

Tuvalu

Fisheries are central to Tuvalu's economy and food systems. In 2021, offshore commercial fishing generated more than 76% of government revenue. Coastal fisheries – primarily subsistence fishing – support high per capita fish consumption and local food security. Women have traditionally made key contributions in coastal fisheries, engaging in gleaning, inshore fishing, processing, and trade. Beyond food security, women collect shells for handicraft production, supporting household livelihoods and the national economy.

Despite their contributions, resource management remains male-dominated, limiting women's participation in decision-making structures. Structural barriers and gendered social norms also continue to constrain women's access to resources, economic opportunities, and political participation.

Positive shifts are underway. Girls now outperform boys in education, women are increasingly represented in public leadership, and initiatives like the *Tau Maketi* market and targeted loan schemes are supporting women entrepreneurs. Tuvalu's 2024 National Gender Equity Policy is also a significant step forward. Yet challenges remain, particularly in addressing gender-based violence and economic disparities. Strengthening women's participation in fisheries governance and improving access to training, resources, and markets will be key to advancing gender equity and strengthening sector resilience.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the role of seafood production in Tuvalu, with a focus on gender dimensions, highlighting opportunities to strengthen gender equity and women's empowerment in the sector and beyond. It is part of a series offering development partners, government agencies, NGOs, and researchers with a snapshot of gender equity and fisheries to inform the planning and delivery of relevant activities these actors might be involved in or are in the process of developing.



Fisheries production

National data

In 2021, Tuvalu's annual coastal fisheries production was estimated at 1,500 tonnes, with subsistence fishing accounting for 1,150 tonnes and commercial fishing contributing 350 tonnes.¹

National estimates also show that purse seine fleets operating in Tuvalu's waters landed a total of 58,922 tonnes of fish in 2022, primarily skipjack (*Katsuwonus pelamis*) tuna (92%), followed by yellowfin (*Thunnus albacares*) and bigeye (*Thunnus obesus*).² That same year, Fijian and Chinese longline fleets caught 1,041 tonnes of tuna in Tuvalu's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), with albacore (*Thunnus alalunga*) making up 44% of the total, followed by yellowfin and bigeye.² Tuvalu operated six purse seine vessels in 2022, which caught 41,117 tonnes of tuna.² Skipjack accounted for over 85% of the catch.

Sea Around Us data

The Sea Around Us^a estimated total annual marine capture production for fleets flagged to Tuvalu as follows:

- ▶ Marine subsistence^b (2019) – 1,316 tonnes
- ▶ Marine commercial^c (2019) – 7,635 tonnes caught by the industrial sector, with 5,253 tonnes caught within the EEZ of the Pacific Island region (48% in Kiribati, 21% in Papua New Guinea and 12% in the Federated States of Micronesia, or FSM), 502 tonnes within its own EEZ, and 1,879 tonnes on the high seas. Local artisanal fleets captured 458 tonnes within Tuvalu's waters.

Foreign industrial fleets accounted for an additional catch of 142,833 tonnes (2019) within Tuvalu's waters. The following fleets were responsible for the majority of those catches: South Korea (14%), Taiwan (13%), Japan (11%), Papua New Guinea (10%), USA (10%), Kiribati (10%) and FSM (7%).

Fish consumption

The 2015-16 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) yielded estimates of annual fish consumption of 72 kg per person (90 kg on outer islands and 55 kg for the capital Funafuti).⁴ While this still represents some of the highest fish consumption rates in the world, it is lower than estimates from a decade earlier. In rural areas, most of this fish comes from subsistence fishing and provides over 75% of dietary animal protein.⁵

Economic contribution to GDP

Fisheries were estimated to contribute 4.8% to GDP in 2021.¹ Fisheries access fees were estimated to generate USD 25.6 million contributing 76.3% to government revenue in 2021.¹

Employment contribution (all)

Fishing and gleaning are important livelihood activities in Tuvalu, particularly for rural households. According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, 17% of Tuvalu's 1,799 occupied private households⁶ engage in fishing or gleaning,^d with higher participation in rural areas (32%) compared to Funafuti (5%).⁶ Findings from the 2022-2023 HIES show that fishing is more common in lower-income, youth-led, and male-headed households.⁶ Fisheries have become an increasingly important source of cash income in Tuvalu. Fisheries' contribution to primary-sector cash income grew from 30% in 2015 to 53% in 2022, reflecting a growing reliance on fishing as a key livelihood strategy.⁶

Diverse fishing methods and locations characterize Tuvalu's small-scale fisheries. According to the 2022-2023 HIES, net fishing was the most commonly used method (33% of fishing households), followed by rod (22%) and handline fishing. Gleaning, trolling, and fish fencing was conducted by 22% of households. Most fishing occurs in the lagoon, particularly among higher-income (74%) and urban households (64%). Other key fishing areas include reef flats (29%), outer reefs (22%), and the open ocean (17%). Most catches were comprised of reef and pelagic fishes, with only 2% of fishing households harvesting invertebrates. Nationally, 23% of fishing households sold their catch locally, with higher rates among urban environments (45%) and those including members with disabilities (38%).⁶

No data was available from the Illuminating Hidden Harvest (IHH) Initiative^{8,e} for Tuvalu.

