

Intersectionality Between CEDAW and Culture in Tonga's Gender Development Efforts

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Abstract

The South Pacific Region is known for its slow progress in gender equality and ranks relatively low on the GII (Gender Inequality Index). However, Tonga, as the only part of that region that has not ratified CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), has experienced significant fluctuations in its GII rating. After improving from 0.460 in 2015 to 0.354 in 2020, Tonga's GII worsened to 0.444 in 2023, placing it 92nd out of 193 countries (UNDP, 2025). This phenomenon raises a question about the reasons for the reversal in Tonga's Gender Inequality Index trajectory despite the government's domestic gender policy efforts and the absence of CEDAW ratification. This research uses a descriptive analytical method and gathers data from various sources such as reputable articles, books, government reports, international organizations' reports, and other sources known to be part of library research and documentation research. This study uses Liberal Feminism with Intersection Approach to analyze the phenomenon. Findings show that Tonga's earlier success in improving GII was due to the good government effort to acknowledge the overlapping problem between CEDAW and Cultural Identity '*anga fakatonga*' and transform it into a domestic gender policy that is appropriate to Tonga's Socio-Cultural Conditions. However, the recent GII deterioration suggests that structural barriers, including limited women's political representation at 7.1% and declining female labor force participation, continue to constrain progress. This study will help the government and policymakers to understand the importance of acknowledging intersectionality within gender problems and turn it into a supporting factor in gender development efforts.

Keywords: Intersectional Approach, Liberal Feminism, Anga-Fakatonga, CEDAW, Gender Development

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INTRODUCTION

United Nations (UN) and other international communities are showing a lot of concern regarding women's issues and have been focusing some of their agenda on solving women's discrimination problems. In 1979, the UN created CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), an international law focusing on women and children to eradicate problems associated with those entities (UN Women, 2009). The effort later continued with the establishment of UN Women to support, control, and evaluate the implementation of CEDAW (UN Women, 2010). Apart from that, there is also the GII (Gender Inequality Index) as an assessment tool to watch every country's progress toward gender equality, ranging from 0-1, where 1 stands for complete inequality (UNDP, 2010).

According to the UNDP 2025 Human Development Report, countries in the South Pacific region have been known to have slow development of gender equality and have a relatively low position in the GII; however, Tonga, the only country in the region that does not ratify CEDAW, presents a complex case. After achieving significant improvements from 2015 to 2020, Tonga's GII has deteriorated in recent years. The 2023/2024 report shows Tonga's GII at 0.444, ranking 92nd out of 193 countries, a decline from its 2020 position of 0.354 (ranked 79th) (UNDP, 2025). The 2023 report from UNDP showed that Tonga's gender inequality index (GII) is 0.444 (UNDP, 2025) and represents a 44.4% loss in potential human development due to gender inequality. In comparison, Papua New Guinea's GII during 2023 is 0.576, Fiji is 0.331, and Samoa is 0.360 (UNDP, 2025). These records indicate that Tonga's position has worsened relative to some regional peers. The GII deterioration has contributed to a decline in Tonga's Human Development Index (HDI) ranking, which stood at 92nd with a score of 0.769 in 2023 (UNDP, 2025).

As a small country in the Pacific, Tonga became fully autonomous only after 1970 but has demonstrated both progress and setbacks in gender development. The country's GII trajectory is interesting to study because Tonga, which did not ratify CEDAW, initially achieved GII improvements beyond several major countries that have ratified CEDAW, yet has recently experienced reversals. As a small country, Tonga has also not been widely exposed and rarely discussed. Research on Tonga is important to be used as a lesson for other countries in managing gender equality, especially for countries that have a strong cultural background such as Indonesia and countries that have ratified CEDAW but could not have gender development progress as good as Tonga's earlier achievements.

This study aims to examine the factors that have influenced the changes in Tonga's Gender Inequality Index (GII), particularly the deterioration observed after 2020 despite the country's earlier progress in gender equality. It seeks to analyze the relationship between Tonga's domestic socio-cultural, political, and institutional conditions and its gender development outcomes, while also exploring how the absence of CEDAW ratification has shaped the country's approach to gender equality. By investigating these dynamics, this research intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges that have characterized Tonga's gender development trajectory.

