roles. However, the degree of influence will also typically still hinge on the attitude of the male decision maker, and whether he is willing to listen to and heed advice, or willing to create space for his wife to publicly play a role related to his exercise of power.

6.4.2 Influential roles of CAVAWS in Vanuatu:

In the case of Vanuatu, workshop members identified how women who participate in rural Committees Against Violence Against Women (CAVAWS) associated with the Vanuatu Women Centre, can and do exercise a mix of leadership and influence in the following ways:

- Through building relationships of trust with village chiefs and other male authorities at the village level to influence how they deal with cases involving women and children.
- In some instances, village chiefs now actively seek out CAVAW members to assist with them cases concerning violence against women and children or to provide them with legal or other information about options and processes. This is testament to how CAVAW members have become known and trusted actors and are able to exercise considerable influence over village chiefs and church leaders in their role advocating for individual women.
- Examples were provided of how village chiefs had even waived cultural or customary rules regarding women's ability to speak in Nakamal cases in cases where CAVAW members had become involved. CAVAW members speak to Nakamals about why the woman involved should be allowed to speak directly to her case. Alternatively, they informally advocate or represent the woman in the case so that her side of the story is also heard and understood.
- Ability to exercise these roles of leadership and influence depends on the strength of relationships and trust built over time between CAVAW members and chiefs and depends on the attitude of individual chiefs, their leadership approach, and the advocacy skills of CAVAW members.

6.5 How can women become more involved in decision making and other support roles in local justice systems?

6.5.1 Vanuatu participant responses:

- Women's opportunities to exercise power in local communities through their roles in being represented, in leading or in exercising authority are fluid and highly localised.
- Therefore, whenever working with a local community it is essential to first look for and identify women from all backgrounds (customary, church, court, public service,

business, women's groups, police, local government etc.) who are playing roles in that local area in representing, leading, or exercising authority. Some areas of leadership will be much more difficult for women to make progress in than others, so it important to put effort in the places likely to 'bear fruit.'

- For conservative customary leaders, the most influential actors will be other male customary leaders, and so there need to be strategies to work with more progressive customary leaders in local areas, so they can engage with the more conservative ones, to create gradual change seen as legitimate that will reduce the risk of backlash.
- A broad understanding of 'leadership' should be used in identifying women leaders so as not to overlook women who do not identify themselves as 'leaders' or who may be performing less obvious, quieter leadership roles.
- Participants thought it was always important to include the wives and close female relatives of male decision makers in the community.
- Once women 'leaders,' actual or potential, have been identified in a particular location, it is crucial to make sure they are always invited and included in all activities and discussions, so they are able to participate from the beginning and in an ongoing way. They may need extra support to participate, like help with transport or looking after children or parents. These needs should be considered.
- If organisations are working in local communities, then conducting a mapping of women authorities, leaders, and other significant community roles they play (using a consistent mapping tool), should be a standardised part of planning and commencing activities in each local area. That way the necessary information is available to inform planning for how to involve and empower women from that location in all activities and to work out the kinds of support they might need and the way to deliver this.
- Encourage women to speak out and build their confidence to put their views forward and to work with other women to feel they are supported.
- Always notice and question if women are absent when there is an important decision-making process going on in the local community. It may be necessary to insist that a 'place at the table' be created for these women, as men may be dominant across all fields of local authorities and may be accustomed to proceeding without any women participating. This practice needs to be changed over time by asking that women be included each time and explaining why it is needed as the outcome will be better for everyone.
- In locations where there is strong resistance to the participation and inclusion of women, develop specific strategies to address this within the specific location being careful not to create a risk of backlash against the women in the local area.
- Each area where women are growing their leadership and authority may need different kinds of support, including from supportive men who can tell others about the benefits to everyone having women actively participating and exercising power in the community.
- Think about how women from different backgrounds can come together and work together so that women working in CAVAWS are also working with older women, customarily powerful women, Church women etc. Bring together women from different generations also to talk about how women can support each other and respond to issues impacting across different age groups, especially young women.

