

Regional Study No. 2

Updating the Common Country Analyses 2026 for Micronesia

Human Rights, Gender Equality and Leaving No One Behind

May 2026



Preface

This 2026 update of the Common Country Analyses (CCA) for Micronesia comes at a pivotal moment for the subregion. As the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau navigate an increasingly complex development landscape, the need to anchor policymaking in human rights, gender equality and the principle of inclusiveness has never been stronger. This study responds to this imperative by providing an integrated, people-centred assessment of emerging risks, persistent inequalities and opportunities for transformative change.

Micronesian countries continue to face profound structural challenges, including geographic dispersion, climate-related vulnerabilities, demographic shifts and capacity constraints. These pressures are further shaped by an evolving geopolitical environment marked by intensifying strategic competition, reconfigurations in regional cooperation and heightened exposure to external economic shocks. Such dynamics have direct implications for the realization of human rights, gender equality and inclusive development, often reinforcing longstanding disparities and hindering equal access to essential services, justice and economic opportunity.

Despite these constraints, Micronesian governments and communities demonstrate deep resilience, strong social cohesion and a steadfast commitment to shared prosperity and human dignity. Their active engagement in regional diplomacy, stewardship of vast ocean spaces and articulation of a unified Pacific voice underscore both their agency and the subregion's growing strategic relevance. These strengths remain critical for advancing rights-based, gender-responsive and inclusive development pathways.

The United Nations system, through its Multi-Country Resident Coordinator's Office in Micronesia, is committed to supporting this vision. By providing rigorous analysis, strengthening accountability mechanisms and promoting evidence-based decision-making, the United Nations seeks to help member States navigate the intersection of development priorities, institutional capacity and shifting geopolitical realities, while ensuring that human rights, gender equality and leaving no one behind remain at the centre of policy dialogue and implementation.

This study builds on the 2023–2027 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and draws on extensive engagement from across the United Nations system. It synthesizes new data, treaty-body findings, national reporting, community perspectives and cross-sectoral analyses to highlight progress achieved, identify structural gaps and outline practical measures to accelerate the realization of human rights and gender equality. Its three analytical pillars—the human rights-based approach (HRBA), gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) and leaving no one behind (LNOB), provide both the conceptual foundation and operational orientation for the work ahead.

The objective of this regional study is not only to update the evidence base for the CCA, but also to serve as a strategic resource for governments, development partners, the private sector, civil society and communities. By promoting policy coherence and supporting national priorities, it aims to facilitate dialogue on the reforms required to advance inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. Central to this approach is the recognition that human rights are not an adjunct to development: they form the essential framework through which progress becomes measurable, meaningful and just.

We hope this study contributes to ongoing efforts to uphold human dignity, expand opportunities and empower those most at risk of being left behind. The United Nations remains committed to working alongside the governments and people of Micronesia to advance a future anchored in equality, resilience and justice for all.

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Disclaimers

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¹ United Nations System (2022). *Principles for the ethical use of artificial intelligence in the United Nations system*. Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Coordination, High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) Inter-Agency Working Group on Artificial Intelligence, 20 September.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADR	Alternative dispute resolution
CAT	Convention Against Torture
CCA	Common Country Analyses
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on Rights of the Child
CROP	Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
FSM	Federated States of Micronesia
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEWE	Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment
HRBA	Human Rights-Based Approach
HRC	Human Rights Committee
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICPPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
IPV	Intimate partner violence
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and other identities
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHRI	National Human Rights Institution
NMIRF	National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-Up
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PwD	Person with disabilities
RMI	Republic of the Marshall Islands
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SPC	Pacific Community
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WGT	Working Group on Treaties

1. Introduction

This regional study updates the Common Country Analyses (CCA) across the five Micronesian countries of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau, by examining: (i) evolving human rights commitments; (ii) gender equality; and (iii) the dynamics of the inclusiveness principle. The analysis identifies structural barriers, current progress and priority actions required to align national trajectories with international human rights standards, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is universal, transformative and grounded in human dignity and equality.²

A central analytical lens of this study is the human rights-based approach (HRBA), defined by the United Nations as a normative and operational framework that anchors development in international human rights law.³ HRBA seeks to identify and address inequalities and discriminatory practices at the heart of development challenges, and requires programmes to strengthen the capacities of duty-bearers to meet their human rights obligations and of rights-holders to claim their rights. The United Nations' common understanding on HRBA establishes five guiding principles, of universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability, which inform all development cooperation strategies.⁴

Complementing HRBA, the United Nations positions gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) as a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Persistent gender inequalities, in access to resources, labour-market participation, political representation and exposure to gender-based violence, continue to hinder progress. The United Nations stresses that gender equality is essential for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), not only SDG 5 (gender equality), and must be systematically integrated across national policies, public institutions and budgetary processes.⁵ The United Nations' system-wide mechanisms, such as the United Nations system-wide action plan (UN-SWAP), strengthen accountability for GEWE across the United Nations entities.⁶

The third foundational pillar of this study, the leave no one behind (LNOB) commitment, is described by the United Nations as the "central, transformative promise" of the 2030 Agenda.⁷ LNOB requires the identification of groups at risk of marginalization, the analysis of intersecting drivers of exclusion, such as discrimination, geography, socio-economic status, governance weaknesses and exposure to shocks, and the adoption of measures that prioritize those furthest behind.⁸ It is grounded in human rights norms and emphasizes meaningful participation and accountability throughout all stages of policy-making and implementation.⁹

² United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "Leave No One Behind – Universal Values, Principle Two," n.d., <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>.

³ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "Human Rights-Based Approach," n.d., <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ United Nations, "Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," n.d., <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

⁶ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, "Gender Equality," n.d., <https://unsceb.org/topics/gender-equality>.

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *What Does It Mean to Leave No One Behind?* (UNDP Discussion Paper, 2018), https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Discussion_Paper_LNOB_EN_lres.pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "Leave No One Behind – Universal Values, Principle Two."

Collectively, HRBA, GEWE and LNOB, grounded in these international human rights treaties, provide a coherent, mutually reinforcing framework for assessing the structural constraints facing Micronesia, and for identifying reforms necessary to ensure that development is inclusive, equitable and fully aligned with international human rights obligations. By applying these principles, this study seeks to support Micronesian governments, regional partners and the United Nations system in implementing the 2030 Agenda in a manner that reaches the furthest behind first.

The sections that follow build on this analytical foundation by examining the human rights landscape across the five Micronesian countries, assessing the status of core treaty ratifications, identifying legislative and institutional gaps and analyzing persistent inequalities affecting women, children, persons with disabilities and other groups at heightened risk of exclusion. Subsequent sections provide country-specific diagnostics on access to justice, gender equality and the drivers of marginalization, followed by a comprehensive LNOB analysis that highlights the intersecting vulnerabilities shaping development outcomes across the subregion. The final section synthesizes these findings into priority policy directions and actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening human rights protections, advancing gender equality and ensuring that no one is left behind in the subregion's progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

2. Ratification Status of Core Human Rights Treaties

The international human rights treaties establish legal obligations for States. The nine core United Nations treaties, ratified to varying degrees across Micronesia, provide normative foundations for civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The table below summarizes the ratification status of each of the five countries for the nine human rights conventions.

TABLE 1: THE RATIFICATION STATUS OF MICRONESIA FOR THE CORE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CONVENTIONS

	FSM	Kiribati	Marshall Islands	Nauru	Palau
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)			✓		
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)			✓		✓
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)	✓		✓		
Convention against Torture (CAT)		✓	✓	✓	
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW)					
International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED)			✓		

Sources: OHCHR (undated) *Treaty Bodies*. Accessible at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies>.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) obliges States to ensure survival, protection, development and participation rights for all children, requiring child-centred legislative frameworks, child protection systems and universal access to basic services. All Micronesian countries are parties to the CRC, though implementation gaps remain due to data limitations, customary law conflicts and resource constraints.¹⁰

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) mandates the elimination of discrimination against women in all spheres and requires States to take measures to protect women's rights in marriage, employment, education and public life. Reservations and incomplete domestic incorporation in some countries, including FSM, impede the full realization of its obligations.¹¹

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) requires States to promote, protect and ensure full and equal enjoyment of rights by persons with disabilities, mandating accessibility, the prohibition of discrimination and the recognition of legal capacity. Implementation remains uneven across Micronesia, with gaps in national coordination and accessibility frameworks.¹²

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) articulate fundamental rights relevant to HRBA, including freedom of expression, fair trial, equality before the law and rights to education, health, work and social protection. Limited ratification across the subregion weakens legal protections and restricts alignment with global human rights standards.¹³

Treaties such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the Convention against Torture (CAT), the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW) and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) further define racial discrimination, protections against torture, exploitation of migrant workers and enforced disappearance, forming essential components of a rights-protective legislative environment.

2.1. Reservations

FSM's only principal reservations pertain to CEDAW, expressed when it acceded in 2004, and broadly pertain to limiting obligations on pay equity, paid maternity leave, and certain core equality and family-law provisions. More specifically: (i) article 2 relating to policy obligations to eliminate discrimination; (ii) article 5(a) on modifying social and cultural patterns; (iii) article 11 on employment; and (iv) article 16 on marriage and family relations, intended to preserve certain constitutional and customary law practices.¹⁴ Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau have conveyed no substantive reservations or interpretative declarations to those Conventions that they are a party to.

2.2. Reporting

FSM's reporting record reflects both progress and ongoing constraints. In its 2025 report to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group, the Government acknowledged that it has yet to ratify

¹⁰ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, no date, b.

¹¹ United Nations, no date.

¹² United Nations Sustainable Development Group, no date, b.

¹³ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, no date, b.