This research contributes to the existing literature by providing an in-depth analysis of a relatively understudied Pacific Island country whose experience challenges the common assumption that CEDAW ratification alone determines improvements in gender equality. The findings are expected to enrich comparative studies on gender policy implementation by highlighting the importance of local cultural values, governance structures, and institutional capacity in shaping gender outcomes. Furthermore, this study offers practical insights for policymakers, particularly in culturally conservative societies such as Indonesia and other developing countries, on designing gender equality strategies that are responsive to national contexts while remaining aligned with international development goals.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted using a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach, because in order to create empirical analysis regarding the changes in Tonga's GII requires the use of inductive logic. The use of a qualitative approach was chosen because the elements needed in the research are considered closer to the characteristics that exist in a qualitative research approach. This is because this research departs from an in-depth and specific research analysis in order to obtain general results, to contribute to international relations research.

This scientific study uses library research and documentation research as data collection methods. Data has been gathered from various resources to avoid bias and subjectivity. Within the various data, there will be many chances to compare one source to another to maintain credibility. Data has been gathered from reputable articles, books, and scientific studies published both online and offline. The document resources are gathered from government reports such as annual reports, policy documents, regulations, and international organizations' reports such as the Human Development Report (HDR) from UNDP and Country Assessments Report from UN. Updated data for 2023-2025 has been incorporated from the UNDP 2025 Human Development Report, World Bank Gender Data Portal, and recent Pacific regional assessments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The government of Tonga has been trying to make various efforts to increase gender development in its nation. But above this gender problem, the government of Tonga needs to face the cultural background '*anga fakatonga*', which has been strongly held by the people, and contains some elements opposite to CEDAW. The government identifies this intersection between culture and gender development efforts. By doing so, a cultural problem that has been lying as an obstacle transforms into a contributing factor to gender development. The WEGET Policy (Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Tonga) is one of the policies created by the government after careful consideration of the intersection problem in Tonga. This policy, which replaced the earlier RNPAGAD (Revised National Policy on Gender and Development), contains various efforts and foundations for Tonga's gender development, appropriate with the *anga fakatonga*. As of 2026, the WEGET III Policy has been adopted, continuing this culturally sensitive approach (UN Women, 2024).

The GII has three dimensions of women's development as its assessment tool; first, the reproductive health dimension with two indicators, namely maternal mortality ratio and adolescent fertility rate; second, economic dimensions with labour participation indicator; and third, empowerment dimensions using education and parliamentary participation (UNDP, 2010). According to the Tonga GII index during the 2023 period, Tonga's GII stood at 0.444 with the following component indicators: maternal mortality ratio of 67 per 100,000 live births, adolescent fertility rate of 24.8 per 1,000 women aged 15-19, women's parliamentary seats at 7.1%, female secondary education at 94.2%, and female labor force participation at 41.7% (UNDP, 2025).

Economic Participations

In 2024, the labor force participation rate of women in Tonga was at 41.7%, while male participation was 64.0% (World Bank, 2025). This represents a decline from earlier years, with female participation dropping from 42.9% in 2016 to 41.7% in 2024 according to ILO modeled estimates (ILO, 2025). The 2021 Household Income and Expenditure Survey reported a higher figure of 50.5% for women and 70.1% for men, suggesting methodological differences between data sources (ILO, 2024). In that year's cluster, the government made a series of efforts to increase women's interest in economic participation in the creative economy sector and participation in the health workforce sector.

Women Labor Force Participation in the Healthcare System

The Tongan government's efforts to encourage women's participation in the health workforce have been carried out in several ways. The Government of Tonga established an educational institution for health workers, such as nurses, midwives, and other fields of expertise, specifically for women called The Queen Salote Institute (Australian Aid & PC, 2019). In this

institution, women will receive formal education in the health sector, for example, a diploma degree in nursing, as well as other education in the form of specialist training to obtain various certificates to register for work. In addition, in its development, the Queen Salote Institute then collaborated with the Sydney Nursing School and Auckland University of Technology to obtain even more qualified training (Australian Aid & PC, 2019).

Queen Salote Institute is the only educational institution specifically for women. Meanwhile, many other areas of expertise education are only specifically for men, for example, maritime, electronics, automotive, and other engineering fields (GFC, 2019). To support this, the government then revised Tonga's nursing law so as to provide more benefits for women and motivate them to become involved as medical staff, both as experts and policy makers. In the revision of Tonga's 2016 nursing law, Article III, one of the requirements for registering midwives, nurses, and other health practitioners, is to have a certificate of expertise qualification recognized by the government (Nurses Act, 2016).

