

*A full list of contributing and supporting organisations are acknowledged on back cover.*

# PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN AS POLITICAL LEADERS:

## A MULTI-COUNTRY STUDY

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SYNTHESIS REPORT

DECEMBER 2019  
RESEARCH REPORT

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collaboration with IWDA Perceptions Management  
Group and WAVE partner research teams

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# REPORT SUMMARY

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**“Our patriarchal system doesn’t give places for women to lead. But women have great potential to become leaders. We see now, starting already, women becoming ministers, becoming secretaries of state. Their presence is important. Their participation, in all areas, is important. The role of Alola Foundation is to give support to the women who are strong so that their voice, their participation, can make a big difference in politics.” (Evelina Iman, Alola Foundation, Timor-Leste)**

Gender equality in political leadership is endorsed in multiple international conventions and global agreements. These include the *Convention on the Political Rights of Women* (1953), the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979). Women’s equal political participation was affirmed as a right and global priority almost 25 years ago in the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995). The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, calls for women’s “full and effective participation” in all arenas of public decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

These agreements all require nations to put in place measures to ensure equal participation by women and men in political leadership. In spite of these widely endorsed commitments, women’s participation is significantly lower than that of men at international, national and local levels. Women currently comprise 6% of all heads of government and 24% of all members of parliament.<sup>2</sup> Women’s representation at local levels of governance is extremely low around the world. This underrepresentation is an issue of both human rights and democracy.

Research in recent decades has revealed both formal and informal barriers to women’s participation in political leadership. Formal barriers include discriminatory electoral laws, political party practices that favour men and important differences between women and men in relation to access to resources. Informal barriers include social beliefs and attitudes – about leadership in general and about women as leaders - which

are less visible but extremely influential. There is a growing body of evidence that some of the deeper challenges to women’s equal participation in political leadership – enshrined in international agreements yet conspicuously absent – relate to this informal sphere.<sup>3</sup> The evidence suggests that public perceptions relating to political leadership, and to women as potential leaders, have a profound influence on women’s electoral success.

This report discusses research into public perceptions of women as leaders in Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands. The research was conducted by women’s rights organisations in these countries through the Women’s Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) program delivered by International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) in Asia and the Pacific and funded by the Government of the Netherlands. The research builds on a similar study conducted in Fiji in 2014.

Participation by women in political leadership in Asia and the Pacific is variable but includes some of the lowest figures globally. *The Perceptions* research in Fiji found that most people thought that women and men are equally qualified for leadership and that Fiji would benefit from the increased participation of women. The researchers noted a gender bias underlying the unequal representation of women and men in political leadership in Fiji and recommended ‘definitive action’ to promote women’s participation.<sup>4</sup> Informed by the Fiji research, the new *Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders* study was included in the WAVE program as an action research project designed to strengthen the evidence base for work towards increased representation by women.

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 5, Target 5.5 at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>.

<sup>2</sup> Figures as at March 2019. See IPU Joint Statement with UN, ‘Women’s political leadership: striving for a 50 % balance in 2030’ at <https://www.ipu.org/news/statements/2019-03/womens-political-leadership-striving-50-cent-balance-in-2030>.

<sup>3</sup> Pilar Domingo, *Women’s voice and leadership in decision making: assessing the evidence* (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Fiji Women’s Forum and IWDA, *Public Perceptions of Women in Leadership* (Melbourne, Fiji Women’s Forum and IWDA, 2014), p.1.

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## Research questions

The purpose of the research was to deepen understanding of (a) public perceptions of the qualities of and qualifications for political leadership and (b) gender norms associated with these perceptions. The research questions were:

1. **What public views on the capacity of women to be political leaders are held by people including women and men?**<sup>5</sup>
2. **How have public perceptions of women as leaders been influenced by gender norms?**
3. **How do public perceptions of leadership influence the opportunities and challenges for women who wish to become leaders?**
4. **What public views are there on how to create an enabling environment to support the meaningful participation of women as leaders?**

The intention of the research was to generate findings to assist women leaders and all those working to increase women's participation in political leadership in Asia, the Pacific and beyond.

## Research design

The research in Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands was designed to respond to the four research questions. Following initial consideration of replicating the same study in all three settings, individual projects were instead developed locally, resulting in three studies with a common theme but unique characteristics.

In Cambodia, the research was guided by a Project Working Group representing all IWDA partner organisations. The research focussed on perceptions of women as political leaders at sub-national or 'Commune Council' level. Four hundred and fifty-eight (458) people in three provinces took part in a survey, 59 people took part in six focus groups and 29 people with specific insights into women's political leadership were interviewed. The research team also conducted consultative meetings in each province, presenting quantitative data and requesting feedback from stakeholders of the research.

In Timor-Leste, the research was coordinated by an international team comprising two researchers from Australia and three researchers from Timor-Leste. This study also focussed on people's views of women as leaders at the local or *suku* level. Two hundred and forty (240) people participated in a survey, 18 focus groups were conducted and 12 key informants were interviewed. The research took place in three districts and the capital, Dili.

The research in Solomon Islands similarly explored public perceptions of leadership and views on women as political leaders. In addition, this study investigated public views on gender quotas to increase women's political representation. As elsewhere in the Pacific region, the use of temporary special measures (TSM) has been debated for several years in Solomon Islands. The *Public Perceptions* research considered awareness of and concerns about TSM held by community members in three provinces. Seven hundred and twenty-three (723) people participated in a survey, 18 focus groups took place and 99 people were interviewed as part of the research.

## Findings across the three studies

The findings and recommendations from each of the three projects reflect the unique contexts in which they took place. However, there are important shared themes. The following reflections are common to the three studies and may offer useful insights into women and political leadership beyond these specific contexts.

**There is widespread support for the idea that women and men have equal rights. There is also widespread in-principle support that there should be more women in political leadership. When explored further, however, there are contradictions between these views and other views held by people suggesting that men are better suited to political leadership than women.**

The overwhelming majority of participants in all three studies expressed support for the idea of gender equality and for increased political representation by women. However, this stated support is sometimes contradicted by other data relating to public perceptions of political leadership and perceptions of women as leaders. Across the studies, leadership qualities associated with men

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<sup>5</sup> IWDA refers to designations of women and men acknowledging that these categories are not fixed and recognising diversities in gender identity.

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(being hard-working, ambitious and self-confident) differed from those associated with women (being honest, positive and humble). The attributes and capacities considered necessary for public leadership roles are commonly associated with men. The 'belief in' gender equality is therefore not consistently supported by these more specific views.

**There are differences in expectations of women and men as political leaders. The expectations of women are much higher and harder to meet.**

Findings from the three studies suggest that there are important differences in expectations of elected public leaders based on gender. Women are expected to be more ethical, caring and suited to issues of social welfare than men. Women leaders are expected to be honest, well-behaved and humble, expectations not held of men in political leadership. Further, social norms emphasising women's domestic and caring roles and positioning these as a priority over public roles are evident in all three studies. As the researchers in Solomon Islands report, "there are many criteria for a 'good woman leader' and many women would struggle to meet all of them."

**There is some public recognition that women's political opportunities are impeded by structural barriers. However, informal barriers to women's opportunities may be less well understood.**

When asked about barriers to women's political participation, research participants across the three countries identified a number of structural issues as impediments to women's representation. These included access to resources, educational differences between women and men, the practices of political parties and the powerful influence of incumbent leaders.

However, the research suggests people may be less aware of the impact of gendered perceptions of women on women's leadership opportunities. This emerges in part from data across the studies suggesting that women themselves are often blamed for their lack of success as political leaders. Reasons given for why there are fewer women in political leadership included the suggestion that women "lack confidence", that women are "unwilling to put themselves forward" and that women are not sufficiently well prepared for the rigours of political leadership. When women are perceived to have shortcomings relative to men, underrepresentation

is attributed to women themselves rather than to the influence of these gendered perceptions.

Some participants did nominate informal obstacles to women's participation. Participants in Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste spoke of 'cultural obstacles' and suggested that certain gender norms reinforced by both state and church institutions did not assist women's political leadership.

**People may be both supportive of and concerned about interventions to increase women's participation in political leadership.**

The majority of research participants in all three countries were broadly supportive of increasing and normalising women's political leadership. The findings suggest that there is some public recognition that specific interventions may be required to achieve this. In Solomon Islands, research participants who were informed about TSM were generally supportive of special measures at both provincial and national levels.

However, participants also expressed apprehension about these interventions. Concerns included how affirmative action might compromise perceptions of 'merit', the possibility that women who gained leadership roles would not be respected by incumbent leaders and the fear that men as a group would experience a loss in power as a consequence of women gaining leadership roles. The research suggests that work towards the increased representation of women must engage with these fears and concerns.

**Considerations for future work**

There was a strong emphasis in the *Public Perceptions* research on generating findings to assist women's rights organisations and advocates for gender equality in political leadership. IWDA and partner organisations are actively drawing on the findings and recommendations from each country in relation to both immediate elections and long term planning.

This report sets out a number of possible directions for future work arising from the research. These have been organised into categories of programming, policy and advocacy, research and influencing. They are intended for consideration by individuals and organisations working for equal representation in political leadership.

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## Conducting research as a feminist endeavour

This research was informed by theoretical and applied understandings of feminist research and the IWDA *Feminist Research Framework*.<sup>6</sup> The final section of the report provides reflections on the research as a feminist endeavour by considering the four principles of this framework.

## Conclusion

The *Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders* research provides valuable insights into views on women and political leadership in three countries. Findings highlight the importance of considering the interdependence of individual and systemic, and formal and informal, factors in relation to women's political leadership.<sup>7</sup> Work towards greater gender equality in political leadership must address both the visible barriers and the deeper structures that contribute to the underrepresentation of women. This research provides an additional evidence base for women's rights organisations working in this complex landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> Available at <https://iwda.org.au/resource/feminist-research-framework/>.

<sup>7</sup> See the analytical framework used by research and consulting firm Gender at Work at <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>.



# INTRODUCTION

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Gender equality is a priority in multiple international conventions and global agreements, including the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.<sup>8</sup> These agreements require nations to put in place measures to ensure equal participation by women and men in leadership as a prerequisite for sustainable global development. In spite of these widely endorsed commitments, women's participation in political leadership and decision making is significantly lower than that of men at international, national and local levels. Research in recent decades has drawn attention to both the structural barriers to equal participation - access to resources, formal laws, policies - and the less tangible but highly influential informal barriers - social norms, beliefs and practices.

This report outlines the findings of research investigating public perceptions of women as political leaders in three countries: Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands. The purpose of the study was to deepen understanding of these perceptions and of the gender norms associated with public leadership. It is hoped that findings from this research will assist women leaders and all those working to increase the participation of women in political leadership in Asia, the Pacific and beyond.

## Women and political leadership - the global picture

Women comprise half the world's population, yet decision making institutions and leadership roles globally are overwhelmingly dominated by men. This inequality is evident in political, legal and financial spheres. It is visible in national parliaments, where men vastly outnumber women in most countries. In spite of multiple international instruments affirming equal participation by women and men, decisions with national and international ramifications are made on a daily basis throughout the world by groups consisting primarily of men.

Research on women's political participation commonly focuses on formal representation, particularly at the national level. Whilst this is not the only meaningful indicator of women's political activity and influence, it provides an important context for consideration of women's political participation more generally.

The proportion of women in parliament globally has been increasing steadily over the past 70 years. At the time of writing, 24% of parliamentary seats are held by women, compared to 2% in 1945.<sup>9</sup> This gradual increase is, without any doubt, a positive development. Dramatic increases have been made in the past decade in Sub-Saharan African states and the Arab States region in particular.<sup>10</sup> In 2018 alone, an unprecedented number of women registered as parliamentary candidates in Lebanon, Rwanda achieved the highest number of women in a lower house in history (64%) and a new record was set for young and diverse women entering US Congress.<sup>11</sup> These are significant and hard won gains.

Nevertheless, around the world, and in spite of the introduction of gender quotas in many states, participation in national leadership is still highly unequal. Of the 193 national parliaments in the world, just three have achieved 50% or more representation by women.<sup>12</sup>

Only a quarter of parliaments have the 'critical mass' of 30% often cited as a minimum for ensuring meaningful change in how parliaments operate.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, three parliaments in the Pacific region had no women members at all.<sup>14</sup> Representation by region is shown below. The proportion in the Pacific region showing as 19.5% drops to 6.5% when Australia and New Zealand are excluded.<sup>15</sup>

The National Democratic Institute estimates that, at the current rate of change in women's

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>, adopted by United Nations member states in 2015.

