His Excellency Josaia Vorege Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji; Her Excellency Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand; Her Excellency Fiame Naomi Mata’afa, Prime Minister of Samoa; Honorable Katy Gallagher, Minister for Women in Australia; Honorable Rosy Akbar, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in Fiji; Honorable Henry Puna, Forum Secretary General; distinguished guests and colleagues, ali, ni sa bula and good morning! It is my honor and pleasure to participate in the inaugural virtual meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders. I express warm greetings to everyone here today, both virtually and in-person at the Forum Secretariat.

As island nations, we are bound by our respective cultures as independent people of our homelands, and it is these very cultures that bring us together at the political table to discuss and to negotiate on mutual interests, shared principles and values. These cultures are a part of what makes us contribute as individuals and as people of our respective nations, and they allow us to grow and prosper as a region. We are leaders and we are women leaders because our cultures allow it, just as our fellow men are leaders in our Blue Pacific Region.

I am truly blessed to be a Palauan woman, and a Palauan woman leader, in the traditionally matriarchal Belau. But even in this historical matriarchy, elected leaders are overwhelmingly male, even though women are the ones who put them there. We organize the campaigns. We go door to door. We get them into the government. Traditionally, Palau is matrilineal. The women hold the power because we make decisions regarding lands and traditional wealth. When a man is a chief, he has to listen to his sister. It is my distinct privilege to honor my
Palauan culture, and embody my foremothers' strengths through supportive leadership and uplifting policies.

The 2012 Forum Leaders equality declaration to promote women in leadership in the Pacific has never been more relevant. Gender equality should always be front of mind at the highest levels of the Forum, and this meeting of the Pacific Women Leaders ahead of the Forum Leaders Meeting will only help to ensure that our highest level of political leaders is aware of the critical role gender has and will always have in our respective politics and the collective politics of our region as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adopt new ways of working. Although such adoptions have provided results that have been better than imagined, especially with the greater involvement of technologies to facilitate and support digital collaboration, we cannot ignore the devastating disruption it has had and continues to have on our small island nations and our people. COVID-19 has altered our livelihoods, affecting people across various sectors of our societies. Our tourism industries have had to close doors, forcing commercial agriculture and fisheries operations to cut down on labor, supply and productivity. This has further contributed to an impact on the local communities due to the drop in demand, causing business closures, layoffs and loss of income for many due to shutdown induced unemployment.

Madam Chair, excellencies, distinguished guests and colleagues, given the unprecedented nature of COVID-19, challenges continue to impact the ability of communities to build back, and to build back better in light of the global recession that likely have long lasting effects. The worsened prospects of the pandemic have drastically challenged the interconnected national economy of our Blue Pacific Region, leaving people and communities counting the costs. It is with certainty that I
can say that many in the room can attest to all that I have shared as we are all in this pandemic together.

It is only through collaboration as Pacific Women Leaders, alongside our men leaders of the region, that we can overcome the pandemic as a region, and stimulate regional recovery and a return of stability. It is only through collaboration in a gender equal manner that we can overcome the escalating threats of the impacts of climate change. It is only through this very manner that our collective efforts as leaders of our small and vulnerable Pacific Island nations can ensure the achievement of our regional vision of securing the future of our Blue Pacific.

The effect of COVID-19 on international trade and shipping has now more than ever highlighted the necessity of local and regional partnerships, support, and programs. Women as economic and political actors influence policies and institutions towards greater provision of public goods, such as energy, water and sanitation, and social infrastructure, which tend to matter more to women and support climate resilience and disaster preparedness.

As women, we are so deeply interconnected to our communities, and have a holistic perspective of the land we work, the sea we depend on for its bounty, and of our own needs as well as those of our families and communities. Because of these, women's voices in decision and policy making are imperative for lasting, sustainable development.

Madam Chair, excellencies, distinguished guests and colleagues, let this inaugural meeting be an event focused on the power and strength of women and how together, we can work to effect change. Like the men in our societies, in their traditional and political roles, we, the women of the Pacific, also play vital roles in our societies.
Let us use this opportunity and this occasion to network and build strong partnerships and solidarity as we continue to champion our mutual interests, shared principles and values as a region for the good of our people, our nations and the world.

Ko kmal mesulang, vinaka and thank you.