¹⁴ For further details, see: United Nations, *Micronesia (Federated States of): CEDAW Reservations and Declarations* (n.d.), https://www.bayefsky.com/pdf/micronesia_t2_cedaw.pdf; and *Federated States of Micronesia – CEDAW Legislative Compliance Review* (n.d.), https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/chapter_micronesia.pdf.

several core international human rights treaties and highlighted persistent capacity limitations that affect its ability to meet reporting obligations.¹⁵ To strengthen compliance and improve coordination, FSM has been encouraged to further build its national reporting capacity, and to reinforce its recently established Joint National Human Rights and SDG Taskforce as a standing mechanism for reporting, implementation and follow-up.¹⁶

Kiribati continues to face significant challenges in meeting its international reporting obligations. Although a National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up was established in 2014, the government notes persistent delays in obtaining data, limited technical capacity, staff turnover and reliance on external partners for expertise, all of which contribute to reporting backlogs across the treaties to which Kiribati is a party. These constraints have resulted in largely ad hoc reporting and have impeded consistent, timely engagement with international human rights mechanisms.¹⁷

The Marshall Islands has also faced periodic challenges in meeting its international reporting obligations, largely due to limited administrative and technical capacity. The national report describes ongoing reliance on external technical assistance and capacity-building support from partners such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Pacific Community (SPC) and other UN agencies to strengthen institutional systems and sustain reporting processes. These capacity constraints have contributed to delays in preparing treaty body reports and completing overdue submissions, underscoring the need for continued support to build long-term, nationally driven reporting capabilities.¹⁸

Nauru's 2025 UPR report acknowledges that its capacity to implement and report on human rights treaties remains constrained by limited financial and human resources. The Government notes that these constraints affect both implementation and timely reporting, even as it continues restructuring and strengthening its national mechanism, the Working Group on Treaties (WGT), which functions as the country's national mechanism for implementation, reporting and follow-up. Ongoing revisions to the WGT's terms of reference and composition aim to improve coordination and ensure more efficient engagement with the United Nations treaty bodies but the report emphasizes that sustained capacity gaps continue to hinder consistent treaty reporting.¹⁹

¹⁵ The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a cooperative, State-driven process of the United Nations Human Rights Council through which every United Nations member State's human rights record is reviewed on a regular cycle. It provides a platform for assessing progress, identifying gaps and receiving recommendations from other States on how to strengthen human rights protection at the national level. The process is grounded in dialogue, transparency and equal treatment among States, drawing on information from governments, United Nations entities and civil society. By encouraging peer learning, accountability and follow-up action, the UPR serves as a key mechanism for promoting the fulfilment of international human rights obligations and advancing inclusive, sustainable development. Find the latest UPR of FSM at: United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Federated States of Micronesia*, A/HRC/WG.6/51/FSM/1 (2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/51/FSM/1>.

¹⁶ See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Federated States of Micronesia*, A/HRC/47/4 (2021), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/47/4>.

¹⁷ See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Kiribati*, A/HRC/WG.6/49/KIR/1 (2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/49/KIR/1>.

¹⁸ See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Marshall Islands*, A/HRC/WG.6/50/MHL/1 (2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/50/MHL/1>.

¹⁹ See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Nauru*, A/HRC/WG.6/51/NRU/1 (2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/51/NRU/1>.

Palau's reporting burden remains comparatively limited, as it has ratified only two of the nine core international human rights treaties: CRC and CRPD. To coordinate its obligations under these and other signed instruments, Palau has established a national multi-agency Reporting Committee on UN Conventions on Human Rights, tasked with overseeing reporting processes and ensuring inter-ministerial input. However, the national report underscores that human, technical and financial resource constraints continue to limit Palau's ability to systematically engage with treaty bodies, fulfil reporting obligations and track implementation of recommendations. Strengthening this institutional capacity would significantly enhance the country's ability to meet its international human rights commitments.²⁰

²⁰ See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Palau*, A/HRC/WG.6/38/PLW/1 (2021), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/38/PLW/1>.

3. Key Gaps in Human Rights and Gender Equality

Across the Micronesian countries of FSM, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau, important commitments to human rights and gender equality have been accompanied by measurable progress in recent years despite ongoing structural constraints. Legislative advances have strengthened protections against gender-based violence, particularly through the adoption and implementation of family protection and domestic violence laws, alongside the development of national gender policies and action plans. Institutional frameworks have also been reinforced through the establishment and/or enhancement of gender bureaux, human rights focal points and inter-agency coordination mechanisms, with increasing efforts to integrate gender equality into national development planning and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) processes.²¹

At the same time, engagement with international human rights mechanisms has expanded, including improved participation in treaty reporting and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), particularly in relation to CEDAW and CRPD. Progress is also evident in community-level initiatives and awareness-raising efforts, often implemented in partnership with civil society and grounded in culturally sensitive approaches that engage traditional leaders. While women's participation in decision-making remains limited, targeted measures such as leadership programmes and advocacy initiatives have begun to enhance their visibility in public life. Collectively, these developments signal a positive trajectory, although sustained investment in implementation, capacity and data systems will be essential to translate commitments into tangible outcomes for vulnerable and marginalized groups.²²

The above notwithstanding, significant gaps persist between treaty obligations and their practical realization. Limited resources, geographic isolation and the continued influence of customary systems collectively serve to constrain the development of coherent legal frameworks and effective implementation mechanisms. As a result, women, children, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups continue to face barriers to protection, participation and access to justice.²³ The following sub-sections outline the key structural, legislative and institutional challenges that impede full alignment with international standards and hinder equitable enjoyment of rights across the region.

3.1. FSM

FSM has taken steps to align national frameworks with international human rights standards. However, gaps in legislation, institutional capacity and service provision continue to limit the full realization of rights for women, children and persons with disabilities. Geographic dispersion, resource constraints, fragmented implementing architecture and reliance on customary systems compound implementation challenges across all four states of FSM.

3.1.1. Children's Rights

FSM lacks a comprehensive child-rights law or unified national framework, resulting in fragmented protections only partially aligned with CRC. Although FSM has ratified two Optional Protocols, the absence of a coordinating mechanism, limited disaggregated data and under-resourced

²¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Reports* (various years).

²² Ibid.

²³ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2026* (Suva and Port Vila: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre, 2026).

child-protection services constrain effective implementation.²⁴ Children, especially on outer islands, face persistent barriers to quality education, health services, safe water and climate-resilient infrastructure.²⁵ Referral pathways, case management and child-friendly complaints mechanisms remain limited, and statutory safeguards against all forms of violence and exploitation are not yet fully harmonized across the four states.²⁶

3.1.2. Women's Rights

FSM ratified CEDAW in 2004 but maintains reservations on key provisions concerning discriminatory customs, employment protections, maternity leave and family relations. Implementation remains uneven due to the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, gaps in federal-level criminalization of all forms of violence against women, including marital rape, and inconsistent state-level family-law provisions.²⁷ Structural constraints include limited legal remedies, weak labour protections, inadequate data and limited access to services in remote locations.²⁸ Under-reporting of domestic and sexual violence and lack of specialized services further restrict women's access to justice and support.²⁹

3.1.3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities

FSM ratified the CRPD in 2016, yet lacks a national disability law and a fully mandated coordinating mechanism to oversee implementation. Disability-related provisions vary by state, and mainstreaming across education, health, employment, infrastructure and disaster-risk reduction remains limited.³⁰ Physical accessibility, availability of assistive devices, inclusive education and community-based services remain insufficient, particularly in remote islands.³¹ Women and children with disabilities face heightened barriers to health, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, and schooling.³² The absence of a national disability data system hampers planning, budgeting and monitoring.

3.1.4. Civil and Political Freedoms

FSM has not ratified the ICCPR, leaving several civil and political rights without treaty-based guarantees. While constitutional protections exist, there is no overarching anti-discrimination law covering gender identity, disability or sexual orientation. Freedom of information is not established in law, and criminal defamation may discourage free expression.³³ Systemic challenges, such as delays in court proceedings, inconsistent publication of judgments, lack of translation and limited legal aid,³⁴ constrain access to

²⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Federated States of Micronesia*, A/HRC/WG.6/51/FSM/2 (2025), para. 38.

²⁵ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Federated States of Micronesia* (Suva: UNICEF Pacific Office, 2017), 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Federated States of Micronesia* (2025), paras. 33, 35.

²⁸ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Federated States of Micronesia* (Suva: UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office, 2022), 7, 11, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/UN_WOMEN_FSM.pdf.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁰ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Initial Report Submitted by the Federated States of Micronesia under Article 35 of the Convention, due in 2019*, CRPD/C/FSM/1 (2025), paras. 12, 28, 41, 132.

³¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Federated States of Micronesia* (2025), para. 41.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, para. 12.

³⁴ Supreme Court of the Federated States of Micronesia, *2024 Annual Report* (Supreme Court of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2025), 19, 45-46.

justice. UPR submissions highlight the need for defamation-law reforms, stronger anti-discrimination protections and ICCPR ratification.³⁵

3.1.5. National Human Rights Institution

FSM does not have a Paris Principles-compliant national human rights institution. The National Human Rights and SDG Taskforce, established in 2022, supports reporting and coordination, but lacks independence, investigative powers and a broad human rights mandate. Establishing a national human rights institution (NHRI) would require legislation ensuring independence, secure tenure, an adequate budget and the authority to investigate, advise and monitor compliance nationwide.

3.1.6. Access to Justice

Access to justice remains limited due to geographic dispersion, transportation constraints, costs and infrastructure deficits.³⁶ Justice institutions face capacity challenges, including shortages of trained judges, prosecutors and court personnel. Customary mechanisms, widely used for dispute resolution, prioritize reconciliation³⁷ but lack safeguards for women, children and persons with disabilities, and may reinforce unequal power dynamics. Strengthening justice access will require expanded legal aid, training for law-enforcement and customary leaders, child- and gender-sensitive procedures, and accessible infrastructure and services for persons with disabilities.

3.2. Kiribati

Kiribati's human rights framework reflects a blend of constitutional, statutory and customary systems, producing uneven protection across different groups. While the country has ratified several core treaties and introduced relevant legislation, implementation gaps, resource constraints and the influence of customary norms continue to limit the full realization of rights for children, women, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.