<sup>9</sup> As at October 2019. See <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://womendeliver.org/2018/why-women-in-politics/> for figures relating to these regions.

<sup>11</sup> Rachel George, Gender norms and women's political representation, ALIGN blog 7/2/19.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>. As at October 2019, national parliaments with 50%+ representation by women are Rwanda (61.3%), Cuba (53.2%) and Bolivia (53.1%). The Inter-Parliamentary Union publishes statistics on national, regional and global participation of women in parliament and publishes an analysis on International Women's Day every year.

<sup>13</sup> See Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliament in 2018: The year in review*, IPU, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> These are Federated States of Micronesia, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

<sup>15</sup> The figure of 6.5% is derived by averaging the percentage of all Pacific Island nations excluding Australia and New Zealand: <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

**Table 1:**  
**Regional averages of women in parliament** <sup>16</sup>

|   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| Americas                                | 30.8%                   |
| Europe (including Nordic countries)     | 29.3%                   |
| Europe (not including Nordic countries) | 28.1%                   |
| Sub-Saharan Africa                      | 24.1%                   |
| Asia                                    | 19.7%                   |
| Middle East and North Africa            | 16.8%                   |
| Pacific                                 | 19.5%                   |
| <b>Global average</b>                   | <b>24%<sup>17</sup></b> |

participation in legislative and executive branches of government, equal representation in national leadership globally will not be reached until 2080.<sup>18</sup>

Other indicators are striking. Women comprise only 7% of all heads of state, 5% of heads of government, 20% of parliamentary speakers and 21% of all national government ministers.<sup>19</sup>

Assessment of women's political leadership requires consideration of participation at sub-national as well as national levels. Globally consistent data on women's participation at sub-national levels is difficult to find, in part due to the challenges of defining local level governance around the world. However, based on a review of over 400 sources, the Overseas Development Institute concluded in 2015 that women throughout the world "have overwhelmingly limited access to positions of leadership" at all levels of governance.<sup>20</sup> The United Nations General Assembly has called for more consistent reporting on women's participation in lower levels of government as a high priority.<sup>21</sup>

Equal participation by women and men in national and sub-national leadership is therefore far from imminent. This is first and foremost a human rights issue. Multiple international instruments endorse the importance of gender equality in all domains, including public decision-making. These include the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *Convention on the Political Rights of Women* (1953), the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979). Women's equal political participation was affirmed as a right and global priority in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). The 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, calls for "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Source: <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>. Figures as at October 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Discrepancies in averages relate to combining figures of single/lower houses with upper house/senate figures.

<sup>18</sup> National Democratic Institute, *35th Anniversary Report*, NDI, 2019, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> Figures as at March 2019. See IPU Joint Statement with UN, 'Women's political leadership: striving for a 50 % balance in 2030.'

<sup>20</sup> Pilar Domingo, *Women's voice and leadership in decision making: assessing the evidence*, (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2015), p.2.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'Measures taken and progress achieved in the promotion of women and political participation: Report of the Secretary-General,' UNGA, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 5, Target 5.5 at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>.

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Women's equal participation in political leadership is also an issue of democracy. The shared premise of all these global agreements is that greater participation by women in public decision making is beneficial for countries. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which has been monitoring women's participation in public leadership since the 1970s, states:

We feel strongly about achieving gender equality, recognizing the link between democracy and the equal participation of men and women in parliaments. Changing parliaments is key to changing society. Women's increasing presence and influence result in changes in laws, practices, behaviour and cultures.<sup>23</sup>

Empirical research on the impact of increased parliamentary representation is limited. However, interest in the consequences of increased diversity of various kinds, including gender diversity, is growing. Drawing on studies from multiple regions, the European Institute for Gender Equality has developed indicators to measure the economic benefits of increased gender equality in political decision-making. Their findings suggest that greater participation by women in public decision-making has positive social and economic outcomes for societies, in part because increased diversity on decision making bodies is associated with increased likelihood of "new and creative solutions to problems".<sup>24</sup>

The Overseas Development Institute's review concludes that, whilst individual women leaders may not actively promote gender equality, women's increased presence in decision making in itself results in greater gender equality through legal, policy and political reform and through influencing

change in gender norms.<sup>25</sup> In recognition of the importance of evidence on the impact of parliamentary participation by women, the IPU commenced a study on this in 2019.<sup>26</sup>

Research in recent decades has shown that the barriers to women's equal participation in political leadership can be both formal and informal.<sup>27</sup> Formal barriers include discriminatory electoral laws, political party practices that favour men and important differences between women and men in relation to access to education and resources. Informal barriers, less visible yet extremely influential, include public perceptions of political leadership and of women's capacity for leadership.<sup>28</sup> Research on the influence of public perceptions on women's electoral success is recent and there is limited data on this topic in relation to Asia and the Pacific region.

An outline of women and political leadership would not be complete without reference to the high levels of intimidation, harassment and violence experienced by women in politics globally. Violence against women is prevalent across all levels of political leadership and in all regions of the world. Research conducted by IPU in 2016 found that the sexism, harassment and violence experienced by women parliamentarians is a significant barrier to women's full participation in public life.<sup>29</sup> The United Nations has characterised this violence as "widespread and systematic" and called for greater attention to this issue globally.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See an outline of IPU databases and other resources related to women in political leadership here <https://www.ipu.org/our-work/gender-equality/women-in-parliament/ipu-knowledge-hub-women-in-politics>. For information on how IPU is endeavouring to improve its own gender equal practices see <https://www.ipu.org/about-us/gender-equal-ipu>.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/economic-and-financial-affairs/economic-benefits-gender-equality>.

<sup>25</sup> Domingo et al, *Women's voice and leadership in decision-making*, pp. 86-88.

<sup>26</sup> For information on this new study see [https://www.ipu.org/sites/default/files/documents/ipu\\_wip\\_study\\_2018\\_tor\\_21sept18.pdf](https://www.ipu.org/sites/default/files/documents/ipu_wip_study_2018_tor_21sept18.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> See the body of work produced in the two-year 'Women's voice and leadership in decision-making' project led by Overseas Development Institute (2014-16) for a detailed list of literature on this topic.

<sup>28</sup> Pilar Domingo, *Women's voice and leadership in decision making: assessing the evidence* (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians in Europe*, IPU, 2018. See also National Democratic Institute, *Tweets that chill: analyzing online violence against women in politics*, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Report with IPU data on violence against women in politics presented at United Nations General Assembly 3/10/19, retrieved <https://www.ipu.org/news/news-in-brief/2018-10/report-with-ipu-data-violence-against-women-in-politics-presented-unga>. Data is being collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (Acled). See <https://www.acleddata.com/2019/05/28/press-release-new-data-confirm-political-violence-targeting-women-is-on-the-rise/>.

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The *Public Perceptions* research took place following the rise to prominence of #MeToo and related movements in many countries around the world. Whilst the harassment and abuse of women in politics and elsewhere are not new, recent years have seen greater public discussion of these issues as systemic in nature and endemic across institutions.<sup>31</sup> According to UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, these movements are “opening new conversations and (...) shedding new light on the pervasive nature of gender inequality.”<sup>32</sup>

The focus of the research discussed in this report is on public perceptions of women in political leadership and does not refer directly to these developments. However, the growing consciousness of systemic abuse and discrimination against women across many public arenas, including political leadership, is an important part of the environment in which the research took place.

## THE PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS RESEARCH TOOK PLACE FOLLOWING THE RISE TO PROMINENCE OF #METOO AND RELATED MOVEMENTS IN MANY COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD.

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<sup>31</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliament in 2017: The year in review*, p.8.

<sup>32</sup> Speaking at Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture 25 November 2017. See <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/annual-lecture-2017>.

# RESEARCH CONTEXT

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## International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)

International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) was founded in Melbourne, Australia in 1985.<sup>33</sup> IWDA's vision is *Gender equality for all*. The organisation's purpose is to *advance and protect the rights of diverse women and girls*.

The five goals articulated in IWDA's 2016-2021 strategy are:

1. Promote women's leadership and participation
2. Strengthen women's safety and security
3. Accelerate women's economic empowerment
4. Advance systemic change
5. Ensure organisational sustainability and accountability.<sup>34</sup>

IWDA currently works with civil society organisations in Cambodia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Fiji. Partners are emerging and established women's rights organisations whose goals and values are aligned with those of IWDA.

The four core values that guide IWDA in its work are:

**Feminist** - We respect women's diverse experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths and strive to empower women to realise their full and equal rights.

**Accountable** - We are honest and transparent and are committed to evaluating and communicating the outcomes of our work with integrity. We are accountable to our partners, our supporters and, most of all, the diverse women we work with.

**Collaborative** - We build trusting relationships and strong partnerships as we believe that advancing together with women's rights organisations and networks is crucial for achieving progressive change.

**Transformative** - We are determined to make real, lasting improvements in women's lives by working to transform the root causes of gender inequality and holding governments and decision makers accountable.

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<sup>33</sup> For more information please see <https://iwda.org.au/who-we-are/our-story/>.

<sup>34</sup> The *IWDA Strategic Plan 2016-2021* can be found at [https://www.iwda.org.au/assets/files/20160829-StratPlan\\_final\\_DIGITAL.pdf](https://www.iwda.org.au/assets/files/20160829-StratPlan_final_DIGITAL.pdf).

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## Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE)

IWDA has advocated for women's increased participation in formal leadership since its inception. In 2016, IWDA received support from the Government of the Netherlands for work in this area through the Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women (FLOW) program.<sup>35</sup> This funding has been used to establish a five year program (2016-2020) known as Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE).

WAVE is a civil and political participation program that seeks to support women to lead transformative, sustainable change towards gender equality, enabled by strategic feminist engagement. Through WAVE, IWDA partners with 17 women's rights organisations in Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville and Solomon Islands.

The program's Theory of Change sets out four pillars of change:

- **increase individual women and young women's political, economic and social leadership**
- **change inequitable legal, policy and economic frameworks**
- **strengthen women's movements in Asia and the Pacific**
- **provide evidence for how change towards gender equality happens to inform and influence individuals, institutions and movements.**

A key objective of the WAVE program is to work with partner organisations to increase the representation and participation of women in political and non-formal leadership positions in Asia and the Pacific. The WAVE research agenda and activities seek to generate a body of knowledge and evidence on topics related to women's leadership, participation, movements and organisational strengthening to inform work towards gender equality by IWDA, partners and the wider sector.

## Feminist Research Framework

In 2017 IWDA published a Feminist Research Framework to guide research undertaken by or on behalf of the organisation. Informed by research principles developed by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and the Research for Development Impact Network, the framework provides practical guidance for designing and implementing research using a feminist approach.

The principles of the framework are:

- **Our research builds feminist knowledge of women's lives**
- **We are accountable for how our research is conducted**
- **We are committed to ethical collaboration**
- **We conduct applied research that seeks a transformative impact on the causes of gender inequality.<sup>36</sup>**

The *Public Perceptions* research was guided by this framework. Due to limitations of time and resources, the study was not designed as feminist participatory action research.

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<sup>35</sup> For more information on this program and a list of organisations funded under FLOW please see <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/besluiten/2015/06/12/funding-leadership-and-opportunities-for-women-flow-2016-2020>.

<sup>36</sup> The IWDA *Feminist Research Framework* is available at <https://iwda.org.au/resource/feminist-research-framework/>.

# PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN AS LEADERS RESEARCH

## Rationale

The *Public Perceptions* research was included in the WAVE program to strengthen the evidence base for work towards increasing women's participation in public leadership. Participation by women in political leadership in Asia and the Pacific is variable,

but this region includes some of the lowest figures globally. The table below provides a snapshot of parliamentary representation in the countries and autonomous region where IWDA partner organisations participate in the WAVE program.

