



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Donor Approaches to Supporting Women Candidates in the Pacific

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While the Pacific 'boasts a ... rich legal and policy framework dedicated to the promotion of gender equality' (McLeod 2015:6), women remain significantly under-represented in formal politics. Development partners have provided significant support over many years to Pacific women to improve their representation and leadership in formal political institutions; increasing the level of women's representation in parliaments has been a particular focus. The rationale for this attention has been the very low level of women's representation in the Pacific compared to other regions. It has also reflected the apparent important development implications of increasing women's representation in parliament, and the thinking that small gains in women's political representation will lead to broader development gains.

Development partner support for women's leadership, of which support for women candidates is an important subset, is very significant both in terms of quantum of aid and the increasing priority accorded to gender issues within development programs. This is exemplified by Australia's substantial support for women's leadership as a priority area under its 10 year, AU\$320 million Pacific Women initiative. The Pacific is also a crowded field in terms of the number of development partners active in the area of women's leadership. For example, a range of development partners, including bilateral donors, multilateral agencies and international non-government organisations, provide support for women candidates through a number of direct and indirect programs. That increasing levels of resources devoted to women's leadership issues have not been met

by significant increases in women's representation in formal politics suggests the approaches guiding the delivery of those resources need adjusting.

### Direct Support for Women Candidates

Development partners have sought to support women candidates directly through four broad program approaches:

*Institutional reforms:* Donors have provided support to advocates of institutional reform and their efforts to structurally reform formal political institutions to improve women's prospects for electoral success. A major focus of such efforts in the Pacific has been on the establishment of parliamentary quotas for women by way of temporary special measures. Support has included technical assistance to help with drafting of legislation and support for advocacy groups to sustain campaigns.

*Capacity building:* One of the most common forms of support provided by development partners to women candidates has been capacity building intended to improve women's understanding of electoral processes and campaigning techniques. Candidate training workshops have commonly been held for intending women candidates in the months prior to an election. Training course content has included a strong focus on transformational leadership, an emphasis on rights-based approaches and general program management (centred on campaigning). Much of this training assumes a role for women candidates as gender ambassadors and thus focuses on the importance of winning the women's vote. Development partners have also provided to women candidates modest resourcing intended to bridge significant resource inequalities generally experienced by women candidates in relation to their male competitors. One common form of support has been the printing of campaign materials.

*Support for cultural and social change:* Development partners have also provided assistance focused on changing voting culture in relation to gender, largely through civic

awareness initiatives. Such programs have sought to change voter perceptions about women candidates, and assist the mobilisation of voters who support women candidates. While attempts to help change cultural and social norms from the outside are common, the effectiveness of such an approach is not substantiated by the evidence base.

*Advocacy and networking:* Development partners have also focused support on sustaining local advocacy networks, which have been an important source of support for women candidates. A common approach is to support national women's organisations, often as part of a broader gender or civil society program.

### Indirect Support for Women Candidates

In addition to direct support for women candidates, a range of development programs may help women candidates more indirectly. For example, programs to support women's economic empowerment may increase the resources available to potential women candidates over time. Efforts to support women's leadership in the public sector and civil society may also improve the profile of potential candidates as successful leaders.

### Observations about Current Development Partner Approaches

There are many factors shaping the electoral prospects of women in the Pacific. However, the limited number of women elected to Pacific parliaments suggests that development partner approaches are not making a significant difference. What are some of the issues involved with current approaches?

*A poor evidence base:* McLeod (2015:3) observes 'there is limited evidence about the factors underpinning women's successful entry into parliament'. At a programmatic level, efforts to improve the electoral prospects of women candidates have not always been founded on available evidence or accompanied by rigorous monitoring and evaluation. This makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of support efforts and to adapt support over time according to what is learned. There is also a gap in the type of data available — many program reports focus on outputs (course attendance) and too little on outcomes.

*Coordination:* Development partner support for women candidates has not been well coordinated. Development partners, including the Centre for Democratic Institutions, have often duplicated support. Competition between specialist development partners has undermined prospects for productive collaboration. Sector-wide coordination has

been fairly weak, meaning different programs have not easily recognised synergies across different activities. Recent investments by Pacific Women that seek to foster improved coordination and alignment over the long term are very welcome in this regard.

*Scale and sequencing:* There has been a disconnect between the challenges facing women candidates when campaigning and the focus of development partner programs. Haley and Zubrinich (2016:6) call for a better understanding of women's political participation 'across all levels of society and across the electoral cycle'. In terms of scale, many development programs have focused on urban women candidates contesting national elections, despite strong evidence indicating that successful women candidates have leveraged strong local connections with their communities (Haley and Zubrinich 2016). Development partners have also provided only limited attention to issues of sequencing: how different types of support need to be calibrated over an election cycle.

*Supply-driven:* Much development partner support for women candidates has been supply-driven, based on general programs developed for other regions. While it is important for development partners to draw on global experiences to identify innovative forms of support that may be relevant in the Pacific, there are too few examples of context-responsive programming developed in partnership with Pacific women in response to specific challenges faced in elections.

### Changes Afoot ...

One of the most notable things about development partner support for women candidates in the Pacific is its changing nature. Development partners are beginning to invest much more effort in improving coordination, building the evidence base to inform better-targeted programming and developing new support modalities to better empower women candidates.

### Author Notes

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### References

- Haley, N. and K. Zubrinich 2016. *Women's Political and Administrative Leadership in the Pacific*. Research Report prepared for *Pacific Women*, January 2016.
- McLeod, A. 2015. *State of the Art 4: Women's Leadership in the Pacific*. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.

