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'What did the winning candidate have that I don't have?': gender, politics and elections in Solomon Islands

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ABSTRACT

Women's political under-representation is a concern for both emerging and established democracies. In Solomon Islands, only four women were elected to Parliament in the 40 years from independence in 1978 to 2018. This article analyses the barriers to success for female candidates in Solomon Islands elections, focusing on the impact of informal institutions related to kinship, clientelism and leadership. It argues that in a context such as Solomon Islands, an emerging democracy with a weakly institutionalised party system, informal institutions play a highly influential, and highly gendered, role.

KEYWORDS Gender; politics; female candidates; elections; Solomon Islands; Melanesia

'What did the winning candidate have that I don't have?

\$\$\$', he is a male and had support from the powerful ascribed traditional leadership'

Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard, 'To be a Successful Candidate' (in Whittington, Ospina, & Pollard, 2006, p. 28)

In Solomon Islands, a small island developing state in Melanesia,¹ women have been entirely absent from elected office for most of its post-independence history. Until 2018, there had never been more than one woman in Parliament at any one time; that year, Lanelle Tanangada's win in a by-election brought the number of women in Parliament to two (out of 50) and the total number of women elected since independence to four. Progress on increasing the number of women in politics has been slow and sporadic, and women remain severely under-represented as candidates in elections as well as in Parliament. There are some success stories, as well as near-success stories – women who perform well in elections, even if they are not elected – yet the relative absence and poor performance of female candidates persists.

The institutional context that affects women's access to political office has been examined by various scholars of Melanesia and the broader Pacific Islands region (see Drage, 1995; Huffer, 2006; Zetlin, 2014). A feminist institutionalist framework defines political institutions in a broad sense to include not only state institutions – notoriously weak in the Pacific Islands – but also non-state organisations, norms and informal rules of behaviour and discourses (see Krook, 2010). Formal and informal institutions 'fit together as part of a complex ecology of interconnected rules' (Friedenvall & Krook, 2011, p. 50) that not only structure political life but also constrain and enable political actors (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

Informal institutions and norms can facilitate or act as a barrier to female candidates. Elin Bjarnegård and Meryl Kenny (2015) assert that research into the informal dynamics of candidate selection within political parties is crucial for the understanding the gendered nature of politics. Recent feminist institutionalist scholarship has explored candidate selection mechanisms in a wide variety of party systems (see Bjarnegård, 2013; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016; Hinojosa, 2012; Kenny, 2013; Piscopo, 2016). Yet research into candidate selection within weakly institutionalised party systems is rare (see Baker, 2018).

This article will explore how informal institutions and norms affect the success or failure of female candidates in the case of Solomon Islands, an emerging democracy with a weakly institutionalised party system. This research adds to existing feminist institutionalist literature on pathways to political office in explaining the performance of female candidates in a political context where formalised political party structures do not play a significant role in elections. While women's political under-representation is a concern for both emerging and established democracies, it has become a pressing issue for international development partners and domestic political actors in Melanesia (see Barbara & Baker, 2016). This is particularly the case in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu where the combined representation of women in national legislatures as of July 2018 sat at 0.9%. This article will add to research on women's representation in Melanesia, which can in turn inform policy on how best to support female candidates.

Gender, elections and informal institutions

The academic discourse on gender and candidate recruitment has shifted over time from a focus on the relative role of supply-side and demand-side factors (see Norris & Lovenduski, 1995), to an explicitly feminist institutionalist approach (Krook, 2010). This research has mostly focused on political systems in established democracies. In this context, the processes of candidate selection within political parties have been cited as a crucial determinant (see Kenny, 2013; Norris, 1997; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Recent scholarship

has explored the gendering of 'the interaction between formal regulations and informal practices at the party level' (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016, p. 371), looking at how informal norms can affect candidate selection processes within parties to favour male candidates (see Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Murray, 2015), but also how informal practices can be created, manipulated and reformed by female party members to their advantage (Piscopo, 2016). Informal institutions also inform and regulate the political behaviour of voters, processes that can of course have gendered outcomes. Thus, 'good institutional analysis requires rigorous attention to both formal and informal rules' (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, p. 726).

