



A Pacific perspective of *Feminism* and *Gender equality*

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Overview

Feminism is a western concept that is received with mixed responses in the Pacific despite being promoted alongside 'gender equality'. However, international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) promote women's roles in the Pacific, which some associate with feminism. Hence changes at various levels have occurred in some countries. The different countries' socio-cultural, economic and political realities mean the circumstances lead to different outcomes.

Although examples of feminism can be seen throughout the region, some people consider it cautiously (including me).



"I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a tofi (inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging".

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi (2007)



Defining *feminism*

Feminism describes a movement to end “...*sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression and to achieve full gender equality in law and in practice*” (Council of Europe, n.d., para. 4).

- Advocating for equality and empowerment of all women in society, leadership, etc.
- Levelling the playing field
- Argues that women are disadvantaged; thus, the need to push for better and more opportunities, and recognition of women’s rights
- Different areas of feminism promoted by different groups worldwide

The International Women’s Development Agency ([IWDA], n.d.) describes intersectional feminism as “...the interplay between gender and other forms of discrimination, like race, age, class, socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity” (para. 9)

Pacific and feminism

Pacific peoples have a complex relationship with feminism.

- Prominent views:
 - Oppose and reject it
 - Some building capacity as it's something that is gradually developing and gaining acceptance in the Pacific
 - Some have been pushing for change
- Pacific ontologies are not reflected in Western individual ontologies that form the basis of western feminism
 - The preoccupation with western or first-world issues in foundational feminist theories devoid of realities and ways of being of Pacific women, e.g. community development
 - Until feminist theories include **communal** and marginalised voices, they will not be compatible
 - Homogenised view of the Pacific impacts also on inclusion of Pacific voices
 - Tension between Pacific communities' values and those propagated in current feminist theory.

(Naepi, 2018)





Pacific and feminism


Common themes that emerge from examples of what could be forms of feminism include:

- Strong sense of women gathering resources for the betterment of communities
- Women as a stronghold in families
- Diverse cultural underpinnings – not homogenous

“When discussing the Pacific, we must be careful not to equate one island’s understanding of the world as representative of the whole Pacific”

(Naepi, 2018, p. 7)

- Pushing (advocating for and promoting) gender equality in the Pacific



Gender equality in the Pacific

Largely supported by international bodies, e.g. the United Nations Organisation (UNO)

[UN Women – Pacific](#)

- Works with the 14 PICs to address issues which include:
 - Gender inequality
 - Empower women
 - Build more inclusive societies
- Levels of achievement across the region, e.g. more girls enrolled and completing school, more women in senior professional roles, new legislation protecting women and girls from DV
- More work is required
 - Pacific women still less compared to international data of women in leadership
 - Women tend to be in low-paid or unpaid employment
 - Between 2008 and 2014, the number of Pacific women who experienced DV doubled the global average

International Charters/ Conventions – Pacific women

- UN – Millennium Dev. Goals (MDGs [8])/ Sustainable Dev. Goals (SDGs [17])

SDGs replace the MDGs with “...a broader and transformative agenda reflects the complex 21st-century challenges and needs

- [SDG 5: Gender equality](#) (MDG 3: **promote** *gender equality and empower women*)
 - **Achieve** gender equality and empower all women and girls
 - [Groups – Pacific Island Women Caucus](#)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ([CEDAW](#))
 - Pacific
 - A core international human rights treaty requiring member states to have legal frameworks which *respect, protect and fulfil women’s human rights* (Pacific Community, 2022, para. 6)
 - Embedded in high-level regional policy frameworks, such as strengthened commitment under *the 2012 Pacific Leaders’ Gender Equality Declaration and Pacific Platform for Action (2018-2030)*
 - 13 of 14 Pacific Island Nations have ratified



CEDAW Pacific Members

- (Rolls, 2022)

Country	Year ratified
Tokelau	1985 (NZ government)
Niue	1985 (NZ government)
Samoa	1992
Fiji	1995
Vanuatu	1995
PNG	1995
Tuvalu	1999
Solomon Is.	2002
FSM	2004
Kiribati	2004
The Rep. of Marshall Is.	2006
The Cook Is.	2006

International Organisations – Pacific women

Pacific women in international organisations advocating for removal of barriers, empowerment of women, full equality:

Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era ([DAWN](#)), 1984

International Women's Development Agency ([IWDA](#)), 1985

Pacific Allied (Women's) Council Inspires Faith in Ideals Concerning All ([PACIFICA](#))

A Samoan perspective of *feminism - positives*

All people are equal and protected under Article 15 of Samoa's Constitution.