**Table 2:**

**Percentage of women in parliament in countries and autonomous region (Bougainville) participating in the WAVE program.<sup>37</sup>**

| COUNTRY          | LOWER OR SINGLE HOUSE | UPPER HOUSE OR SENATE |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Myanmar          | 11.3%                 | 12.1%                 |
| Cambodia         | 20%                   | 17.7%                 |
| Timor-Leste      | 38.5%                 | -                     |
| Papua New Guinea | 0%                    | -                     |
| Bougainville     | 9.7%                  | -                     |
| Solomon Islands  | 4%                    | -                     |

Existing research suggests that public views on the nature of leadership and the gender norms influencing these views are key to women's access to and influence in public leadership roles.<sup>38</sup> Reporting on women in parliament in Asia and the Pacific, IPU suggested in 2017:

In this region, gender norms continue to work against women's entry into politics, as societies lay stronger emphasis on women's role in the unpaid, domestic sphere.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Figures for countries other than Bougainville retrieved October 2019 at <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=7&year=2019>. Upper and lower houses of parliament for a given country may be differently constituted and the factors influencing election to each house may vary. For information on the Autonomous Bougainville Government see <http://www.abg.gov.pg/government/parliament>.

<sup>38</sup> Rachel Marcus et al, *How do gender norms change?*, (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2015), p.6 and Gender and Development Network, *Turning promises into progress* (London, GADN, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> IPU, *Women in Parliament 2017*, p.6.

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The Overseas Development Institute suggests that there is an important role for small-scale studies in providing insights into social norms relating to women and leadership.<sup>40</sup> These studies can contribute to understanding the informal, systemic factors influencing women's access to and participation in leadership.<sup>41</sup> However, there is limited research in Asia and the Pacific on these norms and on perceptions of women as political leaders.<sup>42</sup>

The *Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders* research was undertaken to better understand views and gender norms in Cambodia, Timor Leste and Solomon Islands. The purpose of the research in each country was to deepen understanding of (a) public perceptions of the qualities of and qualifications for political leadership and (b) gender norms associated with these perceptions. The further purpose in resourcing this research in three unique contexts was to generate findings that could be considered collectively in order to inform broader work towards gender equality.

**The research questions were:**

- 1. What public views on the capacity of women to be political leaders are held by people including women and men?**
- 2. How have public perceptions of women as leaders been influenced by gender norms?**
- 3. How do public perceptions of leadership influence the opportunities and challenges for women who wish to become leaders?**
- 4. What public views are there on how to create an enabling environment to support the meaningful participation of women as leaders?**

Unique research teams were formed in each country. The research was guided and managed by IWDA partner organisations in Cambodia and Solomon Islands through the appointment of project working groups and local research coordinators. The research in Timor-Leste was managed by an Australian/Timorese consultant team. Academic research advisors provided assistance in all three studies.

This report considers findings in relation to the research questions and proposes avenues for future strategic programming and advocacy.

## **Fiji 2014 research**

The research discussed in this report builds on similar work undertaken by the Fiji Women's Forum in 2014.<sup>44</sup> The *Public Perceptions of Women in Leadership* study, supported by IWDA under a previous iteration of the FLOW program, was the first to explore community views in Fiji about women and political leadership. The research took place immediately before the 2014 general election and following a politically turbulent time. The focus of the research was on understanding community views about women as political leaders and identifying strategies for increasing voter support for women candidates. Key findings from the research summarised below are drawn from the report produced in 2014.<sup>45</sup>

**The majority of people in Fiji feel that women are under-represented in government and that changing this would be beneficial to the nation as a whole.**

With the exception of a small minority, research participants in 2014 agreed that there were too few women in government in Fiji and that having more women in parliament was desirable. Most people thought that change in political representation was inevitable and that women would hold important leadership roles in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>40</sup> Paola Perezniето, *What can internationally comparable quantitative data tell us about how gender norms are changing?*, (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2015), p.6.

<sup>41</sup> IWDA and the WAVE program draw on analytical work by the Gender at Work Network to understand the relationship between gender equality and power, both institutionalised and informal. For more information see [genderatwork.org](http://genderatwork.org).

<sup>42</sup> A comparative study on women's pathways to political leadership in Asia by Nanyung Choi discusses barriers to participation and provides useful references to stereotypes of women politicians in several countries. Nanyung Choi, 'Women's Political Pathways in Southeast Asia', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21 (2). *Lebanese women in leadership positions: a survey on national perceptions*, (HIVOS & Beyond Reform and Development, 2018) provides relevant information from another region.

<sup>43</sup> IWDA refers to designations of women and men acknowledging that these categories are not fixed and recognising diversities in gender identity.

<sup>44</sup> Fiji Women's Forum is made up of four co-conveners: the National Council of Women Fiji, Soqosoqo Vakamarama I-Taukei, Fiji Women's Rights Movement and FemLINKPACIFIC.

<sup>45</sup> Fiji Women's Forum and IWDA, *Public Perceptions of Women in Leadership*, (Melbourne, Fiji Women's Forum and IWDA, 2014).



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Awareness of actual women political leaders, however, was very low in spite of significant gains made by women in the political sphere in Fiji following the previous (2006) election.

Participants were much more readily able to nominate men whose political style they admired than women and the researchers found that “the language of ‘leader’ continues to conjure images of men in the public imagination.”<sup>46</sup>

**People recognise that the qualifications and attributes of leadership are not unique to men but are common to both men and women.**

Although the political landscape in Fiji has been dominated by men, most participants in the research did not believe that men were inherently better suited to leadership than women. The traits most frequently nominated as important for leadership – being hardworking, honest and intelligent – were associated equally with women and men. Generally, women were seen as capable and well equipped to fulfil political leadership roles. Participants identified ‘cultural’ barriers, discrimination and lack of community support as the main reasons why fewer women than men participate in electoral politics in Fiji.

**Conservative viewpoints that favour leadership by men are a small but significant minority in certain demographics; the strongest support for leadership by women is to be found amongst women and young people.**

The research suggested that there is some correlation between differing views on women’s political leadership and groups within the community. Women and young people were more likely than other groups to have favourable views about women’s participation in political leadership. Young women in particular had a stronger preference for voting for a woman candidate rather than a man. Older men and men in rural areas were more likely than others to hold the view that men are intrinsically better suited to leadership than women.

#### **The Fiji researchers concluded:**

The study draws attention to the gender bias that lies at the heart of why women are under-represented in government and the necessity

for definitive action to support women’s political participation in order to better reflect the public’s desire for more gender balanced political representation.<sup>47</sup>

## **Public Perceptions research 2018-19**

IWDA consulted with partners in 2016 and committed funds to undertake research into public perceptions of women as leaders in Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands in 2017. Partner organisations in those countries indicated a strong interest in conducting research of this nature in their local contexts. An IWDA project management group guided the *Public Perceptions* research. The research was originally conceived as one project to take place in three countries. Teams in each country would collect a shared minimum data set based on the original research in Fiji, with additional data to be collected as desired by partners. The intention was to create a data set for comparative analysis. Several factors contributed to a change in approach.

In preparation for implementing the research, it became apparent that there were important differences in political context, partner priorities and research already conducted in each country.<sup>48</sup> In Cambodia and Timor-Leste, partners did not see great value in a study on national representation but had a strong interest in the participation of women at local government level. This is important to note, as research on women’s political leadership is commonly focused on parliamentary representation rather than participation at local and community levels. In Solomon Islands, where there has been considerable research into public views on women’s leadership, there was a strong imperative not to replicate previous surveys. The interest here was in extending existing knowledge with further inquiry into awareness of and views on temporary special measures.

Informed by these considerations and reflection on feminist research practice, IWDA agreed that the research design in each country should be informed by the priorities of local partner organisations. The project management group agreed that the research purpose and high level research questions would continue to serve as a conceptual frame of reference for the whole project. However, the focus and design of the research in each country would be adjusted to maximise relevance and value for partners.

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<sup>46</sup> Fiji Women’s Forum and IWDA, p.37.

<sup>47</sup> Fiji Women’s Forum and IWDA, p.1.

<sup>48</sup> Literature reviews on women and political leadership prepared for each country are available at [iwda.org.au](http://iwda.org.au).

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In all three cases, the *Public Perceptions* research was designed as a mixed methods study with question sets similar to those used in Fiji but including components unique to each setting. The specific socio-political context, design and human resourcing of the research in each country are outlined below, followed by a summary of findings and recommendations or points for further discussion. Recommendations for Solomon Islands and Cambodia were developed by partner organisations and local women's rights advocates. In Timor-Leste the research team has highlighted areas for further discussion, to be further considered by Alola Foundation and other local advocates for women's participation in Timor-Leste in early 2020.

## Risk mitigation

Risk assessment and mitigation undertaken in the ethics approval process for each project recognised that there are power differences between women and men and that women's participation in the research must not compromise their individual safety and security. The research teams were strongly committed to principles of do no harm and endeavoured to create a safe environment for all participants both during and following the research.

As noted, it is well established that women aspiring to or holding political leadership roles are at significant risk of experiencing violence. The *Public Perceptions* research did not specifically focus on this theme. The surveys and interviews therefore did not include questions about violence against women leaders. Nevertheless, some data collected does refer to concerns about women's vulnerability in public spaces and vulnerability to abuse. Based on anecdotal evidence from implementing partners working in these contexts and global research referred to earlier, violence towards women seeking to fulfil or currently fulfilling a leadership role may be a barrier to women's political leadership. Experiences and perceptions of violence and harassment of women leaders are currently being explored in IWDA's related research, *Women's Leadership Pathways*, which explores "Why, when

women are threatened with violence and social exclusion, do women still pursue political, social and economic leadership?"<sup>49</sup>

## Limitations

In presenting findings from the three studies, there are several limitations to note. Whilst this research inquired into people's perceptions of political leadership, the research teams in all three countries felt that it was not appropriate to ask participants directly about their voting choices. The researchers advised that this could potentially create discomfort and reluctance to participate. Therefore, there is no data on whether participants had ever voted for a woman candidate and, if so, what their considerations were.

Second, the possibility of social desirability bias must be considered in relation to a study of this nature, particularly given that the research was conducted in partnership with women's rights organisations.<sup>50</sup> The research teams were cognisant of this and strongly emphasised the importance of creating an environment conducive to open and forthright exchange with participants.

Third, the studies did not incorporate a strong intersectional lens.<sup>51</sup> Although the organisations involved in the research are all well versed in intersectionality, the scale and scope of the studies, and the timeframe within which they were to be completed, meant that this prism was not highly prominent.

Finally, conducting research in several languages inevitably introduces questions of accuracy in translation and broader interpretation of data. Although the research teams engaged with these issues with care, it is important to acknowledge that some concepts are difficult to translate and that this may influence analysis.

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<sup>49</sup> The *Women's Leadership Pathways* research (2017-2020) is documenting individual women's experiences of economic, social and political leadership with WAVE partners in five countries, including Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands. This research is overseen by consulting firm Le Groupe-conseil baastel Itée on behalf of IWDA and is due to be completed in 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Social desirability bias refers to the possibility that research participants might be influenced in their responses by what they believe is more likely to be socially acceptable or "desirable" rather than expressing their true feelings.

<sup>51</sup> Intersectionality is an analytical framework for identifying how different systems of power (including gender, race, class) interact and in doing so can affect people's lives in ways that cannot be understood by considering one system only. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color,' *Stanford Law Review* 43(6), 1991, pp.1241-1299.

# CAMBODIA

## Context

**Population:** 1.3 million

**Women:** 51.5%

**People under 15 years old:** 31%

**People living in rural areas:** 77%

**Major industries:** agriculture, garment production, construction, tourism

**Independence:** 1953

**First general election:** 1993

**System of parliament:** constitutional monarchy (King and Prime Minister)

**Women in Senate in 2019:** 11/62 seats (17.7%)

**Women in National Assembly in 2019:** 25/125 seats (20%)

**Women on Commune Councils in 2017:** 16.8%<sup>52</sup>

Originally a monarchy, Cambodia became part of the French imperial territories in the 1860s and remained under colonial rule until independence in 1953. A brief period of political stability was followed by almost four decades of extremely violent conflict including the period known as Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). Cambodia held its first free election in 1993.

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy operated as a parliamentary representative democracy. The Parliament has two chambers: the Senate or upper house (62 seats) and the National Assembly or lower house (125

seats). Members of the National Assembly are voted for by citizens through the political party system. There have been six national elections since, the most recent in July 2018. Over the past 20 years, Cambodia has had one of the fastest growing economies in Asia. Although agriculture remains the dominant sector, globalisation has had a significant impact through the development of new industries including garment production and construction. Poverty in Cambodia is estimated to have halved between 2000 and 2010.<sup>53</sup>

However, the picture is not straightforward, with high levels of poverty continuing, particularly in rural areas. The new industries have been accompanied by high levels of migration for work and the forced removal of land from families. There are significant challenges in relation to human development in terms of living conditions, regulation of employment and environmental degradation.<sup>54</sup>

Gender assessments conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) between 2012-2014 show that women's participation in the economic sphere in Cambodia has risen dramatically in the last 20 years. Young women in particular have joined the formal labour market in large numbers, often becoming the primary generators of family income.