Employment contribution (women)

“Women's traditional inshore fishing and gleaning activities have become less central to household food security and are often pursued for leisure or social purposes...”

“Women are the primary traders of fish, selling catch at roadside stalls, through home-to-home networks, and on credit.”

Women in Tuvalu have traditionally played a key role in coastal fisheries, primarily through inshore fishing and gleaning for invertebrates, contributing significantly to household nutrition security. However, their participation has often been undervalued due to prevailing social norms.⁹ While men can take on fishing activities typically performed by women, women traditionally do not participate in men's fishing activities. Deep-sea fishing, in particular, remains a male-dominated practice.^{9,10}

Technological advancements and shifting social norms are contributing to reshaping gender roles in Tuvalu's fisheries. The introduction of outboard motors has changed fishing dynamics,¹¹ with men increasingly engaging in pelagic fishing, leading to greater availability of fish for both family consumption and commercial sale. As a result, women's traditional inshore fishing and gleaning activities have become less central to household food security and are often pursued for leisure or social purposes, including to collect shells for crafts (also see below subsection titled *Ornamental shell trade*).^{11,f}

In Funafuti, Tuvalu's capital, changing attitudes have created more opportunities for women to engage in fishing beyond traditional roles. At the same time, socioeconomic factors, including labour migration separating families,¹² and rising divorce rates have contributed to an increase in female-headed households, with many of these women relying on subsistence fishing to support their families.

Despite changes to fishing practices, in Funafuti and on outer islands, women continue to play a central role in post-harvest activities, particularly fish processing and trading.¹¹ Their contribution to food security is particularly important during unsafe weather conditions when families rely more on women's gleaning activities as an alternative to offshore fishing.¹² While traditional preservation methods such as salting, smoking and drying¹³ remain vital to local food security, they are increasingly at risk of being lost due to the growing use of modern storage and processing methods, changing diets, and greater access to imported, often cheaper, alternatives such as noodles, tinned fish, and tinned meat. Women are the primary traders of fish, selling catch at roadside stalls, through home-to-home networks, and on credit. They are responsible for weighing, handling and pricing, as well as managing cold storage.

Community functions

Beyond household consumption and commercial sales, a significant portion of fish and shellfish is allocated for community functions that are held regularly and often involve large gatherings. While men are typically responsible for supplying fish for these events, women play a key role in preparing and cooking seafood, often through coordinated efforts within women's groups. This practice is likely substantial and culturally significant, but remains largely overlooked in fisheries reporting, with no data available to quantify men's and women's contributions to these non-monetary activities.

In some cases, the strong emphasis on the provisioning of highly-valued traditional foods – which may include banned species such as sea turtles – for these events has led to the circumvention of local management rules, including sourcing from other islands. Recognising dynamic and gendered contributions to these events could help inform more effective and culturally sensitive fisheries policies and programmes.⁸

Ornamental shell trade

Beyond fisheries for household consumption, women also play a central

role in Tuvalu's ornamental shell trade for handicraft production. A 2003 study conducted in Funafuti and Nukufetau showed that these contributions significantly impact both household livelihoods and the national economy.¹⁴ Women collect different shells, including *pule* (*Cypraea* spp.) and *misa* (*Melampus* spp.), from beaches and reef flats. These are crafted into necklaces worn when performing the traditional *fatele* dance,¹⁵ into items used for ceremonial purposes during communal functions, as well as into other jewelry and home decorations.¹⁶ Shells hold profound cultural significance, also serving as valuable family heirlooms (*pakasoa*) and symbols of status. More recently, giving shell ornaments to friends and family leaving Tuvalu has become a common practice.

While traditional shell handicrafts have been produced in Tuvalu since at least the early 1900s, the commercial shell trade only emerged following the country's separation from Kiribati in 1976.¹⁶ A report from the early 1990s found that many women involved in the trade relied on it as a primary source of income, with shell sales contributing between 50% and 70% of household earnings for most collectors – an estimate that remains true today for households engaged in the trade.^h Findings from the 2022-2023 HIES indicate that female-headed households relied more on handicraft production (which includes food production) for income than on any other primary activity, while male-headed households earned the most from fisheries.⁶ However, there are concerns about resource sustainability, with some species, such as *pule*, having reportedly declined near main settlements in Funafuti due to over-harvesting.¹⁶ Demand and prices for shell products increased considerably after COVID-19, with the average price of shell necklaces at the airport rising from USD 5 to USD 10 or more.ⁱ

Despite the shell trade's economic importance, no national regulations govern shell collection in Tuvalu. Instead, local resource management is overseen by traditional authorities, including chiefs, elders, and the island council (*Kaupule*), with occasional input from the council of elders (*Falekaupule*) or the traditional assembly on each island. Management measures such as seasonal closures, collection bans, and special protected areas are locally determined and have been further formalised through the recent launch of coastal fisheries management plans.¹⁷ While no license is required to collect shells or fish, women who sell handicrafts or fish must obtain a government license and pay a fee to participate in the trade.^j

