



- Being President Hilda Heine
- Calls for Pause on Deep-Sea Mining
- Free(r) Movement at the Forum

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**““Women are the backbone of family and community so I believe they should be the backbone of national leadership.”**

**~ President Hilda Heine**

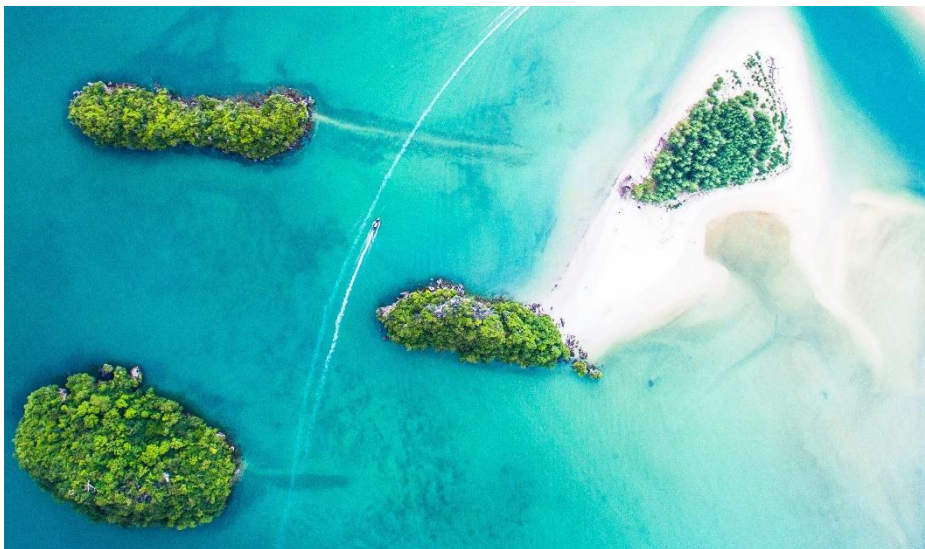


Photo by Denys Nevozhai on Unsplash

## **BEING PRESIDENT HILDA HEINE**

In January 2016 Hilda Heine became the President of the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), and the first woman to head the government of an independent Pacific Island nation.

The RMI is a small island state of 29 coral atolls and five islands. It has a population of 42,000 people, with a high number of Marshallese living in the United States (US) and US territories. There are 33 seats in Nitijela, the Marshallese parliament, and no formal political parties, so candidates contest elections as independents, and the President of RMI is both head of government and head of state.

Hilda Heine was born in Jaluit Atoll in 1951, where she grew up and attended public school. She acquired her undergraduate degree at the University of Oregon in 1970 and a master’s at the University of Hawaii in 1975. She worked in the Marshall Islands as a classroom teacher, school counsellor and administrator, and was President of the College of the Marshall Islands.

In 2004 she received an Educational PhD from the University of Southern California, making her the first Marshallese to have a doctorate degree. In 2005 Dr Heine became Program Director of Pacific Comprehensive Assistance Center at (PREL) in Majuro.

Dr Hilda Heine entered the Nitijela in 2011 and became Minister of Education. In 2016, after a no-confidence motion removed Casten Memra, who served for only a week as president, Hilda Heine secured 24 votes from the 33-member Marshall Islands parliament and became president.

She did not win a second term in 2020, but in January 2024 was once again sworn in as President of the RMI, this time with a majority of only 17 votes to 16.

The paper, *Being the President: Hilda Heine Gender and Political Leadership in the Marshall Islands* (2020) by J Cox, J Corbett and C Spark, looks at some of the strategies which have contributed to her success, one of which is using formal processes to disrupt the ‘boys’ club’. Because of the informal and personal nature of politics in the Pacific Islands, key decisions are often made by individual ministers outside of cabinet – over lunch or in a bar. But Heine has insisted that issues have to be brought to the cabinet for discussion before decisions are made. And once a decision is made, it has to be brought back to cabinet if changes are needed.

