Remarks by Her Excellency Ms. Ilana V. Seid
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Palau to the United Nations
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Madam Chair,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Palau comes to you with a slightly different voice. Palau is proud to be one of the very few traditionally matriarchal societies in the world. In Palau, women have historically held clan wealth and land, which is passed down through our mothers, and women choose our male leaders or chiefs. Palau became an independent democracy in 1994, and we have transitioned to a modern form of government, but our traditions are still alive and well. I am happy to report that women in Palau are still much respected, our voices are still honored, and we continue to be active participants in our country. Today, a majority of Palau’s school principals, lawyers, Supreme Court judges, and bureau directors are women. 50% of our ambassadors are women. And female ambition is alive and well - last year all of the graduating valedictorians were all women. This is a demonstration that when women have a voice, when they are respected as individuals, when they are shielded from gender bias, and they are allowed to lead - they do. This is not only reflected in our youth, but it continues throughout a woman’s lifetime - for example, one of our women’s groups, Mechesil Belau, has lobbied and had over 30 resolutions passed into law in our 27 short years as a Republic.

While Palau is not without its share of challenges, I’d like to share some of the indicators that are correlated with having a strong female society. Palau has one of the highest literacy rates in the world - nearly 100%; we have a highly educated population with 46% of women with post-high school education, higher than the 37% of men. Over 91% of our population have access to safe water, sanitation, and electricity. As a developing country, we also have a very high Human Development Index of .83. And we are so proud to have one of the most pristine environments in the world, with large swaths of protected areas, and a UNESCO world heritage site.
Where can we improve? Perhaps as a result of our traditions of choosing male leaders, only 8% of our congressional seats are held by women. 1 out of 8 of our Ministers (13%) is a woman. This has resulted in lack of legislation protecting the rights of working women - for instance, there is still no paid family (maternity or paternity) leave. There is a per capita gender wage gap of 18%. Further, in Palau, women are typically the primary caregivers for children, the elderly and the disabled, and because women’s participation in the formal sector is lower than men - they contribute less to and benefit less from social insurance programs. There is also some data to suggest that as women transition into more formal workforce roles, that traditional roles in child rearing suffer without anyone filling the gaps - Palau suffers from very high rates of youth-to-youth violence (20-30%), and a suicide rate which is about twice the global suicide rate, with mostly young males taking their lives.

Additionally, rural women in Palau, like in many parts of the world, face severe risks to their incomes and livelihoods as a result of climate change. In Palau, women collect seafood near the shorelines like sea cucumbers, clams and mangrove clams - some of the populations of these species have declined by over 90% in the last 10 years as a result of overexploitation and climate change. These women have less access to key productive resources such as finance, transport, technology, extension services, and markets. We also need to work together at international and regional levels to ensure that those at the forefront of climate change are given tools and protections for development, and to ensure they are not left behind.

We are incredibly proud to be a case study in female equity - great things happen when women have a voice and when they are given a chance. But as all of us continue to work towards more gender parity, we need to push forward more leadership at the top and more legislation and dialogue that enables women to continue to succeed both at work and at home. Thank you