Solomon Islands, like other Melanesian independent states, was of the postcolonial 'third wave' of democratisation in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, formal barriers to women's participation in post-independence politics were limited from the outset. Women gained suffrage at the same time as men, and the right to stand as candidates was never restricted by gender. Constitutions contained protections from gender-based discrimination. Yet the formal right to political equality did not translate to equality in a practical sense.

Institutions such as electoral systems can have gendered impacts (see Rule, 1994). The Solomon Islands electoral system and broader political infrastructure are remnants from its former status as a British colony, with first-past-the-post (FPP) plurality voting in single-member electoral districts and a Westminster parliamentary system (see Levine & Roberts, 2005). There is an argument to be made that such institutions, inherited from the British, are most resistant to gender advancement, but women are present in greater numbers in most other Commonwealth countries. At the end of 2017, Solomon Islands ranked 50th out of 52 Commonwealth countries in terms of women's representation in lower or only legislatures, with only its neighbouring countries Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu ranking lower (see Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). Most Commonwealth countries (32 out of 52) use an FPP system, including 14 of the top 25 in terms of women's representation.² Formal rules, therefore, can only tell some of the story. Informal institutions – described by Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (2004, p. 727) as 'socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels' – play a highly impactful role in dictating women's electoral chances.

Informal institutions tend to be a more difficult area of inquiry than formal institutions given that their rules, norms and practices are often harder to capture (Waylen, 2015). As Louise Chappell and Georgina Waylen (2013, p. 605) note, informal institutions are 'hidden and embedded in everyday practices that are disguised as standard, and taken-for-granted'. In this context, ethnographic research methods can be an advantage (Waylen, 2014), as can first-hand accounts (see Hinojosa, 2012; Kenny, 2013). This

study draws on published accounts from female candidates, in-depth interviews with candidates and voters, participant observation of the campaign period, and data from the Domestic Election Observation team led by academics from the Australian National University during the 2014 Solomon Islands election (see Haley, Zubrinich, Barbara, Baker, & McMahon, 2015).

Politics and women's representation in Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands has a party system that is weak and fragmented, a situation described by Jeffrey Steeves (1996; 2011) as 'unbounded politics'. It very clearly meets the definition of a weakly institutionalised party system (Mainwaring, 1998; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).³ This creates a political environment in which the rules of the game take on a very different form to those in democracies with strong party systems. Informal processes have more sway in less well-institutionalised party systems (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Waylen, 2003).

Solomon Islands politics is characterised by high turnover in almost every election.⁴ Voters in general do not identify with parties, choosing to instead support individual candidates regardless of affiliation. Voting is localised and strongly clientelist. The likelihood that a candidate will deliver benefits to individuals, families and/or communities is prioritised over any national party policy platform (Soaki, 2017; Wood, 2014c). Party endorsement is not a key determinant of candidate success; 33 out of 50 members of Parliament (MPs) elected in 2014 ran as independents (Haley et al., 2015).

Parties in Solomon Islands tend to function as vehicles for the politically ambitious. Terence Wood (2014d, p. 3) notes:

The most important function of parties is not as blocs of MPs with similar beliefs or policy preferences, but rather as vessels of patronage, which enable wealthy political actors to gain influence by distributing money to MPs (and aspiring MPs) in exchange for political loyalty.

In this way, the fortunes of political parties rise and fall based on individual leaders. The function of parties as 'vessels of patronage' and how that affects female aspirants has been examined in the literature on gender and candidate recruitment (see Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Hinojosa, 2009; Johnson, 2016), yet always in a context of a stronger political party system.

Formal political parties have historically not been well-regulated in Solomon Islands. The passage of the Political Parties Integrity Act prior to the 2014 election was intended to change this. From its impact in the 2014 election, the legislation could be only said to have been partially successful (see Haley et al., 2015). While the proportion of candidates with party endorsement increased from 20% in 2010 to 46% in 2014, still more than half of all candidates ran as independents. Where party manifestos are published, there is often very little to differentiate between them (Haley et al., 2015).

Furthermore, while candidates may be affiliated with a party, the absence of selection processes within parties mean that the decision to stand is not dependent on any institutionalised party mechanism. The Political Parties Integrity Act may have had some impact, yet its aim of establishing a strong party system is still unrealised.