In line with the law, women benefit. This is because they are the only gender who can obtain degrees and certificates of expertise in midwifery and nursing in Tonga, while men have to spend more effort by studying outside Tonga. Not only that, but other efforts are also seen in the salary distribution system, where the health sector is the only sector that provides women's salaries 12% higher than men's (Salary Survey, 2022). This is done in order to attract women to be involved as workers in Tonga's health sector, both in terms of administration, members of the Ministry of Health, and experts.

Based on a report resulting from a collaboration between the Ministry of Home Affairs of Tonga, the NGO Australian Aids, and the United Nations. It can be seen that around 70% of Ministry of Health employees in Tonga are women, including ministerial administrative staff, research members, and health workers who are divided into six divisions (Tonga Ministry of Health, 2020).

The government's efforts to integrate women in the health sector can also be seen in the number of nurses and midwives. The nursing profession is dominated by female workers. Even for the midwifery profession as a whole, it is dominated by women (Australian Aid & PC, 2019). The government provides special training and education for women to encourage their involvement in the health sector. Therefore, the professional nursing profession in Tonga is entirely a female workforce, and most women in Tonga receive further education in health specialties rather than other fields (Australian Aid & PC, 2019).

Basically, women who work outside the household sector do not conform to the concept of *Ko'e 'a pi 'a fafine* (Home is for women), but the health sector has exception because of the roots of habit that are as strong as *ko'e 'api'a fafine* in Tongan culture. If the government forces participation in work in other fields such as engineering can lead to marginalization of Tongan women who do not expect any change in their gender role in *anga fakatonga*, which has become an identity. In addition, the government will also intersect with social tensions. Therefore, the government needs to increase women's participation in the workforce, finally accommodating the identity of the healer and nurturer in women as a triggering aspect of gender development.

Creative Economy Empowerment

Based on the WEGET policy, one of the government's top priorities in Tonga in order to achieve the objective of this policy is enabling access to economic assets and employment (Australian Aid & PC, 2019). Interpreted to be women's entrepreneurship and women's enterprise at the level of the women's community and trade (UN Women, 2018). Kindly outlines of such endeavors align with liberal feminism and the CEDAW, which expect empowerment and public participation from women. But to achieve this, the government cannot equate the aspects of

empowerment with a Western-style definition because there are cultural elements that are missed from CEDAW considerations. In practice, the government only focuses on empowerment and training in the field of handicrafts such as making *ngatu* and traditional clothing that has always been based on Tonga's *anga fakatonga*, considered the realm of women. In order to achieve this agenda, the government then cooperated with several NGOs through three major efforts.

The first attempt is that the Ministry of Justice, under the authority of the Tongan government, together with the Talitha Project, is working to encourage women to take advantage of *ngatu* in digital trade and transactions (Robinson, 2018). The Tonga Ministry of Justice and the Talitha Project are collaborating with the Bank of the South Pacific (BSP) and several telecommunications companies to support women gain understanding of financial literacy. Through this collaboration, BSP forms and provides financial literacy support for women, especially young women in Tonga, so they can understand digital transactions and other elements of banking (Pacific Waves, 2017). In addition to literacy, women also opened bank accounts as a form of convenience and support for them. After the opening of the account, these women were also taught how to broaden the market reach of their products. Government and the Talitha Project provided skill training in the fields of *ngatu* production, cloth production, and handwork so that it is more varied and can attract market interest (Robinson, 2018). The women were then taught how to open tents in the port area to sell their products to tourists (Pacific Waves, 2017).

The second step is that the Government of Tonga cooperates with NGOs, including MORDI Tonga Trust (mainstreaming of rural development innovation), IFAD, and the New Zealand aid program, which are working to develop infrastructure and climate resistance in Tonga (IFAD, 2022). The government is targeting the development of a community hall, which is usually used by women for weaving. The construction of this hall is intended to create a comfortable and safe place for women. Apart from that, the design is capable of withstanding a category five tropical storm; it is also projected to be able to be used as refuge when needed (MORDI Tonga, 2018).

The third attempt is community empowerment in the skills training sector that is useful for creative economy industry activities. In 2017, the government cooperated with IFAD and several partners and initiated the TRIP II project (Tonga Rural Innovation Project). Namely, a project to increase community empowerment and development in Tonga. TRIP II is more or less composed of three basic components: (i) Community development; (ii) sustainable economic livelihoods; and (iii) project management and coordination (IFAD, 2022). This project also aims to increase economic empowerment for women in Tonga through skills training and sustainable agriculture education.

