



# Journey into politics

A NEW PROGRAM TO BOOST WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE THROUGHOUT THE PACIFIC REGION HAS BEEN LAUNCHED.

Story: **Emma O'Sullivan**

**A**t a recent meeting of women politicians in Sydney, Rhoda Sikilabu from the Solomon Islands was keen to share her story. It was one of self-sacrifice and dedication to her community. It was her journey into politics.

"I just did it the Solomon way," she explained. "I left high school as a very young woman and I worked for 11 years and I had this passion to be a politician. I left my work. I denied my children of a good education. I went back and lived in the village for 15 years. I think that is a long, hard and painful journey of an election campaign."

In 2006 Ms Sikilabu's efforts were rewarded when she gained a seat in the country's provincial assembly for the Isabel province.

"There were no political parties. In my campaign I just had to make the voters aware that men and women are equal, they run as equal people in the government," she said.

Spurred on by her success, she decided to run in the 2010 general election. Her election campaign saw her swimming across flooded rivers, camping in the bush and trekking over mountains in order to speak with voters in the most remote villages.

"That was the hardest campaign that I did," she said. Ms Sikilabu came second, a result she believes proves women candidates are making progress. She is likely to try again next time.

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Her story illustrates some of the obstacles – economic, cultural and institutional – faced by Pacific Island women who have decided to enter an arena which, in their region, is almost completely dominated by men.

But Ms Sikilabu and around 40 other parliamentarians from the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand who were gathered in the room that



Photos: Newspix and Fiona Way

day are determined to create an easier path for those who follow them.

This was their reason for attending the first forum of the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships project, which was co-hosted by the Australian parliament and the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians group. It was a very rare opportunity for the women to meet in person so they could share their experiences and build relationships.

The seeds of this gathering were planted in 2012 at the annual Pacific Islands Forum. The only woman among 15 leaders present, Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced Australia would provide \$320 million over 10 years to improve Pacific women's economic and leadership prospects and to keep them free from violence.

By the forum's end, Pacific Island leaders had made a detailed gender equality declaration. The statement put on the record their deep concern that violence against women was too high, political participation too low and economic opportunities limited. It also outlined measures for each nation to implement and committed them to providing yearly progress reports.

Australia's \$320 million spend – the 'Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development' initiative – is being administered by AusAID, which has provided almost \$3 million for the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships project.

AusAID deputy director-general James Batley has spent many years working as a diplomat in a number of Pacific countries including Fiji and Papua New Guinea, and he was present at the forum to give an overview of the initiative.

"It's a matter of people's rights, it's a matter of fairness, but it's also a matter of addressing entrenched poverty in these countries," he said.

"There's plenty of evidence now from right around the world that involving women in decision making, empowering them to take part in the decision making processes of communities and countries leads to better outcomes."

#### SHAPING DEVELOPMENT:

*Women politicians from the Pacific meet to support each other*

In Pacific Island parliaments, women hold just five per cent of seats, and progress on increasing that number is slow. One positive development last year saw the number of women in Papua New Guinea's national parliament triple from one to three.

However, out of the parliamentary chambers in the world recorded by the Inter-Parliamentary Union as having no women members, three are in the Pacific region. They are in Nauru, the Federated States of Micronesia and Vanuatu.

Perhaps one of the first obstacles a woman must overcome when she begins campaigning for election is the heavily entrenched view that Pacific women do not belong in politics.

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Recently-elected Cook Islands MP Selina Napa grew up in a family familiar with politics, with her father having been an MP. Because of this she was also reasonably well-known in her community. But she was still challenged by some, who questioned her credentials simply because she was a woman.

“I had to put it out to them that a woman is just as capable of doing things as men are whether it be in the home, in workplaces, that women are just as capable of doing it,” she said.

Chair of the Australia-Pacific Parliamentary Group and federal MP Amanda Rishworth said unfortunately politics often seems to be seen as men’s business in the Pacific. This was highlighted on a parliamentary trip to the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea where Ms Rishworth met many women who she believed were capable of holding political office.

“One of the concerning things for me was when I asked some of the bright young women that I met, ‘maybe you should think about going into politics’, it didn’t seem like it was an option for them,” she said.

This attitude, that politics is men’s business, is often explained as being part of a cultural tradition. But House of Representatives Speaker Anna Burke, who attended the forum, said this justification is “ridiculous”.

“We need to say, ‘no it’s not cultural’. It’s about attitudes towards women that we need to overcome,” she said.