- Land ownership is based on gender-neutral circumstances (based on ancestral and local heritage)
- Ministry for Women (1994), now the Ministry for Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD)
- First political independent PIC to ratify CEDAW (1992)
- 1 of 3 PIC to implement a form of Temporary Special Measures (TMSs) to increase the participation of women in politics – [The Constitution Amendment Act 2013](#) (enacted a 10% quota for female representation in parliament)
- Appointed first female Deputy PM after the 2016 elections
- Elected first female PM in 2021 elections

(Ministry for Women, Community and Social Development [MWCSD], n.d.)

Female Representation in National Parliament in Samoa



Source: [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) June 2022

A Samoan perspective of *feminism - positives*


Many provisions ensuring the protection of women and girls, e.g. the [National Policy on Gender Equality and Rights of Women and Girls 2021- 2031](#)

The goal “...is the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls in Samoa by 2030 (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, n.d., p. 7)

Four cultural genders in Samoa; female, male, *fa’afafine* and *fa’atama*. However, the latter two gender groups are not recognised in policy and legislation (UN Women, n.d. b)

However, much remains to be done to improve the conditions for women and girls in Samoa.





A Samoan perspective of *feminism – issues*

Women make up significantly less number of Matai (chief)

- Under-represented in village fono (council)
- Titles linked to land overwhelmingly male
- Some villages still exclude women from holding titles, therefore, limiting opportunities for the participation of women

Domestic Violence continues to be an issue of concern

- women who move away from their village to live with their husband's family and village are disadvantaged when their husband passes and more likely to experience domestic violence

(Ministry for Women, Community and Social Development [MWCSO], n.d.)

Samoan 'gendered' concepts and phrases

The following shape my perspective of feminism:

Positioning – knowing who I am

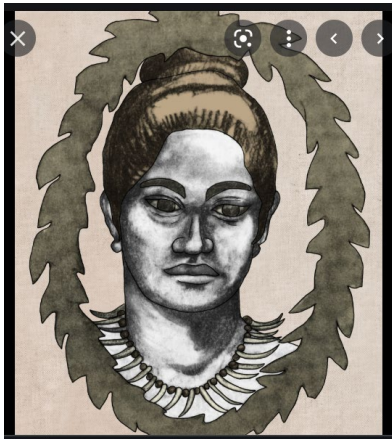
- E iloa le tagata I lona tu, tautala ma aga -
- E au le ina'ilau a tama'ita'i
- Tamasa
- feagaiga
- Aua luma
- Nofotane



Nafanua – Toa Tama’ita’i (goddess of war)



<https://alchetron.com/Nafanua>



Salamasina – Tupu o Samoa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peh5aSFg6Eg&ab_channel=TulounaLeLagi

Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa – PM of Samoa



Women’s Mau – Samoa

<https://e-tangata.co.nz/reflections/remembering-the-women-of-the-mau-movement-in-samoa/>

Teresia Teaiwa: “We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood.”
Pages 133-136 | Published online: 22 Jun 2017
• [Download citation](#)
• <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1323707>



Claire Slatter (Fiji), Board Chair. She is a founding member of DAWN and was General Coordinator from 1997 to 2004. She is a feminist scholar with a background in anti-nuclear, anti-colonial, trade union and social justice activism. She has an M.A from the Australian National University and a Ph.D. from Massey University and has taught politics at the University of the South Pacific for 20 years. For nearly three years she taught ethics at the Fiji National University. She has been a consultant with a number of international development agencies including UNIFEM (now UN Women), UNDP, WHO, Oxfam and the International Women’s Development Agency on gender equality, development, neoliberal reforms, and women’s health, and rights.