Based on data and publications from the Tonga government recorded until 2018, there are 117 entrepreneurship trainings that have been carried out, and almost 70% of training participants are women (Pacific Community, 2019). Although there are specific numbers related to the comparison of *ngatu* sales results before and after receiving the training, the number of participants in the training shows that the government is trying to prioritize women in creative economic empowerment. Therefore, simultaneously with the effort to increase the health workforce, Tonga GII figures in the economy increased.

A notable development since 2021 is the Tonga Labour Mobility Policy, which allows increased participation of women in labour mobility schemes in New Zealand and Australia in horticulture, meat processing, construction, tourism and hospitality (Government of Tonga, 2021). This policy represents a significant shift in acknowledging women's economic agency beyond traditional roles. Furthermore, the 2024 Beijing+30 review noted that Pacific women's participation in business leadership has significantly increased and continues to exceed global averages, though Tonga continues to face structural barriers in translating education gains into economic participation (Pacific Islands Forum, 2024).

Maternal Mortality Ratio

In 2016, the index showed that the ratio of maternal deaths was 124 per 100,000 births, but by 2023 this figure was reduced to 67 per 100,000 births (UNDP, 2025). This improvement was due to the government's efforts to improve health facilities in terms of infrastructure and human resources. In the sub-chapter on health workers, it has been explained that the government is making a series of cultural accommodations to increase women's participation as part of the health workforce in Tonga, both in terms of direct management and policy-making. These efforts then yielded results where, after 2017, more women were working in the world of health sector than men. This effect then has a positive influence on the level of confidence of the Tongan people to involve themselves in examining health conditions, in their mothers' health.

Aligning socio-cultural values attached to women with the ability as a trained and qualified health worker apparently has a positive impact on reducing maternal and infant mortality. This is because, in addition to the creation of more qualified health human resources, there is also a psychological effect on society, which culturally tends to believe in women as compassionate entities to care for and heal. Therefore, in the 2016-2023 time period, there was an increasing number of mothers who reported their pregnancies, births, and infant deaths in hospitals and other health facilities in the regions (Figueroa et al., 2021).

The success of the government's efforts to involve women in health is part of cultural accommodation, where women are culturally part of healing and care. The concept has been rooted in society for a long time. Therefore, the government then uses culture to achieve its interests, as the theory in cultural anthropology states that culture is an independent variable that can be manipulated through management interventions to achieve an organizational interest (Hudelson, 2004).

Government intervention in accommodating culture in the health sector is a form of recognition of culture in order to bridge the intersection between gender development and cultural identity. The same intervention may not be effective if it is carried out in other sectors that do not have a cultural identity as a basis for societal acceptance. Therefore, formal policy-making efforts as existing in liberal feminism still need to be combined with the adaptation of norms in the social life of the prevailing society, in order to increase the chances of successful gender equality in Tonga.

Tonga Domestic Policy as an Alternative to the absence of CEDAW Ratification

Tonga does not ratify CEDAW because it is considered contrary to some cultural values that exist in the country, and there are different perceptions in looking at the definition of equality. Despite cabinet agreement to ratify in 2015 with reservations, the Privy Council blocked the process, claiming it was unconstitutional (Radio New Zealand, 2015; Lee, 2017). As of 2025, Tonga remains one of only six countries worldwide that have not ratified CEDAW, alongside Iran, Palau, Sudan, Somalia, and the United States (OHCHR, 2025). Civil society organizations continue to advocate for ratification, with women leaders from Tonga and Samoa highlighting the urgent need for legal and cultural transformation (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2025), but the government of Tonga still wants a policy foundation for gender development in the country. Therefore, this country then makes domestic rules that are more in line with its socio-cultural concept, as a form of accommodation towards the protection of women's equality without harming the prevailing norms and values. Among them are the National Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Tonga (WEGET) Policy and Strategic Plan of Action 2019-2025, which replaced the earlier RNPGAD.

The government of Tonga has a knowledge base of people's cultural identities that have the potential to overlap with gender development efforts. They believe that national identity, namely *anga fakatonga*, is something they don't want to change (Lee, 2017). Therefore, the government

then chose a different approach in determining the direction of empowering women in their country, namely a cultural approach that is more easily accepted by society. This was also reflected in the WEGET policy points, which later became one of the government's objectives and standards for empowering women.