She has found ways to turn gender into an advantage. Referring to her election in 2016 she says: “I think I got elected to this position in a way because I’m a woman, a neutral candidate and when many men were vying for the office, I was [seen as] a safer, less controversial candidate.” She also says that Marshallese culture makes it very difficult for men to criticise women, because women are considered their mothers. Heine’s gender has led to her being given the title of “mother of the nation”. Heine is a mother of three, and also a grandmother. A positive female leadership includes traits such as duty, responsibility, service and inclusion.

Hilda Heine is one of several women who went to college in the US and have had senior careers in the Marshallese public service. They founded Jined ilo Kobo (women are the mothers of the child) and have supported the non-government organisation Women United Together Marshall Islands.

She refused to move house when she became president in 2016. She did not want to be seduced by the trappings of her position, and refused to use her position for personal gain, using this as an opportunity to set a different example.

For President Hilda Heine, breaking glass ceilings is leaving a legacy and being a role model for women:

“When I first contemplated going to get my doctorate degree in education and someone was asking – ‘why am I doing this?’ The first – the most important thing I thought about then was that I needed to show that it can be done – that Marshallese and especially women can do it... if I can attend an outer island where schools lacked everything – quality teachers, school supplies and books, often missing school many days in a school year – and yet, I was able to go on and complete my doctorate in education, and later, became a women president, it can happen to anybody.”

Sources: *Being the President: Hilda Heine Gender and Political Leadership in the Marshall Islands* (2020) by J Cox, J Corbett and C Spark; *Being Hilda Heine* by Bernadette Carreon, 28 February 2016, *The Sunday Post*; *Pacific Women in Politics* [www.pacwip.org](http://www.pacwip.org); *Council of Women World Leaders* [www.councilwomenworldleaders.org](http://www.councilwomenworldleaders.org)

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## **CALLS FOR PAUSE ON DEEP-SEA MINING**

At the International Seabed Authority’s annual meeting in Jamaica in July, Tuvalu joined the now 32 countries against the imminent start of deep-sea mining (DSM) for metallic modules. Ten members (Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) of the 18-nation Pacific Islands Forum are now opposed to any imminent start to DSM. Other countries opposed to it include France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Australia’s Government has not yet signed the moratorium on DSM.

President Surangel Whipps of Palau said:

“We are running ahead of ourselves trying to go and extract minerals when we don’t know what’s down there, what impact it is going to have.”

Mining of the nodules that cover large areas of the sea bed is being advocated to provide the metals and rare earth needed for green technologies, particularly electric vehicles. A strong proponent of DSM is The Metals Company (TMC), which is working in partnership with Pacific Island nations, Nauru, Kiribati and Tonga, and for over ten years has been exploring the planet’s largest deposit of nodules on the seafloor of the Clarion Clipperton Zone in the Pacific Ocean. CEO of TMC is the entrepreneur, Gerard Barron, who has been described as ‘Australia’s Elon Musk’. He is a University of Southern Queensland graduate, who grew up on the Darling Downs.

The Blue Climate Initiative, a program of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, produces research to combat climate change while protecting the ocean. A report it published in 2023, entitled *Next Generation EV Batteries Eliminate the Need for Deep Sea Mining*, claims that advances in electric vehicle battery technology and the adoption of these technologies mean that EV batteries dependent on cobalt, nickel and manganese are being superseded by these next generation batteries. The report says:

“As a result, the deep sea mining of these metals is neither necessary, economically advantageous, or environmentally advisable. In fact, efforts to promote the mining of these metals in the deep ocean now serve neither manufacturers nor consumers, but only enterprises that have been established for the express purpose of deep sea mining. Typically, companies and consumers are asked to make sacrifices for the good of conservation and the environment. Now, happily, what is good for both enterprise and the end consumer, also serves the need to protect and preserve our oceans, and the life that resides within.”