3.2.1. Children's Rights

Kiribati ratified the CRC in 1995 and adopted the Children, Young People and Family Welfare Act in 2013, but CRC provisions are not directly enforceable in courts. Key rights, especially those linked to ICCPR, ICESCR and Optional Protocols, remain only partly reflected in national law. Customary practices which conflict with CRC standards remain, including corporal punishment, early marriage and patriarchal family authority, particularly on outer islands.³⁸ Birth registration remains incomplete despite recent mobile initiatives, resulting in limited access to services for unregistered children.³⁹

Major gaps persist in juvenile justice, child-disaggregated data and uniform implementation due to limited resources.⁴⁰ Civil society participation in policymaking is modest, and bodies such as the Kiribati National Advisory Committee on Children (KNACC) have limited reach. Inconsistent definitions of a

³⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Federated States of Micronesia* (2025), para. 9.

³⁶ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Initial Report Submitted by the Federated States of Micronesia under Article 35 of the Convention, due in 2019* (2025), paras. 53.

³⁷ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Federated States of Micronesia* (2017), 96.

³⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Kiribati*, A/HRC/WG.6/49/KIR/2 (2025), paras. 29, 31, 33, 54.

³⁹ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in Kiribati* (Suva: UNICEF Pacific Office, 2017), 84.

⁴⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Kiribati* (2025), para. 55.

child, reservations to several CRC articles and the absence of a clear prohibition of corporal punishment continue to impede alignment with CRC norms.⁴¹

3.2.2. Women's Rights

Kiribati has ratified CEDAW but not its Optional Protocol, and constitutional equality guarantees are limited. High levels of gender-based violence persist, with gaps in enforcement, services and accountability. Customary law and patrilineal inheritance restrict women's rights to land and property.⁴² Access to sexual and reproductive health services remains uneven, especially on outer islands.⁴³ Women are markedly under-represented in public decision-making in Kiribati, holding only about 6–11 per cent of parliamentary seats,⁴⁴ and legislative reforms to align family and marriage laws with CEDAW remain incomplete.⁴⁵

3.2.3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Although Kiribati acceded to the CRPD in 2013, domestic laws do not yet fully reflect CRPD standards. Accessibility obligations, legal capacity protections⁴⁶ and safeguards against forced treatment are under-developed.⁴⁷ Disability data remain limited despite the use of Washington Group questions.^{48 49} Organizations of persons with disabilities have insufficient participation in policy-making, and the alignment of sectoral laws on education, health and employment remains a work in progress.⁵⁰

3.2.4. Civil and Political Freedoms

Kiribati has not ratified the ICCPR or CAT. Constitutional rights are subject to broad public interest and customary law limitations, weakening practical protection. Anti-discrimination provisions do not cover all grounds, and same-sex relations remain criminalized.⁵¹ Restrictions persist around defamation, access to information⁵² and protection for journalists and human rights defenders, although NGOs

⁴¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Kiribati*, CRC/C/KIR/CO/2-4 (2022), paras. 18, 26.

⁴² UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (Suva: UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office, 2022), 2, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UN-WOMEN-KIRIBATI_0.pdf.

⁴³ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Kiribati* (2025), para. 41.

⁴⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Women in national parliaments: Kiribati* (2024), <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/KI/KI-LC01/data-on-women/>; UN Women, *Country fact sheet: Kiribati* (2024), <https://data.unwomen.org/country/kiribati>.

⁴⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025, paras. 27, 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 51.

⁴⁷ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Kiribati*, CRPD/C/KIR/CO/1 (2025), para. 27.

⁴⁸ Washington Group questions refer to a standardized set of short questions developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics to identify persons with disabilities in censuses and surveys. They focus on functional difficulties across core domains, such as seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care and communication, rather than medical diagnoses, with the aim of enabling internationally comparable data on disability prevalence and participation. For more details, visit: <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-ss/>.

⁴⁹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Kiribati* (2025), para. 59.

⁵⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Kiribati* (2025), para. 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, para. 16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 25-26.

operate with relative freedom.⁵³ Judicial independence concerns have been raised, including past suspension of senior judges.⁵⁴

3.2.5. National Human Rights Institution

There is no Paris Principles-compliant NHRI. The National Human Rights Taskforce and the Ministry of Justice’s Human Rights Unit coordinate reporting and training, but lack independence, funding and investigative powers. Establishing an NHRI with statutory safeguards, complaint-handling powers and secure funding would significantly strengthen oversight.

3.2.6. Access to Justice

Justice services are concentrated in South Tarawa, creating geographic and financial barriers for outer-island populations. Kiribati lacks a nationwide legal aid system, and reliance on customary mechanisms can disadvantage women and children, especially in matters relating to gender-based violence (GBV) and families.⁵⁵ Courts encourage mediation, but formal alternative dispute resolution (ADR) remains limited. Strengthening legal aid, ensuring gender- and child-sensitive procedures, improving juvenile justice and aligning customary practices with human rights standards are key priorities.

3.3. Marshall Islands

The Marshall Islands has made significant human rights commitments across core international treaties, yet gaps in domestic legislation, implementation capacity and the influence of customary systems continue to limit the full enjoyment of rights. Structural constraints, geographic dispersion, limited resources and uneven alignment between international obligations and national laws contribute to persistent protection challenges for children, women, persons with disabilities and communities affected by environmental and historical nuclear harms.

3.3.1. Children’s Rights

The Marshall Islands has ratified the CRC but has not fully incorporated it into domestic law, and coordination on children’s issues remains weak. Birth registration is incomplete, particularly in outer islands, limiting access to essential services.⁵⁶ Protection gaps persist in responding to domestic violence, sexual abuse and trafficking, with limited data and insufficient prevention systems.⁵⁷ Juvenile justice remains partly non-compliant with the CRC, including child–adult co-detention and the criminalization of status offences.⁵⁸ Children with disabilities, those on outer islands and victims of abuse face inadequate support due to resource constraints.⁵⁹ Legal frameworks, including family,

⁵³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: Kiribati* (Freedom House, 2025), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kiribati/freedom-world/2025>.

⁵⁴ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Kiribati Senior Judge Removal a Major Setback to Justice – UN Expert,” press release, April 26, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/kiribati-senior-judge-removal-major-setback-justice-un-expert>.

⁵⁵ United Nations Children’s Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in Kiribati* (Suva: UNICEF Pacific Office, 2017), 100.

⁵⁶ United Nations Children’s Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Marshall Islands* (Suva: UNICEF Pacific Office, 2017), 95.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 78, 84-87.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 88, 91.

⁵⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Marshall Islands*, A/HRC/WG.6/50/MHL/2 (2025), para. 55.

education, labour and health laws, are not yet fully aligned with the Child Rights Protection Act, and corporal punishment remains lawful in several settings.⁶⁰

3.3.2. Women's Rights

Despite broad treaty ratification, including CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, legislation and institutions do not yet fully reflect gender-equality obligations. The Constitution lacks a definition of discrimination aligned with CEDAW, and there is no comprehensive anti-discrimination law. Customary law, particularly in land and inheritance, can override women's rights.⁶¹ Violence against women remains widespread, with studies showing extremely high rates of intimate-partner violence; however, reporting, prosecution and service provision remain limited.⁶² Barriers to justice include distance, cost, low legal awareness, limited legal aid and weak coordination of survivor services.⁶³ Women remain underrepresented in political life⁶⁴ despite recent progress. Trafficking-related risks persist, and protections linked to marriage and nationality remain incomplete.⁶⁵

3.3.3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Marshall Islands has ratified the CRPD but not its Optional Protocol. The 2015 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act provides an important foundation, but broader alignment with CRPD standards remains incomplete. Anti-discrimination mechanisms require strengthening, including constitutional coverage and enforcement across sectors such as education, labour, transport, health and housing.⁶⁶ Coordination among government bodies is limited, and persons with disabilities often lack awareness of their rights.⁶⁷ Sectoral laws have not been fully harmonized with the 2015 Act, and implementation capacity remains inadequate.⁶⁸

3.3.4. Civil and Political Freedoms

The Marshall Islands has ratified the ICCPR and maintains constitutional protections for key civil and political rights. However, enforcement gaps persist, including incomplete anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. While freedoms of expression, assembly and association are generally respected, there is no dedicated access-to-information law.⁶⁹ Structural issues, including corruption concerns, the legacy of nuclear testing and climate-related displacement, continue to affect equal enjoyment of rights and access to remedies.⁷⁰

⁶⁰ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Marshall Islands* (2017), 86.

⁶¹ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Initial to Third Periodic Reports of the Marshall Islands*, CEDAW/C/MHL/CO/1-3 (2018), para. 12; United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Marshall Islands* (2017), 83.

⁶² UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (Suva: UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office, 2022), 9-10, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UN_WOMEN_RMI.pdf.

⁶³ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Initial to Third Periodic Reports of the Marshall Islands* (2018), paras. 14-15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 20.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, paras 26, 30.

⁶⁶ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of the Marshall Islands*, CRPD/C/MHL/CO/1 (2026), paras. 9, 17-18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 23.

⁶⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Marshall Islands* (2025), para. 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 59-60.

3.3.5. National Human Rights Institution

The National Human Rights Committee serves as the central human rights mechanism, coordinating reporting and promoting awareness. However, it is not an independent NHRI and does not meet the Paris Principles. Its mandate includes complaints handling, monitoring and inter-agency coordination, but limited resourcing and independence constrain its effectiveness. The National Human Rights Commission Act was passed in March 2026. The Marshall Islands will need to ensure adequate resources and independence for its newly established NHRI to fully meet Paris Principles standards.

3.3.6. Access to Justice

Access to justice is hindered by geographic isolation, concentration of courts in Majuro/Ebeye, high transport costs and limited legal aid availability.⁷¹ Judicial capacity constraints, including few judges, case backlogs and limited infrastructure, affect timely proceedings. Customary law plays a strong role in land, family and traditional rights matters and can override statutory protections, particularly for women.⁷² Children lack a dedicated complaints body or child-sensitive procedures, and reliance on informal mechanisms persists.⁷³ Mediation and ADR exist but remain limited in capacity. Key priorities include expanding legal aid, strengthening child- and gender-sensitive procedures, enforcing equality laws, and ensuring that customary mechanisms comply with human rights standards.