In the 2014 election, there was an added incentive for parties to endorse female candidates through provisions in the Political Parties Integrity Act requiring parties to endorse a minimum of 10% women, together with a financial incentive of SBD \$10,000 per successful female candidate paid to the party. Weak enforcement mechanisms are shown to greatly reduce the efficacy of such measures (Htun & Jones, 2002; Murray, 2004), and this seemed to be the case in Solomon Islands. As shown in Table 1 (see below), just 3 out of the 12 registered political parties endorsed more than 10% women candidates, with half of all registered parties endorsing none. Most female candidates, however, were affiliated to parties; almost 70% of female candidates were party-endorsed, compared to 44% of male candidates. In interviews, party-endorsed female candidates claimed to have received only very limited, if any, financial and resourcing support for their campaigns from their parties (personal communication, 2014). While the one successful female candidate in 2014 had party endorsement from the People's Alliance Party, in general independent candidates performed better than party-endorsed candidates in the election (Haley et al., 2015). This indicates the limited influence parties have over voting behaviour in Solomon Islands, as in many of its neighbouring countries (Haley & Zubrinich, 2013; Morgan, 2005; Standish, 2007).

Table 1. Women's representation on party candidate rosters, 2014 general election.

Party	No. of women candidates	Total no. of candidates	Percentage of women candidates
People's Alliance Party	9	33	27.3%
New Nation Party	1	6	16.7%
Solomon Islands People First Party	3	28	10.7%
National Transformation Party of Solomon Islands	2	23	8.7%
Solomon Islands Pan-Melanesian Congress Party	1	17	5.9%
United Democratic Party	2	35	5.7%
Democratic Alliance Party	0	13	0.0%
Direct Development Party	0	3	0.0%
Kadere Party of Solomon Islands	0	20	0.0%
People's Progressive Party	0	3	0.0%
Solomon Islands Party for Rural Advancement	0	12	0.0%
Youth Owned Rural and Urban Party	0	10	0.0%

Source: Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, pers. comm., 2014

From independence to 2014, 92 women contested a general election at least once,⁵ and three were elected to Parliament. Hilda Kari was elected in North East Guadalcanal in 1989; she successfully re-contested the seat, renamed East Central Guadalcanal, in 1993 and 1997, before losing the 2001 election. Vika Lusibaea won a by-election for the seat of North Malaita in 2012. In the 2014 Solomon Islands election, the sole success story was Freda Tuki Soriacomua, a first-time candidate who contested the Temotu Vatud seat. Another woman, Lanelle Tanangada, entered Parliament following a May 2018 by-election for the seat of Gizo/Kolombangara. Apart from these four women, there have been some near-successful women candidates, notably Afu Billy who lost in East Malaita constituency in 2001 by two votes. In the 2014 election, there were twenty-six women among the 447 candidates (5.8%). Over half of the women candidates who contested the 2014 election won less than 2% of the vote, and over 40% of the women candidates placed last or second-to-last (see Table 2). Nevertheless, one woman won in 2014, and three others came second in their constituencies. Four candidates, although unsuccessful, polled between 10% and 20% in their constituencies – a respectable result in a single member district plurality electoral system in which a high number of candidates typically contest each constituency. Most candidates, both female and male, who have contested elections in

Table 2. Results of women candidates, 2014 election.

