

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# POLICY BRIEF: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THE PACIFIC REGION

Amnesty International has profiled five human rights defenders from across the Pacific to highlight their critical work and draw attention to the immense challenges they face. These profiles explore the work of two human rights defenders from Fiji, two from Papua New Guinea, and one from Tonga.

Across the Pacific region, human rights defenders regularly experience harassment, violence, threats from their communities or the targets of their advocacy, and, in some cases, arrests by the police. In some countries, repressive laws limit their ability to work, and broad and ambiguous legal provisions are used to prosecute them. In Papua New Guinea, human rights defenders working on environmental rights and women's rights are particularly at risk. Women human rights defenders working near the Porgera mine have experienced gender-related violence directly linked to their human rights advocacy and have struggled to obtain justice for these violations. In Fiji, violations of the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly are common because laws provide wide powers to the government to restrict this right, which are not consistent with international human rights law. On the more positive side, Tonga has a strong LGBTI movement, even though "leitis" (transwomen) experience stigma, bullying and hostility.

The multiple layers of restrictions experienced by women human rights defenders, LGBTI activists, and environmentalists are, in many countries, aggravated by the shrinking civil society space. Where human rights defenders face harassment and violence in the community, the authorities have a duty to protect them on an equal basis, regardless of their advocacy activities or beliefs.

Most countries in the Pacific do not have laws designed to protect the rights of human rights defenders. Moreover, the work of human rights defenders is not seen as legitimate by some governments; rather, it is perceived as threatening. Finally, the lack of systematic data on human rights defenders and the risks they face hinders advocacy aimed at improving the human rights situation in their countries.

Through highlighting the stories of these five human rights defenders, Amnesty aims to support calls for the formal legal recognition of their critical role.

Amnesty International makes the following specific recommendations:

- Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and other Pacific Island governments should adopt the principles set out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and take immediate steps to protect and promote the rights of human rights defenders.
- In particular, Pacific Island governments should protect human rights defenders from harassment, threats, violence, intimidation, censorship, and abusive prosecutions.
- Governments should also review their existing laws, policies, and practices, in order to change or repeal those that unduly restrict the work of human rights defenders, and to enable their legitimate activities in promoting and defending human rights.
- The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat should recognize the precarious status of human rights defenders in the region and incorporate the goal of protecting and promoting human rights defenders into their agenda, including at the 2019 Pacific Leaders Meeting.