

## **Women's political representation in the Pacific Islands region**

Kerryn Baker

Research Fellow – Pacific Politics

State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program

The Australian National University

Women are significantly under-represented in parliamentary politics in the Pacific Islands. The region has the lowest level of women's representation in the world. Furthermore, the region is home to four of the six countries in the world with no women in their lower or only house of parliament. Women make up just 4.6 per cent of parliamentarians in independent Pacific countries. In local level politics in the region, women are also under-represented.

There are numerous reasons why the under-representation of women in politics is concerning. The right of women to have equal access to decision-making positions is recognised in international conventions including the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), signed by most (but not all) Pacific Islands states. The persistent under-representation of women means that the political skills and expertise of half the population are being under-utilised, and that those who are best positioned to advocate women's issues are largely absent from the political sphere (Mansbridge, 2005). It has been argued that higher levels of women's representation can increase political engagement amongst women (see Atkeson & Carrillo, 2007; Karp & Banducci, 2008), and that female politicians provide younger women with important role models (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). The presence of women in legislatures is also an important indicator of democratic legitimacy. When groups such as women are absent from political decision-making, the political system cannot truly be regarded as representative.

The under-representation of women in politics in the region is particularly concerning as the rate of increase is extremely low. While from 1994 to 2006 the percentage of women representatives in Pacific parliaments almost doubled (albeit from a low base), from 2 per cent to 3.8 per cent (Drage 1995; Fraenkel 2006), from 2006 to 2015 it has risen by less than 1 per cent, from 3.8 per cent to 4.6 per cent (see Table One). In 2005, six Pacific Islands countries – the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu – featured in the so-called 'dirty dozen', the 12 states who at the time had no women members of Parliament (WEDO, 2005). Ten years later, while the number of countries worldwide with no women's representation has halved, Pacific Islands states make up over half of this group. The Federated State of Micronesia, Palau, Tonga and Vanuatu, along with Qatar and Yemen, have no women parliamentarians today.

In recent elections in the region in Solomon Islands (November 2014), Tonga (November 2014), and Bougainville (May-June 2015), women's representation respectively stagnated, decreased to zero, and increased slightly. In Solomon Islands, while sitting member Vika Lusibaea was not re-elected, a new woman MP, Freda Tuki Soria Comua, won. Soria Comua is only the third woman parliamentarian in Solomon Islands history. This meant that the level of women's representation remained constant, at one member among 50 (2 per cent).

**Table 1: Women’s political representation in the Pacific Islands region – lower or only legislatures (as at 22 June 2015)**

COUNTRY	Women MPs	Total MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
French Polynesia	30	57	52.0
New Caledonia	24	54	44.4
Guam	3	15	20.0
Wallis and Futuna	4	20	20.0
Cook Islands	4	24	16.7
Fiji	8	50	16.0
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands <sup>a</sup>	3	20	15.0
Niue	3	20	15.0
Tokelau	3	20	15.0
Kiribati	4	46	8.7
Tuvalu	1	15	6.7
Samoa	3	49	6.1
American Samoa	1	18	5.6
Nauru	1	18	5.6
Republic of the Marshall Islands	1	33	3.0
Papua New Guinea	3	111	2.7
Solomon Islands	1	50	2.0
Federated States of Micronesia	0	14	0.0
Palau <sup>b</sup>	0	16	0.0
Tonga	0	26	0.0
Vanuatu	0	52	0.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>728</b>	<b>13.3</b>
<b>TOTAL (EXCLUDING NON-SOVEREIGN TERRITORIES)</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>480</b>	<b>4.6</b>

Source: Adapted from IPU Women in Parliament (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>)

Notes: <sup>a</sup> One woman also sits in the nine-member Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Senate.

<sup>b</sup> Three women sit in the 13-member Palau Senate.

In Tonga, the previous Parliament has one woman member, Dr 'Ana Maui Taufe'ulungaki, who was appointed as a Cabinet Minister by the Prime Minister at the time after no women candidates were elected in the 2010 election. In 2014, none of the women candidates were elected, and Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva declined to make any outside Cabinet appointments, citing his past opposition to the practice. As a result, Tonga now has no women members in its 26-seat Parliament.