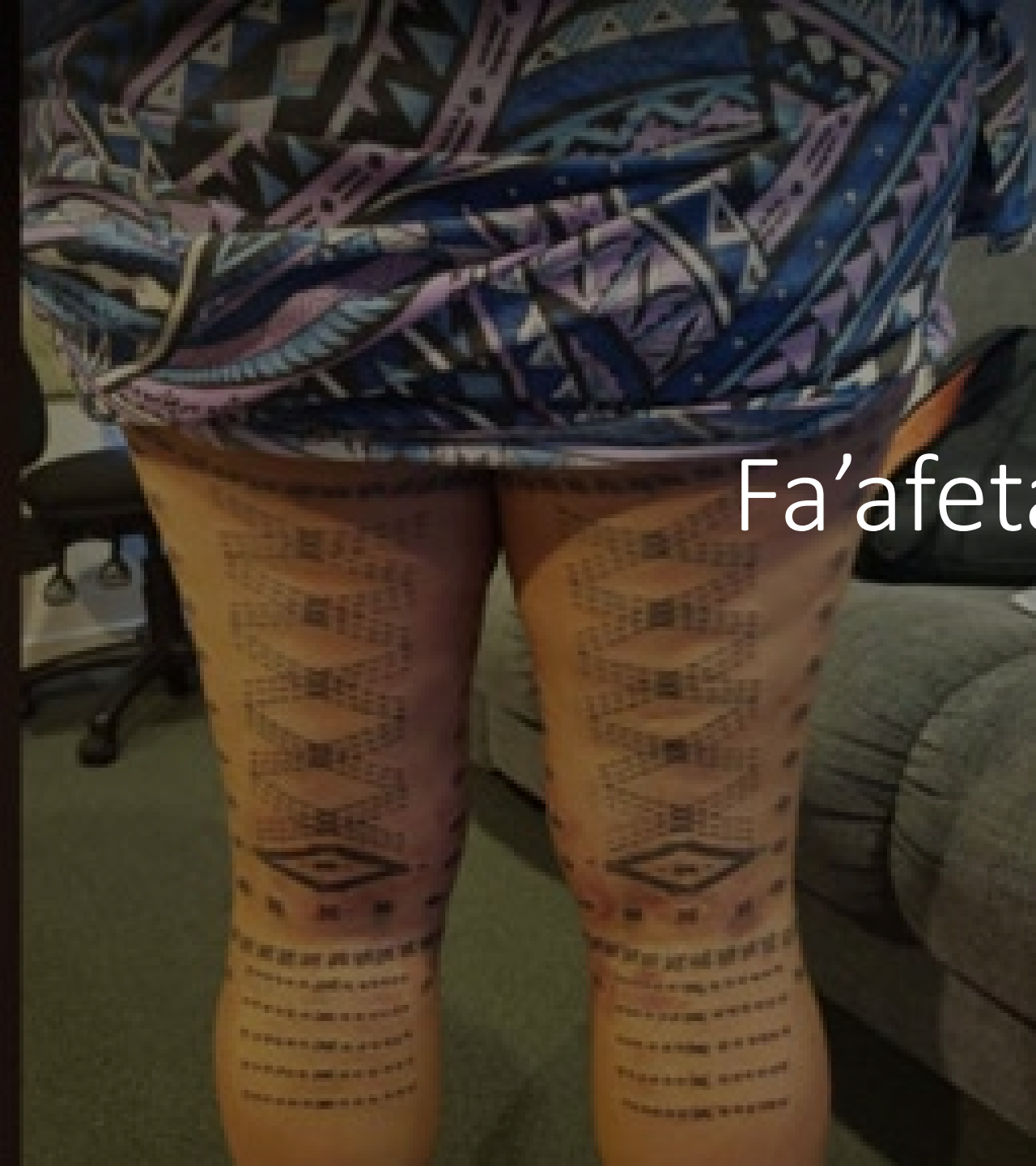
Angela Davis: ‘We knew that the role of ...
theguardian.com



Conclusion

Each person/ woman will have their own sense of identity, which impacts their perspective of feminism. Hence, culture and traditions in the Pacific play a big part in how people perceive feminism. Elements of feminism can be seen in all Pacific societies; however, they are not all the same. The events in the Pacific tend to focus on the promotion of gender equality and community development.

My perspective of feminism is thus impacted by my own upbringing and the worldviews that align with my values.



Fa'afetai lava!



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