

## TUVALU GOVERNMENT



### Pacific Technical Cooperation Session of the CEDAW Committee

#### **Opening Statement by the Prime Minister of Tuvalu**

[9<sup>th</sup> April 2025]

1. Madam Chair and distinguished members of the Committee.
2. Representatives of partner organizations and fellow delegates.
3. I am delighted to appear before the Committee as the Prime Minister of Tuvalu and the Minister responsible for gender equality in Tuvalu.
4. I thank Fiji for hosting this historical session and for the largess of her hospitality and the courtesies extended to me and my delegation since arrival in Fiji.
5. I thank the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), UN Women, and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for their leadership in bringing the CEDAW Committee to the Pacific.
6. I also thank the Pacific Community (SPC) for supporting Tuvalu and other Pacific Island nations preparing for this dialogue.
7. I express Tuvalu's deepest appreciation to the Committee for its continued commitment to advancing gender equality globally.
8. My delegation looks forward to engaging meaningfully with the Committee concerning Tuvalu's progress, challenges and aspirations in implementing the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW).
9. Having the dialogue in Fiji, ensures that the unique and peculiar circumstances of Small Island Developing States, like Tuvalu, are better understood and appreciated.
10. Madam Chair our challenges and opportunities are deeply linked to our environment, particularly to the ocean that sustains us.
11. Ironically, it is the ocean that now threatens our future survivability as a nation and a people due to the impacts of climate change-induced sea level rise.
12. I would speak more on that later.
13. Madam Chair, the preparation of our national report went through a rigorous and robust process.
14. As a small country with limited technical and human capacity, collecting the necessary data to assess our progress and challenges took considerable time.
15. We made sure that the reporting process was inclusive and participatory, combining it with our national review of the Beijing Platform for Action +30.
16. The process allowed us to reflect on our achievements, gaps, priorities and challenges in a holistic manner.
17. The process engaged over 40 participants from across government departments and civil society organizations.
18. Through this collaboration, we identified both the progress made in promoting gender equality and the persistent challenges that hindered progress.

19. The voices of those working directly with communities, particularly civil society organisations, were crucial in the formulation of our report, and I acknowledge and applaud their contributions.
20. This dialogue today is an opportunity for us to reflect, learn, and reinforce our commitments to progressing gender equality.
21. And we approach this dialogue with an open mind and a genuine determination to improve the lives of women and girls in Tuvalu.

### ***Tuvalu Context***

22. Madam Chair, to understand the progress Tuvalu has achieved in implementing CEDAW, it is imperative to also understand our national context.
23. How decisions are made, how policies and laws evolve and the rich cultures and values that underpin our societies.
24. In Tuvalu, policy and legal reforms do not occur in a vacuum.
25. Our governance system is deeply rooted in community engagement and collective decision-making.
26. Public consultations with island communities are fundamental to the formulation of all national policies and laws.
27. Any proposed changes, whether related to gender equality, economic development, or environmental sustainability, must be discussed with communities to ensure their alignment with our cultural values and national aspirations.
28. This process takes time, but it ensures that policies are understood, accepted, and owned by whole of society to ensure their effective implementation.
29. Tuvalu is a country built on strong social and traditional values of respect, cooperation, and the wellbeing of the collective over the individual.
30. Families and communities are at the heart of our way of life, and our relationship with the ocean is central to our identity.
31. The ocean is not just a resource; it is our home, it is our livelihood, and it is our connection to our ancestors.
32. However, the ocean also represents our greatest vulnerability as climate change-induced sea level rise continues to threaten our islands and our very way of life, if not halted and reversed.
33. As a Small Island Developing State, Tuvalu faces unique structural challenges that influence our capacity to advance gender equality.
34. With a small public service workforce, we have limited technical and human capacity to implement and monitor effectively the gender responsiveness of our policies and services.
35. The country is geographically dispersed, with nine islands of a combined land area of 26 square kilometres spread across 750,000 square kilometres of ocean.
36. This makes service delivery in sectors like education, health, and justice particularly complex, especially for women and girls living in outer islands.
37. Our small residential population of just over 10,000 people means that every individual plays a vital role.
38. However, it also means that our capacity to enforce laws and policies is seriously constrained.
39. Access to justice and essential services remains a challenge, particularly for women experiencing gender-based violence or those seeking economic opportunities.
40. Despite these challenges, we remain committed to ensuring that gender equality is integrated and mainstreamed into our national development.

