

This In Brief argues initiatives aimed at improving women's political representation in the Pacific must be informed by the emerging evidence concerning the performance of individual women candidates. They must move beyond diagnostics that attribute women's poor performance at the polls to culture, custom or the lack of a level playing field and seek instead to learn from the experiences of women who are elected, and those who poll strongly but fall shy of being elected.

Women's Political Representation at the National Level

Women are significantly under-represented in legislatures throughout the world. This is especially so in the Pacific. Indeed, although women account for 20 per cent of elected leaders worldwide they account for only 3 per cent of elected leaders in the sovereign states of the Pacific, and in Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu), home to nearly eight million people, only 4 of the 213 parliamentary seats (1.9 per cent) are held by women.

Despite concerted donor efforts, especially in the area of candidate training and in support for the introduction of temporary special measures, the growth in women's representation has been much slower in the Pacific than in other developing regions. In some Pacific countries women's representation has in fact diminished. Samoa, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands are all cases in point. In Samoa, the number of women in parliament dropped from four to two at the March 2011 elections, while the October 2012 national elections saw no women elected to the Vanuatu parliament. Moreover, in Solomon Islands, where there is only one woman in parliament, the overall percentage of votes received by women candidates dropped by 50 per cent in 2010 as compared with the 2006 elections.

Women's Political Representation at the Sub-national Level

Women's leadership and decision-making in the Pacific is most visible at the local level, and it is here that leadership gains have been the greatest. Quotas, which are in use in over 100 countries around the

world, have been used to successfully increase women's representation at the sub-national level in our region:

- the Autonomous Region of Bougainville's unicameral parliament has three regional seats reserved for women
- Papua New Guinea has provision for a nominated women's representative on each provincial assembly and each local-level government
- Vanuatu introduced reserved seats for women at the municipal level in 2013.

Papua New Guinea's *Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local Level Governments* provided for women's representatives on each Joint District Planning and Budget Priorities Committee, these being the committees which determined how District Services Improvement Program funds were expended in the period 2005–2014. There are similar provisions for women's representatives on the new district authorities.

Addressing Under-Representation

Scholars have attributed the enduring under-representation of women in politics in the region to a multitude of factors, most notably culture, the pervasiveness of masculine political cultures, a view that politics is men's work, the view that electoral systems are not gender neutral and the absence of a level playing field with respect to campaign financing (Huffer 2006; Pollard 2003; Whittington et al. 2006).

Having examined the range of approaches being used to support women's leadership, we find:

- existing efforts around women's leadership have not resulted in the gains expected or desired; it is time, therefore, to find new ways of engaging and new modalities for support
- existing initiatives have tended to focus on political representation at the national level; on their own these will not achieve a critical mass of women in leadership positions across all levels of decision-making
- there is little systematic analytical work being undertaken at the grass roots level and little is being done to foster community-level leadership, let alone women's leadership

- there is a paucity of credible analytical work around the strategies that do work for women candidates, or indeed around what makes a credible women's candidate.

Where's the Evidence?

There is growing evidence that the social capital of urban elites (male and female alike) does not translate into votes at the ballot box in Melanesia or the broader Pacific. Instead, women who perform well at the polls are either community based or have deep connections to their electorates (Haley and Anere 2009; Kama 2010; Susub 2011), have strong male backers (Haley and Zubrinich 2013), are from high-profile families (Baker 2014; Baker et al. 2013), have often built good reputations as a local representative (Fraenkel 2006; Kama 2010), have a constituency support base (Whittington et al. 2006), have significant involvement in the church (Baker 2014) and are recognised as serving the community or delivering benefits locally (Baker et al. 2013; Kama 2010; Sepoe 2011). Few women who have contested recent national elections in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu fit this description, and this goes a long way towards explaining why women candidates have performed so poorly.

Nonetheless, the annual [RAMSI Peoples Survey](#) (2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) has consistently found that the vast majority (more than 85 per cent) of Solomon Islanders are generally supportive of the idea of women in politics, want more women in parliament, support the concept of special reserved seats for women and would vote for a good woman candidate. This suggests Solomon Islands' voters are not rejecting women candidates per se, but those they consider to be poor candidates.

Policy Implications

Selection processes that prioritise the characteristics common to women who have performed well in past elections should be applied to future training courses for women intending to contest forthcoming elections. Put simply, women selected to receive training and support need to be drawn from a different pool. Coupled with this, efforts to support women's leadership should be informed by lessons learnt from contexts where women's leadership gains have been the greatest.

Author Notes

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