Candidate	Constituency	No. of votes	Percentage of votes	Placing
Freda Tuki Soriacomua	Temotu Vatud	681	25.8%	1 st of 6
Janet Hatimoana	Nggela	1649	19.4%	2 nd of 14
Alice Pollard	West Are' Are	800	17.4%	2 nd of 6
Catherine Launa Nori	Maringe/Kokota	586	13.0%	3 rd of 8
Vika Lusibaea	Central Honiara	1286	11.1%	4 th of 12
Rhoda Sikilabu	Gao/Bugotu	370	7.6%	4 th of 5
Victoria Onika	South Guadalcanal	336	7.0%	5 th of 9
Julie Gegeu Haro	West Honiara	345	6.8%	2 nd of 7
Everlyn Kahia	Central Makira	240	6.4%	6 th of 13
Noelyne Biliki	Central Guadalcanal	114	2.3%	5 th of 9
Hellen Luiramo Hodges	Fataleka	98	2.3%	9 th of 13
Matilda Tosa Elta	Central Guadalcanal	78	1.6%	7 th of 9
Ruth Waririu Votanugu	North West Choiseul	56	1.2%	8 th of 8
Joan Bessie Maega'asia	South New Georgia R&T	47	1.1%	6 th of 6
Delores Numa Matangani	North New Georgia	26	0.9%	4 th of 4
Nelly Mabulou	Temotu Pele	26	0.8%	19 th of 23
Rose Anilabata	Central Kwara'ae	40	0.7%	14 th of 17
Tilaila Nilkapp Buarafi	Central Honiara	74	0.6%	11 th of 12
Gwendolyn Ruru Masuguria	Central Makira	23	0.6%	12 th of 13
Ann Tanny Oromae	Central Kwara'ae	31	0.5%	16 th of 17
Enif Petsakibo	East Guadalcanal	27	0.5%	6 th of 6
Stella Morgan Kokopu	West Guadalcanal	23	0.5%	11 th of 12
Hilda Thugea Kari	Central Honiara	51	0.4%	12 th of 12
Mairy Kotomae	Ranongga/Simbo	15	0.3%	7 th of 8
Catherine Adifaka	East Honiara	17	0.2%	13 th of 16
Margaret Rose Maelaua	West Kwara'ae	4	0.1%	15 th of 16

Source: Terence Wood, personal communication 2015

post-independence Solomon Islands have won less than 10% of the vote (Wood, 2014a). Other general elections and by-elections have seen three other women elected, and five cases of women winning the second highest number of votes (Wood 2015). While the number of women candidates has steadily increased, notwithstanding a slight decrease in 2010, there is no indication that women candidates in Solomon Islands are becoming more competitive over time (see Corbett & Wood, 2013).

Survey results indicate that Solomon Islanders have consistently shown their support for greater women's representation and willingness to elect 'good' women candidates (Haley et al., 2015; McMurray, 2012), yet these attitudes fail to correspond to the actual rates of success for women candidates. Culture is often seen as the primary obstacle to women's electoral success in Solomon Islands and other neighbouring countries (see Soaki, 2017; Zetlin, 2014). While culture is not an informal institution itself according to Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) definition, informal institutions may be embedded within broader cultural values. In the following sections, three informal institutions – expectations relating to kinship, clientelism, and leadership – and their impact on women's electoral chances will be examined in detail.

Kinship

The importance of kinship connections has been covered extensively in literature on Solomon Islands politics (Hiriasia, 2016; Premdas & Steeves, 1983; Wood, 2014b). While kin relationships do not determine all political behaviour, local norms within kin groups can strengthen the obligation between candidate and voter, or between candidate and broker (Wood, 2014b). Aspiring female candidates may find their positions threatened by male relatives within their kinship networks. Afu Billy (2002, p. 59), who lost in the 2001 election in East Malaita by two votes, recounted that when a man who was married to her niece decided to contest as well, she felt pressure to stand aside:

My traditional obligation as a woman in a situation where a very strong in-law, and an older man, also wants what I want is to surrender it to him, as a sign of respect. In practice, it was not easy to conform ... The situation placed me in a rather awkward position but I decided that, as much as I would like to fulfil my cultural obligations, there was no way that I could now give up. Personally, I felt that culture was being used to promote the male ego[.]

Alice Pollard, a candidate in the 2014 election who had also contested in 2006, had intended to run in the 2010 election but withdrew after her brother nominated as a candidate (personal communication, 2014). In 2014, she moved quickly to complete the nomination process before any male relations could decide to enter the race (personal communication, 2014). Pollard's

experience shows how this norm can work to the advantage of a female candidate; while she chose not to run against her brother in 2010, she felt that nominating first would also prevent male relatives from running against her in 2014. In Billy's case, however, expressing her intention to run first did not prevent her in-law from also doing so, and in that case the onus was on her as a woman to step aside. While she still decided to run, the final result saw her lose the race by two votes to her male in-law.