While women play a central role in shell collection and trade, they remain largely absent from resource management discussions and decisions. Decision-making within the *Falekaupule* is largely restricted to older men, typically aged 50 and above. In Funafuti some younger *matai* (chiefs) are present, but traditional norms around who can engage often limits their ability to actively participate in discussions.^k In Funafuti, women without male relatives may represent their families in elder councils, allowing them to participate in decision-making, but equal and active participation is not guaranteed since cultural practices and traditional attitudes and perceptions often cast women as silent observers rather than full participants.^l Although the *Falekaupule Act (1997)* provides a legal basis for women's inclusion in traditional decision-making, customary practices continue to constrain their participation, prompting government efforts to amend the law to enable women to debate and contribute to key processes such as budget approval.¹⁸ There are a small number of women *matai* who may contribute to governance processes but they are not permitted to vote.¹⁸ Cultural taboos also restrict women's participation in island councils, although a growing number of women are being elected to the *Kaupule*.

No data was available from the Illuminating Hidden Harvest Initiative^{8,m} for Tuvalu.

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Social considerations

Tuvaluan society remains patriarchal. Gender roles shape household responsibilities, community engagement, and economic participation. Traditionally, Tuvaluan women have been responsible for childcare, food preparation, water collection, housekeeping, crafts, and informal economic activities, while men have held primary authority in decision-making and formal employment.¹⁹ Women also continue to face disadvantages in land ownership and inheritance due to both customary practices²⁰ and discriminatory legal provisions, including the 2023 Constitution, *Native Lands Act (1956)*, and *Lands Code (1962)*, which allow for gender- and age-based distinctions.²¹ However, urbanization, limited land access, economic shifts, and an increased reliance on cash-based livelihoods have led to evolving gender roles and changing family (*kaaiga*) structures, especially in Funafuti, where more women are entering the workforce.¹⁹

Despite male dominance in family decision-making and authority, Tuvaluan culture also places strong emphasis on respect and kinship ties.¹⁹ Traditional practices, such as *tuagaene* (brother-sister reverence) and the protective role of uncles reinforce family cohesion, respect, and mutual support.¹⁹ However, these traditions do not necessarily translate into greater gender equality in leadership or resource control, where men continue to hold the majority of decision-making power.

“Education outcomes for girls have steadily improved[...]. Yet, girls remain under-represented in technical and vocational training, limiting their access to higher-paying career paths.”

Education

Education outcomes for girls have steadily improved, with higher enrollment and academic performance than boys over the past five years (2020-2025) across all levels of education.²² Yet, girls remain underrepresented in technical and vocational training, limiting their access to higher-paying career paths.ⁿ

Education levels are also closely linked to hardship, with regional data showing stark disparities. In Tuvalu, households led by individuals who attended primary school, or portions of it, experience hardship at rates 26% higher than the national average, while those with a tertiary-educated head of household are 39% less likely to face hardship.²³

To address gender disparities, the government has launched initiatives such as the Tuvalu Learning Project and the Tuvalu Australian Partnership for Quality Education. These programs aim to enhance early childhood learning, improve literacy, and promote gender-inclusive curricula, while also tackling issues including bullying and the underperformance of boys. By fostering safer, more inclusive learning environments, these efforts seek to empower girls to achieve their full potential while also addressing gendered gaps in education.²² In its Corporate Plan, the Tuvalu Fisheries Department also highlights that it will “work on the role of women in fisheries in Tuvalu and [develop] a new scheme to attract promising school leavers to study and work in Fisheries.”²⁴ The government aims to integrate additional gender-focused initiatives into its upcoming Corporate Plan, which is scheduled for completion by August 2025.^o

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Labour force dynamics

In 2022, labour force participation rate stood at 24.9%, with a notable gender gap: 29.6% for working age men compared to 20% for working age women.²⁵ Women are primarily engaged in the informal economy, particularly handicraft production, which accounts for 12% of primary economic activities but is not formally recognised. Employment in the informal economy is usually characterized by a lack of structure and a lack of access to legal protection, secure benefits, welfare protection, or representation.²⁵ Unpaid care work continues to limit women's economic

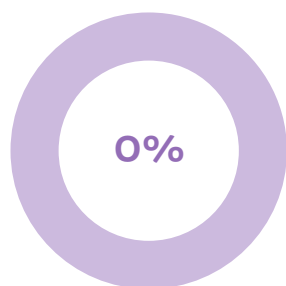
participation, with 57% of women aged 15 and older listing household chores as their main activity.²⁰ Recognizing the need to support female entrepreneurs, and responding to diminished foreign demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government established the *Tau Maketi* monthly market initiative, providing women with a dedicated space to sell their products.²⁶ Women make up 93% of market participants, earning an average of USD 1,225 per market day.²⁰ Additional efforts to support women’s economic independence include grassroots initiatives such as the Nukufetau Women Trust Fund, which have supported over 500 women, and the Development Bank of Tuvalu Women and Youth Loan Scheme to facilitate access to financial resources and to support women and youth entrepreneurs with starting and expanding their business.²² However, challenges persist, including limited employment opportunities for women, restricted access to financing, a small population that limits market scale, and the continued influence of social norms on women’s economic roles.