3.4. Nauru

Nauru's human rights framework reflects a combination of limited treaty participation, capacity constraints and the strong influence of customary norms, resulting in uneven protection across different groups. While the country has introduced important reforms in areas such as child protection, gender-based violence and disability rights, various gaps in legislation, implementation and institutional capacity continue to impede the full realization of civil, political, economic and social rights, particularly for children, women and persons with disabilities.

3.4.1. Children's Rights

Nauru has ratified only four core child-related treaties, with the ICCPR and ICESCR still unratified, limiting the wider rights framework. Child protection systems remain under-resourced, and the 2016 Child Protection and Welfare Act is not fully implemented. Older laws, including the Guardianship Act, remain inconsistent with CRC standards, relying on outdated welfare approaches that inadequately protect children's rights to participation, best interests and protection from arbitrary decision-making. Violence against children, including corporal punishment, remains widespread amid weak prevention and reporting systems and insufficient support for refugee and asylum-seeking children.⁷⁴ Access to justice is constrained by limited legal aid, a lack of child-sensitive procedures and no separate juvenile facilities while gaps in birth registration, data systems and legal harmonization across key sectors persist.⁷⁵

⁷¹ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Initial to Third Periodic Reports of the Marshall Islands* (2018), paras. 14-15.

⁷² United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Initial to Third Periodic Reports of the Marshall Islands* (2018), para. 12.

⁷³ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Marshall Islands* (2017), 91, 93.

⁷⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in Nauru* (Suva: UNICEF Pacific Office, 2017), 69, 77, 82.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 73, 76.

3.4.2. Women’s Rights

Nauru has ratified CEDAW but lacks a constitutional definition of discrimination aligned with article 1, and past attempts to strengthen equality provisions have failed. There is no comprehensive gender-equality law, and patriarchal norms continue to shape women’s roles and limit autonomy. Gender-based violence remains widespread and underreported, with gaps in legal protection, weak enforcement and limited services for survivors.⁷⁶ Reproductive-health laws remain restrictive, and adolescent pregnancy contributes to school dropout.⁷⁷ Laws governing marriage, property and family relations retain discriminatory elements requiring reform.⁷⁸ Broader structural gaps include insufficient training for justice actors, limited legal aid and reliance on informal community mechanisms for handling domestic and sexual-violence cases.⁷⁹

3.4.3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Although Nauru ratified the CRPD in 2012, domestic legislation is not yet harmonized with the Convention. Disability is not a protected ground across constitutional and legislative frameworks, and there is no comprehensive disability law defining discrimination or reasonable accommodation. Accessibility standards for buildings, transport and communications remain underdeveloped, and the disability community faces a lack of awareness of their rights and limited involvement in policymaking. Weak data systems and fragmented coordination hinder effective planning, and persons with disabilities have inadequate legal remedies when excluded from services, education or employment.⁸⁰

3.4.4. Civil and Political Freedoms

Nauru has not ratified the ICCPR, and constitutional rights may be restricted under broadly framed “public interest” clauses. Media independence is limited due to state ownership and civil-service control of the main media bureau, and the absence of an access-to-information law constrains transparency.⁸¹ Restrictions on free expression have been reported, particularly around refugee and offshore-processing issues, alongside past limitations on access for journalists and observers.⁸² Judicial independence faces concerns, with delays in cases, limited affordable legal services and incomplete alignment with international fair-trial standards. Although Freedom House classifies Nauru as ‘free’, gaps in law and practice continue to constrain meaningful civic participation.⁸³

3.4.5. National Human Rights Institution

Nauru lacks a Paris Principles-compliant NHRI. The Department of Justice coordinates reporting and awareness-raising but lacks independence, investigatory powers and a broad human-rights mandate. The 2025 Human Rights Commission Act establishes a new national commission, but further steps are needed to secure independence, clarify investigatory functions, ensure transparent appointments,

⁷⁶ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (Suva: UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office, 2022), 8-9, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/UN_WOMEN_NAURU.pdf.

⁷⁷ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Initial and Second Periodic Reports of Nauru*, CEDAW/C/NRU/CO/1-2 (2017), para. 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁷⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Compilation on Nauru*, A/HRC/WG.6/37/NRU/2 (2020), para. 36.

⁸⁰ Atu Emberson-Bain, *Inequality, Discrimination and Exclusion: Assessing CRPD Compliance in Pacific Island Legislation* (Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 2021).

⁸¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Nauru*, A/HRC/WG.6/51/NRU/2 (2025), para. 15.

⁸² Amnesty International, *Island of Despair: Australia’s “Processing” of Refugees on Nauru* (London: Amnesty International, 2016), 4.

⁸³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: Nauru* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2025), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/nauru/freedom-world/2025>.

guarantee stable funding and build capacity for public complaints handling, detention monitoring and legislative review.⁸⁴

3.4.6. Access to Justice

Access to justice is hindered by the absence of a comprehensive legal-aid system, limited availability of qualified lawyers⁸⁵ and ongoing concerns regarding judicial independence following past interference in judicial appointments.⁸⁶ Many disputes, including family and community matters, are resolved informally, often to the detriment of women and other vulnerable groups.⁸⁷ Customary law governs land, inheritance and matters concerning Nauruans, with the Nauru Lands Committee applying local custom. ADR mechanisms exist but remain limited. Strengthening access to justice requires: expanding legal aid, ensuring gender- and child-sensitive procedures, reinforcing judicial independence, improving access for persons with disabilities, and integrating rights-based standards across customary and formal systems.

3.5. Palau

Palau has ratified key human rights treaties, but continues to face significant legislative and institutional gaps, particularly where customary systems intersect with formal law. Limited resources, partial integration of international standards and uneven implementation contribute to protection gaps for children, women and persons with disabilities.

3.5.1. Children's Rights

Palau has ratified the CRC and CRPD, but not the CAT, ICCPR or ICESCR, leaving gaps in civil, political, economic and social rights protections. CRC principles, non-discrimination, best interests, survival and development and participation, are not yet fully integrated into legislation, policies or decision-making. Child-level complaint mechanisms and a dedicated oversight body are absent. Children face discriminatory barriers, including unequal marriage ages⁸⁸ and weaker access to services for non-Palauan children, those in outer islands or in poverty.⁸⁹ Implementation of child protection laws remains uneven, with limited resources for victim services, insufficient child-friendly procedures⁹⁰ and inadequate enforcement against exploitation and child labour.⁹¹ Juvenile justice reforms remain incomplete, with limited diversion options and inconsistent safeguards. Corporal punishment remains lawful in some settings, and statutory-customary tensions persist.

3.5.2. Women's Rights

Palau has ratified CEDAW but not its Optional Protocol, and legislative alignment remains partial. There is no comprehensive gender-equality or anti-discrimination law. Gender-based violence is widespread

⁸⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, *National Report Submitted Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Nauru*, A/HRC/WG.6/51/NRU/1 (2025).

⁸⁵ Pacific Judicial Strengthening Initiative, *Situation Analysis of Pacific Legal Aid Systems* (Sydney: Federal Court of Australia, updated May 2021), A-11-A-12.

⁸⁶ Gabriela Knaul, *Communication to the Government of Nauru*, UA G/SO 214 (3-3-16), NRU 1/2014 (24 January 2014).

⁸⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Compilation on Nauru* (2020), para. 40.

⁸⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Palau*, A/HRC/WG.6/52/PLW/2 (2026), para. 50.

⁸⁹ United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in Palau* (Suva: UNICEF Pacific Office, 2017), 89.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁹¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Palau* (2026), para. 53.

and significantly underreported, with limited access to survivor-centred services,⁹² uneven enforcement and capacity gaps among police, judiciary and frontline actors. Traditional governance structures often complicate access to justice, and cultural norms contribute to silence around violence.⁹³ Sectoral laws, including employment and reproductive health, contain gaps in equality protections, and abortion remains criminalized except in exceptional cases. Persistent barriers in rural areas include limited legal aid, lack of integrated case management and weak data systems.⁹⁴

3.5.3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Palau has ratified the CRPD and its Optional Protocol, and enacted a disability law in 2024, but full harmonization with the Convention is pending. Disability-based discrimination is not yet comprehensively prohibited across all public and private sectors, and stronger enforcement mechanisms are needed. Accessibility of transport, public buildings and communications remains limited, and data for policy planning are incomplete.⁹⁵ Guardianship laws still allow deprivation of legal capacity,⁹⁶ and supported decision-making models have yet to be established. Organizations of persons with disabilities, including women and children, are not consistently involved in policymaking or monitoring,⁹⁷ and disability inclusion in sectoral laws on health, education, employment and disaster risk reduction remains partial.

3.5.4. Civil and Political Freedoms

Palau has not ratified the ICCPR or its Optional Protocol. Constitutional protections cover key rights, but gaps persist in explicit safeguards for sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. Equality guarantees are not consistently reflected in sectoral laws, and statutory guidance on restrictions of rights does not fully reflect international standards. While media and the judiciary are independent, enforcement gaps and corruption concerns affect equal protection.⁹⁸ There is no freedom-of-information or whistle-blower protection law, and no Paris Principles-compliant national human rights institution. Current oversight mechanisms are fragmented across ministries and lack independence and investigatory powers.

3.5.5. National Human Rights Institution

Palau lacks an independent NHRI and relies instead on a Reporting Committee for UN conventions. These mechanisms lack an adequate degree of independence, a broad mandate, complaint-handling functions and investigative powers. Transitioning to a small, independent, Paris Principles-compliant human rights commission, with secure funding, transparent appointments and powers for inquiries, detention visits and legislative review, would strengthen oversight. Current constraints include limited staffing, resources and civil society engagement.

⁹² Ibid., para. 47.

⁹³ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (Suva: UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office, 2022), 10, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UN_WOMEN_PALAU.pdf.

⁹⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector: Palau* (Rome: FAO, 2023), 44, 47.

⁹⁵ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Palau*, CRPD/C/PLW/CO/1 (2025), paras. 17, 59-60.

⁹⁶ Ibid., para. 21.

⁹⁷ Ibid., para. 11.

⁹⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Compilation of Information Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Palau* (2026), para. 12.