In Bougainville, 35 women contested the 2015 election, higher than in any previous election in the autonomous region. While the majority of women candidates were contesting the reserved seats for women, there were 12 women contesting against men in 11 open constituencies. The election marked a milestone in Bougainvillean politics as Josephine Getsi became the first woman elected to an open seat when she won in Peit constituency. Getsi joins the three women elected in the reserved seats in the House of Representatives, which now has 10 per cent women's representation. The increase in women's representation at that level, however, has not led to an increase in Cabinet, with just one female minister appointed.

### **Barriers to women's representation**

There are institutional, cultural, and socio-economic barriers to greater women's representation in the region. In terms of institutional barriers, women are not eligible to stand for or have restricted access to some political positions. In Tonga, there are nine parliamentary seats reserved for nobles which can only be occupied by men. In Samoa, only those with *matai* titles can stand for Parliament, and women make up only one in ten *matai*. There are also some villages which ban women from holding *matai* titles. Electoral systems can also play a role in women's under-representation, with women's representation likely to be higher under proportional representation (PR) systems (Matland, 1998). In Papua New Guinea, it was expected that the shift to limited preferential voting (LPV) before the 2007 election would result in increased women's representation (Sepoe, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

In terms of cultural barriers, rigid gender roles and a tradition of male-dominated public debate can negatively affect women's participation in the political sphere. It should be noted that many cultural traditions in the Pacific Islands region encourage and perpetuate respect towards women, that matrilineal land ownership systems are found throughout the region, and that many traditional practices exist wherein women's endorsement is necessary for a man to become a community leader (Huffer, 2006). Nevertheless, women are under-represented in politics throughout the region and there are customary traditions that may contribute to women's absence from public decision-making spaces. Gender stereotypes and a perception that politics is 'men's work' affect women's representation, both in terms of aspiring women candidates and in terms of voter attitudes towards women leaders. Where women have traditional roles in political decision-making, it is often as 'behind-the-scenes' actors (see So'o and Fraenkel, 2005), a role that does not translate to representation in contemporary political structures.

---

<sup>1</sup> While LPV had no impact on women's representation in the 2007 election, in 2012 three women were elected, two more than we can assume would be the case under the former first-past-the-post (FPP) system, based on first preference allocations. In the 2015 Bougainville election, too, the sole woman elected in an open seat, Josephine Getsi in Peit, would not have won under FPP.

An absence of financial resources and a lack of economic independence can be barriers to women's representation insofar as they prevent women from aspiring to enter politics, and restrict their ability to campaign effectively (Clark & Rodrigues, 2009; Huffer, 2006; McLeod, 2002). This is a particularly salient barrier in parts of the Pacific where 'money politics' is widespread (Fraenkel, 2006). Access to education and to employment can affect participation in politics. In most parts of the Pacific women have more limited access than men to paid employment (Huffer, 2006), and in some areas girls have unequal access to schooling (PIFS, 2013; UN Women, 2014).

### **Who are the women in Pacific politics?**

Women parliamentarians in the Pacific Islands region tend to be relatively highly educated, often with degrees from overseas institutions, including Australian universities (Baker, Ng Shiu & Corbett, 2013; Crocombe, 2008). They tend to come from public service backgrounds, usually teaching, and have a history of community involvement, including leadership positions with church or women's groups. In some cases, high public profiles have led to political careers, such as for Julie Soso in Papua New Guinea and Francesca Semoso in Bougainville, who were well-known as radio presenters and in other public roles before entering politics. In others, however, campaigns were fought (and won) on the basis of more grassroots community involvement.

They are also likely to come from politically connected families (Crocombe, 2008; Corbett & Liki, 2014). The importance of family connections is evident in the numerous women candidates who have been successful in by-elections triggered by the death or resignation of a male relative (see Baker, Ng Shiu & Corbett, 2013), including Vika Lusibaea in Solomon Islands who won the 2012 North Malaita by-election after her husband's resignation from the seat, and Tangariki Reete in Kiribati who succeeded her late father in Parliament. Other examples of women MPs who have potentially benefited from family connections include Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, Samoa's Minister of Justice, who is the daughter of two politicians including the first Prime Minister of Samoa, and Semoso, the sitting Northern Bougainville regional women's member, whose brother Fidelis is one of her parliamentary colleagues.

### **Special measures to increase women's representation**

Special measures are one method to increase women's representation. Where special measures are effectively designed and implemented, they can significantly alter the face of power in male-dominated political systems. Perhaps the most impressive example of the use of special measures is in Rwanda, which has seen a huge increase in women's representation since a 30 per cent quota for women in all decision-making bodies was introduced in 2003. Currently women occupy over 60 per cent of parliamentary seats in Rwanda.