The level of kin support one can expect in an election is also dependent on family connections. The primacy of family connections in determining access to political office is another institutional barrier that works in gendered ways. Female politicians in highly male-dominated systems often come from prominent families who are involved in politics (Corbett & Liki, 2015; Hinojosa, 2009), and numerous among them have achieved success in by-elections triggered by the death or resignation of a male relative (Baker, Ng Shiu, & Corbett, 2013; Jalalzai, 2013). Afu Billy (2002, p. 59) noted how coming from a well-known family within East Malaita, where her late father was 'one of the great spiritual leaders of the area' as a leader of the South Seas Evangelical Church bolstered her candidacy.

Vika Lusibaea won the seat of North Malaita in a by-election in 2012 triggered by her husband's forced resignation:

I only came in so he could continue all the work ... I am just there so we have someone sitting in his chair in order for us to have access to the funding and the projects. Everything else is the same. (V Lusibaea, quoted in Hawkins, 2012)

In 2014, after her husband declared his intention to run for the seat of North Malaita, Lusibaea declined to re-contest her seat, choosing to stand for the Central Honiara constituency instead in which she placed fourth. Similarly, Lanelle Tanangada won a by-election in 2018 for the seat of Gizo/Kolambangara, after that seat was vacated by her husband due to a successful election petition alleging treating and bribery in the 2014 election. In Solomon Islands as elsewhere, women's political identity is often tied to their familial links (Hinojosa, 2012).

The advantages of family connections were also evident in the 2014 election, particularly in the constituency of Nggela where Janet Hatimoana placed second. Winning almost 20% of the vote, she was the second-highest polling female candidate of the election. Hatimoana contested her late husband's seat, hoping to capitalise on his support base. Johnley Hatimoana had died in office in 2014, and given that it was the year of general elections, no by-election was held; the 2014 general election was therefore a *de facto* by-election for the seat, with no incumbent. Family connections can constitute a pathway into political success that may otherwise be unavailable for aspiring female candidates, albeit one complicated by politically ambitious male relatives.

Clientelism

Solomon Islands politics is also heavily influenced by clientelism and what is referred to in the Melanesian context as ‘money politics’ (see Baker, 2015; Haley & Zubrinich, 2015; Wood, 2016). Tobias Haque (2012, p. 4) argues that the influence of clientelist politics in Solomon Islands is due to the limited engagement of most Solomon Islanders with the formal economy and the central government. Rick Houenipwela (2016), who first entered Parliament as the MP for Small Malaita in 2010 and in November 2017 was elected Prime Minister, has noted that in his constituency voters see their local MP as the ‘government’, which leads to an expectation that the local MP will personally deliver services to the constituency. This perception has been entrenched by the increase in constituency development funds (CDF), a form of state funding that is distributed directly to MPs to spend in their constituencies (see Wiltshire & Batley, 2018). In Solomon Islands, the amounts MPs receive in CDF rose substantially prior to the 2014 election (Haley et al., 2015). The distribution of CDF was the most commonly discussed election issue in campaigning in 2014, and there were widespread rumours in many constituencies that CDF was being used to fund the campaigns of incumbent MPs (Haley et al., 2015).

In Solomon Islands, while female candidates are mostly non-incumbents and thus less likely to have the benefit of the clientelist resources in the form of CDF, to some it presents an opportunity to capitalise on the archetype of the ‘clean’ and non-corrupt female politician (see Jalalzai, 2008; Murray, 2010). While Pacific male politicians are often assumed to be corrupt, there are different expectations for women (Corbett, 2015). Some female candidates in the 2014 election sought to take advantage of this perception by incorporating anti-corruption messaging prominently in their campaigns (personal communication, 2014). Increased women’s representation has been linked to good governance and lower levels of corruption by some studies (see for example Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 1999). The idea that women are a different, better type of politician, however, has been critiqued as a moralistic and constraining model for women in politics (Goetz, 2007). In a political context where service delivery is prioritised as in Solomon Islands, the perception that women are a ‘different’ type of politician could potentially work against female candidates (see Baker, 2015). Soriacomua campaigned predominantly on the issue of service delivery to her remote constituency (Habru, 2015). Many competitive male candidates likewise made service delivery the central feature of their campaigns (Haley et al., 2015).