Women’s rights and political empowerment

Following an extensive review, the *Constitution of Tuvalu Act (2023)*²⁷ introduced important updates to the 1986 Constitution, including Article 27 in the *Bill of Rights*, which prohibits discrimination on a range of grounds, including sex, race, origin, religion, political opinion, disability, and belief. Despite this progress, exceptions remain that permit gender-based discrimination in personal matters, including adoption, marriage, divorce, and burial, as well as in matters related to land ownership.²⁰ Further exemptions apply to pre-existing laws, customary practices deemed “reasonable,” and certain areas of public service and judicial discretion.²⁰

Although the 2023 Constitution introduced stronger protections against discrimination on the basis of sex and disability, gender as a social category and gender equality more broadly are not explicitly included in the anti-discrimination clause or the *Bill of Rights*. Recent amendments also reinforce the primacy of Christian principles and Tuvaluan traditions in legal interpretation. The accompanying *Charter of Duties and Responsibilities* reflects a decolonial approach to human rights, seeking to balance international human rights standards with Tuvalu’s cultural framework, emphasising collective identity over individual rights.²⁸ How competing rights will be interpreted remains to be seen, as the judiciary’s role in shaping legal precedent under this framework is yet to be tested.²⁸

Tuvalu has made notable progress in recent years in advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment through legal, institutional, and grassroots efforts. The endorsement of the updated *Te Paagatasi a Tuvalu - National Gender Equity Policy* in 2024 was a significant milestone, setting out clear priorities for women’s economic empowerment, increased participation in public life, the elimination of gender-based violence, and gender mainstreaming across government policies and programs.²⁹ The *Marriage Act (2015)* amendment raising the minimum marriage age from 16 to 18 years, the *Family Protection and Domestic Violence Act (2014)* criminalizing domestic violence, the passage of the *National Human Rights Institution Act* in 2017, and the constitutional revisions in 2023 further affirm Tuvalu’s commitment to gender equality and human rights.



Percentage of women in the Members of Parliament in 2024

Political participation

Women’s political participation remains low, largely due to societal discrimination, entrenched gender norms and traditional perceptions of women’s roles as caregivers. No women currently serve as Members of Parliament, and only seven out of 48 local government representatives are female.²⁰ No woman has ever occupied the function of Speaker in the country and there is currently no electoral quota in place to increase female

representation. Local decision-making structures, such as the *Falekaupule*, continue to marginalize women, with very few involved in decisions related to rural island development, including fisheries management. In three of the eight *Kaupules*, no women hold any leadership positions, and only one *Kaupule* has a female President.²⁰ Leadership, particularly in outer islands, remains largely reserved for older men, with pastors reinforcing traditional gender roles in many communities. While some progress is notable, this imbalance raises concerns about conflicts between evolving gender dynamics and the preservation of cultural identity in governance.

“In 2022, for the first time, two women were elected as ministers in the influential Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu.”

“The Tuvalu Broadcasting Corporation has equal gender representation, with women in key roles.”

However, there have been significant strides in leadership representation across other sectors. Women held 37% of senior government positions in 2024, compared to 34% in 2018, while the proportion of female magistrates rose from 13% in 2020 to 53% in 2023. The current Secretary General of the Tuvalu Parliament, Lakaaga Uniuni, is a woman. Women also hold key management roles, including Attorney General, and General Managers of national corporations. A notable achievement includes the election in 2022 of the first two women as ministers in the influential Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu, which has 9,700 followers (over 90% of Tuvalu’s population). In the media sector, gender parity has been achieved, with equal representation of men and women in the Tuvalu Broadcasting Corporation and women holding key positions. A 2021 analysis of 11 Tuvalu organizations found that while women occupy only 29% of director positions in business leadership,^p representation was highest in the agriculture and fisheries sector (40%).³⁰

At the institutional level, the Women Affairs Department, established in 1999 and later reformed to Gender Affairs Department (GAD) in 2014, plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality. GAD provides policy advice to the government, raises public awareness, and supports the integration of gender perspectives across different sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, GAD was instrumental in establishing a safe house for domestic violence victims and organizing the *Tau Maketi* market for women entrepreneurs.²⁰ However, effective policymaking and programme implementation are hindered by limited resources for GAD, a lack of robust gender statistics, and comprehensive data collection mechanisms.²⁰ This deficiency extends to monitoring and reporting, making it challenging to hold institutions accountable for implementing gender equality commitments.

Gender-based violence

“43.8% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence.”

The 2019-2020 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey revealed that 43.8% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence. Only one in three victims sought help, highlighting the social stigma, lack of trust in institutions, and barriers to accessing support services. Deep-rooted cultural norms, including the concept of *Tagata e pule ite kaaiga*, which emphasizes male dominance in family decision-making and authority,¹⁹ can sometimes lead to the mistaken belief that men must take any measures to exercise control over their wives and children. This belief system can sometimes result in physical abuse or restrictions on women’s rights,¹⁹ undermining women’s status and perpetuating gender inequality within households.

