Women's Access to Land and Surveying in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories

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SUMMARY

As surveyors, we understand that secure and equitable land rights are fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). How we manage access to land and make decisions about land use shapes nearly every dimension of national growth and resilience—from climate adaptation (who is affected, and to what extent) to infrastructure delivery (whose land is used, who is compensated, and on what terms). In measuring progress toward Agenda 2030, it is essential that we examine these dynamics closely. This paper contributes to the FIG Commission 7 Working Group on Women's Access to Land and Surveying by reviewing the context of women and land in the Pacific Islands.

This desktop review examines women's land tenure security and professional participation across the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs)—including the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Despite clear climate and infrastructure needs—recent, peer-reviewed literature on gender, land and surveying in the region remains limited. The seminal Making Land Work volumes (AusAID, 2008a and 2008b) provided early insights into gender and customary tenure, but no comprehensive update has followed, and the focus was largely technocratic. More recent analyses by development partners and multilaterals are available, but largely focus on broader gender equality issues, including land as a subset (e.g. UN-Women, 2021), but notably UN Women (2022), the Pacific Community (SPC 2023), and FAO's gender and land governance reviews (FAO 2021). Monson (2024) and others make the critical point that with few women decision-makers and professionals, we must ensure that women's voices and perspectives are heard and ultimately empowered.

Existing research is concentrated in a few countries—particularly Fiji (Sakai, 2024), Papua New Guinea (Kwapena, 2025), Solomon Islands (e.g. Monson, 2024), and Vanuatu (e.g. Alston, Fuller &

Kwarney, 2025, McDonnell, 2023)—where land reform, customary tenure, and gender equity are recurrent themes. Common challenges persist: patrilineal inheritance systems, chiefly authority, and evolving land markets constrain women's ownership and decision-making power. Formalisation processes can unintentionally reinforce male authority when gender perspectives are not integrated (Monson, 2024). Climate change and resource pressures – including global events like Covid-19 – compound and intensify these existing inequalities.

Yet there are also emerging opportunities. Community-driven initiatives in Fiji and Vanuatu illustrate how integrating gender perspectives into land-use planning and resource management strengthens adaptation and social outcomes (UN Women 2024). Women's leadership in customary land committees and resilience programs has shown measurable benefits for community decision-making, food security, and sustainable resource use. Documenting these examples for surveyors, and surveyors roles in supporting alternative, gender-inclusive processes, policies and tenure types, is important for further expansion of such activities.

This paper seeks to bridge persistent evidence gaps and build momentum for greater recognition of women's roles in land governance and surveying across the Pacific. Advancing women's land rights—through culturally grounded, participatory approaches that bridge customary and statutory systems—is not only a matter of justice but also essential to SDGs 1, 5, 10, 13 and 15.

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