



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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What Women (Candidates) Want

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Hearing Women

In a very early SSGM Discussion Paper, Bronwen Douglas (2000:3–7) highlighted the importance of listening to and ‘hearing Melanesian women’. This In Brief echoes such sentiments, and finds real value resides in the knowledge and insights of women candidates, who already know the forms of support that would enhance their chances of election.

In March 2015 four SSGM scholars (Nicole Haley, Kerryn Baker, Theresa Meki and I) attended the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Women’s Forum, sponsored by the United States Embassy. At the request of the embassy and the United Nations Development Programme we conducted a separate follow-up workshop titled Women’s Leadership and Political Participation. The workshop was attended by recently elected executives of the PNG National Council of Women (NCW), presidents of the provincial councils of women, provincial assembly nominees, campaign managers and women intending to contest the 2017 national elections. A number of those present had contested the 2012 elections, polling well and finishing among the top-ranked losing candidates. Fortuitously, the workshop provided us with an opportunity to interview former candidates and document their experiences as well as those of women in local government, particularly women’s representatives appointed to local-level governments, joint district planning and budget priorities committees (now district development authorities) and provincial assemblies.

For the purposes of the workshop we developed and administered a short survey which collected data concerning the age, education and social and professional ties of this cohort. Focus groups conducted as part of the workshop explored the issue of campaign financing and the distribution of funding for women’s development initiatives. Women shared their experiences as candidates, campaign managers, officials and participants in the political process, offering key insights about more effective means of campaign support.

This In Brief deals with a range of issues surrounding elections and campaigning as discussed in the focus groups.

Quite unexpectedly we found that a number of the better-performing unsuccessful candidates in the 2012 national elections were subsequently appointed to positions in provincial assemblies. Credibly contesting national-level elections is clearly one of the pathways to local and provincial leadership. That these women successfully parlayed their national election losses into positions of influence at the subnational level demonstrates a hitherto unrecognised link between national and subnational politics in PNG.

What Women Know (and Want)

The workshop also provided us with an opportunity to ask successful seasoned campaigners about their support networks and their views on how donors might best support women’s political participation in PNG, at all levels of decision-making. Bearing in mind a number of these women came very close to winning the seats they contested, the knowledge they had about elections was not surprising. Whether it was about the way elections are run, how men campaign or how women need to campaign if they are to be successful, their discussion was highly analytic and apt. They were also acutely attuned to the factors leading to their failure (in the case of experienced candidates) or the challenges facing them (in the case of intending candidates).

They emphatically highlighted the prevalence of ‘money politics’ in recent PNG elections (Haley and Zubrinich 2015a). Remarkably, this is a subject donor-funded campaign handbooks for women are generally silent on (for examples see Kelly 2013 and Morgan 2015). Several participants asserted that a basic campaign costs in the order K500,000, although evidence from the 2012 PNG national elections would suggest winning candidates invested far more (Haley and Zubrinich 2015a). One highlands woman suggested K2,000,000 was closer to the mark for a highlands-style campaign. Participants

also told anecdotes concerning the ways influential male candidates try to thwart women's campaigns. Former candidates were explicit about the need for upfront campaign financing — and a lot of it — but recognised that international donors could not be expected to supply this. However, they identified forms of more indirect support, including transport, media coverage, mentoring and culturally specific training that acknowledges the political economy of elections as things that might enhance their campaigns.

Community engagement and community-driven development initiatives were identified as areas where donors might promote women's voice and agency generally, and female candidates in particular. They suggested that giving women candidates space to speak at multi-candidate campaign launches would increase the visibility of women candidates, and in doing so would provide a mechanism for donors to help with the cost of travel to the remote areas — something that often proves prohibitive and dangerous. Women candidates invariably need to travel with an entourage to prevent physical harm as well as damage to their reputations. One intending candidate put it like this, 'It can be very physical, as a single woman ... I have to move here and there, travel back and forth, it's a personal safety issue.'

A heartening feature of the workshop was the intergenerational nature of the election enterprise. Attendees included young women who had supported previous candidates and others being mentored by previous candidates and campaign managers. The more experienced women urged the younger ones to take the initiative and use their kin networks to establish a strong support base early. One, who had served as campaign manager for the incumbent in her electorate, asserted the importance of knowing how limited preferential voting works in order to take advantage of second and third preferences. She stressed, too, the need to campaign beyond one's local area and to establish relationships across ethnic lines.

Another key theme to emerge from the discussion was the need for women candidates to bridge the gender divide. Women need support of male kin in order to contest (Haley and Zubrinich 2015b). They also need to appeal to male voters, not just female voters. 'They must', one attendee observed, 'establish relationships with females and win support of male folk, influential women relate to women and communicate with men'.

Despite the negativity towards the NCW in other arenas and whispers that it is little more than an older women's elitist organisation, workshop attendees (young and old alike) saw it as an organisation well placed to promote women's

leadership at both the national level and subnational level. They suggested the NCW could act as a visible advocate for female candidates.

Janet Sape, a seasoned campaigner and now executive director for the PNG Women in Business, suggested that in addition to material support, donors might do more with established political parties to encourage greater tangible support for women candidates. Sape also highlighted the value of training activities such as those carried out by the Centre for Democratic Institutions which provide insight into political party participation.

Most of all, candidates and intending candidates asserted that whatever form help takes it needs to be offered early in the campaign cycle given that strong male candidates (especially the incumbents) mobilise resources early and campaign over the whole five-year election cycle. In short, women want to be able to start campaigning early in the electoral cycle, be visible, have a level playing field in terms of money and political gifting, and to use tried and true campaign strategies.

Author Notes

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