In spite of these changes, the gender assessments describe significant disparities between women and men in present day Cambodia. Women are still much less likely than men to have access to safe and secure employment, are more likely to experience violence and have worse health outcomes than men. Women are underrepresented at all levels of political leadership and public decision making.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs suggests that, while the social change that has been taking place in Cambodia may have some benefits,

women are expected to follow social norms, and beliefs which allow men to enjoy their 'gender

<sup>52</sup> Statistics retrieved October 2019 as follows: provisional report on 2019 Census at nis.gov.kh (overall population, % women), data.worldbank.org (% people under 15, % rural population), data.ipu.org (% women in Senate/National Assembly), Cambodia 2018 CEDAW report (% women on Commune Councils). The *Phnom Penh Post* reported 20% women on Commune Councils in 2018 following dissolution of the main opposition party: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/women-still-underrepresented-politics>.

<sup>53</sup> The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Cambodia*, 2014, p.7.

<sup>54</sup> The Asia Foundation, pp. 8-9; Ministry of Women's Affairs, *Women's economic empowerment: Cambodia gender assessment*, 2014, p.9.

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privilege', while women under-value their own capacity and potential. Invisible social norms continue to confine women to household and childcare duties, while at the same time the family's economic status pressures women to engage in income-generating work.<sup>55</sup>

The ADB gender assessment concludes that "Cambodia remains a hierarchical society with strong ideas about power and status" and that "attitudes toward gender roles still emphasize the woman as household manager and the man as provider."<sup>56</sup>

Successive governments since 1993 have introduced legislation to increase gender equality. There is currently a complex framework of laws intended to promote equality between women and men, including in relation to political participation. National plans consistently emphasise gender mainstreaming as a priority.<sup>57</sup> The Government of Cambodia ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 1992 and has provided several reports since.

The most recent report (2018) presents an optimistic picture of change in relation to gender equality but goes on to acknowledge significant gender gaps in economic empowerment, education, health and participation in decision-making, concluding:

Cambodian women face difficulties as social norms on gender relations continue to constrain development of women's potentials and women's empowerment in the economic, social, public and political life. (...) The nation will redouble its efforts to further increase women's economic participation and political empowerment to achieve gender equality.<sup>58</sup>

Analysts agree that the legislative framework for gender equality in Cambodia is commendable. Many suggest, however, that implementation of the legislation has been poorly monitored and enforced.<sup>59</sup> Researchers agree that social norms

are a key influencing factor, with political processes in Cambodia described as "gendered from the family level."<sup>60</sup> The *Public Perceptions* research was designed to increase understanding of commonly-held views of political leadership and implications for women's opportunities.

## Research Design

The *Public Perceptions* research was originally planned to take place in Cambodia in the first half of 2018. Civil and political rights became particularly constrained in 2017 in anticipation of a national election the following year. This period saw increasing scrutiny of civil society organisations, the dissolution of the main opposition party and the shutting down of several independent media outlets.<sup>61</sup> Given this context, IWDA and partner organisations decided to postpone the research until after the election.

A Project Working Group including all IWDA partners was formed. This group employed a local Research Coordinator to guide the project in Cambodia. The Working Group, in dialogue with the Research Coordinator and IWDA Program Manager, determined the overall subject and design of the research in Cambodia. Partners requested a focus on women's participation in local or 'Commune Council' leadership rather than national leadership.

Partner organisations mostly work and seek to influence change at the sub-national level and felt that a deeper understanding of public perceptions at the local level would be more beneficial for advocacy, policy reform and programming strategy in relation to women's leadership. Given the political environment, the research team agreed to avoid any questions relating to voting practices or affiliation with political parties.

**The *Public Perceptions* research in Cambodia sought to answer the following questions:**

### 1. What attributes do people think leaders should have?

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<sup>55</sup> Ministry of Women's Affairs, *Gender mainstreaming: institutional, partnership and policy context - Cambodia Gender Assessment*, (Phnom Penh: MOWA, 2014), pp. 2-3.

<sup>56</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Cambodia: country gender analysis*, (Manila, ADB, 2012), p.2.

<sup>57</sup> These include the *National Strategic Development Plan, 2019- 2023* (in development) and the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency.

<sup>58</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, *Sixth periodic report submitted by Cambodia under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, 2018, pp. 45-46.

<sup>59</sup> See Asian Development Bank (2012), pp.8-9 and Cambodia Center for Human Rights, 'Policy Brief: Women's Political Representation in Cambodia,' 2013, p.3.

<sup>60</sup> Sokunthea Koy, *How women's roles in local politics are understood at the commune level*, 2016, p.47.

<sup>61</sup> See <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/cambodia>.

2. What is the public perception of women’s capacity to be a leader in the political sphere?
3. How do perceptions towards women leaders vary between different social actors?
4. How do gender norms affect public perceptions of women as leaders?

**The study design included four components:**

- an individual survey with a representative sample of community members in three provinces
- focus groups in those same locations to generate further insights from community members
- interviews with key informants
- consultations with stakeholders.

The research was approved in writing by the Governors of each of three districts where data collection was undertaken. The ethical aspects of the research were discussed in detail by the Project

Working Group and IWDA with a strong emphasis on reducing risk to participants and research staff. Ethics approval for this research was granted by IWDA.

**The *Public Perceptions* research team in Cambodia comprised:**

- Project Working Group – representatives from IWDA partners Banteay Srei, Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC), Amara and United Sisterhood Alliance<sup>62</sup>
- Research Coordinator, reporting to the Project Working Group and hosted by GADC
- Two technical advisors with expertise in quantitative and qualitative data respectively
- Research assistants (two women, two men) and one data entry assistant
- IWDA Program Manager for Cambodia.

Data collection activity is shown below.

**Table 3:**  
**Cambodia data collection activities Oct 2018-Feb 2019.**

| SURVEY PARTICIPANTS      | FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS                            | KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS  | STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIVE MEETINGS          | STUDY SITES   |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| 458 (231 men, 227 women) | Six groups with total 59 people (32 women, 27 men) | 29 individual interviews (21 women, 8 men; representatives of national and district governments, Commune Councils and NGOs) | One meeting per province (3 women, 17 men) | Two communes each within three provinces: Battambang, Siem Reap, Pursat |

<sup>62</sup> United Sisterhood is an alliance of Workers’ Information Centre, Women’s Network for Unity, Messenger Band and Social Action for Community Development.

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## Findings

The research in Cambodia found that gender norms underlying public perceptions of women have a strong influence on women's ability to achieve leadership roles. The participation of women in Commune Councils in the three provinces where the research took place was between 18% and 23%, well below that of men.<sup>63</sup> Where women have been elected, these norms also influence perceptions of the areas of responsibility to which women are considered most suited. In this research, women leaders were strongly associated with the poorly resourced yet highly valued Commune Committees for Women and Children (CCWC).

The research highlights the role of political parties in influencing women's opportunities at commune level. Political party privileging of male candidates was seen as a major impediment for women, commonly ranked low on electoral lists and assigned low status roles within the party. Women key informants who had successfully achieved political leadership roles confirmed that support from senior men within their party had been key to their success.

The following outline summarises findings from the research organised into three themes. The findings and recommendations have been drawn from the full research report produced by the research team.

# THE RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN INFLUENCING WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES AT COMMUNE LEVEL.

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<sup>63</sup> The Government of Cambodia target for women's membership of Commune Councils is 25% by 2022 and 30% by 2030. See Royal Government of Cambodia, *Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) Framework (2016-2030)*, 2018, p.105.

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## Theme 1: Perceptions of leadership and gender norms

### Summary of findings

- Respondents believed that a wide range of personal characteristics are 'essential' for Commune Council leadership. Different 'essential' characteristics were associated with women and men.
- Personal qualities considered essential for leadership and associated with women included being honest, positive, humble and trustworthy.
- Personal qualities considered essential for leadership and associated with men included being hard-working, ambitious and self-confident.
- The burden of domestic and caring labour emerged as an important perceived obstacle for women. Men were seen as having fewer domestic responsibilities and greater freedom to devote to public roles than women.
- When asked what educational background Commune Council members should have, a majority of respondents nominated upper secondary education. The number of women and men in the study locations who meet this criterion is low.
- Having previous experience of Commune Council or community leadership roles was seen as valuable and more important for political leadership than family background.

**"When [candidates] are participating with the political party, they need to do door-to-door outreach in the village many times. Women do not easily walk away from home. Women are thinking a lot about their home and children. Men can sacrifice more than women for the work of political parties."**

*(Community member, man)*

## Theme 2: Perceptions of women's leadership at Commune Council level

### Summary of findings

- Generally, respondents believed that women and men perform equally well in Commune Councils across different measures of leadership performance.
- However, women councillors were perceived to be stronger than men in two domains: improving the welfare of children and the elderly and being more accountable in their use of commune money.
- The majority of respondents 'strongly agreed' that men and women are treated equally in the Commune Council and that women are included in decision making and developing plans and policies.
- Some participants in qualitative activities thought women's activity on Commune Councils is limited to the less visible and poorly resourced sphere of 'women's and children's' issues.
- Women's involvement in this aspect of Commune Councils was nevertheless credited with improving gender equality and making Commune Councils more responsive to the needs of marginalised groups, including survivors of domestic violence.

**"Men's work looks big, but women's work is soft. For example, if men build a road, in the next six months we will see a new road. For women, whether we are aware of safe immigration, domestic violence or poverty, these are things we can't see in the face but we will see them long term. In two years, the number of domestic violence cases in this commune has decreased from 50-60 per year to 30-40 per year due to our work."**

*(Woman deputy Commune chief)*

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### Theme 3: Public and political support of women at Commune Council level

#### Summary of findings

- Public support for women candidates for Commune Council office was high, with 95% of respondents expressing support for women candidates personally and 90% perceiving that there is public support for women candidates.
- A significant proportion of respondents (75%) believed that women candidates receive sufficient support from political parties to run in commune elections.
- While many respondents believed there is good support for women candidates, the continued low ranking of women on candidate lists at elections was perceived as a significant barrier.
- Respondents identified Commune Council support, including access to formal and informal training opportunities, as key to women's electoral chances and change in public perceptions of women's capacity.
- The high time commitment and low pay of Commune Council work were seen as deterrents for highly qualified candidates.

**"There were around ten women in the last commune election. But when commune council membership is set for only ten people, those who got a number at the very end were not selected."**

*(Woman deputy Commune chief)*

#### Recommendations

The research concludes that improved representation of women in Commune Councils in Cambodia requires legal, institutional and social norm change. Researchers call for collaboration between the central government, political parties and civil society organisations to generate a shared commitment to gender equality at the Commune Council level.

The following recommendations were developed by the Research Coordinator and research advisors and were endorsed by the Project Working Group.

1. The Government of Cambodia, civil society organisations (CSOs) including women's rights organisations, private sector actors and media agencies should coordinate action to transform the gender norms that limit women's leadership opportunities. Media, social media and community forums should be used to challenge gender stereotypes and showcase both positive role models of women leaders and male advocates for women's rights and leadership.
2. The Government should introduce legal and practical measures to advance the goal of achieving gender balance on Commune Councils beyond the short-term targets in Cambodia's Sustainable Development Goals.
3. The Government should implement gender responsive budgeting in Commune Investment Plans and increase the allocation of funds for Commune Council activities that advance gender equality.
4. The Government, CSOs, women's rights organisations and Commune Councillors should implement actions to support women in more diverse roles in Commune Councils beyond the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) and set a target for gender balance across all Commune Clerk positions.
5. The Government, development partners, NGOs and CSOs should expand initiatives to strengthen the gender responsiveness of Commune Councils.
6. The Government, development partners, NGOs and CSOs should expand leadership development opportunities for women.
7. Political parties should implement policies and enforceable measures to achieve meaningful gender balance on their candidate lists, engaging with government and civil society stakeholders as needed to support implementation.

The full report on this research, *Public Perceptions of Women's Leadership at Commune Councils in Cambodia*, will be available in 2020 at [iwda.org.au](http://iwda.org.au).