Money politics is a feature of Solomon Islands elections, either through candidates directly exchanging cash, food or goods in exchange for promises of support,⁶ or through indirect displays of generosity (Haque, 2012; Wood, 2016). Haque (2012, p. 5) argues that money politics is the key determinant

of election outcomes: 'The candidates who win are largely those best able to strategically distribute patronage to key constituents'. The rise of money politics in western Melanesia, as well as the poor enforcement of campaign finance regulations (Whittington et al., 2006), has meant that even for those candidates that do not directly engage in vote-buying or gifting, the costs of running a competitive campaign have nevertheless increased. Successful and near-successful political candidates tend to have significant economic resources (True, Niner, Parashar, & George, 2012).

In their analysis of the backgrounds and characteristics of Solomon Islands MPs, Jack Corbett and Terence Wood (2013) note the marked increase over time of politicians with business backgrounds. Politicians with private sector experience made up 20% of parliamentarians in 1980, but that figure had risen to 62% in 2001; by 2010, it had declined to a still-notable 41%. They attribute this in part to the rise of money politics and related increase in the cost of campaigning (Corbett & Wood, 2013). This feature of Solomon Islands politics creates an institutional constraint that is profoundly gendered, as more men than women are engaged in the formal economy, and women in general earn less money than men. Where women do have experience working in high-profile businesses, however, they can use this to their advantage in campaigning. Soriacomua emphasised her background as a successful businesswoman in the logging and immigration consultancy fields (Habru, 2015). In the seat of Maringe/Kokota in Isabel province, first-time candidate Catherine Nori, who placed third, also used her high profile as a prominent business leader in the province in her campaign (personal communication, 2014).

Leadership positions within community groups can also be a way for female candidates to demonstrate service delivery and generosity to constituents. Successful and near-successful women candidates in Solomon Islands in the past have benefited from a reputation for being active within their communities (Wood, 2014c). Afu Billy's previous work with non-governmental organisations in Malaitan communities set the stage for her near-successful campaign in East Malaita in 2001 (Billy, 2002). Alice Pollard, running for the second time in West 'Are 'Are in 2014, was well known in the constituency due to her role in the West 'Are 'Are Rokotanikeni Association (WARA), an organisation which provides access to banking schemes and microfinance for women, which she founded in 1999. The savings scheme run by the WARA had enabled women in many communities in West 'Are 'Are to purchase solar panels (Pacific Women/Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2013), which had been installed in over 700 homes in the constituency (Asian Development Bank, 2014). Through her work with the WARA, Pollard could demonstrate a history of both community involvement and service delivery in her election campaign, and ultimately placed second.

The structure of patronage networks often advantages men over women (Bjarnegård, 2013; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2014). This can be due to gendered

access to such networks, but also the divergent expectations held by voters around acceptable behaviour of male and female political actors. If a woman is perceived to be practising money politics or engaging in corrupt activity, she can also be punished by the electorate for acting against the archetype of the 'clean' female politician (see Baker, 2015). In the 2014 campaign various accusations of corruption were levelled against high-profile female candidates, who went on to lose in their constituencies (personal communication, 2014).

Leadership

In Solomon Islands, leadership roles in both customary and formal political spaces tend to be occupied by men. This fact does belie considerable variation in gender relations across the country, understandable given its linguistic and cultural diversity. Many areas of Solomon Islands are matrilineal, and in these spaces female authority was present and active in the pre-colonial era (McDougall, 2014). Where women did historically exercise power in decision-making, however, it was largely behind-the-scenes (Pollard, 2000; Scheyvens, 2003).

Politics – and especially parliamentary politics – is commonly viewed as men's space. Solomon Islands, like other Melanesian countries, is strongly associated with 'Big Man' systems of leadership characterised by small political units where leadership is merit-based rather than inherited (Sahlins, 1963). Not all of Solomon Islands can be placed in this category – several areas are considered to have a more strictly hierarchical and hereditary-based form of leadership – but for the most part, traditional Solomon Islands societies were small groupings presided over by a 'big man',⁷ who attained and retained his position by prowess in fighting and by distributing largesse to kin and followers (Bennett, 2002). The modern political system is heavily influenced by this 'big man' style of politics (Steeves, 2011).