In the Pacific Islands region, special measures are not in widespread use. There are, however, some notable exceptions. In the three French Pacific territories of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna, the French parity laws have been applied since 1999. These laws mandate that equal numbers of female and male candidates are represented on party lists, in a 'zipper' pattern – so female and male candidates must be alternated. In the French Pacific, the use of special measures has dramatically increased women's representation (Baker, 2014b). Today in French Polynesia, over half the

members of the Territorial Assembly are women, while in New Caledonia women's representation in Congress is 44.4 per cent. While the parity laws have had a lesser impact in Wallis and Futuna, due in large part to the absence of a strong party system, at 20 per cent women's representation there is still notably higher than in most other Pacific countries.

Reserved seats for women are used in Bougainville, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea. There are three seats for women, along with three seats reserved for ex-combatants, in the 40-seat House of Representatives. There is also one Cabinet seat reserved for a woman. The Bougainville system has been lauded for guaranteeing a minimum level of women's representation in the legislature (and in Cabinet); there has been criticism, however, that the system has led to a widespread perception that the reserved seats are the only seats women are eligible to stand in, and has thus acted as a ceiling for women's representation (Baker, 2014c). There has been a concerted effort by local women's groups, notably the Bougainville Women's Federation, in co-operation with international donors to increase women's representation in Bougainville beyond the reserved seats. In the 2015 election, a record 12 women stood as candidates in open seats, and Josephine Getsi in Peit constituency became the first woman elected in an open seat.

In Samoa, special measures were introduced in 2013 and will be applied for the first time in the 2016 general election. The Samoan Parliament has adopted a 'safety net' system which seats a minimum level of women's representation at five members of Parliament. If less than five women are elected in a general election, additional members of Parliament will be appointed. These additional members will be the unsuccessful women candidates who polled the highest, percentage-wise, in the election. The 'safety net' will only apply if less than five women are elected; if five or more women win seats in the election, there will be no additional members (Baker, 2014a).

These cases are examples of three different forms of special measures for women – party list quotas, reserved seats, and the 'safety net' system. While the party list quota in the French Pacific has had the most dramatic impact on women's representation, the lesser results in Wallis and Futuna show that in the absence of a strong party system its effect is limited. Reserved seats can function without a party system, yet can attract criticism for acting as a ceiling rather than a floor for women's representation as having designated 'women's seats' can lead to an assumption that other seats are therefore 'men's seats'. This perception also extends to Cabinet, where the constitutional provision mandating one reserved seat for a woman has been interpreted as a restriction on the number of female ministers. The 'safety net' system used in Samoa, although it is as yet untested in a general election, seemingly provides an alternative to reserved seats. Rather than having separate seats for women, under the 'safety net' system all women who enter Parliament must stand for the same seats as male candidates in a general election. The special measures in this case are only activated if women's representation fails to meet a certain threshold.

### **Increasing women's representation in the region**

There are other methods to increase women's representation in politics, including candidate training that is targeted at potential women candidates to increase their chances of success. Women candidate

training is run in various Pacific islands countries in the lead-up to general elections. Women's groups, governmental agencies and international donors have also run awareness campaigns during election campaigns to encourage voters to vote for women.

Where special measures are not politically viable, candidate training and voter awareness can also result in greater women's representation. It is crucial that candidate training is contextualised and draws on local experience, including from past successful and near-successful women candidates and from women's groups. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to candidate training, especially in a region as diverse as the Pacific Islands. Candidate training can be made more effective by introducing different selection processes that take into account, amongst other things, past electoral experience, and by targeting the course to the specific political context of the country (Haley & Zubrinich, 2015).

One of the major hurdles most commonly articulated by women candidates in the region is the financial cost of campaigning. Assistance with campaign materials such as posters, banners and t-shirts, as well as campaign expenses such as mobile phone credit, would be advantageous to women candidates. It must be noted that any assistance should be confirmed well in advance of an election period and any logistical challenges, such as transferring funds between countries and accessing printing services in remote locations, taken into account. In some cases, offers of assistance with campaign materials have come to nothing because of such logistical difficulties, leaving women candidates disappointed and at a disadvantage in the middle of a campaign period.

Advertising space on radio, TV, and in newspapers could also potentially benefit women candidates. Some aspiring candidates have highlighted the production of short documentary films about themselves as a method to raise their profiles as part of preparation for a campaign; the costs, however, of making such a film are often prohibitive. Radio is the most effective method of telecommunication with voters in many parts of the region, making it a useful tool in terms of both awareness raising of the importance of women's representation in general and profile raising of individual women candidates.