Structural barriers further exacerbate these challenges. Implementation of the *Family Protection and Domestic Violence Act (2014)* faces challenges and support services for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors remain limited, due in part to insufficient support infrastructure, limited institutional capacity, a lack of established victim response protocols, and recent cuts in government funding. Legal delays are also a major concern, with some cases taking more than two years to reach court, eroding confidence in

the justice system and discouraging women from seeking legal recourse. However, public attitudes toward domestic violence are changing, with acceptance of domestic violence decreasing from 70% in 2007 to 30% in 2020.²⁰ While awareness is growing and public discussions around GBV have increased, turning this into practical improvements in service provision and survivor protection remains an ongoing struggle.

Key frameworks promoting gender equality and their ratification status^a

✓ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified in 1999.³¹ Tuvalu submitted its combined third and fourth periodic reports on time in 2012. Due to challenges such as staff turnover in the Gender Affairs Department, the COVID-19 pandemic, and severe droughts since 2020, reporting was delayed,^{21, 32} with Tuvalu submitting its combined fifth and sixth periodic reports in December 2024.³²

✗ Tuvalu has not ratified CEDAW's Optional Protocol.

✓ Beijing Platform for Action. Tuvalu submitted its 30+ report in 2024.²²

While not legally binding, Tuvalu also endorsed the *Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration*,³³ which was adopted in 2012, reaffirmed in 2015 and revitalized in 2023; and the *Pacific Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (1994, 2004, 2017)*, which aims to "accelerate the implementation of gender commitments at all levels in order to achieve gender equality and the promotion and protection of the human rights of all women and girls, in all their diversity."³⁴

Gender equality, women's empowerment, and the rights of women and girls' also feature prominently in the *Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway*³⁵ – an outcome document of the 2014 Small Island Developing States Conference – and the more recent *Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for Small Island Developing States* of 2024.³⁶

Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)^a does not include data for Tuvalu for any of the years it was derived (2014, 2019, 2023).

Gender Inequality Index (GII)

The Gender Inequality Index (GII)^a does not include data for Tuvalu.

Gender in fisheries governance

Sixteen fisheries governance documents^{9,5} were reviewed, and three are inclusive of women and gender, and two are inclusive of female pronouns.

The **Corporate Plan 2017-2019 of the Fisheries Department (2016)**, sets an objective to coordinate the relationship between the Kaupule (local council) which regulates fisheries for local food supply, and the fisheries department which provides support through data collection and management advice. One activity to achieve this objective is meeting with various stakeholders to understand their roles and responsibilities, with women and youth groups explicitly mentioned as key groups to engage. Building on this, the **Corporate Plan of the Tuvalu Fisheries Department 2020-2022 (2020)**, commits to consulting with women and youth on

marine resource management and to addressing the under-representation of women in the Fisheries Department staff. Furthermore, the **Tuvalu Fisheries Department Annual Work Plan 2021 (2020)**, specifically includes women and youth in revenue generating activities for near-shore fishing and in safety training for at-sea fishing operations.

The **Fishing Crew Regulation (2020)** uses both male and female pronouns when referring to qualified crew members. The **Marine Resources Act (2006)** also includes both male and female pronouns under the section on the powers of authorized officers. However, usage is inconsistent - some subsections use only "he," while others use "he or she" or "him or her."

Threats and drivers of change in fisheries

Several key threats to and drivers of change in Tuvalu's coastal ecosystems along with encouraging examples of how these may be addressed are outlined below. Threats and drivers of change to fisheries may have specific gender dimensions associated with them, making gender integration necessary in efforts to improve adaptation and foster resilience in the face of change.

Climate change: With a national average elevation of just 0.5m above normal high tide levels,ⁱ Tuvalu faces severe and immediate threats from climate change.³⁷ Rising sea surface temperatures, increasing ocean acidification, elevated rates of sea level rise, heightened cyclone intensity, and increases in extreme rainfall events are likely all affecting coastal habitats that support local communities' livelihoods as well as food and nutrition security.^{38,39} Despite these risks, there are currently no explicit constitutional, legislative, or policy measures recognising and protecting the right to a healthy environment in Tuvalu.^u Establishing such frameworks could play a critical role in enabling more sustainable, inclusive and effective responses, facilitating access to climate information and services for marginalised groups, including rural women, and supporting long-term resilience to climate impacts.^v

"With a national average elevation of just 0.5m above normal high tide levels, Tuvalu faces severe and immediate threats from climate change."

Sea level monitoring in Funafuti over the past 33 years shows an average **sea level rise** of 4.4mm per year,⁴⁰ significantly higher than the global average.⁴¹ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projects a further rise of 0.5m to 1m by 2100, as well as increases in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events.⁴² These changes are expected to exacerbate flooding, soil salinization, coastal erosion, and seawater intrusion, in turn threatening vital crops such as *pulaka*, breadfruit and other traditional staples.³⁷ Given Tuvalu's low lying nature and the reality of locked-in sea level rise, the habitability of most islands will be severely threatened by the end of the century, regardless of global emissions reductions.³⁵ This vulnerability was powerfully highlighted in 2021, when Tuvalu's Foreign Minister Simon Kofe delivered a speech for the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) – which brought together 120 world leaders and over 40,000 registered participants – while standing knee-deep in seawater, underscoring Tuvalu's position at the forefront of climate change impacts. To address these risks, the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project (TCAP) (see section on *Programmes and Initiatives* below), launched in 2020, carried out the first comprehensive elevation mapping across all islands, enabling accurate modelling of exposure to sea level rise and storm surges at the national scale. An online platform^w explains this work and has helped government and community members better understand how they will be exposed as well as projected timelines for inundation of land across the islands under differing scenarios and time frames for sea level rise into the future.^x TCAP also produced Tuvalu's first technically feasible national long term adaptation plan (L-TAP) known locally as *Te Lafiga o Tuvalu* (Tuvalu's

Refuge). Based on the science, data and experience gained during TCAP and the creation of 7.3ha of raised land designed to remain flood free beyond 2100 on the capital Funafuti, L-TAP outlined plans to construct 3.6km² of elevated land to provide safe, climate resilient space for the staged relocation of people and infrastructure, while supporting Tuvalu's ongoing development aspirations.

These efforts coincide with new labour mobility schemes and climate-related migration pathways that are expected to reshape Tuvalu's population profile. The Falepili Union, a landmark treaty between Tuvalu and Australia, affirms Tuvalu's statehood in the face of sea-level rise and supports Tuvaluans to remain in their homeland and preserve cultural identity through joint adaptation and resilience initiatives (e.g., TCAP). It also establishes a special mobility arrangement, initially providing 280 Tuvaluan citizens per year the choice to migrate to Australia – temporarily or permanently – to live, work, and study as permanent residents.⁴⁴ While such pathways may offer valuable opportunities, they also raise concerns about demographic shifts that could disrupt the intergenerational transmission of Tuvaluan cultural heritage.^y

Rising sea temperatures can lead to **coral bleaching**, which can severely weaken reef ecosystems by causing widespread coral mortality. As corals die, the reef loses its complex habitat structure, leading to declines in fish populations, reduced reef resilience, and overall degradation of a reef's ecosystem function. Bleaching levels vary between islands: A rapid assessment survey in April 2021 found low levels of bleaching in the Funafuti Marine Conservation Area and on Nukulaelae, while bleaching was more widespread on Niutao, with bleached coral making up an average of 31% of the surveyed coastal substrate.⁴⁵ On Vaitapu, there was evidence of past coral bleaching followed by recent recovery of some hard corals⁴⁵ and reports indicate that in 2023 approximately 70% of corals in Nui Island were affected.⁴⁶ Through the first semester of 2024, satellite monitoring regularly placed Tuvalu in coral bleaching hotspots of 1°C,⁴⁷ areas where heat stress is high enough to bring out coral bleaching.⁴⁸ Beyond ecological implications, the loss of healthy coral reefs compromises Tuvalu's natural defense against coastal erosion and storm surges, exacerbating the island nation's vulnerability to climate change.

“Rural women in Tuvalu face disproportionate climate impacts. To support women's rights, the Tuvalu National Council of Women and civil society leaders are helping shape inclusive national climate responses.”

These impacts will likely continue to disproportionately affect rural women in Tuvalu due to their dependence on natural resources for both income and sustenance.²¹ To support women's rights and needs as part of climate action, the Tuvalu National Council of Women, which is a member of the National Advisory Committee on Climate Change and a board member of TCAP, has been key to integrating women's perspectives into climate change strategies through its membership on key national committees.²⁰ Additionally, women leaders in civil society organizations have been actively raising awareness and developing inclusive community responses.²⁰ The *National Climate Change Policy 2021-2030* (Te Vaka Fenua o Tuvalu) emphasizes the inclusion of women and marginalized groups in climate action, requiring gender-responsive and socially inclusive approaches to climate finance, project planning, and risk management.⁴⁹ It also ensures that women especially from outer islands are actively engaged in shaping climate and disaster strategies.²⁰

Climate-driven declines in commercially important fisheries species are threatening stocks throughout the Pacific island region.² Oceanic environment projections for Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) suggest that under a high emissions scenario, purse-seine catches of skipjack tuna in Tuvalu's EEZ are expected to decline significantly by 2050.⁵⁰ Anticipated changes to tuna spawning and feeding grounds in the

Pacific have led to increased pressure by foreign industrial fishing fleets currently operating in Tuvalu's EEZ. Nearshore fisheries, including finfish and invertebrates, have also faced intensified exploitation. Community members have reported declines in the size and abundance of certain fish species, along with the disappearance of invertebrates such as giant clams (*Tridacna* spp.). However, the lack of historical monitoring data makes it difficult to fully assess changes in biodiversity over time.⁵¹

COVID-19: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted both social and economic life in Tuvalu. Approximately 63% of women business owners interviewed as part of a rapid socioeconomic assessment conducted in 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 in Tuvalu reported that their businesses were affected by the impacts of the pandemic, compared to 37% of men.⁵² Income-generating activities most significantly impacted by COVID-19 included those dependent on tourism and handicraft selling, which are predominately led by women. Women cooperatives that typically earn more than USD 200 every two weeks selling jewellery made from seashells at the airports lost this source of income due to flight cancellations.⁵² Men engaged in the informal income sector also faced impacts due to COVID-19, changing their activities to meet local market demands. As in other Pacific Island nations, many villages experienced increased migration from urban areas and a commensurate increase in fishing pressure.⁵³ Women in Tuvalu noted concern around the impacts of relocation on the sustainability of natural resources, including fish, and emphasized challenges associated with preserving fresh fish due to frequent generator malfunctions. However, despite these challenges, relocation also brought positive change as it fostered a renewed sense of traditional sharing and support within communities. People shared fish and other resources to help accommodate families moving to new areas.⁵²

“Approximately 63% of women business owners [...] reported that their businesses were affected by the impacts of the pandemic, compared to 37% of men.”