In such systems, women generally take a backseat in men's political manoeuvring, and have limited access to the political power of leadership positions (see Zimmer-Tamakoshi, 1997). In electoral politics, the people who hold such positions are often key powerbrokers, who candidates depend upon to canvass votes at the constituency levels. Local brokers play a crucial role in election campaigns, aligning themselves with candidates and making representations to voters on their behalf, and are predominantly men (Wood, 2015, 2016). These brokers tend to be politically influential within communities, and are predominantly men (Wood 2015). Local gender norms may pose a disadvantage to female candidates by preventing male brokers from working closely with female candidates (Wood, 2016). In campaigns leading up to the 2014 election, female candidates often had young men prominently engaged in their campaigns, yet political gatekeepers within communities tend to be older men.

Big-man style leadership is not universal within Solomon Islands, with some areas ascribing to hereditary-based chiefly forms of leadership. One such area is Tikopia where Freda Tuki Soriacomua, the sole successful female candidate in the 2014 election, hails from. A 2015 profile of Soriacomua in *Islands Business* notes that Soriacomua comes from a chiefly family, and attained the permission of the chief in Tikopia and his advisors to be nominated as a candidate (Habru, 2015). She stated in an interview: 'The chief is a respected and a powerful figure in Tikopia ... [but also] an ordinary human being who needs sugar, rice, kerosene and other basic necessities of life' (quoted in Habru, 2015). Soriacomua was able to negotiate a space in electoral politics, and set herself up for a successful campaign, by drawing upon her own familial chiefly connections and seeking endorsement and legitimacy from customary leaders.

It should be noted that women have had some success in negotiating space in modern politics even in areas with heavily masculinised traditions of leadership. Malaitan societies were historically rigidly patriarchal, with men assuming the roles involving political decision-making while women bore the brunt of domestic labour responsibilities (Barnes, 2000). Nevertheless, many of the successes and near-successes for women in parliamentary politics have taken place in Malaita. The province was where Vika Lusibaea won in 2012, and where Afu Billy placed a close second in 2001. In the 2014 election, it was one of three provinces in which a female candidate placed second in a constituency. Customary traditions of leadership in Solomon Islands remain salient, but they are not immutable and there are potential avenues to negotiate support for female candidates who can demonstrate leadership credentials.

The impact of colonisation can also help to explain women's relative absence from the public sphere. Colonising powers privileged the marital relationship and the nuclear family with the man at the head, entrenching men's dominance over women (Dureau, 1998; McDougall, 2014). Women were encouraged to take on greater workloads in the domestic sphere, while men were encouraged to work outside the home and village (Barnes, 2000; Dureau, 1993; Pollard, 2000). Where new technologies and opportunities for education were introduced, men were the beneficiaries (Scheyvens, 2003), thus creating a male-dominated indigenous elite. The colonial administration was likewise male-dominated. Women's marginalisation from these new structures of power meant gender roles that subordinated women were not fundamentally challenged even as society underwent dramatic shifts; instead, men became the intermediaries between custom and modernity, and the status women did have in some areas was eroded.

Concepts of complementarity, widely employed elsewhere in Melanesia to describe relations between women and men (see Baker, 2019), are also seen as the basis of contemporary gender relations in Solomon Islands, in which

women play a supporting but valued role (Pollard, 2000, 2003). Women are fettered for their roles as wives and mothers, and for their role in maintaining community and custom (Keesing, 1985; Pollard, 2000, 2003). Despite this, leadership positions within the community and in the wider public sphere remain predominantly the preserve of men, with women's roles largely confined to the domestic sphere.

One key space in which qualities of political leadership can be established is through church structures. The introduction of Christianity had a profound effect on Solomon Islands, and the population is overwhelmingly Christian. Church leadership can play a politically influential role that restricts candidate self-selection (Billy, 2002; Wood, 2016). In Billy's 2001 campaign, she drew on her family connections, and the connections of her party, with the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC) which had a large congregation in her constituency (Billy, 2002). Pollard, a self-described 'committed Christian woman leader', also highlighted voluntary work she had done for the SSEC in her 2014 campaign (personal communication, 2014).