3.5.6. Access to Justice

Access to justice is constrained by limited legal aid, especially in civil and family matters, and geographic concentration of services in the capital. Survivors of gender-based violence face cost, distance and information barriers. Customary mechanisms heavily shape land, family and community dispute resolution; while often restorative, they may limit formal protections for women and children.⁹⁹ Judicial capacity is constrained by small bench size and reliance on foreign judges for complex cases,¹⁰⁰ contributing to delays. Alternative dispute resolution frameworks exist but remain limited. Strengthening access requires expanded legal aid, gender- and child-sensitive procedures, harmonization of statutory and customary systems, outreach to outer islands, and training for police, social workers, customary leaders and the judiciary.

3.6. Summary

Addressing these persistent gaps in human rights and gender equality requires a comprehensive and sustained effort to strengthen legal frameworks, build institutional capacity and ensure inclusive implementation across all sectors. While each country faces distinct structural and cultural challenges, common priorities include harmonizing national laws with international standards, expanding access to justice, investing in data and monitoring systems, and ensuring that women, children, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups can meaningfully participate in decision-making. Durable progress will depend on coordinated action by governments, traditional leaders, civil society and development partners, grounded in context-specific solutions that respect cultural practices, while upholding universal human rights. Closing these gaps is essential not only for compliance with international obligations, but also for advancing equitable, resilient and inclusive development across the region.

⁹⁹ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022), 10; United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in Palau* (2017), 82.

¹⁰⁰ Pacific Judicial Strengthening Initiative, *Situation Analysis of Pacific Legal Aid Systems* (2021), A-15.

4. Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in the Micronesian Subregion

Gender equality and women’s empowerment in the Micronesian subregion are shaped by the interaction of strong customary systems, evolving legal and policy frameworks, and persistent gender norms. Across Micronesia, women play important and often influential roles within traditional governance and cultural life. However, these customary strengths coexist with structural barriers in contemporary political and socio-economic systems, producing uneven progress toward gender equality.

The Micronesia Gender Equality Framework 2025 and the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration 2012 demonstrate regional commitment and have contributed to improvements in women’s participation in decision-making.¹⁰¹ Despite these gains, several critical challenges continue to constrain the realization of gender equality, including:¹⁰²

- i. High prevalence of GBV and intimate partner violence, which remains one of the most significant human rights concerns across the subregion;
- ii. Persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership, alongside limited access to decision-making processes, resources and economic opportunities within modern state institutions and labour markets;
- iii. Elevated adolescent fertility rates, signaling gaps in sexual and reproductive health information and services;
- iv. Restricted access to climate finance and adaptation resources for women’s organizations, despite women’s central roles in community resilience and climate response; and
- v. Insufficient gender-disaggregated data, though availability is gradually improving and support for more gender-responsive policymaking.

This section situates the subregion’s gender equality challenges and opportunities within broader human rights developments. It also draws on country-level snapshots to highlight variations across FSM, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau, providing a nuanced picture of progress and remaining gaps.

4.1. Legal and Institutional Foundations for Gender Equality

All Micronesian countries embed gender equality commitments within their constitutions or legal frameworks. FSM guarantees equal protection at both national and state levels, with recent legal reforms explicitly adding sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination. The Marshall Islands’ Constitution likewise prohibits direct and indirect gender discrimination, establishing a strong

¹⁰¹ Micronesia Islands Forum, *Micronesia Gender Equality Framework 2025–2030* (Suva: Pacific Community, 2025),

https://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/SPC/Publications/55515_Micronesia_Gender_Equality_Framework_2025_2030.pdf; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration* (2023), <https://forumsec.org/publications/revitalised-pacific-leaders-gender-equality-declaration>.

¹⁰² Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2026* (2026).

legal basis for equality in social, economic and political life. Palau’s constitutional protections prohibit sex discrimination though gaps remain regarding explicit protections for sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁰³ Despite these constitutional protections, however, implementation challenges persist. For example, Kiribati rejected a 2014 amendment that would have added gender identity and sexual orientation to its list of protected characteristics, demonstrating ongoing political hesitation to extend equality protections to all women, particularly those with diverse identities. Nauru, while decriminalizing same-sex sexual activity in 2016, still lacks legal prohibitions on gender identity-based discrimination, contributing to insecure environments for LGBTQI+ women and girls.¹⁰⁴

Legal provisions regarding marriage and consent directly affect women and girls. Kiribati and the Marshall Islands have raised the minimum marriage age for girls to 18, aligning with global standards. Yet disparities persist. FSM allows customary marriages with no minimum age in some states, and Palau permits customary marriages without establishing a clear statutory minimum age for citizens, creating risks for early or forced marriage. Harmonizing plural legal systems remains a priority for advancing gender equality.¹⁰⁵

4.2. Gender, Customary Systems and Women’s Rights to Land and Leadership

Women’s traditional authority in many Micronesian societies is both a strength and a source of tension. In Palau and the Marshall Islands, for example, matrilineal systems historically positioned women as custodians of land and lineage, conferring significant social status and leadership roles. Palauan women hold positions of influence in clan-based governance, and groups such as *Mechesil Belau* continue to shape national policy discourse. In the Marshall Islands, women’s traditional roles as *alap* (clan heads) and *ierojj/lerojj* (female chiefs) reinforce their authority within land and resource governance.¹⁰⁶ However, these systems are increasingly under strain. Migration, changes in household structures, and the influence of colonial and post-independence statutory reforms have weakened women’s practical authority over land.

In the Marshall Islands, more women now reside on their husband’s land rather than their own, thereby reducing their access to traditional protection networks. In FSM, while some states continue to follow matrilineal systems, others follow patrilineal inheritance, and the erosion of customary land rights has reduced women’s influence.¹⁰⁷ Kiribati’s customary systems remain strongly patriarchal, with women excluded from decision-making in *maneabas* (traditional councils) and land inheritance rules systematically favouring male heirs. These norms limit women’s access to productive assets and reinforce gender hierarchies. In Nauru, matrilineal traditions have similarly weakened over time, contributing to a decline in women’s authority over land and family affairs.¹⁰⁸ Strengthening women’s land rights and enhancing their role in customary governance processes remain central to advancing gender equality across the subregion.

¹⁰³ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022).

¹⁰⁴ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (2022).

¹⁰⁵ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022).

¹⁰⁶ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022).

¹⁰⁷ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022).

¹⁰⁸ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (2022).

4.3. Political Participation and Leadership

Women’s participation in formal political institutions remains low across Micronesia, with representation figures well below global averages. Palau reports 6.9 per cent female representation in parliament, with similar figures in Kiribati (6.7 per cent) and the Marshall Islands (6.1 per cent). FSM has only recently elected its first female senator, bringing national representation to 7.1 per cent. Nauru records slightly higher representation (10.5 per cent), though still far below parity, and political culture remains resistant to temporary special measures designed to increase women’s participation (table 2).

TABLE 2: WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS, MICRONESIAN SUBREGION
(LATEST AVAILABLE DATA)

Country	Women in Parliament (%)	Year
FSM	7.1	2022
Kiribati	6.7	2022
Marshall Islands	6.1	2022
Nauru	10.5	2022
Palau	6.9	2022

Sources: UN Women (undated) *Gender Equality Briefs*.

These low representation levels contrast with the strong presence of women in senior civil service roles in some countries. In Kiribati, for example, women hold 53 per cent of Permanent Secretary positions and 56 per cent of Deputy Secretary positions, demonstrating their capacity to lead at senior administrative levels even amidst political underrepresentation. Yet cultural norms, gendered expectations of caregiving, and limited access to party structures continue to restrict women’s political leadership across all five countries of the subregion.¹⁰⁹ Initiatives such as mock parliaments in the Marshall Islands and women’s leadership networks in Palau show promising pathways for strengthening women’s political voice, but sustained institutional commitment is required.

4.4. Gender-Based Violence: Prevalence, Norms and Response Systems

Gender-based violence is one of the most pressing human rights and gender equality challenges across the Micronesian subregion. Multiple national surveys document extremely high prevalence rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), reflecting entrenched gender norms and limited access to survivor-centred services.

- i. Kiribati reports the highest IPV levels, with 61 per cent of ever-partnered women experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.¹¹⁰
- ii. Palau reports that 35.7 per cent of women have experienced physical or sexual violence since age 15, and emotional violence is also widespread.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022).

- iii. FSM records a lifetime IPV prevalence of 32.8 per cent, with nearly one in five women experiencing physical violence in the past year.¹¹²

Social norms contribute significantly to the persistence of violence. In Kiribati, 70.2 per cent of women believe a husband is justified in hitting his wife in at least one circumstance, indicating high social acceptance of violence against women. In FSM and Palau, violence is often considered a private family matter, discouraging reporting and limiting access to justice mechanisms.¹¹³

Legal protections are uneven. Palau's Family Protection Act (2012) introduced a no-drop policy that has enabled more women to seek formal redress. Other countries have taken steps to strengthen domestic violence legislation, but gaps remain in enforcement, case management and the provision of safe shelters and specialized services.¹¹⁴ Addressing gender-based violence is central to women's empowerment and requires sustained political commitment, community engagement and investment in survivor-centred systems.

4.5. Economic Empowerment and Gendered Labour Patterns

While women in Micronesia demonstrate high levels of educational attainment in several countries, this has not translated into equal economic participation. Labour force participation for women remains substantially lower than for men across all five countries, with particularly wide gaps in the Marshall Islands (27.9 per cent) and Kiribati (40.5 per cent). In FSM, women's labour force participation stands at 46.2 per cent, with high rates of informal employment limiting access to job security and social protection.¹¹⁵

Unpaid care and domestic responsibilities significantly constrain women's participation. In Nauru, 39 per cent of women aged 15–59 identified home duties as their main economic activity; more than three times the rate among men. Even where women participate in the labour market, they are concentrated in lower-paid sectors, such as education, health and clerical work, and are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and high-wage industries.¹¹⁶

Income disparities also persist. Female-headed households are more likely to be poor in FSM and Nauru, reflecting structural barriers to income-earning and asset accumulation. Women entrepreneurs face constrained access to credit, limited business training and challenges linked to land tenure systems that restrict their ability to use property as collateral.¹¹⁷ Efforts to advance women's economic empowerment must therefore address both labour market inequalities and the socio-cultural norms that assign women primary responsibility for care-giving.