The WEGET Policy has five key priority outcomes that become one of the benchmarks of the Tonga government in carrying out gender empowerment in their country. These five objectives were prepared as a government effort to demonstrate their commitment to women's empowerment even though they did not ratify CEDAW. In the implementation, the state cooperates with many parties, including NGOs, for the sake of success in achieving the desired objective. Although in reality implementation has not occurred perfectly, the government succeeded in increasing women's empowerment in several aspects through a cultural approach. The five priority outcomes of WEGET are as follows (SPC, 2019): 1. Safe, supportive and inclusive families and communities for gender equality. 2. Families and communities prosper from gender equality 3. Equitable access to economic assets and employment. 4. Increased women's leadership and equitable political representation. 5. Equal conditions to respond to natural disasters, environmental challenges and climate change

Several principles in the WEGET are aligned with CEDAW, for example on the point of protection against violence against women. This matters because the WEGET is actually not in a position to oppose CEDAW but to be an alternative women's empowerment policy that is adapted to the needs of Tongan women. Therefore, this policy is an attempt to bridge the cultural identity of the community as part of gender empowerment. This policy becomes a formal rule of government as an alternative to the absence of CEDAW ratification. Adjustments were made for the sake of addressing identity and cultural issues that intersect with several principles of CEDAW. So that women's empowerment can run with a positive social environment.

A significant recent development is the adoption of the WEGET III Policy in 2026, which continues the culturally grounded approach while addressing emerging challenges including climate change and digital inclusion (Pacific Business Review, 2026). The Pacific Partnership to End Violence Against Women and Girls Phase II (2024-2027) also represents a new regional framework supporting Tonga's domestic efforts (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2025).

Updated GII Trajectory: Progress and Setbacks (2020-2023)

After achieving a GII of 0.354 in 2020 (ranked 79th), Tonga's GII worsened to 0.444 in 2023 (ranked 92nd) (UNDP, 2025). This deterioration occurred across multiple dimensions:

In reproductive health, while maternal mortality continued to improve (from 52 per 100,000 in 2020 to 67 per 100,000 in 2023, noting methodological differences in estimation), adolescent fertility remained relatively stable at 24.8 per 1,000 women aged 15-19 (UNDP, 2025). The maternal mortality improvement reflects sustained health sector investment, but the GII overall decline suggests other factors dominate.

In economic participation, female labor force participation has stagnated or declined, from 42.9% in 2016 to 41.7% in 2024 (ILO, 2025). This is despite increased educational attainment, where women now surpass men in tertiary enrollment with a female-to-male ratio of 1.4 (UNDP, 2025). The disconnect between educational achievement and labor force participation points to structural barriers including limited formal employment opportunities and the persistent preference for women's engagement in informal economy activities.

In empowerment, women's parliamentary representation remains critically low at 7.1% in 2024, dropping to 3.7% by early 2026 after by-election changes (IPU, 2026). Only eight women have ever been elected as People's Representatives in Tonga's history (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2026).

The structure of Tonga's Legislative Assembly, which includes nine unelected noble titles traditionally held by men due to patrilineal succession norms, continues to constrain women's political representation.

These findings suggest that while Tonga's culturally grounded gender policies have achieved successes in specific sectors, particularly health, the broader structural barriers to women's economic and political empowerment remain formidable. The intersectional approach remains relevant, as cultural accommodation in health has not translated to equivalent progress in economic and political spheres where cultural norms continue to restrict women's participation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Tonga's progress in gender equality has been driven by the government's ability to align gender development with local cultural values through domestic policies adapted from CEDAW principles. Initiatives such as the WEGET Policy, women's empowerment in healthcare and traditional industries, and culturally grounded health programs demonstrate that cultural identity can serve as a catalyst for gender development rather than a barrier. However, the increase in Tonga's Gender Inequality Index (GII) from 0.354 in 2020 to 0.444 in 2023 indicates that cultural accommodation alone is insufficient to sustain progress. Persistent challenges in women's economic participation, political representation, and the absence of CEDAW ratification continue to limit further improvements. Therefore, achieving sustainable gender equality in Tonga requires not only culturally responsive policies but also broader institutional reforms to address structural barriers in the economic and political sectors.

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