Church connections, however, may be more valuable to male candidates than female candidates (see Whittington et al., 2006). Women's organising through church networks is widespread in Solomon Islands; many of the most powerful women's groups are church-based, and almost all are explicitly Christian (Pollard, 2003). Church women's groups in Melanesia often appear to have conservative agendas and might act to reinforce rigid gender roles and inequalities (Jolly, 1991; Lee, 1985; Scheyvens, 2003). Indeed, the name of one of the largest women's groups in Solomon Islands, the Mother's Union, highlights a domestic focus. Yet church women's networks provide a forum for political participation and a space to hone leadership skills (Douglas, 2003; McDougall, 2014; Scheyvens, 2003). Leadership in women's groups, however, often does not translate into politically valuable leadership experience, and the positions within the church that might have political value are dominated by men. Within patriarchal church leadership structures, there are formal and informal rules that relegate women to less prestigious roles within the church hierarchy.

Conclusion

Institutions and norms around kinship, clientelism, and leadership, while influential, do not perfectly determine political behaviour. There is a myriad of other factors – not least of which involve the attributes of individual candidates themselves – that impact on electoral success. Aspects such as party affiliation, church involvement, and political experience can impact on a candidate's chances of success. As we have seen, obligations within family and community can result in pressure not to stand, and this is based on gendered traditions that favour male political ambitions (Billy, 2002). Furthermore, the

paramountcy of culture in the political imagination of Solomon Islands provides a recurring undercurrent throughout this research. Culture – as it is today, tying together customary and imported Christian traditions – is often wielded as a weapon against women's political ambitions, usually by male leaders unwilling to cede power. It can constitute an intangible yet unyielding barrier to women's electoral ambitions in Solomon Islands as elsewhere in Melanesia.

The persistence of women's political under-representation means that, as in many other countries, gender equality in elected office in Solomon Islands is far from a reality. The literature on gender and paths to political office has given us valuable insight into how formal and informal institutions have gendered impacts at each stage of the electoral process. Yet the bias towards studies of established democracies, and countries with strong formalised party structures, means that such pathways in countries with weak and fragmented party systems are still relatively under-studied. This research into female candidates in Solomon Islands adds to this literature through a case study in which parties play a less influential role in elections.

Shared expectations around kinship, clientelism and leadership, as shown above, strongly influence political behaviour and outcomes. These processes are demonstrably gendered. Overall, the experience of female candidates in Solomon Islands shows the difficulties women can face in weakly institutionalised party systems. While the formal rules of the game, as established through Parliament and the courts, are relatively gender-neutral, an 'unbounded' political system exacerbates the impact of informal rules and norms (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Waylen, 2003), in ways that are often detrimental to women engaging in politics.

While overall the level of women's representation in politics remains one of the lowest in the world, individual women have shown that it is possible to negotiate these gendered institutions to run a successful or near-successful campaign. A further in-depth exploration of the intersectionalities that impact on the performance of female candidates, while outside the scope of this article, would contribute to our knowledge of paths to political office, especially with regards to the role of chiefly and 'big woman' status in electoral success. The discussion in this article highlights the potential for future research into gender and electoral success in political contexts similarly 'unbounded' by formalised party structures.

Notes

1. Melanesia is a sub-region of the Pacific Islands region, encompassing the independent states of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, as well as the French territory of New Caledonia, and the regions of Papua and West

Papua in Indonesia. For more on the politics of the term 'Melanesia' see Kabutaulaka (2015).

2. Some of these higher-ranking countries in terms of women's representation also have reserved seats or a statutory gender quota in place, including Tanzania and Uganda, but others do not.
3. For more discussion on the levels of institutionalisation of party systems in Melanesia, see Okole (2005).
4. Turnover did drop in the 2014 election, to 28% from an average of around 50%. The prominent Solomon Islander academic Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka attributed this in part to the increase in constituency development fundings distributed to MPs immediately prior to the election (quoted in Kando 2014).
5. Prior to the 2014 election, 72 women had contested at least one general election (Wood 2015), and in 2014 elections 20 women contested a general election for the first time.
6. During the 2014 election campaign this transaction usually involved the candidate or the candidate's agents taking possession of the voter's ID card, which was then returned the night before the election.
7. It should be noted that in some parts of Solomon Islands there are also those recognised as 'big women' for their leadership skills (Whittington et al. 2006), but 'big women' are far less common than 'big men'.

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