# TIMOR-LESTE

## Context

**Population:** 1.3 million

**Women:** 49%

**People under 15 years old:** 44%

**People living in rural areas:** 69%

**Major industries:** agriculture, petroleum, natural gas

**Restoration of independence and first general election:** 2002

**System of parliament:** Democratic republic (President and Prime Minister)

**Women in national parliament in 2019:** 25/65 seats (38.5%)

**Women on *suku* (village) councils in 2019:** 4.7%<sup>64</sup>

Timor-Leste regained independence in 2002 following over 300 years of Portuguese colonial rule and 24 years of military occupation by Indonesia.<sup>65</sup> The country operates as a democratic republic with a single chamber parliament and a presidential head of state. Members of parliament are elected to 65 seats through a political party system and represent the whole population.

There have been six presidential elections and five parliamentary elections since independence, the

most recent parliamentary election taking place in May 2018.

The creation of a new nation state in 2002 was seen by many as an opportunity to formalise equality between women and men. Timor-Leste ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003 and has provided reports in 2007 and 2013.<sup>66</sup> The Constitution formalises equality between women and men in law and there are a number of legislative frameworks intended to promote gender equality in political leadership. The best known of these is the quota requiring political parties to include at least one woman in every group of three candidates on electoral lists at national elections. As a consequence of this quota, Timor-Leste has had a relatively high proportion of women in parliament. In mid 2019, 25 of the 65 seats in parliament (38.5 %) were held by women, placing Timor-Leste in the top 23 countries globally in terms of parliamentary representation of women.

Notwithstanding this outstanding achievement, there are significant disparities between women and men in Timor-Leste. The most recent general gender assessment, conducted by Asian Development Bank in 2014, shows that women are less likely than men to have undertaken formal education, less likely to participate in the formal labour force and, due in large part to a high birth rate, experience much poorer health than men.<sup>67</sup> Violence against women and girls is extremely high and women are much less likely than men to participate in sub-national government.<sup>68</sup>

The gender assessment describes a society in which gender roles are relatively inflexible.<sup>69</sup> Women are expected to take responsibility for domestic work,

<sup>64</sup> Statistics retrieved October 2019 as follows: data.un.org (overall population and % women), data.worldbank.org (% people under 15 and % rural population), data.ipu.org (% women in parliament) and timor-leste.gov.tl (% women on *suku* councils). Political administration units in Timor-Leste in descending order from the national government are districts or 'municipalities', sub-districts, *suku* (villages) and *aldeia* (sub-villages or hamlets).

<sup>65</sup> Timor-Leste had a brief period of Independence from November 28 - December 7, 1975 between Portugal ceding sovereignty and invasion by Indonesian forces.

<sup>66</sup> The first report and combined second/third reports can be found at [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?TreatyID=3&DocTypeID=29&ctl00\\_PlaceHolderMain\\_radResultsGridChangePage=4\\_50](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?TreatyID=3&DocTypeID=29&ctl00_PlaceHolderMain_radResultsGridChangePage=4_50).

<sup>67</sup> See Asian Development Bank, *Timor-Leste Country Gender Assessment*, (Manila, ADB, 2014). This report was coordinated by the then Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality (SEPI) with support from ADB and UN Women and is the most recent general assessment of gender issues in Timor-Leste.

<sup>68</sup> Asian Development Bank, 2014, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>69</sup> Republica Democratica de Timor-Leste, *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*, Section 17: "Women and men shall have the same rights and duties in all areas of family, political, economic, social and cultural life."

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care for others and produce food. Men are largely expected to work outside the domestic sphere and to take responsibility for decision making at family and community levels. The report suggests that a 'customary' assigning of women to the domestic sphere and men to the public sphere has been strongly reinforced over time by the values of the Catholic church, to which the overwhelming majority of the population belongs.<sup>70</sup>

Previous studies suggest that there is broad support for gender equality as a principle in Timor-Leste.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, women face many challenges in achieving influence at the national level and are highly underrepresented in formal political leadership at the local level.

Parliaments to date have been characterised as being dominated by a 'military elite': men who played important and visible roles during the fight for independence.<sup>72</sup> Local feminists have argued that many women also played extremely important organisational, logistical and political roles during the resistance. However, political interest in documenting and formally acknowledging the role of women during this period of history has been low.<sup>73</sup> Some observers suggest that this lack of formal recognition for the contribution of women to independence has influenced how women are perceived in present-day Timor-Leste and had profound implications for gender dynamics in the new nation state.<sup>74</sup>

There is no legislation equivalent to the national quota system at the sub-national level. Currently, 5% of leaders at the *suku* level and 3.8% of chiefs at the *aldeia* (hamlet) level are women, a significant increase from the previous election but nevertheless a very low level of representation.<sup>75</sup> Local level governance in Timor-Leste is commonly described as 'hybrid': a complex system that combines both

customary practices and recently introduced democratic processes. Influential sources of authority for local leaders, including reputation derived from resistance activity, 'traditional' status and political party affiliation, overwhelmingly favour candidates who are men. While surveys suggest the majority of the population supports gender equality, the gender norms described above are dominant in many institutional settings. In the view of some,

The concept of gender equality is still not properly understood in Timor-Leste, and many times seen as "women's issues to be dealt by women" and "against local traditions and culture."<sup>76</sup>

Although the number of women on *suku* councils has increased recently, women members report being excluded from many of the informal decision-making processes that take place at the local level.<sup>77</sup> Analysts suggest that, in present-day Timor-Leste, there is a desire for leadership that embraces both historically familiar practices and the principles of a modern state.<sup>78</sup> The *Public Perceptions* research in Timor-Leste sought to increase understanding of current gender norms, ideas about leadership and implications for women's political leadership.

## Research Design

The *Public Perceptions* research in Timor Leste was originally planned to take place in the first half of 2018, well after the 2017 general election. However, this election was followed by a period of political impasse and a new election was called for May 2018. IWDA and local partner in the research, Alola Foundation, agreed it would be preferable to conduct the research following this unexpected election.

The overall theme and design of the research were developed by IWDA in dialogue with Alola

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<sup>70</sup> Asian Development Bank (2014), p.xiii.

<sup>71</sup> See The Asia Foundation, *East Timor National Survey of Voter Knowledge* (2001) and *Timor-Leste 2016 Tatoli! Public Opinion Poll* (2016) and International Republican Institute, *National Public Opinion Survey of Timor-Leste* (2017).

<sup>72</sup> Sara Niner, '*Hakat klot*, narrow steps: negotiating gender in post-conflict Timor-Leste', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13(3) (2011), 413-435, p.413.

<sup>73</sup> Sofi Ospina, *Participation of women in politics and decision making in Timor-Leste*, 2006, p.7.

<sup>74</sup> Sara Niner, 'Reflection on the special gender stream: 2017 Timor-Leste Studies Association conference', *Australian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 10(2), 2017, 1-5, p.1.

<sup>75</sup> Figures (22 women of 452 *suku* leaders) supplied by Alola Foundation October 2019. These figures are significantly higher than the previous elections following lobbying by local advocates. In the 2009 elections women gained 2.5% of *suku* leadership roles and 1% of *aldeia* leadership roles. See Fundação Pátria, Asosiasaun FADA and Plan International Timor-Leste, *Women's Participation in Suku Level Governance*, 2015, p.43.

<sup>76</sup> Nurima Alkatiri, 'Gender equality in Timor-Leste: the need for investment towards change of mindset.' *SOCDEM Asia Quarterly* 6(1), 2017, p.33.

<sup>77</sup> Deborah Cummins, 'The problem of gender quotas: women's representatives on Timor-Leste's *suku* councils', *Development in Practice* 21(1), 2011, pp.85-95, p.89.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, Anne, 'Entangled worlds: villages and political community in Timor-Leste,' *Local Global* 11, 2013, pp.54-71, p.67.

Foundation and with input from the Research Advisory Group. The Group recommended that the specific focus of the research be on perceptions of women as leaders at local government or *suku* level. Increasing women’s participation in local political leadership is a priority for women’s rights organisations in Timor-Leste and a key strategy for Alola Foundation. The Advisory Group also advised that community members in rural areas engage with and understand local level politics much more than national politics.

The team designed the research around the high level questions for the *Perceptions* research.

**The study included three components:**

- an individual survey with community members in three districts and the capital, Dili
- focus groups in those same locations to gather qualitative data from community members
- interviews with key informants.

There is no requirement for ethics approval at the central government level in Timor-Leste. However, the field research team sought permission

locally from police and *suku* chiefs to survey local participants. Ethics approval for this research was granted by IWDA. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade made a contribution to the field work costs for this study.

**The research team in Timor-Leste comprised:**

- Research consultants contracted by IWDA to manage the project. This group consisted of one researcher each from Monash University, Bridging Peoples consulting firm, the National University in Timor-Leste, Timor Surveys and local NGO Lao Hamutuk
- Alola Foundation
- Research Advisory Group, consisting of advocates for gender equality in Timor-Leste
- Research Advisor
- Survey team (three researchers)
- IWDA Program Manager for Timor-Leste.

Data collection activities are outlined below.

**Table 4:**  
**Timor-Leste data collection activities Nov 2018-Feb 2019.**

| SURVEY PARTICIPANTS      | FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS                          | KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS  | STUDY SITES  |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|
| 240 (120 women, 120 men) | 18 groups of 130 participants (64 women, 66 men) | 13 individual interviews (4 women, 9 men; <i>suku</i> chiefs, NGO directors, church leaders, youth leader, electoral commission representative) | Multiple locations in three districts (Viqueque, Bobonaro and Ermera) + multiple suburbs in Dili |

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## Findings

While women's political representation has been relatively high at national level in Timor-Leste, participation at local level is very low. Aspiring women leaders face a range of challenges, including having lower levels of formal education, fewer resources and less access to socially familiar sources of authority compared to men. Women's electoral chances at local level are also influenced by social norms relating to political leadership and women's capacity for leadership.

The *Public Perceptions* research in Timor-Leste suggests that, while gender equality in political leadership is officially endorsed and some change is taking place, public leadership continues to be strongly associated with men. The researchers describe women as being caught between the principles of gender equality enshrined in the modern nation state of Timor-Leste and the realities of life in local communities. These realities include culturally proscribed gender stereotypes which leave many women with little confidence to compete for and sustain political leadership.

The following summary of research findings and ideas for consideration has been drawn from the full research report developed by the team in Timor-Leste.

**ASPIRING WOMEN LEADERS FACE A RANGE OF CHALLENGES, INCLUDING HAVING LOWER LEVELS OF FORMAL EDUCATION, FEWER RESOURCES AND LESS ACCESS TO SOCIALLY FAMILIAR SOURCES OF AUTHORITY COMPARED TO MEN.**

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## Theme 1: Perceptions of gender relations and roles

### Summary of findings

- The majority of people surveyed (86%) agreed that women and men have equal rights.
- Two thirds of people (66%) agreed that Timorese culture is supportive of women's leadership at *suku* level.
- A similar proportion (71%) also said that men make better local leaders than women.
- These results suggest the potential for contradictions to exist in relation to views on women's political leadership.
- There were variations in views in relation to age, gender, education and whether respondents were from matrilineal or patrilineal communities.

**"We are not shy. Men don't allow us to be leaders. We need to ask their permission just to walk around at night or even to travel to Dili."**

*(young woman in focus group, responding to young man suggesting women are "too shy" to be political leaders)*

## Theme 2: Perceptions of barriers for women leaders

### Summary of findings

- Participants attributed women's underrepresentation to a mix of individual and structural factors.
- The main reasons for underrepresentation given were:
  - i. women lack the confidence to stand for election
  - ii. women face cultural obstacles/prohibitions
  - iii. women don't receive support from *suku* leaders.

- There were differences in views between older and younger people, with older men more likely to hold 'traditional' views about roles appropriate to women and men.
- An overwhelming majority of participants (96%) believed there should be more efforts to normalise leadership by women.

**"Domestic work occupies much of women's time. The distance between one hamlet to another one is very far, a woman cannot reach all hamlets in her village so that people can get to know her program. Another factor is the population does not yet trust women leaders. A lot of women could not take part in electoral campaigning before the election because they did not have the money. Our people strongly believe in cultural practices rather than looking at people's creativity. Inside the village we need to give a lot of opportunity for women to implement programs and we need to socialize this a lot."**

*(Woman NGO representative)*

## Theme 3: Perceptions of leadership qualities and skills

### Summary of findings

- The qualities nominated by participants as most important for leaders are 'functional': being intelligent, articulate, strategic and decisive.
- 'Moral' qualities were also considered important: being honest, responsible, hardworking and trustworthy.
- 'Personal' qualities were rated as less important: being humble, calm, ambitious, self-sacrificing, self-confident, religious, emotional and well-liked.
- Some of the 'functional' qualities were associated more with men, some of the 'moral' qualities more with women.
- Intelligence was attributed equally to women and men.