41. We accept that the resilience of Tuvalu depends on the participation and leadership of women at all levels of society.
42. Against this backdrop, I now turn to the specific progress Tuvalu has achieved in implementing CEDAW and the persistent challenges that we continue to encounter.

### ***Progress and Challenges in Implementing CEDAW***

43. Madam Chair, Tuvalu remains committed to implementing CEDAW, and we have made meaningful progress in several areas.
44. At the same time, we also acknowledge the existent of obstacles that challenge progress.
45. Since our last report, we have taken significant steps to strengthen our legal and policy framework for gender equality.
46. We have actioned several of the CEDAW Committee's recommendations.
47. The Marriage Act was amended in 2015 to raise the minimum legal age for marriage to 18 years for both girls and boys.
48. The 2014 Family Protection and Domestic Violence Act of Tuvalu criminalizes domestic violence and provides protection measures such as restraining orders, child protection, and survivor support services.
49. The 2017 Labour and Employment Relations Act introduced strong protections against workplace discrimination.
50. Another major step forward has been in our constitutional framework.
51. The 2023 review of our Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sex.
52. In terms of leadership, we have seen a gradual but encouraging increase in the number of women in senior government positions.
53. Today, women hold 37 percent of senior leadership roles in government, compared to 34 percent in 2018.
54. In the judiciary, women now make up 53 percent of magistrates, a significant increase from just 13 percent in 2020.
55. Women also lead key government institutions like the offices of the Attorney General and the Auditor-General.
56. There is also a noticeable increase in the number of women chief executive officers in government ministries and state-owned enterprises.
57. My delegation to this dialogue is dominated by women, not because I wanted more women on the delegation, but because they deserve to be here on their own merits as holders of key executive positions in the government.
58. Madam chair, despite this progress, we recognize that deep-rooted challenges remain.
59. One of the most pressing issues is gender-based violence.
60. Forty-four percent of women in Tuvalu have experienced intimate partner violence, yet only one in three survivors seeks help.
61. Another area where we continue to struggle is women's participation in politics.
62. There are currently no women in the Parliament, and women make up only 17 percent of members in local governments.
63. While efforts to increase women's leadership are ongoing, including leadership training and awareness-raising, cultural and institutional barriers remain strong.
64. Discussions on temporary special measures have taken place, but there is considerable resistance to their adoption.
65. Discriminatory laws and cultural norms continue to present obstacles to full gender equality.

66. While the constitutional review marked an important milestone, some laws still contain provisions that disadvantage women, particularly in areas related to land inheritance and customary rights.
67. The Tuvalu Lands Code and the Native Lands Act are currently under review, but progress has been slow due to cultural sensitivities.
68. Our ability to track progress on gender equality is another significant challenge.
69. Tuvalu does not yet have a strong system for collecting and analysing gender-based data and there is no systematic mechanism for monitoring gender-related indicators across sectors.
70. The absence of sex-disaggregated data makes it difficult to assess the real impact of policies and programs in improving gender equality.
71. This is an area where we recognize the need for greater investment.
72. Madam Chair, though we are proud of the progress we have achieved to-date, there remains a lot of work ahead.
73. Gender equality is not just about laws and policies, it requires shifts in attitudes, strengthened institutions, and collective actions across whole of society.
74. We welcome the Committee's insights and counsel on how we can further accelerate progress for gender equality in Tuvalu.

