



**Minister for Foreign Affairs
Nuku'alofa
Kingdom of Tonga**

**Statement of the Honorable Fekitamoeloa Katoa Utoikamanu
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism
Women in Law of the Sea Conference, Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of
the Adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
Monday 26th September 2022,
United Nations Headquarters, New York**

Check Against Delivery

**Madam Co-Chairs,
Mr. Michael Lodge, Secretary General of the International Seabed
Authority,
Under-Secretary General, Mr. Miguel De Serpa Soares,
Yours Excellencies, Ambassador Gafoor, Permanent Representative of
Singapore to the UN ; Ambassador Frazier, Permanent Representative of
Malta to the UN,
Distinguished Panelists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my honor and pleasure to be here in the company of so many distinguished guests and renowned female experts in the law of the sea, and to address this important Conference.

As we gather here today to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, it is with particular appreciation that we recognize and enhance the contribution of women to the progressive development of the Law of the Sea, and the implementation of the essential instruments that serve as foundations.

Adopted in Montego Bay, Jamaica on the 10th December 1982, UNCLOS is widely recognized as the general legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out. But UNCLOS is not a document codifying existing law, it is, in fact, a revolutionary agreement establishing a new,

modern and more equitable legal order based on groundbreaking concepts of international law.

UNCLOS is truly our shared ‘constitution for the oceans.’

As a peacekeeper.

As a servant of humankind.

If the ocean were a country, at several trillion dollars per year of economic activity, the ocean would rank seventh on the list of largest nations by GDP. Evidently, it is in our individual and collective interest to uphold and comply with UNCLOS’ provisions to enable us to respond adequately to new opportunities and challenges.

With over seventy percent of our shared planet’s surface being seas and oceans, the Convention is and must evolve as our Constitution of the Ocean.

More than ever we must protect the integrity of a rules-based system, and above all apply it over all Oceans and Seas.

This is the only way we can guarantee a legal system and order for the peaceful use of our precious ocean. This is the framework for marine scientific research, for the equitable and efficient use of resources and the conservation of marine life in all ocean and seas.

Women around the globe, every day, ensure that the Convention is alive, continues to withstand the tide of time and evolves to address current and future issues and challenges.

Women’s contributions span across so many areas and specialties from the political, to the legal, the technical, the scientific and let us not forget the traditional knowledge and experience.

Women of all generations, of all countries and regions around the world, including the landlocked developing countries, least developed countries and small island developing states are involved.

Just as in so many other areas, their contributions too often gets overlooked and lack the much deserved recognition.

40 years ago, most of the key players in the Convention were men. There was very little to no mention of women and their contribution.

That, Ladies and Gentlemen, was 40 years ago. It was in another century.

We are here in the year 2022, and women still represent less than 40% of ocean science researchers around the world. This is often due to significant impediments facing women entering the ocean related workforce, including institutional arrangements, social justice issues such as lower pay, violence and harassment in the workplace, and cultural barriers.

Addressing this challenge isn't about luck. Empowering women is about action.

We must ensure that women are empowered full participants to this important work and that their work, commitment and dedication is placed at the core of the evolution and implementation of the Convention.

And challenges there are many, We can see some, albeit moderate progress and it is good to see that women are now represented at the leadership levels in the Institutions created by UNCLOS.

When we look at the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, we are proud to see 5 women Honorable Justices of different nationalities, one of whom is our Distinguished Co-Chair, Judge María Teresa Infante Caffi.

When we look at the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf we see women Commissioners sitting in the Commission.

When we look to the Intergovernmental Conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument on BBNJ, Ambassador Rena Lee, another prominent and distinguished lawyer, leading challenging and daunting negotiations to its conclusion.

When we look at the Division on Ocean Affairs and Law of Sea, the role of Director was held by a number of Women, including Mrs. Annick de Marffy our distinguished Co-Chair.

This is not a conclusive list but an indication of the progress over 40 years since the inception of the Convention.

We must recognize the contributions made by all women, who represent their respective countries in multilateral negotiations, women who implement the

Convention in practice either individually, nationally, regionally or internationally, and women who commit their time to studying and contributing to the Convention through academia. This dedication and commitment is to be recognized and valued by us all.

It is only if we ensure that women are respected, treated equally and recognized participants and stakeholders in our efforts toward a more sustainable, just and inclusive future that we can succeed.

We cannot afford to miss out on their contributions.

It falls on each and everyone of us, on communities, on nations, regions and the globe to ensure that the so many talented and passionate women have their place and voice in all aspects of the law of the sea and its implementation.

Our task is to give them the platform and environment to unleash their talents. Let us stay away from tokenism, let us be genuine and redouble our efforts.

Excellencies,

As one of the few, too few women of my generation and from a small island developing state, I wish to especially recognize all those Women and Men, donor partners, Governments, Intergovernmental Organizations, Non-Government Organizations, and philanthropists who have contributed, and continue to contribute what it takes to build capacity and access.

Access to technology, knowledge, capacity is at the core of us implementing the Convention. Intent is laudable but we need the will and capacity for action to translate ambition into tangible outcomes.

So, let us pledge to ensure that especially women from developing countries have the necessary tools and access which empowers them to further develop their skills and knowledge in the field of the law of the sea.

They must not be left behind.

I myself continue to witness and experience firsthand the benefits that such technical assistance initiatives have in building our female lawyers and technical expert's capacity, which in turn empowers them to make impactful and lasting contributions towards the implementation of the law of the sea in Tonga.

Excellencies,

Years since the Third Conference on the Law of the Sea, we continue to highlight the work of distinguished men who contributed to UNCLOS. We recall with gratitude the valuable contribution made by Ambassador Arvid Pardo of Malta in introducing the principle of the Common Heritage of Mankind. It is my hope that before we reach the 50th anniversary of UNCLOS, we can award some equally valuable contribution to a distinguished female expert in the law of the sea.

We are making a good start. As we begin this Conference, the mere fact that the distinguished panelists are women is encouraging. It is even more heartening that we have female representatives from Developing countries, in particular landlocked developing countries, least developed countries and small island developing states.

With the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, we have the concrete opportunity to make real change and progress happen towards gender equality in marine science and ocean affairs. Education, capacity building and empowerment of women to do the necessary, to uphold UNCLOS and to build a more just society on its foundations are the tools at our disposal.

I believe that right now nowhere in the world can we find more concentrated female expertise in the law of the sea than in this room. You all are evidence that there are no limits with respect to the careers women choose. We have the same talent and expertise. We should and must have the same opportunities.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss, listen and share experiences on how we can empower more women in marine sciences, ocean affairs and the law of the sea.

How we can shape better opportunities for women to positively influence the development of the law of the sea in the spirit of UNCLOS.

How we can give women of future generations more say.

I encourage you all to not just follow the sessions and hear from our distinguished women in law of the sea. I encourage you all to 'JUST DO IT'.

I thank you