“Relocation from urban to rural areas during the pandemic strained natural resources, but also revived traditional sharing and community support.”

Ineffective waste management: Ineffective waste management is a serious challenge, especially on Funafuti, due to its small land area and high population density. To establish controlled dump sites on each island, the government of Tuvalu leases land from private landowners. However, those sites are often understaffed and do not always have sufficient equipment to properly manage waste.⁵⁴ Although per capita waste generation is relatively low, over-capacity landfills, illegal dumping, and burning create environmental impacts including marine pollution. Leakage from septic tanks significantly contaminates groundwater and inshore lagoons, harming marine ecosystems and public health.⁵⁵ However, improvements in waste management in recent years have strengthened national recycling capabilities and the government banned single-use plastics in 2020.⁵⁶ The Tuvalu Department of Waste is currently coordinating an initiative to collect and shred plastic bottles⁵⁷ and has also developed a *Tuvalu Integrated Waste Policy and Action Plan 2017-2026*, which highlights the need for gender-sensitive approaches to waste management.⁵⁸

Gender in ODA allocation for fisheries^a

Between 2012 and 2022, Tuvalu received a total of USD 18.18 million in fisheries Official Development Assistance (ODA),^{aa} of which 4% (USD 0.82 million) was allocated to gender equality and women's empowerment in fisheries (i.e., tagged with gender markers 1 or 2). No gender-focused financing for Tuvalu scored as 'Principal' (gender marker 2). Fisheries aid to Tuvalu represents 48% of fisheries aid to the Polynesian subregion, whilst gender-equality focused fisheries aid to Tuvalu represents 17% of gender-equality focused fisheries aid to the region.

Of the ODA screened for gender markers, 100% of gender-equality focused financing for fishing in Tuvalu came from Australia.

Australia
100%

Examples of programmes or initiatives aiming to advance gender equality in fisheries

“...the Pacific Ridge to Reef Programme also incorporates a gender mainstreaming strategy to promote inclusivity, sustainable livelihoods, and resilience.”

The **Pacific Ridge to Reef (R2R) Programme** (ongoing) is a Global Environment Facility (GEF) initiative designed to promote sustainable development in Pacific SIDS through integrated environmental management. Regionally, it is executed by the Pacific Community (SPC) through the GEF Pacific R2R International Waters project.⁵⁹ The programme supports 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories, including Tuvalu, aligning its efforts with each country's specific priorities.⁶⁰ Recognizing the important connection between gender equality and environmental sustainability, the programme also incorporates a gender mainstreaming strategy to promote inclusivity, sustainable livelihoods, and resilience.^{60, 61}

The **Pacific Islands Regional Oceanscape Programme for Economic Resilience (PROPER)** is a World Bank/International Development Association-funded programme currently in its second phase (2024-2029) focused on enhancing the management of Tuvalu's fisheries. The initiative prioritises strengthening government-led fisheries policies, improving national and regional coordination with fisheries stakeholders, and promoting sustainable, community-based resource management and conservation.⁶² Additionally, the programme aims to generate new employment and livelihood opportunities in small-scale fisheries on outer islands and in tuna-related services. PROPER also seeks to address gender inequality and gender-based violence through initiatives that expand economic opportunities for women.⁶³ The initiative is also committed to gender inclusion in fisheries by appointing a project gender focal point; providing training for Tuvalu Fisheries Department staff, ensuring at least 20% female participation; collecting gender-disaggregated data; strengthening livelihood opportunities for women and understanding the barriers they face in coastal fisheries; as well as strengthening their decision-making in local management.⁶³

The **Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project (TCAP-I)** (2017 – 2024) was funded primarily by the Green Climate Fund, with co-financing from the Government of Tuvalu and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with the Tuvaluan government and Hall Contracting in close consultation with local communities.⁶⁴ The project's main aims were to strengthen resilience to coastal hazards by implementing protective measures to safeguard coastal communities and infrastructure on Funafuti, Nanumea, and Nanumaga; develop a long-term coastal adaptation strategy; enhance the capacity of national and local authorities

“A key component of the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project was its strong focus on gender inclusivity, with gender equality considerations embedded from the design stage.”

to effectively implement adaptation initiatives; and empower youth to become future leaders in climate resilience.⁶⁴ A key component of the project was its strong focus on gender inclusivity, with gender equality considerations embedded from the design stage. A comprehensive *Gender Strategy and Action Plan* also guided implementation, ensuring women’s active participation in climate resilience efforts. Women’s empowerment was further reinforced through the involvement of the Tuvalu National Council of Women in the project’s Steering Committee, where they advocated for women’s priorities and ensured their contributions were central to climate adaptation planning.²⁰

Building on the recognized success of the reclamation of 7.3ha of raised safe land on the capital Funafuti, TCAP was renewed for a second and third phase.^{ab} The second phase (TCAP-II) (2024 – 2026) is scaling up climate-resilient coastal protection efforts on the capital by building a further 7.5ha of elevated flood free land and at the same time protecting approximately 800 metres of vulnerable shoreline along the southern lagoon of Fogafale Island – home to nearly half of Tuvalu’s population⁶⁵ of 9,853.⁶⁶ With ongoing urban migration to the capital, a trend likely to intensify under climate stress, the creation of additional raised land is an important priority to support both Tuvalu’s adaptation efforts and its broader development goals.