¹¹² UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022).

¹¹³ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022).

¹¹⁴ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022).

¹¹⁵ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022).

¹¹⁶ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (2022).

¹¹⁷ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (2022).

4.6. Health, Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy

Women's health outcomes across Micronesia show both progress and persistent gaps. Maternal mortality rates are low or zero in several countries, indicating strong access to skilled birth attendants in places such as Palau and Nauru. However, women continue to face barriers to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly with regard to adolescents and women in remote communities. Adolescent fertility rates are high across the subregion: 44 per 1,000 in FSM, 48 in the Marshall Islands, 51 in Kiribati and 92 in Nauru, posing risks to girls' health and educational attainment, and underscoring unmet need for contraception and youth-friendly reproductive services.¹¹⁸

In several countries, sexual and reproductive health services were deprioritized during the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupting access to contraception, antenatal services and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing, as observed in the Marshall Islands and Palau. Cultural and religious resistance to contraceptive use, privacy concerns in small communities, and limited health infrastructure further hinder access.¹¹⁹ High prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NDCs), including diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease, disproportionately affects women in Micronesia, reducing well-being and straining health systems.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Federated States of Micronesia* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Kiribati* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (2022).

¹¹⁹ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Palau* (2022).

¹²⁰ UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2022); UN Women, *Gender Equality Brief for Nauru* (2022).

5. Leave No One Behind Principles and Analysis

The United Nations positions LNOB as the defining commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It recognizes that entrenched discrimination, structural inequalities and intersecting vulnerabilities prevent individuals and groups from accessing equal rights and opportunities.¹²¹ LNOB is grounded in international human rights law, the United Nations Charter and long-standing global norms of equality and non-discrimination and requires governments and the United Nations system to identify those most likely to be excluded and to address the systemic barriers shaping their experiences.¹²²

A Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) strengthens LNOB by analyzing the obligations of duty-bearers and the claims of rights-holders, focusing on reducing structural inequalities and building capacity to ensure rights realization. Monitoring processes include assessing both outcomes and participatory, rights-compatible procedures.¹²³ Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) form a core component of LNOB as inequality and discrimination continue to marginalize women and girls across all development domains. UN Women highlights the importance of integrating gender and LNOB into programme cycles, including planning, implementation and evaluation and emphasizes disability-inclusive approaches addressing stigma and violence against women with disabilities.¹²⁴ Youth empowerment is also embedded in LNOB through commitments to meaningful participation, empowerment, inclusive institutions and equitable access to services. United Nations training platforms stress the importance of engaging young people in policy formulation and implementation within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) principles: HRBA, GEWE and LNOB.¹²⁵

5.1. United Nations Coordination and Governance Frameworks in Micronesia

The United Nations Multi-Country Resident Coordinator’s Office (MCO) in Micronesia, established in 2021, coordinates development assistance across five North Pacific countries: FSM, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau. The UNSDCF 2023–2027 reflects national priorities and integrates LNOB principles across its pillars of People, Prosperity, Planet and Peace.¹²⁶ LNOB is operationalized through multi-agency programmes addressing geographic dispersion, digital divides and insufficient public-service access. A Joint SDG Fund programme has strengthened local governance in Micronesia through digital tools for SDG monitoring, capacity-building and collaborative advocacy, reaching

¹²¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre, *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2026* (2026).

¹²² United Nations Sustainable Development Group, “Leave No One Behind – Universal Values, Principle Two,” n.d.

¹²³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Key Take-Aways: HRBA, LNOB and GEWE in UNSDCF Processes* (2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sdgs/external-key-take-away-brief-hrba-lnob-gew.pdf>.

¹²⁴ UN Women, “Leaving No One Behind – UN Women Transparency Portal”, 2025, <https://open.unwomen.org/en/leaving-no-one-behind>.

¹²⁵ United Nations System Staff College, “Foundational Course on UNSDCF Guiding Principles: HRBA, GEWE & LNOB”, 2024, <https://www.unssc.org/courses/foundational-course-unsdcf-guiding-principles-hrba-gewe-lnob-1>.

¹²⁶ United Nations in Micronesia, *The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2023-27* (2022), accessed via <https://micronesia.un.org/en/236410-un-sustainable-development-cooperation%C2%A0framework-unsdcf-2023-27>.

communities that are traditionally underserved.¹²⁷ The regional digital-transformation initiative has promoted early childhood development, nutrition, employment, shock-responsive social protection, and cross-sectoral digital frameworks, while also enhancing digital literacy.¹²⁸ These interventions improve service access and expand opportunities for marginalized groups, including youth, who benefit from increased employability and access to digital technologies.¹²⁹

Micronesia faces acute climate risks; low-lying islands across the region are threatened by rising sea levels. LNOB consequently serves as a framework for safeguarding rights, bolstering community resilience and advocating for climate justice. The United Nations supports outer-island communities through climate adaptation, marine conservation initiatives and strengthened emergency management systems.¹³⁰ Gender considerations are incorporated into emergency preparedness, digital transformation and governance initiatives, addressing disproportionate vulnerabilities among women and strengthening their participation in decision-making.¹³¹ Kiribati has achieved significant progress in poverty reduction, with more than 19,000 citizens lifted out of poverty due to targeted social protection measures, expansion of national revenue streams and investment in essential services. These outcomes reflect LNOB's central aim of prioritizing the most marginalized and ensuring that all have access to clean water, electricity, education and dignified living conditions.¹³²

The implementation of LNOB in Micronesia demonstrates how the principle functions as both a normative and an operational framework. Through integrated human-rights and gender-equality approaches, digital transformation, climate adaptation and social-protection measures, United Nations agencies support governments in addressing structural inequalities and reaching those most at risk of exclusion. The Micronesian context illustrates the essential role LNOB plays in ensuring that remote, climate-vulnerable and socially diverse communities are not left behind in sustainable development processes. Youth and women, who often face compounded barriers, stand to benefit most from continued investment in participatory decision-making, equitable access to services and capacity development.

The following section provides an LNOB analysis of the five Micronesian countries and their challenges.

5.2. FSM

Citizens of FSM who are at heightened risk of exclusion include, but may not be limited to, the following categories:

- i. Communities living on outer islands and in rural communities: In Yap state, approximately 38 per cent reside on outer islands. In Chuuk state, about 22 per cent reside on outer islands. And in Pohnpei state, roughly seven per cent of people live on outer islands. Kosrae state comprises

¹²⁷ Joint SDG Fund, "Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Palau, Nauru and Kiribati – Joint Programme", 2023, <https://jointsdggfund.org/where-we-work/federated-states-micronesia-republic-marshall-islands-palau-nauru-and-kiribati>.

¹²⁸ MPTF Office, *SIDS Joint Programme Report (FSM, RMI, Palau, Nauru, Kiribati)* (2023), https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-06/federated_states_of_micronesia_republic_of_marshall_islands_palau_nauru_and_kiribati_sids.pdf.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ UN DCO, "Serving the Stewards of the Ocean: The UN in Micronesia", 2024, <https://un-dco.org/stories/serving-stewards-ocean-un-micronesia-reaches-remote-pacific-communities>.

¹³¹ United Nations in Micronesia, *The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2023-27* (2022).

¹³² Cross, R., "Leave No-One Behind: Social Protection Reducing Poverty in Kiribati", *Devpolicy Blog*, 5 August 2025, <https://devpolicy.org/leave-no-one-behind-reducing-poverty-and-inequality-in-kiribati-20250805/>.

a single island. Across FSM as a whole, around 75-80 per cent of all people reside in rural communities.¹³³

- ii. Youth and those not in education, employment or training (NEET): Around 20 per cent of the population of FSM are aged between 15 and 24 (a common definition of ‘youth’). Of these, roughly 30 per cent are not in education, employment or training.
- iii. Migrant workers: FSM has a relatively small proportion of migrant workers, probably accounting for no more than four per cent of the total population.
- iv. LGBTQI+ persons: Micronesian society is conservative and the LGBTQI+ community is generally discreet. There is no robust data on this community’s profile.
- v. Persons with disabilities: Roughly 10 per cent of the population are thought to be persons with disabilities.¹³⁴
- vi. Older persons: Approximately six per cent of FSM’s population are aged 65 or older.
- vii. Low-income households: About 40 per cent of the population live below the national basic-needs poverty line. Approximately half of the population is involved in subsistence farming or fishing for their livelihoods, and up to 80 per cent generate some income from ‘subsistence consumption’ (e.g., home-produced food).

5.3. Kiribati

Citizens of Kiribati who are at heightened risk of exclusion include (but may not be limited to) the following categories:

- i. Communities living on outer islands and in rural communities: Approximately 40-45 per cent of Kiribati’s population lives in rural areas. This broadly represents people living on outer islands and non-urban areas outside South Tarawa’s continuous urban settlement.
- ii. Youth and those not in education, employment or training (NEET): Estimates suggest that about 34–35 per cent of Kiribati’s population are under 15, and about 42–43 per cent are under 25. The 15–24 age group alone is about 17 per cent of the total population. The NEET rate for youth (15–24) is very high, at around one in two young people. Kiribati’s official labour market statistics report that about 49.8 per cent of young men and women (15–24) were NEET in the most recent labour force survey.¹³⁵
- iii. LGBTQI+ persons: Kiribati has no official data on the proportion of the population that is LGBTQI+, and given criminalization and stigma, any numerical estimate would be uncertain.
- iv. Persons with disabilities and elderly persons: Kiribati’s most recent survey data suggests that roughly 8–11 per cent of the total population had some form of disability.¹³⁶
- v. Older persons: Approximately 4–4.5 per cent of Kiribati’s population are aged 65 or older.
- vi. Low-income and climate-impacted households: Roughly 22 per cent of Kiribati’s population live in low-income households. Further, the 2023–2024 household income and expenditure survey found that 25 per cent of Kiribati households had been directly impacted by at least

¹³³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Overview of the State - Federated States of Micronesia 2021*, <https://mchb.tvisdata.hrsa.gov/Narratives/Overview/5287367a-ff2c-4459-b22a-5344998a0548>.

