

Women in Politics: Pacific Islands and New Zealand

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The Pacific Islands is regularly recognised as a region that does not favour the political ambitions of women. While Pacific women have played important political roles within women's organisations as advocates for social and political change in past decades, their path into institutional politics has been more difficult. The result is a region where women currently hold roughly 8% of parliamentary seats.¹

New Zealand is not included in these figures. As a post-industrialised country, it makes more sense to compare the political standing of women in New Zealand with women in Australia rather than other Pacific Island countries (PICs) because of both countries' regionally unique levels of wealth, long histories of self-government, and broadly similar political traditions. New Zealand was the first state to recognise women's right to vote in 1893 but women did not win the right to stand for electoral representation until 1919, and it was not until 1933, that the first woman entered New Zealand's national parliament. By the 1980s, however, women began to make their political mark. Because of a party leadership challenge, Jenny Shipley became the first female Prime Minister in 1997, an office she held until a change of government which saw New Zealand's voters directly elect a second consecutive woman, Helen Clark, as Prime Minister in 1999 at the head of a Labour party government. Clark's government was re-elected three times until her party's electoral defeat in 2008, leading to her resignation as party leader. New Zealand's third female Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern won office just under a decade later, again at the head of

¹ This figure is calculated using statistics for sovereign Pacific Island states only.

a Labour government. Ardern, 37 at the time, was the second youngest person to hold this position in New Zealand's history. Commentary on her youth and marital status dogged her election campaigning in 2017,² but in the intervening years Ardern has managed a number of difficult political events, such as the Christchurch shooting of 2019³ and the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, in ways that have shown her capacity to combine decisive action with compassionate political leadership.⁴ She has also garnered international popularity for her commitments to social justice and environmental issues. She is only the second woman Prime Minister to give birth to a child while holding office (after Pakistan's Benezir Bhutto).

As of August 2020, New Zealand's National Party, the major opposition party to the Labour government, has elected a woman, Judith Collins, as leader. This means the 2020 elections will see women heading both major parties. Collins is known locally as a tough political representative with conservative views on issues related to law and order but also supportive of reforms in areas such as euthanasia, access to abortion and marriage equality. In the early months of 2020, the National party looked to be in a competitive electoral position as the Ardern Labour government struggled to deliver aspects of its housing and infrastructure programmes.⁵ Ardern's deft handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, comprising swift lock-down provisions and clear and accessible communications, elevated her electoral support considerably as the year progressed. At the time of writing, Ardern enjoys a comfortable lead in the polls with voter approval of Collins' National Party running at below 30%. This has not deterred Collins from mounting critical attacks on the failure of the Ardern government's COVID

² See *The Guardian*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2017/aug/02/jacinda-ardern-grilled-over-motherhood-plans-on-first-day-video>.

³ Amelia Lester, "The Roots of Jacinda Ardern's Extraordinary Leadership after Christchurch", *The New York Times*, 23 March 2019. Located at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/what-jacinda-arderns-leadership-means-to-new-zealand-and-to-the-world>.

⁴ Suze Wilson, "Three reasons why Jacinda Ardern's coronavirus response has been a masterclass in crisis leadership", *The Conversation*, 6 April 2020. Located at <https://theconversation.com/three-reasons-why-jacinda-arderns-coronavirus-response-has-been-a-masterclass-in-crisis-leadership-135541>.

⁵ AAP. "The Crusher comes out swinging: Jacinda Ardern's fierce election rival brands the New Zealand PM 'totally useless' and says she's achieved 'nothing' despite eliminating corona virus". *The Daily Mail*, 11 August 2020. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8614219/Judith-Collins-brands-New-Zealand-PM-Jacinda-Ardern-totally-useless.html> [accessed 27 August 2020].

response in the wake of a new outbreak that flared in Auckland in August 2020. Collins has recently unveiled a tough new border security policy as part of her campaign to build voter support.⁶

In contrast to the history of women's political leadership across the Tasman Sea, it was not until 2010 that Australia was able to boast a female Australian Prime Minister, and indeed no woman had even been nominated to lead either of the two major political parties until that point. It is also notable that Australian women in political office have often been subjected to discriminatory media treatment and less than supportive party environments, particularly on the conservative side of politics. Today, New Zealand's women hold just over 40% of seats in the national legislature. This number exceeds women's more modest 30% representation in the Australian Federal parliament's House of Representatives (48% in the Federal Senate).

These figures contrast sharply with the electoral standing of women in Pacific Island countries (PICs), which until the early 2010s, hovered around the 4% level. Some interesting gains in some sites have seen this regional average improve in the last five years to just under 9% although this is not a uniform experience for all Pacific Island countries.⁷ Indeed, three countries, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Federated States of Micronesia, currently have no women members of parliament. Some non-independent territories of the region have much higher levels of female representation because of electoral provisions adopted in metropolitan jurisdictions. In the rest of this chapter, I explain some of the factors that contribute to women's marginalisation from electoral politics, some specific examples that show where and how women have achieved electoral and political success and the fates of various campaigns to promote electoral reform to bring more women into the region's parliaments.

⁶ Jo Moir, "Judith Collins unveils National's border security policy". Radio New Zealand, 20 August 2020. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/423980/judith-collins-unveils-national-s-border-security-policy> [accessed 27 August 2020].

⁷ Figures taken from PACWIP website <https://www.pacwip.org/women-mps/national-women-mps/> [accessed 28 July 2020].

Obstacles to Women's Political Representation

Custom and faith

It is often argued that Pacific women's political marginalisation is explained by the patriarchal underpinnings of Pacific Islands culture. While there is some truth to this claim, the idea that culture legitimises the kinds of discrimination that prevents women achieving political office is also an over-simplification. It is certainly true that Pacific women with political ambitions face accusations of "inauthenticity",⁸ and of acting "above themselves" or *bikhet*.⁹ If they achieve success, it is often alleged that they have lost touch with both tradition and their "real" grassroots constituents/sisters. Yet claims that women with political ambition are acting against custom overlook how custom has been subject to enormous change across the Pacific Islands since the period of European contact; modified by colonial, missionary and other globalising influences.¹⁰ Matrilineal political and economic structures were present in tribal societies in many parts of the region. In others, women were accorded specific sorts of power and respect due to the particular gendered social reproduction roles they shouldered.¹¹ These structures of power were actively undermined both by colonial governments and Christian missionaries when they were overlaid with European-style legal systems and value structures that replicated the "patriarchal, hierarchical and hereditary" structures of metropolitan societies.¹² These led to the normalisation of men's public and political roles, and an eventual masculine dominance of institutional politics, continuing even after Pacific Islands states achieved independence.

⁸ Margaret Jolly, "Spectres of Inauthenticity", *The Contemporary Pacific* 4 (1), 1992, pp. 49-72.

⁹ Martha Macintyre, "Gender Violence in Melanesia and the Problem of Millennium Development Goal No. 3", in M. Jolly and C. Stewart (eds.), *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*. ANU E-press, Canberra, 2012, pp. 239-266.

¹⁰ Bronwen Douglas, "Why Religion, Race and Gender Matter in Pacific Politics", *Development Studies Network*, 2002. Located at https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/gen/gen_civil.pdf [accessed 10 November 2012].

¹¹ Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre (eds.), *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

¹² *Ibid.*

In the Melanesian countries of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, Christian values are closely intertwined with customary protocols and have been institutionalised in various state constitutional structures.¹³ This has further contributed to a general masculinisation of the political realm as male political leaders invoke religiously oriented discourses that seek to remind politically ambitious women about their “rightful” roles. At times, male parliamentarians have also adopted strongly moralistic tones to discredit female parliamentary colleagues, as Kiribati cabinet minister Tangariki Reete found in 2014, when she faced criticism from opposition representatives because of alleged misbehaviour while consuming alcohol. These included comments that she set a poor role model as a “... wife and mother...” and had acted “against Kiribati” custom.¹⁴

Research in Samoa shows how tradition and faith intertwine in ways that can undermine women’s confidence to participate in decision-making.¹⁵ The Matai title that endows Samoans with chiefly authority and the right to participate in local, and national, decision-making is open to women in theory but, in practice, is claimed by only 6% of Samoa’s women. Even when they do hold these titles, women are excluded from 14% of village councils and in other cases choose not to attend these meetings even if they are entitled to.¹⁶ As I will explain later, a unique quota system has been adopted in this setting to increase women’s political representation.

Faith and custom do not always combine to politically disempower women in the region however. Kanak Independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, an ordained Catholic priest until 1970, frequently articulated perspectives on Christian belief and indigenous custom that emphasised their elasticity and responsiveness to adaptation and contemporary reinterpret-

¹³ Bronwen Douglas, “Why Religion, Race and Gender Matter in Pacific Politics”, *Development Studies Network*, 2002. Located at https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/gen/gen_civil.pdf [accessed 10 November 2012].

¹⁴ RNZI, 27 August 2014.

