



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Bridging Resourcing Gaps

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This is the sixth In Brief of a series of eight developed as background papers for a three-day workshop titled 'Improving women's electoral chances through an evidence-based approach', hosted by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the Australian National University in Canberra, June 2016. The In Briefs are designed to accompany the [workshop synthesis report](#).

Successful political candidates, both female and male, tend to have access to significant economic resources (Haley and Zubrinich 2013; True et al. 2012). The rise of money politics in Melanesia, as well as the absence or poor enforcement of campaign finance regulations, has meant that even for those candidates not directly engaging in vote buying or gifting, the costs of running a competitive campaign have nevertheless increased. In the 2007 Papua New Guinea election, money politics — the distribution of gifts and cash in exchange for votes — was more frequently practised by male candidates (Sepoe 2013). In the 2012 election, candidates who participated in money politics generally performed better than other candidates (Haley and Zubrinich 2013). Many unsuccessful female candidates in these two elections attributed their losses to money politics.

The rise of money politics and the related increase in the cost of campaigning creates an institutional constraint that is profoundly gendered. Women are less likely than men to be engaged in the formal economy. Where they do earn a cash income, women on average earn less money than men. Political parties are often seen as potential sources of campaign funding, yet female candidates argue they have become less generous over time, and that it is increasingly hard to obtain financial support from political parties. This creates a resourcing gap for female candidates that often hinders effective campaigning. Furthermore, transport costs are a major expense for female candidates, and often are identified as the biggest financial burden of campaigning. This

is especially true for candidates vying for large electorates, such as the provincial seats in Papua New Guinea, or for electorates that present significant logistical challenges, such as those with limited road infrastructure. Owning a car (or multiple cars), or a boat, can be a huge advantage, but fuel costs can still be prohibitive.

Support to Resource Election Campaigns

Development partners can potentially assist female candidates with some of the costs of campaigning. Often support comes in the form of supplying campaign materials such as posters or T-shirts. Such assistance, however, needs to be confirmed well in advance of an election, so that women can manage their personal resources accordingly. Logistical challenges also need to be taken into account. In one 2015 election, an offer of donor support to produce posters was made prior to the campaign period; yet there were significant delays in poster production and some female candidates did not receive theirs until the final days of the campaign. Candidates expressed frustration at the delays, saying they felt the promise of posters had actually disadvantaged them as otherwise they would have organised their own posters. In other cases, the offer of such material support may not be contextually appropriate. In some parts of the Pacific islands region — and especially in rural areas — posters are not seen as a particularly effective method of campaigning.

Another aspect of support for female candidates comes in the form of public education initiatives to increase awareness on the issue of women's under-representation and promote women candidates. Significant public awareness was carried out before the 2012 Papua New Guinea election around parliamentary reserved seats for women and the need to enhance women's representation. Many of these initiatives were funded by development partner organisations, and this campaign was credited by many as part of the reason for the subsequent increase in successful female candidates,

even in the absence of reserved seats. While a significant amount of development partner funds goes towards voter education programs, which include information on women's political representation, results from 2007 to 2014 Solomon Islands' citizen surveys indicate awareness on the issue of women's under-representation is already high, and that a vast majority of Solomon Islanders believe there should be more women in parliament (Haley et al. 2015; McMurray 2012; Wood 2015). Yet these attitudes towards women's political leadership are not reflected in the actual rates of success for female candidates. How awareness campaigns might be better tailored to address the disconnect between awareness of women's under-representation and rates of success for female candidates is an obvious area for future research.

Innovative Approaches to Fundraising

Several innovative approaches to campaign fundraising have been trialled in at least two recent elections in the Pacific islands, where female candidates used contacts in New Zealand and Australia to raise money for their campaigns. Such approaches can raise important funds, but require female candidates to have already-established international networks to draw on for help. An alternative approach that might have more widespread benefits would be the establishment of a type of [EMILY's List](#) to coordinate fundraising for Pacific female candidates. Development partner organisations could potentially coordinate this support in partnership with local and national women's organisations. In the United States and Australia, EMILY's List has an explicitly pro-choice agenda; certainly this would be politically untenable in a Pacific context, but by adopting a philosophy aimed at women's economic empowerment and ending violence against women, the establishment of such lists in Pacific island countries where it is legal to do so is likely to attract little opposition.

EMILY's List adopts a method whereby seats that are considered to be obtainable and women candidates considered to stand a good chance of winning these seats are identified early in the election cycle. Following this process, material support and logistical assistance are provided. This approach places a much greater focus on targeting competitive candidates in winnable seats than previous support programs implemented in the region. It also adopts a longer-term approach to providing support across an electoral cycle than programs that focus their support in the immediate lead-up to elections. While such an initiative could not and should not engage in money politics or political gifting, providing support for transport costs, posters and

media advertising (when and if appropriate and consistent with domestic laws and campaign finance regulations) would help to address some of the key factors contributing to the campaign resourcing gap experienced by female candidates. There is also likely to be value in complementing this targeted resource supplementation with context-specific training and mentoring that focuses on helping women candidates develop campaign strategies that respond to politics in their electorates, delivered throughout the election cycle.

Author Notes

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