In March 2024 states from around the world were in Jamaica for the International Seabed Authority’s 29<sup>th</sup> session to discuss deep-sea mining. Blue Climate Initiative hosted a special event, attended by 25 different country delegations. Martin Webeler, Ocean Campaigner and Researcher with the Environmental Justice Foundation, discussed claims by those seeking to profit from deep-sea mining and how recent developments in recycling and circular economy programs are affecting the need for DSM. He said:

“Deep-sea mining will neither contribute to solving climate change nor will it stop the extinction of species. The answer is preserving a planet worth living on lies not in the destruction of new habitats but in a circular economic system and the reduction of demand combined with less mineral-intensive green energy technologies.”

*Sources: ‘Nations join ranks to delay deep-sea mining approval by UN regulator’ by Stephen Wright, 31 July 2024, Benarnews; ‘Tuvalu joins growing chorus of nations seeking deep sea mining pause’ by Kimberley Bernard, 31 July 2024, Greenpeace; Next Generation EV Batteries Eliminate the Need for Deep Sea Mining by J Everett, D Kammen and S Rowland, October 2023, Blue Climate Initiative; Raising Awareness at the ISA, press release 26 March 2024, Blue Climate Initiative.*

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## **FREE(R) MOVEMENT AT THE FORUM**

The most interesting development from this year’s Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM) was the endorsement by the new Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Baron Waqa of the ambition to free up the movement of people within the region. In his [opening address](#), he said, “We must advocate for freer movement of our people within the islands including Australia and New Zealand, to facilitate greater regional economic cooperation and integration.”

The Forum started embracing the issue of freedom of movement within the Pacific in May when the outgoing Secretary General, Henry Puna, and the outgoing Chair, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, [backed the idea](#) of a [Pacific Business Travel Card](#) to free up business travel.

Now the new Secretary General has gone much further to embrace the vision of free movement for all people within the Pacific. In making this call, he has joined the [leaders of Samoa, Fiji and Solomon Islands](#) who have all recently voiced similar aspirations. Waqa called for not free but freer movement: free movement might be the ultimate vision, but it is not a practical, short-term aspiration. Also Waqa singled out Australia and New Zealand for attention, as these are the two major countries within the region that so many in the Pacific want easier access to.

According to Tongan Finance Minister Tiofilusi Tuieti there was agreement that there should be “an assessment of the social and economic impact of ... labour mobility programs and also from human migration in the Pacific.”

Biman Prasad, Fiji’s Finance Minister and a leading advocate on integration and free movement, said that a key element of the discussion was “was the ability of the Pacific Island countries, including Australia and New Zealand, to work towards a much better, deeper, meaningful regional integration”. Prasad talked about the relaxation of business visas, but also said that “within the Pacific we need to free ourselves quicker than what we expect Australia and New Zealand and others to do”.

To gauge regional sentiment on this key issue, several ministers were asked during the FEMM about their thoughts on the issue of free – or freer – movement. Cook Islands Assistant Finance Minister Tukaka Ama said that his country supported free movement for PIF citizens, but added it was an area “that needs to be looked at carefully” as free movement might result “in a huge influx of people to a certain destination”.

Tonga’s Tuieti told us that his country has been advocating for free travel as part of wider regional integration but said that it may have to be introduced in phases. Nauru Deputy Finance Minister and Special Envoy Maverick Eoe said that Nauru supported free movement “absolutely”. Commenting on reservations that Australia and NZ might hold, he said, “If we are part of a family in the region, families don’t close doors, simple as that. We’re in the Pacific, and the Pacific is family, open your doors to everyone.”

Fiji’s Prasad has been a leading advocate for the free movement of people. On Australia and New Zealand’s position, Prasad said:

”Almost all the Pacific countries support the idea. The benefits of integration may be differentiated but everyone benefits. Australia and New Zealand understand this. There might be some domestic imperatives in those countries but there is much more understanding and receptiveness to the idea than some years back.”

Overall, there is strong support in the Pacific for free movement of people, but more work is needed to move the idea from vision to implementation.

*Source: This is an edited version of [‘Free\(r\) Movement at the Forum’](#) by Sadhana Sen and Stephen Howes, which appeared on [Devpolicy](#) on 14 August 2024, published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University.*

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