¹³⁴ Pacific Data Hub, “Disability Dashboard”, n.d., <https://pacificdata.org/disability-dashboard>.

¹³⁵ Kiribati National Statistics Office, *Labour in Kiribati based on analysis of the 2019/20 HIES (2022)*, accessed via <https://nso.gov.ki/statistics/social/labor-market>.

¹³⁶ Pacific Data Hub, “Disability Dashboard”, n.d.

one natural disaster (e.g., storms, heavy rain, drought) in the previous 12 months.¹³⁷ Crucially, a 2016 United Nations report found that 70 per cent of Kiribati households were considering migration due to climate-related stresses, reinforcing the idea that climate impacts are nearly universal over longer horizons.¹³⁸

5.4. Marshall Islands

Citizens of the Marshall Islands who are at heightened risk of exclusion include (but may not be limited to) the following categories:

- i. Communities living on outer islands and in rural communities: Approximately 20–22 per cent of the Marshall Islands’ population live on outer islands and in rural communities (i.e., outside the main urban centres of Majuro and Ebeye).¹³⁹
- ii. Youth and those not in education, employment or training (NEET): Estimates suggest that about 18–20 per cent of the Marshall Islands’ population are youth (aged 15–24), and roughly 7–8 per cent of the total population are youth who are NEET.
- iii. LGBTQI+ persons: The Marshall Islands has no official data on the proportion of the population that is LGBTQI+, and given stigma, any numerical estimate would be unreliable. Limited survey and health-programme data suggest that at least several hundred LGBTQI+ people are visible to services but the true number is likely higher.
- iv. Persons with disabilities: Roughly 3–4 per cent of the Marshall Islands’ total population are defined as persons with disabilities albeit using a relatively strict definition based on the Washington Group functional-difficulty measures among people aged 5 and over.¹⁴⁰
- v. Older persons: Approximately 4–5 per cent of the Marshall Islands’ population are aged 65 or older.
- vi. Low-income and climate-impacted households: Roughly seven per cent of the Marshall Islands’ population live in low-income households (i.e., below the national basic-needs poverty line). A recent census-based analysis reported that “just over half of households indicated that natural disasters had limited their livelihoods, with slightly higher rates in rural (outer-island) areas.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Kiribati National Statistics Office, “Kiribati Power of Data - Report demonstrates Kiribati climate change and disaster impacts”, n.d., <https://nso.gov.ki/news/kiribati-power-of-data-report-demonstrates-kiribati-climate-change-and-disaster-impacts>.

¹³⁸ Robert Oakes, Andrea Milan and Jillian Campbell, *Kiribati: Climate Change and Migration-Relationships between Household Vulnerability, Human Mobility and Climate Change*, Report No. 20. (Bonn: United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, 2016), https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:5903/Online_No_20_Kiribati_Report_161207.pdf.

¹³⁹ Helgi Library, “Rural Population (As % of Total) in Marshall Islands”, n.d., <https://www.helgilibrary.com/indicators/rural-population-as-of-total/marshall-islands>.

¹⁴⁰ Marshall Islands, *Republic of the Marshall Islands 2021 Census Report: Volume 1: Basic Tables and Administration Report* (Majuro: Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office, 2023), accessed via https://sdd.spc.int/digital_library/republic-marshall-islands-2021-census-report-volume-1-basic-tables-and; Pacific Data Hub, “Disability Dashboard”, n.d.

¹⁴¹ Pacific Community (SPC), “Fewer People, Higher Incomes: Marshall Islands Shares In-Depth Census Results with Partner Support”, January 26, 2025, <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/blog-post/2025/01/fewer-people-higher-incomes-marshall-islands-shares-in-depth-census>; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Risk Profile: Sudden-Onset Hazards and the Risk of Future Displacement in the Marshall Islands* (Geneva, 2022), https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/220224_IDMC_RiskProfile_TheMarshallIslands.pdf.

5.5. Nauru

Citizens of Nauru who are at heightened risk of exclusion include (but may not be limited to) the following categories:

- i. Youth and those not in education, employment or training (NEET): Approximately 17–19 per cent of Nauru’s population are youth, and roughly 7–8 per cent of the total population are youth who are not in education, employment or training. For just youth (i.e., those aged between 15 and 24), around 40 per cent are not in education, employment or training.
- ii. LGBTQI+ persons: There are no reliable estimates of the proportion of the population who are LGBTQI+ in Nauru. Existing legal and human-rights reports acknowledge LGBTQI+ people but provide no population-wide data while social stigma, under-reporting and the lack of inclusive questions in censuses and surveys mean that most LGBTQI+ people are invisible in official statistics.
- iii. Persons with disabilities: Data suggest that about 2.5–3.0 per cent of the total population are persons with disabilities, using the Washington Group threshold definition for people aged five and above.
- iv. Older persons: Using the standard 65+ definition, about three per cent of Nauru’s population are elderly.
- v. Low-income and climate-impacted households: Roughly 25 per cent of the population live below the national basic-needs poverty line. A nationally representative climate-change and migration study reported that 74 per cent of Nauruan households had experienced one or more impacts of environmental change in the last ten years, especially from drought and/or irregular rainfall.¹⁴²

5.6. Palau

Citizens of Palau who are at heightened risk of exclusion include (but may not be limited to) the following categories:

- i. Communities living on outer islands and in rural communities. Approximately about 17–19 per cent of Palau’s population live on outer islands and in other rural communities.
- ii. Youth and those not in education, employment or training (NEET). Around 18 per cent of Palau’s population are youth (aged between 15 and 24), of which around 18 per cent are not in education, employment or training.
- iii. LGBTQI+ persons: Population and census data in Palau do not include questions on sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics so there is no LGBTQI+ data recorded in official demographic tables. Further, human-rights reporting confirms that same-sex sexual activity is legal but that same-sex marriage is constitutionally banned. There are virtually no comprehensive anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ persons, which also contributes to under-reporting and invisibility in data.

¹⁴² Jillian Campbell, Robert Oakes and Andrea Milan, *Nauru: Climate Change and Migration-Relationships between Household Vulnerability, Human Mobility and Climate Change*, Report No. 19 (Bonn: United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, 2016), <https://www.rcrc-resilience-southeastasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UN-Report-on-Climate-Change-Adaption-and-Migration-in-Nauru-2016.pdf>.

- iv. Persons with disabilities: Data suggests that about 3–3.5 per cent of the total population are persons with disabilities, using the Washington Group threshold definition for people aged five and above.
- v. Older persons: Around 9–12 per cent of Palau’s population are older than 65 years old.
- vi. Low-income and climate-impacted households: Using the national basic-needs poverty line as a proxy measure, about 25 per cent of Palau’s population live in low-income households. A relatively recent survey of Palau documents widespread exposure of communities and households to droughts, extreme rainfall, sea-level rise and coastal flooding.¹⁴³ Further, reports stress that climate change is already disrupting water security, coastal infrastructure, fisheries and tourism and that vulnerable groups such as low-income households, the elderly and persons with disabilities are at heightened risk of harm from extreme events.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Scott M. Fitzpatrick, Matthew F. Napolitano, Jessica H. Stone, et al., *Disaster Risk and Climate Change Impact Survey in the Republic of Palau, Phase I* (Palau: Bureau of Cultural and Historical Preservation, 2021), https://library.sprep.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/Disaster-Risk-and-Climate-Change-Impact-Survey-in-the-Republic-of-Palau_v6.pdf.

¹⁴⁴ World Bank Group, *Climate Risk Country Profile: Palau* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2021), https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/country-profiles/15820-WB_Palau%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf.

6. Development Risks and Recommendations: Measures Required to Close Gaps

The five Micronesian countries continue to face intersecting development risks rooted in: (i) structural constraints; (ii) fragmented legal frameworks; and (iii) persistent inequalities that disproportionately affect women, children, persons with disabilities and outer-island communities. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated investments in legislation, institutions, public services and community-driven systems in a bid to ensure that human rights, gender equality and LNOB commitments are embedded across national policies, budgets and programmes.

6.1. Development Risks

Fragmented Legal and Policy Frameworks Undermining Rights, Gender Equality and LNOB

Across the five Micronesian countries, fragmented legislative frameworks, uneven domestication of international human rights standards and the coexistence of statutory and customary legal systems present a significant development risk. These structural inconsistencies weaken the protection of rights and limit the realization of gender equality and LNOB principles. In several contexts, key human rights treaties remain unratified or are only partially reflected in domestic law. Persisting reservations to core provisions, particularly under CEDAW, alongside gaps in constitutional equality guarantees and the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, further exacerbate inequities.

Without systematic legal harmonization, these shortcomings risk perpetuating exclusion, weakening accountability and constraining inclusive development outcomes. Addressing this risk requires aligning national legislation with obligations under the CRC, CEDAW, CRPD and related instruments; adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination frameworks; and ensuring that sectoral laws, such as those governing family relations, labour, juvenile justice and accessibility, uphold rights-based standards. Reform must also clarify institutional mandates and embed a human rights-based approach (HRBA), reinforcing both the accountability of duty-bearers and the empowerment of rights-holders, while addressing discriminatory customary practices.

Chronic Under-investment in Essential Services and Infrastructure

Persistent under-investment in education, health, social protection and infrastructure remains a critical constraint to inclusive development across Micronesia. Geographic dispersion, limited transport connectivity and human resource shortages amplify inequalities in access, particularly for outer island populations. Education systems face deficits in infrastructure, qualified personnel and inclusive learning provision, while health services are constrained by limited diagnostic capacity, workforce gaps and supply-chain fragility, especially affecting maternal health, disability services, mental health and early childhood development.

These structural weaknesses pose risks to human capital development and further exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Strengthening social protection systems is essential to mitigate poverty, economic shocks and climate-related risks. Expanding coverage, through cash or in-kind support, while ensuring responsiveness to shocks and targeting of marginalized groups is critical. At the same time, sustained investment in resilient infrastructure, including transport, water systems, telecommunications and climate-adaptive public facilities, is necessary to reduce access disparities and support long-term development resilience.