The **Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership Programme (PEUMP)** (2019 – 2025), a programme funded by the European Union and Sweden, aims to provide direct assistance to support regional and national level activities across the Pacific Island region, including in Tuvalu.⁶⁷ Project priorities include mainstreaming a gender, social inclusion, and human-rights based approach in the fisheries sector, such as through the collection of gender-disaggregated data, capacity building, empowering women in decision-making for coastal fisheries, and expanding equal employment opportunities for women in the tuna industry.⁶⁸

The **New Zealand-funded Tuvalu Fisheries Support Programme (TFSP)** (2014 – 2019) assisted the Tuvalu Fisheries Department through operational funding and technical advisors. While the programme’s primary focus was on institutional strengthening, it aligned itself with national policies, including the *Tuvalu National Gender Policy*, which advocates for the development of gender policies and action plans within the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. By recognizing women’s roles in these sectors and promoting their inclusion in decision-making processes, the TFSP indirectly supported gender equity in fisheries, even though gender-focused activities were not a direct project component. Building on Phase I, a second phase began in 2021, running for five years, with an emphasis on supporting sustainable fisheries management to enhance economic benefits and support food security for Tuvalu.⁶⁹

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Young women proudly displaying their catch after participating in *Te Taa* - a traditional fishing method usually performed by large groups of people and used to drive schools of nearshore demersal fishes into the shallows. Photo: Venu Edwin Pedro, © Pacific Community



Women participating in the counting and distribution of catches from a traditional fishing competition. Photo: Venu Edwin Pedro, © Pacific Community

Endnotes

- a Marine fisheries statistics are derived from catch reconstruction under the Sea Around Us - <http://www.seaaroundus.org/data/#/eez>. The approach utilized builds on national statistics and accounts for discards as well as sectoral catch data that often is not included in official datasets (e.g., artisanal or recreational catches). The Sea Around Us data is also utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project. Sea Around Us data are distinguished according to the following categories: large-scale (i.e., industrial) and small-scale (i.e., artisanal, subsistence and recreational) fisheries catches. Recreational catches were not considered here.
- b "Marine subsistence" is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by the subsistence sector. This consists of fisheries conducted by women and/or noncommercial fishers for consumption by one's family, and where applicable, the fraction of the commercial catch that is given to crew or the community (mainly from small-scale fisheries).³
- c "Marine commercial" is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by commercial fisheries. These are fisheries whose landed catch is sold commercially (as opposed to being consumed and/or given away to the crew) and encompass both the industrial (large-scale) and artisanal (small-scale) sectors.³
- d "Gleaning involves harvesting marine species on foot during low tide in intertidal zones with minimal equipment. This widespread activity targets primarily sessile or slow-moving invertebrates across diverse habitats including rocky shores, mud flats, seagrass beds, reefs, and mangroves, typically yielding species-rich catch compositions."⁷
- e For a number of other countries, level of engagement in fisheries sub-sectors was estimated from labour force surveys and Income Expenditure Surveys. However, this was not done for Tuvalu.
- f Based on locally conducted surveys around Funafuti and three of the outer islands.
- g Co-author contribution.
- h Co-author contribution.
- i Co-author contribution.
- j Co-author contribution.
- k Co-author contribution.
- l Co-author contribution.
- m For a number of other countries, level of engagement in fisheries sub-sectors was estimated from labour force surveys and Income Expenditure Surveys. However, this was not done for Tuvalu.
- n Co-author contribution.
- o Co-author contribution.
- p Organisations included in the sample were industry associations, private sector organisations, regional/multi-country organisations and state-owned enterprises.
- q Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/> to read summaries of key conventions/policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- r Specifically, the SAMOA Pathway outlines recommendations to eliminate discrimination, enhance economic empowerment, end violence, ensure participation in decision-making, and protect sexual and reproductive health rights.
- s Sourced from the databases FAO LEX, ECO LEX, and SSF LEX. Fisheries governance documents include fisheries policies, laws, acts, plans, strategies, and regulations. A database of all reviewed governance documents can be found here: [10.5281/zenodo.15098510](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15098510).
- t Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project, 2020 - a project analysis product derived from Lidar and independent sea level measurement on each island.
- u Co-author contribution.
- v Co-author contribution.
- w Latest digital tools to track climate hazards rolled out across Tuvalu.
- x Co-author contribution.
- y Co-author contribution.
- z Climate-driven declines in commercially important fisheries species have been documented throughout the Pacific region.
- aa Different from OECD standard methods, this is measured in disbursements from DAC countries (including EU Institutions) to recipient countries. This captures the amount of money given, as opposed to the amount of money committed. Original data was downloaded on 17th June 2024.
- ab Co-author contribution.

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