6.5.2 Kiribati participant responses:

Kiribati workshop participants emphasised the importance of:

- Understanding which parts of the community will welcome more participation from women in what kinds of roles, and to anticipate those pockets where there would likely be resistance.
- Identify areas where there were few opportunities for change in the short term, such as women becoming members of the *Te Uniname* as that is a very old and traditional system of governance, however women's roles in the maneaba are significant and can be influential. They are determined by which family they are from, according to custom.
- However, there might be scope to identify the women who may have some influence over those elders, mainly their wives and daughters, and to engage with them via women in that way, rather than seeking direct representation of women on the councils.
- On the other hand, one participant suggested a more radical formal equality approach where every political, customary, church and state role is performed by two people: one man and one woman, who work together to fulfil the role. This would ensure that women are routinely and equally represented across all leadership types and roles.
- Participants felt that one of the major constraints on women's ability to participate in more aspects of community decision making and life is lack of time. Women are doing more all the time, especially with so many men no longer productive as they are using alcohol and kava so much.
- Organisations could encourage women to get involved in community decision making activities by offering support (financial or in kind) to cover the domestic work that women would otherwise be doing.
- A system of subsidies would be meaningful and make it easier for women to participate, whether it is through organising childcare or providing help to cook or clean so women have more time to contribute to other parts of community leadership and life.
- The biggest help to women would be to provide education to men on being good fathers and husbands and regulating more strictly their access to kava and alcohol. Participants felt that no one was supporting women in taking up this challenge.
- There are major differences in issues facing women in different religious communities with the evangelical communities generally perceived as more peaceful for women as alcohol and kava are not permitted. The Catholic and Protestant Church leaderships face a larger challenge, including the need to model positive behaviours themselves rather than further entrenching substance abuse by offering kava or alcohol as incentives for men to participate in the Church. Men involved in the council and other powerful roles including church leaders are often heavy users themselves of these substances and are not motivated to use their power to curb excessive substance use by men in their community. Women say that this is the single biggest issue that has made their lives more difficult in the past ten years, as kava use has become endemic, transferring further work burdens to women, draining family budgets and adversely impacting on marriage and family dynamics.

6.6 Key observations and recommendations arising out of Kiribati and Vanuatu workshops:

Each of the two workshops included a good mix of men and women participants, broad representation from various kinds of community leadership backgrounds and were staged in similar ways. It is therefore interesting to see how the directions of the two conversations elicited similar observations in some respects and quite different emphasis and ideas, in others.

6.6.1 Identifying women leaders across all local fields and creating spaces for them to be included

The participants in the Vanuatu workshop offered a clear vision for how anyone involved in efforts to empower women in local communities should first undertake localised mapping and analysis of how women organise and perform leadership roles in the particular place across all the spheres of life discussed throughout this paper: in custom, church, family roles, local courts, local police, local government, civil servants, women's savings and cooperative groups, small business and others. That way women identified can be proactively included in all discussions and activities from the outset, gradually increasing the space for women to build and normalise their authority and roles as leaders and decision maker at community levels. This accords well with the analysis of relevant literature on building Pacific women's leadership, which emphasises the need to build leadership from the grassroots and across all sectors and fields, as women fluidly move between levels, sectors and roles as they lead.

6.6.2 Identifying male allies across all local fields and encouraging them to provide support

Both groups highlighted the need to identify male allies across as many different categories of men as possible, to strengthen the position of women leaders in local communities, including in local justice systems. Both discussions spent significant time exploring potential male allies, as a key strategy for moving forward. In both discussions, participants immediately started identifying individual men they thought could help. These included men who did not use alcohol or kava who had leadership positions in churches; 'reformed' men, such as those who had used kava, alcohol or used to beat their wives, to share their journeys; progressive customary authorities who had reached out to CAVAWS for advice or accompanied women to police stations or who found creative child support solutions to improve local justice outcomes for women; the difference made when supportive uncles and brothers backstopped women relatives involved in local justice processes; the male local court justices who provided an enabling environment for women justices to perform their roles – all these individual men should also be identified in any local community environment to activate and encourage their roles in supporting increased roles for women in community leadership including in local justice processes and helping vulnerable women get access to the protection and justice they seek.