Limited Institutionalization of Community Participation and Local Governance

In the Micronesian context, insufficiently institutionalized participatory mechanisms represent a risk to the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions. While traditional governance structures remain influential, their integration into formal planning systems is often inconsistent and not always aligned with human rights standards. This can limit the inclusion of civil society organizations, women, youth, persons with disabilities and remote communities in decision-making processes.

Without structured and inclusive participation, development initiatives risk weak local ownership, reduced accountability and limited sustainability. Strengthening community-driven development (CDD) approaches and formalizing participatory planning processes are therefore essential risk mitigation measures. Embedding inclusive dialogue platforms and strengthening civil society engagement can improve policy responsiveness, enhance social cohesion and ensure that interventions reflect diverse community needs, particularly in areas such as climate adaptation, disaster risk management, gender-based violence prevention and child protection.

Weak Integration of Gender Equality and LNOB in Planning and Budgeting

Despite progress, the inconsistent integration of gender equality and LNOB principles into national systems represents a cross-cutting development risk. Approaches remain fragmented and frequently are dependent on externally funded programmes, rather than embedded within national planning, budgeting and monitoring frameworks, which then undermines sustainability, coherence and accountability.

Failure to systematically mainstream these principles risks reinforcing existing inequalities and excluding vulnerable populations from development gains. Mitigating this risk requires institutionalizing gender-responsive budgeting, embedding LNOB analysis across programme cycles, and introducing mandatory social impact assessments for legislation and policies. Strengthening the routine use of disaggregated data and establishing clear inclusion indicators are equally critical. Line ministries should be mandated to report on inclusion outcomes, supported by robust coordination mechanisms for gender equality and human rights, ensuring sustained oversight and whole-of-government accountability.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

Prioritizing Inclusive Education, Health and Labour Reforms

Education reforms should include the adoption of national inclusive-education policies aligned with CRC and CRPD obligations, investment in teacher training, expansion of early childhood development systems and improved digital connectivity for remote learners. Health reforms should prioritize sexual and reproductive health services, disability-inclusive health care, improved maternal and child health systems, mental health programming, water and sanitation and climate-responsive service delivery. Labour reforms must address limited job opportunities, youth NEET rates, protection of migrant workers, gender pay gaps and the absence of comprehensive employment nondiscrimination provisions.

Strengthening Social Protection Systems and Resilient Service Delivery across Dispersed Islands

Building universal and shock-responsive social protection systems is essential for tackling chronic poverty and climate vulnerability. National systems should expand cash transfers, food security measures, disability benefits and child-sensitive protection schemes. Given the geographic dispersion of populations, decentralized service models, mobile social workers, tele-health, digital payments and

remote outreach, are necessary to ensure inclusivity. Investments in climate-resilient infrastructure and service continuity planning should be prioritized across all sectors.

Advancing Legislative Reforms to Align with Human Rights Treaties and Gender Equality Standards

Countries should undertake structured legislative mapping that reviews all sectoral legislation for compliance with CRC, CEDAW, CRPD and ICCPR-equivalent standards, ensuring that domestic law fully incorporates nondiscrimination, equality and due-process guarantees. Customary law and statutory law must be harmonized, particularly in areas such as land, family law, inheritance, corporal punishment, child protection and gender-based violence. Reforms should include establishing standardized definitions of discrimination, gender-based violence and disability, and ensuring legal capacity and protection for persons with disabilities in accordance with CRPD standards.

Supporting the Establishment or Enhancement of NHRIs and Access-to-Justice Mechanisms

Most countries lack a Paris Principles-compliant national human rights institution or NHRIs, with existing bodies functioning primarily as reporting mechanisms rather than independent oversight bodies. Establishing NHRIs, or strengthening interim mechanisms such as human rights units or taskforces, would greatly enhance accountability, rights monitoring and remedy for vulnerable populations. Strengthening access to justice necessitates expanding legal aid, improving court accessibility, formalizing child-friendly and gender-sensitive procedures and strengthening the interface between customary and formal justice systems.

Expanding Disaggregated Data Systems

Significant gaps in data relating to gender, age, disability, outer-island population distribution and migration status constrain evidence-based policymaking. Investments are needed in administrative data systems, census and survey infrastructure and routine integration of the Washington Group questions. Disaggregated data should be mandated across all sectors, with national statistical offices adequately resourced to lead multi-stakeholder data harmonization efforts.

Improving Integration of Administrative Data, Surveys and Community-Generated Information

Data systems should be interoperable across ministries, enabling shared dashboards and evidence platforms. Community-generated data, collected by civil society organizations, youth groups, women's organizations, disability representatives and local councils, must be integrated into official systems to capture nuanced experiences, especially on outer islands. National monitoring systems for LNOB indicators should be embedded into UNSDCF processes and national development plans.

Coordinating with Governments, United Nations Agencies, International Financial Institutions and Regional Agencies

Strengthened coordination among governments, United Nations entities, Pacific regional organizations, international financial institutions (IFIs) and bilateral partners is required to overcome fragmentation and ensure coherent support for legislative reforms, capacity building and service delivery. This includes closer engagement with the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies, which play central roles in policy harmonization, technical assistance and regional standard-setting.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Key CROP bodies include the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), which leads regional political coordination and governance initiatives; the Pacific Community (SPC), the region's largest technical agency

Strengthening Participatory Approaches with Civil Society, Youth, Women's Groups and Outer-Island Communities

Civil society organizations, traditional leaders, youth networks, women's collectives, religious leaders and disability groups play a crucial role in bridging structural gaps in service delivery and rights protection. Future planning should institutionalize their involvement through formal consultation mechanisms, participatory budgeting, social accountability platforms and localized planning processes. Ensuring meaningful participation of marginalized groups is central to realizing the LNOB commitment and strengthening democratic governance.

supporting public health, education, statistics and human rights; the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), which provides technical leadership on climate change, biodiversity and environmental governance; the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), responsible for fisheries management and maritime compliance; the University of the South Pacific (USP), which supports regional training, research and professional development; and other specialized bodies such as the Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) and the Pacific Power Association (PPA). Effective coordination with these agencies can enable harmonized standards, shared training platforms, cross-country learning and pooled technical expertise.

7. Conclusions

This 2026 update of the Common Country Analyses for Micronesia reaffirms that the subregion stands at a critical juncture. While the five Micronesian countries, FSM, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau, each possess distinct historical, political and cultural contexts, they share common structural constraints that shape development outcomes: geographic dispersion, limited institutional capacity, deeply rooted customary systems, climate fragility and persistent inequalities across gender, age, disability and geography. These constraints do not merely hinder the realization of rights; they define the lived reality of many citizens across the subregion.

The analysis demonstrates that human rights commitments across Micronesia remain uneven. Variability in treaty ratification, gaps in domestic legislative harmonization and limited national mechanisms for reporting and follow-up collectively weaken accountability and restrict alignment with international standards. Even where commitments exist, implementation is frequently constrained by limited resources, incomplete data systems and the absence of independent bodies empowered to monitor, investigate and enforce rights protection. Strengthening national human rights architectures, through legislation, institution-building and sustained technical capacity, is therefore essential.

Gender equality and women's empowerment remain central development challenges. Across the subregion, high rates of gender-based violence, unequal participation of women in political and economic life, and gaps in legal protections underscore the urgency of accelerating progress. Policy advances in some countries demonstrate clear momentum, yet implementation remains inconsistent. Ensuring that national frameworks fully incorporate CEDAW standards, expanding survivor-centred services and embedding gender-responsive budgeting across all sectors are vital next steps. Achieving GEWE is not only a rights imperative but also a prerequisite for inclusive, sustainable development.

The LNOB analysis highlights the disproportionate vulnerabilities faced by women and girls, persons with disabilities, youth, low-income households and communities living on outer islands. Climate change compounds these inequalities, placing entire communities at risk of displacement, food insecurity and disruptions to education, health and livelihoods. Addressing these intersecting vulnerabilities requires targeted social protection, improved access to essential services, resilient infrastructure and data systems capable of capturing the experiences of groups that are often invisible in official statistics.

The justice systems across the five countries share structural challenges, limited legal aid, reliance on customary dispute-resolution mechanisms, geographic barriers and insufficient gender- and child-sensitive procedures. These realities restrict access to remedy and perpetuate impunity, particularly for women, children and marginalized groups. Efforts to strengthen justice institutions, improve coordination between customary and formal systems, expand community-based services and build professional capacity represent critical pathways toward more equitable and accountable governance.

Despite these challenges, the subregion's strengths are clear. Communities remain resilient, traditional systems retain strong social cohesion, and governments continue to demonstrate commitment to reform through national strategies, legislative reviews and engagement with the UN system. Regional cooperation, supported by the United Nations, Pacific regional organizations and development partners, has already contributed to advances in digital transformation, climate adaptation, youth empowerment and social-protection expansion. These examples illustrate that meaningful progress is both possible and underway.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the path forward depends on sustained political will, long-term investment in people and institutions, and a commitment to embedding human rights, gender equality

and LNOB principles across all national policies and programmes. The United Nations remains a committed partner in this endeavour. Through integrated support, evidence-informed programming and strengthened coordination, the UN system will continue to work alongside Micronesian governments and communities to advance a future grounded in dignity, equality and resilience.

The development challenges facing Micronesia are significant, but so too are the opportunities. With coherent action, strengthened institutions and inclusive policy-making, the subregion can accelerate progress toward the 2030 Agenda and ensure that no one is left behind.

The United Nations Micronesia Regional Study Series aims to foster a forward-looking dialogue among policymakers, development partners, researchers, practitioners and other stakeholders to build political will and develop a consensus on essential policy actions and urgent reforms in the Pacific, including Micronesia. These papers are intended to stimulate discussion and inform decision-making on key development challenges and opportunities in the region. The Regional Study Series is published without formal editing, allowing for the timely and open dissemination of ideas and analyses.

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Human Rights, Gender Equality and Leave No One Behind

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