Special measures can rapidly increase the number of women in politics in countries where women's representation is low (or zero) and there is no sign of gradual increase. In the best case scenario, they are used in conjunction with other measures, including candidate training and voter awareness campaigns. The introduction of special measures can be controversial, however, and in some instances proposals for special measures have proved unpopular and have been rejected by politicians or the general public. In other cases, such as the reserved seats campaign in Papua New Guinea, proposals for special measures have passed some legislative hurdles but despite this, have not been implemented. This means that implementing other methods of increasing women's representation is especially important.

## References

- Atkeson, L. R. & Carrillo, N. (2007). More is better: The influence of collective female descriptive representation on external efficacy. *Politics and Gender*, 3(1), 79-101.
- Baker, K. (2014a). Explaining the outcome of gender quota campaigns in Samoa and Papua New Guinea. *Political Science*, 66(1), 63-83.
- Baker, K. (2014b). Quota adoption and the exogenous track model: the parity laws in the French Pacific collectivities. *Representation*, 50(3), 295-306.
- Baker, K. (2014c). Women's representation and the use of reserved seats in Bougainville. *SSGM In Brief 2014/2*. Canberra: State Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM).
- Baker, K., Ng Shiu, R. & Corbett, J. (2013). Women MPs in Samoa and Kiribati. *SSGM In Brief 2013/11*. Canberra: State Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM).
- Campbell, D. E. & Wolbrecht, C. (2006). See Jane run: Women politicians as role models for adolescents. *Journal of Politics*, 68(2), 233-247.
- Clark, L. & Rodrigues, C. (2009). *Utilising temporary special measures to promote gender balance in Pacific legislatures: A guide to options*. Suva: UNDP Pacific Centre.
- Corbett, J & Liki, A. (2015). Intersecting identities, divergent views: interpreting the experiences of women politicians in the Pacific Islands. *Politics and Gender*, 11(2), 320-344.
- Crocombe, R. (2008). *The South Pacific*. Suva: University of the South Pacific.
- Drage, J. (1995). The exception, not the rule: A comparative analysis of women's political activity in Pacific Island countries. *Pacific Studies*, 18(4), 61-93.
- Fraenkel, J. (2006). The impact of electoral systems on women's representation in Pacific parliaments. In *A woman's place is in the house – the House of Parliament; Research to advance women's political representation in Forum Island Countries* (pp. 57-106). Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS).
- Haley, N. & Zubrinich, K. (2015). Improving women's political representation in the Pacific: the emerging evidence. *SSGM In Brief 2015/31*. Canberra: State Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM).
- Huffer, E. (2006). Desk review of the factors which enable and constrain the advancement of women's political representation in Forum Island Countries. In *A woman's place is in the house – the House of Parliament; research to advance women's political representation in Forum Island Countries* (pp. 1-56). Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS).
- Karp, J. A. & Banducci, S. A. (2008). Political efficacy and participation in twenty-seven democracies: How electoral systems shape political behavior. *British Journal of Political Science*, 38(2), 311-334.

Mansbridge, J. (2005). Quota problems: Combating the dangers of essentialism. *Politics and Gender*, 1(4), 622-638.

Matland, R. E. (1998). Women's representation in national legislatures: developed and developing countries. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 23(1), 109-125.

McLeod, A. (2002). Where are the women in Simbu politics? *Development Bulletin*, 59, 43-46.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS). (2013). *2013 Pacific regional MDGs tracking report*. Suva: PIFS.

Sepoe, O. (2013). Women as candidates and voters: gender issues and the Kerema Open electorate. In R. J. May, R. Anere, N. Haley & K. Wheen (Eds.), *Election 2007: the shift to limited preferential voting in Papua New Guinea* (pp. 139-155). Canberra: ANU Press.

So'o, A. & Fraenkel, J. (2005). The role of ballot chiefs (*matai pälota*) and political parties in Sāmoa's shift to universal suffrage. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 43(3), 333-361.

UN Women. (2014). *Annual report 2013 – UN Women Fiji multi-country office*. Suva: UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office.

Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). (2005). *Beijing Betrayed*. New York: WEDO.

Wood, T. (2014). Why can't women win? Impediments to female electoral success in Solomon Islands. *CDI Discussion Paper 2014/01*. Canberra: Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI).