



Deepening Men's Engagement with Supporting Women in Leadership

Part 1: Men's Supporting Roles in the Political Sphere

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In the last 20 years, gender — and women's leadership in particular — has been a priority of international development in the Pacific region. This is an important agenda, particularly as women's representation in Pacific parliaments continues to lag compared to other regions. While the primary focus is on improving women's access to leadership positions and addressing patriarchal norms and structures, men's involvement and participation is equally important, if not essential.

This In Brief is the first in a two-part series drawing on findings from both authors' doctoral fieldwork conducted in the Melanesian context between 2016 and 2019. These discussions aim to highlight the importance of men's involvement in women's leadership journeys and emancipation. This In Brief argues that men's support is crucial in order for women to succeed in national politics, specifically men's foundational role in the success of women's political campaigns.

The argument is based on both my PhD fieldwork and my reflections as an observer during the 2017 and 2022 election periods in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Male gatekeepers and women's leadership

Women's political representation in the Pacific Islands, excluding Australia, New Zealand and the French and US territories, has been limited. Female membership in national parliaments has never surpassed more than 30 per cent.

For example, in Fiji's 55-seat legislature, only six seats are held by women. After five years (2017–22) without any women, only two of the 118 members of PNG's parliament are currently women. In Solomon Islands, only four out of the 52 parliamentary seats are held by women. In fact, the number of female candidates for the 2024 Solomon Islands elections is lower compared to previous elections. According to the Solomons Islands electoral commission, women make up only six per cent of the total number (334) of contestants. Low candidate numbers and fluctuating levels of women's interest in contesting elections are common throughout the Pacific region.

Various reasons pertaining to cultural norms, societal conventions and structural barriers are offered as explanations for this disparity (Zetlin 2014). One explanation is associated with states' voting cultures. For PNG and other Melanesian countries, voters mostly align themselves with kin connections. While there are matrilineal societies, such as many in the Autonomous

Region of Bougainville, where 'land ownership or custodianship passes through the female line' (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:11), this position of authority does not necessarily facilitate women's access to political empowerment at the national level. In other parts of PNG such as New Ireland, women with certain identities can be quite influential in local spaces (Tararia 2023). However, leadership and decision-making at the national level are still predominantly spaces for men and influenced by patriarchal conventions.

Among the many challenges politically inclined women leaders face, the most salient is a lack of community support and endorsement. Another strong limiting factor is male gatekeepers at various points in the campaign, both prior to and during the election period. These gatekeepers can be pastors, village elders, local-level government presidents, coaches of the local soccer team or indeed anyone who yields a degree of influence.

Observing the election in Popondetta: The weight of male endorsement

For the 10 months preceding the 2017 PNG national elections, I resided in Popondetta, Oro Province to observe political activities through a gendered lens. During this period, I observed the deep involvement of men in the campaign exercise, even in the campaigns of female candidates.

All astute candidates, both male and female, have campaign committees headed by male campaign managers and coordinators, also known as *komitis*. These campaign managers, and the *komitis* that work under them, carry out the brunt of the groundwork of a political campaign. This entails travelling throughout the constituency to conduct awareness and canvassing support for their candidate (Meki 2021). I observed that the nature of this role better suited men than women, as it requires travel into remote areas for weeks, taking time away from families and domestic responsibilities.

Another example of men's deep involvement I observed during the election period happens when public campaign speeches are made. After a candidate (female or male) speaks, the male campaign manager or male village leader usually speaks last, highlighting key points and giving the final endorsement. This endorsement matters because the final speaker is typically a man of influence with exceptional oratory prowess to influence or persuade voters.

In addition to male campaign managers, the *komitis* and those giving the final endorsement, younger men — usually relatives of the candidates — contribute to the campaign exercise by providing security, conducting manual labour, building temporary campaign houses, driving and running other election administration-related errands, all seen as typically male roles.

Women's labour and support for political candidates have long been documented (McLeod 2002). The campaign exercise, whether for a female or male candidate, includes all members of society in one form or another. However, many donor-funded election trainings or workshops, such as United Nations-organised mock parliaments, tend to target only women candidates. Given the many roles so far marked out for men, I argue that male campaigners (or *komiti* members) should accompany women candidates to election training workshops, and/or training should be delivered to villages, with male members of the community invited to attend (Meki 2021).

This could be risky, considering the known but unpredictable political tendency of certain *komiti* members — and even campaign managers — to switch alliances between candidates during the election period. However, including men in these workshops would give them the opportunity to better understand the broader importance of women's representation and challenge pervasive discriminatory gender norms that limit women's effective political participation. Moreover, aside from strategising and politicking to get a woman candidate elected, this could inspire potential long-term male allyship for the cause of equal representation in national decision-making.

Men as allies

There are already documented cases of women's political success due to the involvement and endorsement of their male kin, whether marital, through the 'wives and widows' (Baker and Palmieri 2020) pathway or through political dynasties. The latter is the case in Indonesia, where women political candidates come from established political families with access to resources (Wardani and Subekti 2021). Based on my observation of the 2017 national elections in Popondetta, I argue that the supporting roles men play in women's election campaigns are instrumental to women's overall performance and success.

In part two of this In Brief series, Mercy Masta discusses, with a masculinity lens, how men's allyship

works on the ground through the success of the Bougainville Male Advocacy program and the Network of Human Rights Defenders.

Author notes

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