- Skills in conflict resolution were strongly associated with men. Conflict resolution is a critical responsibility of *suku* leaders and has customarily been the domain of men.

**“Women do not have opportunities to resolve conflict. The problem is men are always in the front-line; we are used to the practice of men always resolving conflict. In my village, I always involve women in resolving problems. The problems in this village are related to land issues. Sometimes, women have brilliant ideas to resolve conflicts related to family problems.”**

*(Head of suku)*

## Theme 4: Gendered perceptions of political leadership

### Summary of findings

- There was near total agreement (96%) that a leader’s community responsibilities must come before their family life.
- One third of people (32%), however, said a woman’s responsibility to her family must come before any community responsibilities. This creates competing expectations for women who wish to be leaders.
- Most respondents said they would vote for a woman if there were ‘better’ women candidates. Suggestions of what would make a candidate ‘better’ covered a wide range of personal attributes and skills. Many of these expectations are not held of men.
- Most people obtain information about candidates from current local leaders, the majority of whom are men. Incumbent leaders can therefore have a significant influence on election outcomes.

**Suggestions of how women could be ‘better’ candidates included: being well-behaved, hard working and active in church; being humble, kind and moral; speaking softly and kindly to people; being patient and understanding.**

*(Focus group participants, various)*

## Ideas for consideration

The tension between expectations of local political leaders and expectations of women highlighted in this research is a clear impediment for women leaders and needs to be understood in work towards increasing women’s participation in *suku* governance. The findings highlight areas for further discussion in relation to both broad social change and the upcoming sub-national elections in Timor-Leste.

### Society-wide transformational change

1. Support local communities to develop a deeper understanding of gender stereotypes and gender inequality and the impact these have on women’s opportunities.
2. Support young people and young men in particular to actively engage with communities as agents of change.
3. Enlist men, especially those in political leadership, to actively advocate for and support women leaders.

### Sub-national elections

1. Incorporate findings from this research into strategic programming and campaigning with women candidates preparing for *suku* elections (expected 2023).
2. Document and share women’s leadership success stories, including sources of support, enabling contexts and strategies used to work across customary and state governance systems to provide visible examples of diverse leadership and provide role models to potential women candidates.<sup>79</sup>
3. Lobby political parties to develop strategies for increasing women’s substantive leadership and roles within party structures.
4. Support the provision of independent election information in the lead up to the municipal elections (expected 2021) and the next *suku* elections (expected 2023).
5. Strengthen complaint and redress mechanisms for discrimination against women candidates.

The full report on this research, *Public Perceptions of Women’s Political Leadership in Timor-Leste*, will be available in 2020 at [iwda.org.au](http://iwda.org.au).

<sup>79</sup> IWDA partners in Timor-Leste are participating in the *Women’s Leadership Pathways* research on this topic noted in footnote 49.

# SOLOMON ISLANDS

## Context

**Population:** est 642,000

**Women:** 49%

**People under 15 years old:** 38%

**People living in rural areas:** 76%

**Major industries:** natural resources (copra, palm oil, timber); aid

**Independence:** 1978

**System of parliament:** parliamentary democracy (Prime Minister)

**Women in parliament in 2019:** 2/50 seats (4%)

**Women in provincial government in 2019:** 4/172 (2.3%)<sup>80</sup>

Solomon Islands is a sovereign state in the Melanesia region of the Pacific. A 'protectorate' of both Germany and Great Britain in the late 1800s, Solomon Islands became independent in 1978. The parliament is a unicameral Westminster system with 50 seats covering the nine provinces and the capital Honiara. There have been 11 general elections since independence, the most recent taking place in April 2019.

Colonial rule in Solomon Islands was accompanied by extensive missionary activity and researchers agree that Christian values have strongly influenced formal structures for and norms relating to public decision making.<sup>81</sup>

Solomon Islands is signatory to a number of regional and international agreements which strongly state the importance of gender equality.<sup>82</sup> It ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 2002 and provided a report in 2013. Successive governments have endorsed policies and frameworks for implementing these commitments. There is a general consensus that there are good and appropriate legislative frameworks in place to promote the status of women, both generally and in relation to political representation.

Despite this, there are significant disparities between women and men in Solomon Islands. The most recent country gender assessment, coordinated by Asian Development Bank and the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs in 2015, acknowledges important progress towards gender equality in a number of policy areas. However, it goes on to describe a general environment in which the experiences of women and girls are strongly differentiated from those of men and boys.

Women are less likely than men to have participated in formal education at all levels and less likely to have paid and secure employment. The report documents high levels of violence against girls and women. Women's participation in public decision making is significantly lower than that of men at community, provincial and national levels, resulting in a situation described by women's rights activist Alice Pollard as "paddling the canoe on one side":

*It refers to the frustration resulting from a situation that is one-sided and lacking in balance and co-operative effort, thus leading to a failure to move forward. It captures succinctly the experience of women in many parts of Melanesia, a scenario in which women are so often seriously under-represented in public decision-making.*<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Statistics retrieved October 2019 as follows: statistics.gov.sb (overall population), data.un.org (% women), data.worldbank.org (% people under 15 and % rural population), data.ipu.org (% women in parliament). Number of women in provincial assembly supplied by Women's Rights Action Movement.

<sup>81</sup> Alice Pollard, *Painaha: gender and leadership in 'Are'Are society, the South Sea Evangelical Church and parliamentary leadership - Solomon Islands*, Masters thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2006, p.218 and Asenati Liki, 'Women leaders in Solomon Islands public service: a personal and scholarly reflection,' *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2010/1*, 2010, p.2.

<sup>82</sup> These include the *Pacific Platform for Action* (1994) and the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995).

<sup>83</sup> Heather Wallace, 'Paddling the canoe on one side: women in decision-making in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands', *Development*, 54 (4), (2011), pp.505-513, p.505.

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Women are very active in the informal sector in Solomon Islands. There are an estimated 3,000 women's groups at provincial and local levels, many church-based. These groups are highly valued by communities.<sup>84</sup> Women's groups played a critical role in the resolution of civil conflict which took place in Solomon Islands from 1998-2003. At significant personal risk, women established the processes of dialogue that brought an end to the violence and disruption, only to be subsequently excluded from formal peace talks.<sup>85</sup> Women have also been active in promoting legislative change, particularly in relation to family violence. Although women's groups are close to communities and understand their realities well, they are generally not recognised for their insights or involved in formal interventions to address key community issues.<sup>86</sup>

There is a significant body of research on women's political representation in Solomon Islands. Research over the past ten years has consistently reported that, when surveyed, most people express support for increased representation of women in political leadership. Yet only four women have been elected since independence. The current status of two women in parliament (4%) is recent. Solomon Islands is amongst the lowest ranking countries in the world for women's national political participation.

In recent years, advocacy for the introduction of temporary special measures (TSM) has gained momentum in Solomon Islands. Review of the *Provincial Government Act* in 2019 has presented an opportunity to include a special measure for increasing the number of women in provincial assemblies. As at December 2019, three provincial assemblies have made an in-principle commitment to introducing additional seats for women as a temporary measure, with several other provincial assemblies also discussing this. Public views on temporary special measures are therefore a strong area of interest to advocates for legislative change.

Women's rights advocates agree that gender norms in Solomon Islands have a significant impact on women's participation in political leadership. Stereotypes of men as public leaders and women as 'belonging' in the domestic sphere are dominant and influential. Social change has resulted in men being able to derive authority from both 'customary'

leadership and the modern political system.<sup>87</sup> Women, however, are still strongly associated with 'traditional' roles.

The *Public Perceptions* research in Solomon Islands sought to better understand these perceptions and, further, to explore community views on temporary special measures for increasing women's political representation.

## Research Design

The overall themes and research questions for the *Public Perceptions* study in Solomon Islands were developed by IWDA partner Women's Rights Action Movement (WRAM) in consultation with IWDA and an academic advisor specialised in electoral processes in the Pacific region.

In considering this study, IWDA and WRAM were aware that significant research has been conducted on women and political leadership in Solomon Islands over the past 15 years. It was imperative not to replicate existing studies and to be cognisant of the possibility of research fatigue within the general community.

There has been limited research in Solomon Islands to date on public understanding of and views on gender quotas. Given the current political context, this emerged as a clear potential focus for the study. The *Public Perceptions* research in Solomon Islands was therefore designed to inquire into public attitudes towards women in leadership roles, challenges for women in politics and views on temporary special measures. The purpose of the project was to produce an evidence base for policy and legislative reform in relation to TSM in Solomon Islands.

### The research explored the following questions:

1. **How do public perceptions of women in political leadership influence the opportunities and challenges for women?**
2. **Is the political environment in Solomon Islands perceived as a level playing field for women and men?**

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<sup>84</sup> Pollard, pp. 91-104 and 128-138.

<sup>85</sup> Pollard, pp. 235-236.

<sup>86</sup> Wallace, p. 507.

<sup>87</sup> Kerryn Baker (2018). 'What did the winning candidate have that I don't have?', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 56(4), p.437.



3. What views on temporary special measures (TSM) are held by people, including women and men?
4. How do we create or build upon an enabling environment for TSM reform at the provincial and/or national level?

There is no formal requirement for approval from the Government of the Solomon Islands for research of this nature. However, senior members of the research team met with key community members in the provincial locations to inform them about the research and seek their approval. In Honiara the research was approved in writing by Honiara City Council. Ethics approval for the research was granted by IWDA.

**The research team in Solomon Islands comprised:**

- Research Advisory Group, consisting of representatives from women’s rights organisations
- WRAM Board and staff
- Research Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator
- Research advisor
- Field researchers (four women and four men)
- IWDA Program Manager for Solomon Islands.

Data collection activities are outlined below.

**Table 5:**  
**Solomon Islands data collection activities Feb-Mar 2019.**

| SURVEY PARTICIPANTS      | FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS   | KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS  | LOCATIONS  |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| 723 (387 women, 336 men) | 18 Women only x 9, men only x 3, mixed groups x 3 (people with disability, young people, leaders) | 99 (70 women: individuals, community/ national/church leaders; 29 men: individuals, community leaders, executives, statesmen) | Three provinces (Western Province, Malaita, Honiara) (Seven constituencies/29 sites) |

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## Findings

The *Public Perceptions* research in Solomon Islands found there is widespread support for the idea of increasing the number of women in political leadership but also, paradoxically, widespread agreement that women have the same opportunities as men. The research confirms the findings of previous studies showing that, in fact, women face very significant barriers in achieving political roles. These include structural disparities but also, importantly, widespread public beliefs about leadership that inherently favour men. The research shows that many people have different expectations of women and men in relation to public leadership and that most candidates would be unable to meet the many criteria held in mind for a 'good woman leader'.

In this political environment, temporary special measures may be an appropriate intervention to increase women's representation in the short term and normalise women's political leadership in the long term. Encouragingly, the findings suggest that many people are open to the idea of TSM. The research also suggests, however, that there are public concerns about gender quotas and recommends that any TSM campaign acknowledge and engage with these at the local level.

The following summary of findings and recommendations has been drawn from the full report developed by the research team in Solomon Islands.

**THE RESEARCH CONFIRMS  
THE FINDINGS OF  
PREVIOUS STUDIES  
SHOWING THAT, IN FACT,  
WOMEN FACE VERY  
SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS  
IN ACHIEVING POLITICAL  
ROLES.**

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## Theme 1: Perceptions of women in politics

### Summary of findings

- There was significant in-principle support amongst participants for more women in political leadership. When asked, "Do you think there should be more women in the provincial assembly?", 88% of people said yes. When asked, "Do you think there should be more women in the national parliament?", 88% also said yes.
- When asked, 'Have you ever voted for a woman candidate?', however, 78% said no.
- The main reasons given for why there should be more women in politics differed between women and men. Women saw women politicians as better able to speak with them and understand their needs. Men saw women politicians as having more integrity and paying more attention to community needs.
- Participants from Honiara tended to believe that the town did worse than other parts of Solomon Islands in terms of women's representation in politics. In interviews, however, women noted that access to information was better in Honiara than elsewhere.
- Participants in Western Province cited the election of a woman Member of Parliament in 2018 as evidence that their province was doing better than others and was improving over time.
- Participants in Malaita Province suggested they did not think their province was better or worse than others but noted that it was hard for women to get into politics.
- Overall, people believed that women's participation in politics is improving over time, with just under 60% of respondents saying it was easier for a woman to be elected now than ten years ago.
- While many key attributes of good women leaders were noted, the attributes most commonly nominated were being a 'good role model', being 'family-oriented' and having 'Christian values'.

