

# Increasing women's political representation in Solomon Islands

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On 29 December 2023, the Solomon Islands National Cabinet approved the introduction of temporary special measures (TSMs) to improve women's political representation in the Provincial Government Assemblies (PGAs). Slated as an amendment to the Provincial Government Amendment Bill, the measures are expected to be voted on in the National Parliament this year, marking a momentous milestone in the fight for gender equality in Solomon Islands.

Women's political participation and representation has been an ongoing challenge in Solomon Islands. Since independence in 1978, **only eight women** have been elected to the National Parliament. At the provincial level there are currently only five female members out of 173 members (2.8%). Women seeking leadership roles face many barriers including a patriarchal culture, religious norms, lack of education, and money politics. For example, in the recent 2024 election it was announced that two serving female MPs would not stand for re-election, stepping aside so that their husbands could contest their seats. The fact that only **six per cent of candidates** in the 2024 election were women, with only eight elected across national and provincial levels, further underscores the existing gender disparity in political representation.

However, over the past six years the Women's Rights Action Movement (WRAM) has been leading a campaign to change this situation alongside their partners, the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (MWYCFA) and the Solomon Islands National Council of Women (SINCW). Their goal is to improve women's political representation at the provincial government level through TSMs.

The debate around increasing women's political leadership is not new in Solomon Islands. In April 2017, a proposal for TSMs was taken to the floor of Parliament for a vote but did not secure enough support to pass. That failure demonstrated that although some members of parliament supported increasing women's participation in leadership, many were not confident that TSMs were the best way to achieve this. This stemmed from a belief that women had the same opportunities and ability to be

elected as men; a notion that the numbers and **research have shown** to be inaccurate.

Research by WRAM and the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) in 2019 on **perceptions of women in leadership** highlighted both the challenges and opportunities involved in addressing this issue. The research found that there was significant support for more women in politics within the community (88%); however, only one in five people had ever voted for a female candidate. Throughout the research process, communities overwhelmingly expressed support for TSMs, with 92% of respondents supporting their implementation. Using this research, WRAM developed and delivered a successful advocacy campaign both at the political and community level with the goal of getting TSMs through the parliament. Its success depended on endorsement from all nine PGAs and evidence of strong community support.

As with all advocacy campaigns, there were setbacks. In 2021, funding from a major donor ceased due to a shift in their geographic priorities, while COVID-19 prevented travel to the provinces to engage in advocacy. In addition, the legal requirements for the endorsement of TSMs changed. As a result, endorsement had to come from the full assembly rather than just the executive. WRAM worked with its long-standing partner, IWDA, to secure new funding from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to continue support for the campaign. When COVID-19 restrictions ended, WRAM began an intensive campaign period, visiting provincial government assemblies and holding community consultations to build support for, and secure endorsement of, TSMs. By 2023, WRAM had secured endorsement from all nine PGAs — a significant achievement in shifting attitudes towards gender equality, and a major step forward for increasing women's political representation in Solomon Islands.

Alongside advocacy to the PGAs, WRAM also conducted community consultations to raise awareness of TSMs and build support for increasing women's participation in political leadership at the community level. The cumulative results from these consultations support the data from the perceptions research with over 90% of community members in the consultations supporting an increased role for women in leadership.

Both achievements were key in building support for TSMs within National Cabinet. They served to demonstrate strong community support and support from the PGAs, leading to a shift in the attitudes of powerful male leaders towards women's leadership across Solomon Islands. The next step in the TSM campaign is to work towards a vote in the new parliament in the second half of the 2024.

There are three key lessons from the success of WRAM's advocacy campaign. First, deep local knowledge is key. WRAM's long-term advocacy experience enabled them to develop a comprehensive knowledge of local contexts and dynamics in each province. Having this understanding enabled the team to respond effectively to concerns raised by PGA members, and ultimately convince them of the value of TSMs.

Second, relationships matter. WRAM's ability to build strong relationships with key stakeholders and allies has been instrumental in the campaign's success. This is evidenced by the close working relationship between WRAM and the Women's Development Division of MWYCFA on TSMs since 2017, which has been key in navigating political spaces. This partnership has been strengthened through recognition of WRAM's expertise and experience in advocating for gender equality, supported by the perceptions research.

Finally, community consultation is not just a box-ticking exercise. Alongside advocacy to the PGAs, WRAM also conducted community consultations to raise awareness of TSMs and build support for increasing women's participation in political leadership at the community level. Evidence from the community consultations has been a powerful advocacy tool in securing support from members of the PGAs and from Members of Parliament at the national level. Both the PGA endorsements and community consultations were key in securing the support of the then Prime Minister in the National Cabinet.

The success of the TSM campaign is a testament to the vital role that women's rights organisations play in advancing gender equality. It demonstrates the deep knowledge, networks, and skills that women's rights movements bring. When they are supported with flexible core funding, have the space and support to respond and adapt quickly, and receive strong support from donors to utilise their own deep cultural and political knowledge, powerful change is possible.

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