***The Impact of Climate Change on Women's Human Rights in Tuvalu***

75. Madam Chair, I want to take the opportunity now to talk further about how climate change affects the lives and fundamental right of women and girls in Tuvalu.
76. Climate change is not a distant threat for Tuvalu, it is a reality that defines our present situation and threatens our future.
77. As one of the most vulnerable countries to sea level rise, Tuvalu stands at the frontline of the global climate crisis.
78. For Tuvalu, the scientific projections are clear and frightening: sea levels are rising, and as current trends continue, large parts of our islands could become uninhabitable within the next few decades.
79. The intensification of tropical cyclones, coastal erosion, coral bleaching, salinization of freshwater sources, and extreme heat are already disrupting the lives of our people.
80. As these challenges intensify, Tuvaluan women are not standing still, they are already taking remedial actions.
81. Across the islands, women have been leading climate resilience programs to protect our environment and preserve our way of life.
82. Women groups have been actively involved in planting mangroves and coastal vegetation to reduce erosion and protect the coastlines.
83. Others, have participated in coral planting initiatives, working to restore marine ecosystems that sustain our fisheries and food supply.
84. In our communities, women are organizing and advocating for policies that protect our environment and educating younger generations on the importance of sustainability.
85. Climate change, in my respectful view, is not just an environmental issue, it is a human rights issue.
86. In Tuvalu, it threatens the right to life, the right to food, the right to water, the right to health, and the right to an adequate standard of living.
87. For Tuvaluan women, it also threatens their right to economic security, safety, and full participation in society.
88. The displacement caused by sea level rise could further jeopardize these rights, forcing communities into uncertain futures where women and children will be among the most vulnerable.

89. Tuvalu, however, does not promote displacement as a solution.
90. Our people do not want to leave their God-given homeland.
91. We want to remain on our islands, protect our culture, and ensure that future generations grow up knowing their home, their language and their traditions.
92. In response to this existential crisis, the government has taken proactive measures to safeguard Tuvalu's future.
93. Madam Chair, as Tuvalu continues to fight for its survival, we urge the international community to recognize climate change as a fundamental threat to human rights.
94. We need stronger global commitments to climate action, not just to reduce emissions, but to support the resilience of frontline communities, especially the women who are working every day to protect our islands.
95. Something that was not highlighted in our report to CEDAW is the remarkable contribution of Tuvaluan women in leading the country's global advocacy on climate change, particularly through their representation at some of the highest levels of international legal proceedings.
96. Tuvalu has taken bold steps on the international legal stage by actively engaging with both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) to seek justice and accountability for the impacts of climate change.
97. Tuvalu supported the global initiative for an ICJ advisory opinion to clarify the legal obligations of states to protect the rights of present and future generations from the harmful effects of climate change.
98. Tuvalu and Antigua and Barbuda as co-chairs of the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS), co-requested and secured an affirmative advisory opinion in May 2024 from the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea on states' duties and responsibilities under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to prevent and reduce greenhouse gas emissions that harm the marine environment.
99. In both legal proceedings, Tuvalu's efforts were led by the current Attorney General and the immediate former Attorney General now Tuvalu's High Commissioner to Fiji both women and members of my delegation.

### ***The Importance of Collective Action and Partnership***

100. Madam Chair, achieving gender equality and ensuring the protection of women's human rights in Tuvalu should not be the sole responsibility of the government.
101. It requires collective efforts, a strong partnership between government, civil society, and development partners, working together toward a shared vision of equality and resilience for the women and girls of Tuvalu.
102. In Tuvalu, civil society organizations have been at the heart of gender equality advocacy and social change for decades.
103. The Tuvalu National Council of Women has played a foundational role since Tuvalu's independence in raising women's awareness of their rights, advocating for CEDAW, and promoting women's leadership.
104. Over the years, the National Council has also worked to develop cultural industries, supporting women in traditional and contemporary handicrafts as a means of economic empowerment.
105. The National Council continues to be a driving force for gender equality, ensuring that women's voices are heard at the highest levels of decision-making.