**"We should have more women in politics. Now we see women involved more in modern society. We hold leadership roles in the community and workplaces. We should be up there."**

*(Woman, key informant interview)*

## Theme 2: Challenges for women political leaders

### Summary of findings

- In spite of evidence to the contrary, many respondents thought the political environment in Solomon Islands is becoming more favourable to women's participation, with 64% of survey respondents agreeing that women and men "get the same chances" in terms of being elected in provincial and national elections.
- Focus group and interview participants suggested that women candidates are judged more harshly than men and can be judged on their husband's reputation as well as their own.
- 'Culture' was commonly nominated as a reason why women do not choose to enter politics, commonly conceptualised as 'men's space'.
- Perceived barriers included women being "unwilling to put themselves forward" for leadership roles and not being well prepared.
- Interview and focus group participants (women and men) raised concerns about women voters not supporting women candidates and suggested that this affects electoral success.
- Attitudes towards women in leadership were seen to be influenced by the practices of the dominant churches.
- Women who have completed higher levels of formal education were perceived to be more likely to be elected.
- 'Money politics', a range of practices whereby candidates give or promise material resources to voters at election time, were seen as a barrier for women aspiring to political leadership roles.

- Whilst 60% of survey respondents believed political parties have significant influence on election outcomes, most focus group and interview participants suggested that the proliferation of parties and the common practice of vote-buying limited the influence of party policies on elections.

**“When we talk about leadership, we talk about men. So there’s already a dominant language that’s inside the community and society - when we talk about leadership we talk about men always. We don’t talk about the need for women.”**

*(Focus group participant)*

**“I heard a little bit about it, reserved seats. But due to criticism, they say women are better off in the normal competition. I worked with government and I heard that.”**

*(Focus group participant, woman)*

### Theme 3: Temporary Special Measures

#### Summary of findings

- The researchers found that there was very low awareness of TSM throughout the areas in which research was conducted, with 76% of respondents saying they had not heard of TSM prior to the survey.
- Once informed about TSM by advocates, 92% of respondents said they supported the introduction of special measures in their provincial assembly and in national parliament.
- Participants were open to a range of different TSM models including the ‘safety net’ model, reserved seats and candidate quotas.<sup>88</sup>
- People who support TSM in principle may nevertheless be concerned about risks associated with its introduction. Concerns included women candidates not being respected, women being unprepared for a political career, the possibility of family discord and making changes to the political system.
- The research suggests that engaging grassroots networks within different social groups would be crucial to a successful TSM campaign.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the research team has developed a set of detailed recommendations relating to programming, policy development and legislative reform. These are summarised below according to the three themes of the research.

#### Perceptions of Women in Politics

1. Government, development partners and donors work in collaboration with women’s rights organisations and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to ensure that gender awareness programs are locally informed and owned. This includes programs relating to women’s leadership and to gender equality more broadly.
2. Women’s Rights Action Movement (WRAM) and the National Women’s Forum work closely with CSOs, Government and other stakeholders to develop targeted training on public perceptions of women and leadership for women candidates, men advocates for gender equality and church, community and political leaders.
3. Government, development partners and donors resource women’s rights organisations and CSOs to provide strategic, locally informed skills development opportunities to women candidates throughout the electoral cycle.
4. Women’s rights organisations and CSOs develop a campaign to increase public awareness of women leaders and provide an alternative narrative about women and leadership to currently dominant narratives.

<sup>88</sup> The ‘safety net’ model, adopted by the Government of Samoa, establishes a minimum number of seats for women in parliament. If this level of representation is not met through the general election, the highest-polling unsuccessful women candidates in the election are given additional seats to meet the threshold.

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## Challenges for women political leaders

1. Women's rights organisations, CSOs and development partners engage men and male advocates for gender equality at local, provincial and national levels in training and strategic work to increase women's political participation.
2. Government, women's rights organisations and CSOs work with the Political Parties Commission to enforce implementation of the legislation requiring ten per cent women candidates at elections and to link political parties with aspiring women candidates.
3. Women's rights organisations, CSOs and development partners engage with churches to influence positive change in terms of women in politics.
4. Women's rights organisations, CSOs and development partners create targeted voter education programs for women.

The full report on this research, *Public perceptions of women as political leaders: views on women's leadership and Temporary Special Measures in Solomon Islands*, will be available in 2020 at [iwda.org.au](http://iwda.org.au).

## Temporary Special Measures

1. Women's rights organisations and CSOs actively draw on the TSM experiences of other Pacific Island nations in developing a legislative approach in Solomon Islands.
2. Women's rights organisations, CSOs and other stakeholders explore options for legislative change to enable TSM at all levels of politics, including further research into models best suited to the Solomon Islands legislative and political context.
3. Women's rights organisations, CSOs and other stakeholders work together to develop a collective and inclusive commitment to TSM.
4. Government, development partners and donors resource the work of women's rights organisations and CSOs in advocating for TSM whilst ensuring that initiatives are locally led.
5. Women's rights organisations develop a large-scale public awareness program on TSM informed by the findings of this and other research and utilising social media to reach young people.

# FINDINGS ACROSS THE THREE COUNTRIES

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The three *Public Perceptions* projects were unique in terms of their question sets and specific areas of investigation. Their findings and recommendations reflect the specific contexts in which they were developed. However, the studies were designed to respond to the high level questions of the project overall. The purpose of the research was to generate a body of evidence for use by women's rights organisations in Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands, but also by organisations and policy makers engaged with women's political leadership more broadly. There are important shared themes in the findings from the three countries. The following section draws out these themes with a view to considering what these mean for future programming and policy work.

There is widespread support for the idea that women and men have equal rights. There is also widespread in-principle support that there should be more women in political leadership. When explored further, however, there are contradictions between these views and other views held by people suggesting that men are better suited to political leadership than women.

Research participants widely recognised gender equality as a principle. Across the studies, there was a high level of awareness of the idea that women and men have equal rights. The majority of participants in all three countries also expressed in-principle support for increasing the number of women political leaders. In Cambodia, support for women candidates for Commune Councils was very high, with 95% of survey respondents saying they supported women as leaders at this local level. In Timor-Leste, 94% of survey respondents said they supported the idea of women being *suku* leaders. In Solomon Islands, 88% of respondents said there should be more women both in provincial assemblies and the national assembly.

Further investigation into participants' perceptions of leadership and women's capacity for leadership suggests that these views are sometimes in tension with other assumptions and beliefs. The nominal support for gender equality and increased representation by women is not always supported by views relating to capacity for leadership. The three studies all investigated the range of personal qualities associated with public leadership. Across the studies, some qualities were associated more with women and some more with men.

In Cambodia, leadership qualities associated with women included being honest, positive and humble. Qualities associated with men included being hard-working, ambitious and self-confident. The research in Cambodia also points to powerful social norms emphasising the priority of women's domestic and caring roles, with men seen as having greater freedom than women to participate in public life. Similarly, the qualities most frequently associated with 'good women leaders' in Solomon Islands were being 'humble', 'family-oriented' and 'good role models'.

In Timor-Leste the majority of respondents suggested men are better suited to leadership at the local level than women, with particular reference made to skills needed in conflict resolution. Common expectations of leaders were that they were 'popular', 'well known' and 'assertive'. In seeking to meet these expectations, women risk being considered not 'feminine' enough. When asked to describe what would make them more likely to vote for a woman candidate, focus group participants in Timor-Leste nominated a set of attributes unlikely to be associated with men in leadership: to be 'humble', 'softly spoken', 'morally correct'; to be, in the words of some participants, 'the mother of the community.'

It is encouraging that the majority of participants in this research expressed support for gender equality as a principle. However, findings from the three countries suggest that many people still believe that men are more likely than women to possess the qualities and attributes associated with political leadership. Strong social norms relating to appropriate gender roles prevail in relation to public leadership and, in many cases, participant views on women's capacity for leadership do not accord with the stated 'belief in' equality more broadly.

There are differences in expectations of women and men as political leaders. The expectations of women are much higher and harder to meet.

Findings from the three studies suggest there are important differences in expectations of elected public leaders based on gender. In Cambodia, leadership by women candidates was strongly associated with being highly conscientious and trustworthy. Women leaders were seen as transparent in their use of Commune Council

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funds and highly ethical in their interactions with community members. Women were also seen as better placed than men to deal with issues of social welfare rather than, for example, infrastructure or commune development. This theme also emerged in the data from Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. These associations are not necessarily negative in their own right. However, these and other themes in the research indicate that expectations of public leaders may be highly gendered, with consequences for elected leaders who do not fulfill these expectations.

All three studies suggest there are strong expectations that women in political leadership should maintain critical domestic roles, that is, that their public role should not compromise their family and caring responsibilities. The research in Timor-Leste highlights the potential for tension between public expectations of political leaders and expectations of women. There are similar themes in the data from Cambodia and Solomon Islands.

This research also draws attention to the differing expectations of women and men in relation to personal behaviour and social standing. Across the studies, many respondents suggested that it was not appropriate for women to attend public gatherings, particularly in the evening. Women key informants in Cambodia and Timor-Leste identified social censure of moving around freely in public as a specific barrier to political work. Further, participants suggested that women must exercise caution in relation to perceptions of their character; a women leader must “hold her reputation in high regard”. There are contradictions inherent in expectations of women as public leaders, as the Solomon Islands researchers point out:

*A good woman leader is outspoken and has leadership experience but is humble and does not put herself above her community; she is simple but educated; she makes national policy but is accessible to everyone.*

The research suggests that the sum of attributes women are expected to have may be close to unattainable and that women candidates and leaders may be judged more harshly than men.

*There is some public recognition that women’s political opportunities are impeded by structural barriers. However, informal barriers to women’s opportunities may be less well understood.*

Notwithstanding the general belief that women and men are ‘equal’, research participants across

the three countries were able to identify specific barriers to women’s political participation and influence. Participants in Cambodia and Timor-Leste identified political parties as having a significant influence on women’s opportunities, including through the common practice of privileging men on electoral lists. Participants in all three countries referred to the influence of incumbent leaders on election outcomes as a barrier for women candidates. Participants in Solomon Islands identified lower educational qualifications, a lack of leadership experience and ‘money politics’ as specific impediments to women’s participation.

Previous research in these countries and beyond suggests that, alongside structural barriers, informal barriers have a significant influence on women’s political opportunities. The data collected in this research suggests that there is some awareness of the beliefs, attitudes and practices that impede women’s political leadership. In Solomon Islands, participants nominated ‘culture’ and the endorsement of existing gender norms by churches as main reasons why there are few women in politics. Participants in Timor-Leste similarly nominated ‘cultural obstacles’. Key informants in Cambodia suggested that women’s influence on Commune Councils is compromised by their exclusion from the informal business that routinely take place outside official commune meetings.

The research suggests there is less awareness of the impact of gendered perceptions of women on their leadership opportunities. The most common reason for why there are fewer women than men in political leadership selected by survey respondents in Timor-Leste was that women “lack confidence” to stand for elections. In Solomon Islands, “lack of preparation” and the view that “women are unwilling to put themselves forward” were nominated as reasons for women’s lower representation. When asked about women’s capacity for leadership at the commune level, respondents in Cambodia frequently referred to the ‘women and children’ functions of the Commune Council. The association of leadership by women with social welfare is common across the countries.

Findings from the three studies suggest these and other commonly held perceptions of women contribute to women’s political underrepresentation. When women are perceived to excel in specific areas but otherwise have shortcomings relative to men, underrepresentation is attributed to women themselves: women are seen as less effective leaders and are therefore less likely to be elected. When there are few women in

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public leadership roles, there are fewer precedents to influence not only aspiring women leaders but the voting public. These complex dynamics have a significant influence on women's political participation.