But it also seems some of the attitudes working against women come from women themselves. Several forum participants, including Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands, said women are reluctant to vote for other women.

“Women are not as independent voters as I think men are and they tend to follow husband’s votes or uncles or brothers,” she said.

But veteran Australian MP Bronwyn Bishop urged women at the forum not to buy into that argument.

“I think that’s an excuse men will use to say we can’t have you because women won’t support you when in fact that’s their way of saying, ‘I don’t want the competition’,” she said. “If you’re strong and you’re giving leadership women will respond to that so it’s something you need to push aside.”

Anna Burke believes part of the solution is to ensure candidates have good campaign skills.

“It’s about the candidate presenting themselves as a credible candidate. It’s about the policies they bring,” she said.

While changing people’s attitudes is one challenge women are beginning to grapple with, changing rules, systems and institutions to improve gender equality is something entirely different.

The search for solutions is further complicated for a region in which modern political systems have only been in place for around half a century, since nations began to gain independence from European rule.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it will take another 50 years to achieve gender equality in Asia-Pacific parliaments if the increase in women’s participation in parliaments remains at the current pace.

Harvard University Professor Pippa Norris has identified six areas that can be targeted to fast-track women into politics, one of which is change to Pacific electoral systems.



#### UNITED WE STAND:

*Creating opportunities for women in politics across the Pacific*

“This is a real barrier in the Pacific,” she explained. “If you have the British system, which was first past the post, single member districts, which is now so common in the Pacific region, then you get far fewer women elected to parliament than if you have any sort of proportional or mixed system.”

Professor Norris said women should grab the opportunity to debate electoral reform if it arises in their country.

“And you don’t have to make the argument necessarily that this is about gender quotas which can be difficult in some cultures,” she said.

“You’re saying basically we need a fairer electoral system. You can make coalitions with parties, you can make coalitions with civic society groups and other minorities will also benefit.”

Another possibility for change lies in the use of reserved seats, an area which is subject to ongoing debate in the Pacific region.

The autonomous region of Bougainville has only had a parliament since 2005, following the resolution of an almost decade-long conflict. Its constitution provides for three reserved seats for women, one of which is held by Elizabeth Burain who was elected under the system in 2010.

“We have a matrilineal society where women own land,” she said. “We also have women represent the clan as chiefs and in the government – we had to make it work.”

“I must stress here that the three reserved seats came about because during the peace arrangement the community, especially women, really worked hard to bring the peace into Bougainville.”

“Now that we are discussing how more women can get into the parliament you will find that there’s differences in supporting temporary special measures. I believe if a



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country wants to make women prove themselves to be leaders, if they cannot have more women they must use temporary special measures.”

Bougainville’s long-term future, including its constitution, is set to be reviewed after 10 years, which means the reserved seats system may also be under consideration. In the meantime, Ms Burain says women like her, who are already in parliament, need to set a strong example and encourage more women to contest both reserved and open seats.

“I think the way forward is when a woman is elected into the parliament she must remember that she is a role model. And we need to network. Because you will find that we really need each other to convince the community that yes, women can also make a difference.”

Ms Bishop agrees: “There’s an obligation on those of us who arrive into the parliamentary arena to ensure that we don’t muck it up for other women.”



### THE PACIFIC WAY:

*Sharing experiences and ideas*

After two days of discussions at the forum the group agreed to 12 key outcomes, the first of which was to foster mentoring relationships between Australian, New Zealand and Pacific parliamentarians.

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians deputy chair Christine Fyffe from Victoria said it is crucial that Pacific MPs know they have a support network.

“Being able to talk to people who understand how you’re going and what is happening to you is very important,” she said.

“I really see it narrowing down as we develop an affinity for each other. You’ll find that certain people will have a better relationship with others and I’m hoping that then there will be a natural flow on – that we will work with these people, with the country or the individuals.”

The women MPs at the forum also identified the need to create an online networking platform for MPs and staff to facilitate discussion, requests for data and information sharing.

MP exchanges will also take place this year which will give Australian and Pacific women parliamentarians the opportunity to learn more about each other and each other’s work.

Ms Fyffe said the evolution of the program very much depends on what the Pacific Island women want.

“They will be telling us what they need, what involvement they want from us and how much they want to do themselves,” she said.

“Because it’s not just for women members of parliament, it’s also for people who work within parliaments and women who are aspirational to become members of parliament.” •

For more information on the Pacific Women’s Parliamentary Partnerships project visit: [www.pacificparliaments.net](http://www.pacificparliaments.net)