6.6.3 Addressing women's domestic workloads as a barrier to their participation in community leadership roles:

In both countries, participants identified women's lack of discretionary time to participate

in community affairs and the need to find ways for women leaders to be freed from some domestic work to create openings, so they had time to participate. The gendered division of labour was identified by both groups as being at the heart of women's ability or not, to participate, highlighting gender labour division, as well as cultural issues, being relevant to women occupying decision making roles.

Given this conclusion, innovative options for addressing this issue should be identified, focusing on dual strategies of achieving a more equitable division of domestic work between men and women, known to be a long and difficult road, but also considering other innovative, lost cost mechanisms to relieve women of some of their domestic workload so they can participate in community affairs and decision making. This could be done through collectives between women for supporting each other with childcare, babysitting, or rostering meal preparation. Both groups identified women's workloads and lack of time as being key barriers to their greater participation in community decision making roles, and therefore this issue requires care consideration by women themselves, backed by active support from development partners.

6.6.4 Focusing on role types where women already have traction and consolidating women's performance of these roles.

Both groups also emphasised the importance of taking a strategic approach and recognising that there are some areas where it will be much more difficult and possibly not even desirable, to try to build women's leadership and authority, such as in some conservative customary roles. Whereas focus is needed on more fluid types of power, where women could more readily consolidate their experience and traction in areas they have already gained access to or exercised power. This study has highlighted the opportunities that exist for women to perform leadership roles as local court justices and court clerks, being the stand-out areas where women have already achieved significant traction and levels of representation.

Yet the interviews conducted with women justices, especially in Vanuatu, highlighted the gendered challenges that many of them face, including discrimination from some male peers on their courts or lamented the lack of support from the judiciary to provide opportunities for them to learn and practice, to build their competence and confidence in their roles. Notably, in some local courts, male peers were supportive, helpful, and offered opportunities, encouragement and backstopping for women to establish their experience and authority, providing an enabling environment for women's judicial authority to grow. Providing a targeted program of support to women justice and local clerks, need not be expensive but could provide major progressive in women achieving strong footholds in roles as local court decision makers. Supporting women in local justice roles will increase the accessibility and relevance of justice to other women and increasing the legitimacy and relevance of local courts to the communities they serve.

6.6.5 Provide targeted practical support to women justices and clerks working in local courts

Most community research participants had limited knowledge of the existence or roles of local court justices and were not aware there were significant numbers of women appointed to these roles. They felt these roles and opportunities are not currently optimised and that it was crucial to 'build these women up' and support them in their roles. Participants recognised the strategic importance of women justices developing their

community profile as authorities and leaders to enable more women to feel confident to use local courts and to build women's community leadership more generally.

Women justices shared their practical suggestions regarding how women justices could be better supported by courts but also through wider community support approaches, including through recruitment practices and the support needed for women to establish themselves in their roles, while addressing any pushback they may experience from male peers, their own families or community members. These suggestions for building these capacities were identified through interviews conducted with research participants:

- Ensuring that advertised vacancies reach women with a wide range of backgrounds, including those working in churches, schools, health care, women with customary roles, participating in savings and micro economic schemes, ensuring that advertisements state that women are encouraged to apply.
- Better community education of the role of local court Justices including the protected status of justices and the equal participation of women as decision makers on panels.
- Court support for briefing husbands and other family members on the role to help women secure the support from their families to perform the role.
- Access to safe transport provided by the judiciary to and from court and while on mobile court circuits.
- Better coordinated security support from police and village chiefs for women justices as needed.
- Additional training for women justices to increase their confidence and experience in the skills for their role.
- Buddy system and network for women local court justices, so they can connect and have the support of other similarly placed women, and a system for escalating complaints or concerns from women justices regarding their equal treatment or security in performing their role.
- Standardised processes to empower women in their roles including ensuring at least one woman sits on each panel sitting and rotating panel chairs.

6.6.6 'Unearthing' and revitalising women's customary roles

There was strong consensus amongst Vanuatu participants that tapping into customary power is an important field to 'unearth' women's roles and power within. Revitalising the historical and contemporary customary roles performed by women would help to restore women's eroded roles in custom, which had impacted their identity and community status at the local level. Efforts should be made to reverse these impacts so that women could build upon their customary identities, as men do. Participants felt this would help to restore balance between women and men's roles and generate a cadre of more senior, high status women in local communities who could participate or influence to a greater extend local justice processes as decision makers.

6.6.7 Links drawn by participants between family violence, family neglect and increased use of alcohol, kava and (in Vanuatu) marijuana

Participants in the consultation meetings in both Vanuatu and Kiribati, were very concerned about the increased use of kava, alcohol and marijuana by men and its negative impacts on women and families. Women felt that male leaders they would ordinarily turn to for leadership on social issues were compromised, as most were also heavy users of these substances and using them to engage other men in their churches or organisations.

Participants raised important questions regarding how women can work with men to address these issues in a productive way, avoiding a 'gender war' dynamic. Their suggested starting point was to identify men able and willing to provide leadership on these harm issues, including by focusing on the damage inaction is doing to women, children, families and communities. In the Kiribati workshop, men raised bingo as being the 'female equivalent' of kava, as it also consumed family budget and resulted in women neglecting their children while playing. Some Kiribati women highlighted that women feel such resentment now they must work extra hard to compensate for men's lack of productivity and that the loss of family income caused by excessive substance use, pressured them to fill this gap by winning back lost earnings at bingo. Others felt they were simply taking back some discretionary time to enjoy themselves, as men felt entitled to do.

7. Conclusion

This research component has established several key points. The first is that the village or local community level is the most relevant level for determining whether Pacific women will be able to have access to justice or not. What happens at the local level is determinative for most women. Those with control over resources in national institutions should take heed of this observation in allocating resources.

The research has also documented how women are direly under-represented as leaders, authorities and decision makers across all systems of Pacific village or local community governance, whether based in custom, church or state power.

There are small numbers of women occupying customary positions of power as 'chiefs' or otherwise, who have the cultural authority and seniority to potentially play larger roles in local justice processes. A process to 'unearth' historical and contemporary customary roles of women, eroded over time, is now needed across Pacific communities. This could restore and strengthen the customary base of women's power at the local level and contribute to re-balance to some degree the uneven power relations between men and women in Pacific communities, which acts as a root cause of gender-based violence and economic marginalisation of women.

A small but growing cohort of ordained women in the protestant and evangelical churches are introducing female leadership to what has traditionally been an exclusively male domain. They offer new opportunities for women church leaders and greater access to women seeking church protection and support when they experience family violence. By reinterpreting scripture, new religious norms based on respect, non-violence and spiritual commitment, can be established and reinforced at the pulpit by male and female ordained clergy alike. There are also small but growing numbers of women local police and senior police who understand their leadership responsibility to ensure police do better by women, who are bringing about change. Women local political representatives, especially in Vanuatu, are normalising women in politics at the municipal level, which could filter through to national levels, and meanwhile, offers opportunities for greater women's involvement in local justice systems.

The stand-out area for opportunities where women are already present and have traction as local decision makers and authorities, is in local state courts. There has been no attention paid to this category of women authorities in the literature or by development organisations. Their strategic importance and roles have been buried in the 'bottom' tier of under resourced and neglected state courts. Women justices and women local court clerks are uniquely placed to provide community access to information and courts, especially to women and to help close the gendered legal literacy gap.

It is time to bring renewed focus to creating an environment where women are supported to grow their authority and leadership in these roles, including by addressing discriminatory conduct by male peers when it arises. Women justices have identified the practical needs they have to help address the discrimination and barriers they face. Targeted programs of support should be provided and adequately resourced to enable them to bring new vigor to their important roles in community life and as women leaders. This in turn requires better overall resourcing and support for local courts so local courts can be relevant in communities and provide effective and efficient justice services as envisaged, including robust community outreach and information.

More empowered women in local courts will contribute to the pool of women leaders more generally at the community level. This potential is real and immediately available because entry to the local court system is open and fluid. Justices in local courts do not need to be law qualified but rather are selected based on community trust, providing a real opportunity for women leaders from a wide range of backgrounds to propel themselves into positions of leadership as local court authorities.

Just as male authorities common wear several 'hats' as customary leaders, church leaders, and court justices, women leaders are also developing multi-layered leadership 'hats', including potentially through their appointment to local courts. This research has documented how women leaders fluidly move between sectors and levels, taking a functional approach to building leadership and social power. Importantly, more women from diverse leadership backgrounds appointed to local courts would also increase access to justice for women in those communities, add to the legitimacy and relevance of local courts to meeting community needs and providing an anchor for building women's authority and roles as decision makers at the local community level, with potential for 'cross-over' to other areas.

Outside the roles of women as authorities, this research has also documented the important other roles women play in supporting other women navigating local justice processes to help them achieve their protection and justice goals. More women from different backgrounds could be encouraged to step into these spaces where they help women needing assistance with family violence or other justice needs, by providing information, advice, accompaniment, advocacy, and moral support. The presence of rural branches of national women's organisations have proven to be especially effective and important in this regard and will continue over time, to build trust and influence with local justice customary, religious and state decision makers, to achieve better outcomes for women. It is impossible to overstate the value and importance of the presence of local women helping other women navigate whichever kind of local justice system they use, creating pressure for greater coherence in how justice systems need to work together to improve women's experiences and outcomes.

Building women's roles as decision makers and influencers in male dominated local justice processes, is not a given but requires strategy and struggle. Understanding how women become local leaders and build their social power moving between different roles, enables identification of the broad base of women needed to contribute to these processes of change including in local justice systems. Identifying categories of male allies, especially those with the ability and will to create space for women's inclusion is another essential prong to the strategy. Women working together to encourage and prompt male allies to 'step up' and provide backing, helps bring 'everyone along on the journey' and reduce risks of backlash against women pushing boundaries in traditionally male dominated spaces. Addressing the practical need to relieve women leaders of some of their domestic workload to free them up, so they can more sustainably contribute to community leadership, is an irrefutable need to be addressed in any change strategy, including through demanding a more equal division of labour and through women themselves innovating solution, as they have always done, with backstopping from development partners.

While gender inequality is the root cause of gender-based violence and substance abuse more a trigger, the issue of substance abuse emerged as being front of mind for many Pacific women participating in this research, often sidelined in efforts to address and

prevent family violence. The lack of rehabilitation programs in the Pacific for both substance abuse and for addressing family violence, is deplorable. This is an issue around which women are demanding investment and change, yet there remains only embryonic or in small-scale pilots, if at all, in most Pacific countries, despite the scale and weight of demand for such services. Struggles to bring protection and justice to women in local communities need to be framed around the issues that women want to work on and see as being of central importance.

The approaches suggested by women participating in this research should be supported. These include identifying male champions who might help them gain a foothold in advocating for increased regulation of alcohol and kava, including around hours of availability, increased social and health awareness of substance abuse, and of the overlap between substance abuse and family violence and breakdown. Women would like to see churches 'stepping up' and leading by example and raising awareness of the multitude of harmful effects substance abuse has on women, who experience increased levels of domestic and sexual violence, increased economic workloads, reduced family incomes and discretionary time, causing deep unhappiness, frustration, exhaustion and greatly weakened families. Impacts on children, including intergenerational impacts, should also be at the forefront of public awareness efforts. Finding ways to involve more men in addressing accountability for family violence and the effects of substance abuse, is a high priority for Pacific women and deserves urgent attention and support.

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