106. More recently, FatuLei has emerged as a critical civil society actor, leading efforts to mobilize civil society organisations in addressing gender-based violence and expanding much-needed counselling services for survivors.
107. Their work in strengthening community-based responses to gender-based violence and advocating for comprehensive support services has been a crucial step toward ensuring that women and girls in Tuvalu have access to justice and protection.
108. Another key organization is the Tuvalu Family Health Association (TuFHA), which has played a fundamental role in promoting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.
109. TuFHA has worked tirelessly to expand access to family planning, maternal healthcare, and reproductive health education, ensuring that women have the information and services they need to make autonomous decisions about their bodies and their futures.
110. The Tuvalu government recognizes the value and strength of civil society.
111. That is why we continue to work in close collaboration with women's groups, faith-based organizations, and non-governmental organisations to ensure that our policies and programs reflect the realities of our communities.
112. We know that lasting change comes from the ground up, and our role as government is to support, enable and institutionalize the progress that civil society is driving.
113. Our development partners also play a critical role, providing technical expertise, funding, and platforms for regional and global advocacy.
114. Through their support, we have been able to strengthen legal frameworks, implement national action plans, and build the institutional capacity needed to advance gender equality.
115. Their continued engagement remains essential in ensuring that our commitments under CEDAW translate into real and tangible improvements in the lives of women and girls.
116. Madam Chair, the challenges we face, whether in advancing gender equality, addressing gender-based violence, or responding to the existential crisis of climate change, cannot be solved in isolation.
117. Only through collective actions can we build a more just, equitable and resilient Tuvalu, where every woman and girl can thrive.

***Areas Where Tuvalu Needs Support to Advance Women's Human Rights***

118. Madam Chair, while Tuvalu remains committed to advancing gender equality and protecting women's human rights, we face structural and resource limitations that make progress challenging.
119. To accelerate change, we recognize the need for targeted support in key areas where external assistance and partnerships could make a real difference.
120. One of the most pressing gaps is the lack of comprehensive gender statistics and data systems.
121. Without reliable sex-disaggregated data, it is difficult to track progress, assess the impact of policies, and design programs that respond effectively to the needs of women and girls.
122. We need technical and financial support to develop a robust gender statistics system that can provide regular, high-quality data across key sectors, including employment, education, health, and gender-based violence.
123. Another critical area for support is for a regional platform for knowledge-sharing and exchanges on good practices for transforming harmful gender norms.
124. Across the Pacific, countries are piloting successful initiatives to shift mindsets and address the deep-rooted beliefs that limit women's participation in leadership, economic development, and decision-making.

125. Creating stronger regional platforms for Tuvaluan leaders, civil society, and gender advocates to learn from and adapt these approaches to address our challenges.
126. We also need support in developing effective behaviour change programs for perpetrators of gender-based violence.
127. While Tuvalu has made progress in addressing violence against women through legal protections and support for survivors, there are no structured interventions aimed at rehabilitating offenders and breaking cycles of violence.
128. Programs that focus on behavioural change, accountability, and non-violent conflict resolution could help prevent repeat offenses and contribute to long-term societal change.
129. Finally, we need climate change solutions that empower women.
130. Women are at the frontline of Tuvalu's climate resilience efforts, but their contributions often go unrecognized and unsupported.
131. Investments in climate-smart livelihoods, renewable energy solutions, and women-led environmental programs could strengthen both our national resilience and gender equality efforts.
132. Ensuring that climate financing mechanisms prioritize women's leadership and participation is essential to securing a sustainable and gender-responsive future for Tuvalu.
133. Madam Chair, Tuvalu does not stand alone in its efforts to advance gender equality.
134. With the right partnerships, knowledge-sharing, and targeted support, we can build a future where women's rights are not just protected in law but fully realized in practice.

### ***Conclusion of the Opening Statement***

135. Madam Chair, distinguished Committee members,
136. As I conclude this opening statement, I wish to reaffirm Tuvalu's strong commitment to gender equality and the full implementation of CEDAW.
137. We recognize that while progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to ensure that the rights of women and girls in Tuvalu are fully realized.
138. We deeply appreciate the expertise and dedication of this Committee in advancing women's rights globally.
139. Your insights and counsel will be invaluable in guiding our next steps and the way forward.
140. We approach this dialogue with openness, humility, and a genuine determination to learn and improve.
141. Tuvalu is a small island nation with unique challenges, but we are also a nation of resilience, strength, and deep cultural values.
142. Our people, especially our women, have demonstrated time and again their ability to adapt, lead, and drive changes.
143. The Government of Tuvalu remains committed to working hand in hand with civil society, traditional leaders, and development partners to ensure that gender equality is not just a policy objective but a lived reality for all women and girl of Tuvalu.
144. We welcome the Committee's insights and look forward to engaging in this dialogue in a spirit of partnership, learning, and shared commitment to justice and equality.
145. I thank you, Madam Chair.
146. Fafetai lasi.

**END**