People may be both supportive of and concerned about interventions to increase women's participation in political leadership

Three quarters of participants in the Timor-Leste study agreed that "Timorese culture is supportive of women leaders." A majority of survey participants in the Cambodia study strongly agreed that "men and women are treated equally in the Commune Council." In spite of compelling evidence to the contrary, a majority of participants in Solomon Islands believed that women's political participation is improving over time.

Participants held a range of views on the merit of political and legislative interventions to increase women's representation. An overwhelming majority of participants in Timor-Leste expressed support for programs to increase public awareness of women's capacities for political leadership. In Cambodia, research participants spoke favourably about the potential of Commune Councils to promote women's political participation. The Solomon Islands research investigated in most detail how participants felt about interventions to increase women's representation in political leadership through its focus on temporary special measures (TSM). This research suggests that, once informed about TSM, many people may be supportive of temporary measures at both provincial and national levels.

Nevertheless, participants also expressed apprehension. Concerns included how women would be perceived in terms of 'merit', the possibility that women would not be respected by incumbent leaders and the fear that men in leadership would experience a loss in power. Findings from the three studies suggest that work towards the increased representation of women must engage with these fears and concerns.

## Considerations for future work

IWDA and partner organisations have a strong commitment to making use of the findings and recommendations from the *Public Perceptions* research. The reports from each country are being shared with other WAVE partners, women's

rights organisations in the region and decision makers in the sector. Partner organisations are actively drawing on the findings in preparation for upcoming elections and in their long term planning.

Questions arising from the research findings are wide ranging, from consideration of candidate strategies to social norm change. The following potential areas for future work drawn from the three studies are intended for consideration.

### Programming

- Develop campaigns to **increase public awareness of local electoral processes, the purpose and outcomes of gender quotas and the availability of women candidates.** The *Public Perceptions* research has highlighted the need for greater community awareness of these areas, including the right of voters to freely and independently express their preferences for political leaders through elections.
- Actively **engage men and boys, young people and men who are advocates for gender equality** in awareness campaigns and strategies to increase women's political participation at both sub-national and national levels.
- Incorporate findings from this research into **long term campaign work with women candidates.** Organisations supporting women candidates can draw on the insights into public perceptions of women generated by this research as part of broader work to increase women's electoral chances.
- Develop strategies to **document and address discrimination against women political candidates.** The research draws attention to electoral and political party processes that reduce the likelihood of women candidates succeeding. Identifying and addressing sources of discrimination will bring greater visibility to these practices.
- **Work with communities to develop skills in analysing power structures.** The *Public Perceptions* research suggests that these skills and the insights they make possible are important in influencing social change. Communities may benefit from support from local NGOs in analysing local power dynamics, particularly in relation to political leadership. Feminist participatory methods may be of interest in this work.



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## Policy and advocacy work

- Advocate for **local campaigns to increase public awareness of the importance of gender equality in political leadership**. The research recommends that strategies be developed to influence perceptions of women leaders held by the public, political leaders and religious institutions. The findings suggest an emphasis on locally informed awareness activities and a focus on young adults in particular.
- Work with sub-national and national government bodies to **enforce existing legislation and introduce new legislation to increase women's participation in governance**. Advocate for stronger enforcement of existing gender quotas and the introduction of quotas where these are not yet in place in electoral frameworks.
- **Lobby political parties to adopt and enforce their own quotas** to increase women's representation and influence within party structures. The research suggests a low level of awareness of gender quotas amongst party leaders. It also highlights the absence of penalties for political parties that do not comply with existing legislation.

## Research

- Further **research how communities receive information about elections** in order to address barriers for women candidates. Incumbent leaders have a strong influence on information about electoral processes and candidates provided to local communities. Understanding better how communities are currently informed is an important step towards changing the gender representation of governance bodies.
- Document and strategically **communicate the achievement of political leadership roles by women**. This may include identifying sources of support, sharing effective campaign strategies and promoting actions taken towards successful election. Develop educational materials based on this work to contribute to the normalisation of leadership by women.<sup>89</sup>

## Influencing

- **Engage with research and political analysis on women's political leadership** to extend understanding of regional and global developments. Research on women's political leadership is being conducted in all regions of the world. Ongoing IWDA and partner engagement with research and analysis will ensure work is informed by the experiences and insights of others working to achieve gender equality in political decision making.
- **Work with donors** and their convening power to ensure that women leaders are included in strategic planning and broader debate relating to the allocation of resources to work on women's leadership.

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<sup>89</sup> As noted, the WAVE program of research includes *Women's Leadership Pathways*, a study documenting individual women's experiences of economic, social and political leadership in Cambodia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste.

# CONDUCTING RESEARCH AS A FEMINIST ENDEAVOUR

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The *Public Perceptions* research was informed by theoretical and applied understandings of feminist research and the IWDA *Feminist Research Framework*. The following section discusses the study in relation to the four principles of this framework.<sup>90</sup>

## **Our research builds feminist knowledge of women's lives**

This principle relates to generating new understandings in relation to women's experiences, the impact of gender norms and how power is gendered.

The *Public Perceptions* research has allowed the views of specific groups of people in relation to women and leadership to be gathered and documented. These views are not commonly sought, yet they have a real impact on women's political opportunities. The data collected speaks to the influence of patriarchal systems and values on the processes of political leadership. Findings from the research add to existing knowledge about the impact of gender norms and perceptions of women as political leaders in the three specific countries and more broadly.

Further investigation into the relationship between gender and other factors influencing success in political leadership - family background, wealth, kinship ties - would be valuable. Greater attention to issues of intersectionality in relation to aspiring women leaders may be a useful avenue for increasing our knowledge of women's lives.

## **We are accountable for how our research is conducted**

IWDA's approach to research is informed by principles of best practice developed by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and the Research for Development Impact Network.<sup>91</sup> These principles set standards for

all aspects of the research, including designing research that has integrity, establishing respectful relationships with all people involved and ensuring that the research is beneficial for participants and their communities.<sup>92</sup>

This project required a high level of dialogue between IWDA and partner organisations managing the research in each of the countries. The research teams were well versed in the principles of ethical research and their implications for practice. All three teams included national researchers with substantial experience in conducting field work with rural communities.

Collectively, the teams have documented a number of areas in which practice could be developed further. These include but are not limited to exploring the use of feminist participatory action research (F-PAR) methods in perceptions research, looking more closely at the implications of conducting research in multiple languages and exploring the use of new technologies in field-based research.

IWDA was accountable for the research projects in each of the three countries. Program Managers had oversight of the research in collaboration with the local research teams. Responsibility for project implementation was held by local teams and researchers. This included obtaining local permissions, managing potential risks to participants and staff and managing the dynamics of interview and focus group discussions.

IWDA Program Managers worked closely with research coordinators to maintain a detailed understanding of all research activity. IWDA's accountability in the *Public Perceptions* research was based on these relationships of mutual understanding and trust.

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<sup>90</sup> For further discussion of IWDA's perspective on feminist approaches to research and evaluation see Tracy McDiarmid et al, 'We are women! We are ready! Amplifying women's voices through feminist participatory action research,' 2018, Melbourne, IWDA.

<sup>91</sup> See <https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/>.

<sup>92</sup> Principles based on the Government of Australia's *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007).

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## **We are committed to ethical collaboration**

IWDA's intention in resourcing the *Public Perceptions* study was to facilitate research aligned with partner priorities. Promoting women's political leadership is a key priority for all WAVE partners. IWDA reconsidered the initial research design, supporting three independent projects rather than one study replicated in three locations and encouraging partners to think openly about the focus of the research. With commune elections due in Cambodia in 2022, municipal and *suku* elections expected to take place in Timor-Leste in 2021/2023 and provincial elections taking place in Solomon Islands on an ongoing basis, findings from this research have immediate application for women's rights organisations in these countries.

IWDA had a strong commitment to working collaboratively with partner organisations in the *Public Perceptions* research. Parameters of time and resources meant that some aspects of this research were influenced more by IWDA than partners. IWDA played a lead role in developing the overall purpose, high level questions and conceptual framework for the research. However, implementation of the research was comprehensively managed by the country teams. This included developing unique survey and qualitative question sets, choosing a sampling approach, recruiting, training and managing field researchers, seeking local permissions, analysing the data collected and interpreting findings. Each country team ran workshops as part of the development of recommendations and a produced a detailed research report. IWDA Program Managers worked closely with the research teams throughout this activity. The research has generated valuable learnings in relation to the possibilities of co-design in future research.

## **We conduct applied research that seeks a transformative impact on the causes of gender equality**

IWDA is committed to research as a form of action. The *Public Perceptions* research has generated findings in relation to women and political leadership specific to the three countries but of relevance more broadly. The findings highlight the impact of informal barriers to women's political leadership and the importance of engaging with public concerns about change in relation to political representation. Confirming work by others, the

research suggests that achieving gender equality requires explicit engagement with gender norms and discriminatory practices that are embedded in our political processes and in everyday life.<sup>93</sup>

Partners in Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands have commenced drawing on the findings from this research in their programming and advocacy work. 'Research into Action' workshops have been held with stakeholders of the research in each country and this work will continue into the future. Partners see this research as an important evidence base for broader transformative work.

A further transformative aspect of this study relates to the potential for capacity building it presented to the individuals and organisations involved, including IWDA. The *Public Perceptions* project was explicitly intended to provide opportunities for partners to gain experience in research design, implementation and analysis. Although systematic documentation of capacity building outcomes was not possible within the time available, it is clear that engagement with this research has been of high value to partner organisations. Key project staff have reported significant change in their own skills and the capacity and reputation of the organisation as a result of conducting this research. In future collaborative studies, this aspect of research could be strengthened by documenting both individual and partner organisation expectations in relation to capacity building and formally evaluating outcomes.

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<sup>93</sup> Gender and Development Network, p.1.

# CONCLUSION

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The *Public Perceptions* research provides important insights into views on women and political leadership in three countries. There is much that is encouraging from the findings. The majority of participants in the studies, as in the Fiji research, were broadly in favour of gender equality and supportive of there being more women in political leadership. Many participants were also aware that the barriers to women's participation are real and complex. These general views provide an important basis for advocates working towards increased political representation by women.

While the majority of participants 'believe in' gender equality, however, prevailing gender norms continue to have a significant influence on perceptions of women as political leaders. Political leadership is still strongly associated with men and views on women's capacity for leadership are coloured by stereotypes of women's qualities and attributes. Leadership is still seen by many people as 'men's business'.

The *Public Perceptions* research also suggests that public expectations of potential women leaders can be extremely high. In stark contrast to the behaviour of many leaders who are men, women who aspire to political leadership roles are expected to be exemplary both in their business dealings and in their personal lives. Women candidates are required to be highly ethical, caring and "in touch with" community concerns. The research suggests that, when women are perceived as not meeting these gendered expectations, they may be harshly judged.

Findings across the three countries indicate that there is some public awareness of both formal and informal barriers to women's political leadership. Many participants recognised that the practices of political parties, limited access to financial resources and the influence of those in power were real and significant impediments to women considering political leadership. The research suggests there is also some public awareness of less visible barriers, including perceptions of women's capacity for leadership. This is evident in the references to 'culture' as an explanation for the low representation of women. The research suggests that increasing

public understanding of these informal barriers should be a focus in work towards gender equality in political leadership.

Finally, the research suggests that, in a context of broader social change, people may be both supportive of and apprehensive about active interventions to increase women's political representation. All three studies indicate there is some public support for normalising women's leadership in keeping with belonging to a 'modern' nation state. This is promising for advocates of gender equality. However, many participants also expressed concern about changes to electoral processes and political decision making structures. This theme was explored most explicitly in the Solomon Islands study, where participants identified specific concerns about changing political processes through the introduction of temporary special measures.

The *Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders* research highlights the importance of considering the interdependence of individual and systemic, and formal and informal, factors in relation to women's political leadership.<sup>94</sup> Formal barriers spoken about in the research, including access to resources, the practices of political parties and the electoral setting, interact with informal barriers, including perceptions of women and their capacity for political leadership. Institutional practices and social norms are in constant dialogue and work towards change must address these deep structures.

The women's rights organisations who participated the *Public Perceptions* research have a sound understanding of this complex landscape. It is hoped that this research provides an evidence base for their ongoing work with individuals, communities, policy makers and governments in making visible the attitudes and practices that contribute so powerfully to the entrenched gender inequality in political leadership in the three research countries and beyond.

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<sup>94</sup> See <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>

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