¹⁵ Measina Meredith, “Factors Preventing Women Entering Electoral Politics in Samoa”, Presentation to the Pacific Islands Political Science Association Conference, University of French Polynesia, 6 June 2014.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

tation.¹⁷ He was also quick to acknowledge the contributions that Kanak women could make to the evolution of Kanak nationalism. These ideas remain central to articulations of indigenous culture and nation-building in New Caledonia today¹⁸ and afford indigenous women some latitude when they contest discriminatory treatment.¹⁹ More concretely, the positive representation of women in Kanak culture helped them win acceptance for the local adoption of Parity measures in New Caledonia in the early 2000s against widespread masculine opposition (Rettig et al. 2007).²⁰ In the following years, these same discourses have enabled Kanak women to attain high political office at all levels of government, municipal, regional and territorial, and pursue innovative gender policy reform²¹ (see discussion on quotas, temporary special measures and parity provisions below).

Economic considerations

Politics in many parts of the Pacific Islands reflects a “big man culture” where candidates demonstrate their capacity for political office through personal achievement, clan-based exchange and material accumulation. The experience, skill, and integrity of candidates are recognised as important, but these qualities may be outweighed in the minds of many voters by other factors.²² This is because, within custom, the bigman is usually assumed to inhabit both a male body, as the term suggests, but also a

¹⁷ Jean Marie Tjibaou, *Kanaky* (Translated by H. Fraser and J. Trotter). Pandanus Books, ANU. Canberra, 2005, pp. 128-129.

¹⁸ Eric Wadell, *Jean Marie Tjibaou: Kanak Witness to the World, An Intellectual Biography*. University of Hawaii Press, Manoa, 2008, p. viii.

¹⁹ Nicole George, “Women’s Political Representation in the Pacific Islands: Lessons from New Caledonia, Lessons for the Region”, Presentation to the Pacific Islands Political Science Association Conference, University of French Polynesia, 3 June 2014.

²⁰ French Parity laws also operate in the French territories of the Pacific Islands and require political parties to field lists of candidates that alternate the names of men and women from the bottom to the top of the list.

²¹ Nicole George, “Women’s Political Representation in the Pacific Islands: Lessons from New Caledonia, Lessons for the Region”, Presentation to the Pacific Islands Political Science Association Conference, University of French Polynesia, 3 June 2014.

²² Pauline Soaki, “Casting her vote: Women’s political participation in Solomon Islands”, in Martha Macintyre and Ceridwen Spark (eds.), *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*. Acton: ANU Press, 2017, pp. 95-114. Retrieved 27 July 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crwn.9.

model of leadership that assigns authority to those who have access to (material) wealth and a capacity to distribute that wealth among kin-based and extended networks.²³ In the contemporary context, this helps to blur the lines that separate bigman politics as part of customary practice and “vote buying,” an activity that, although officially outlawed in most parts of the region, still continues informally. Electoral candidates who eagerly distribute “gifts” as part of their campaigns are more likely to be rewarded with voter support than those who do not.²⁴

Baker has noted that politicians’ primary function is often understood to be that of service delivery in these contexts; thus, for candidates to be taken seriously they must demonstrate a capacity to distribute wealth as part of the campaign process.²⁵ This means that wealth is critical for those with political aspirations and that gendered economic disadvantage compounds women’s political marginalisation. Gender-disaggregated economic data for the region indicates the challenges this poses for women. Between 54% and 66% of women are employed in subsistence food cultivation, agriculture or fisheries (rising to 95% of women in Papua New Guinea), while patrilineal systems of hereditary land and wealth transfer prevent women from accessing capital, credit and education opportunities. Women’s waged employment is generally ghettoised in low-skilled, low-income, feminised occupations such as factory production-line work (e.g., fish canneries, garment manufacturing), teaching, nursing and caring professions, and low-scale clerical work.²⁶ Women’s subordinate economic status has negative implications when they stand for election as they frequently finance their campaigns as independents from their own limited

²³ Orovu Sepoe, “To Make a Difference: Realities of Women’s Participation in Papua New Guinea Politics”, *Development Studies Network*, 2002. Located at https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/gen/gen_civil.pdf [accessed 10 November 2012].

²⁴ Terence Wood. “Predicting the 2019 Solomon Islands Election.” *Devpolicy Blog*, 14 March 2019. Located at <https://devpolicy.org/predicting-the-2019-solomon-islands-elections-20190314> [accessed July 13, 2020].

²⁵ Kerry Baker, “Great Expectations: Gender and Political Representation in the Pacific Islands”, *Government and Opposition*, 53(3), 2018, p. 554. doi:10.1017/gov.2016.54.

²⁶ Elise Huffer, “A desk review of the factors which enable and constrain women’s political representation in Forum Island countries” in Elise Huffer et al., *A Women’s Place is in the House: The House of Parliament: Research to advance women’s political representation in Forum Island Countries: A regional study presented in five reports*, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva, 2006, pp. 1-56, 38.

purse, and hence have difficulty meeting the material expectations of an electorate expecting “big man” largesse. Even if they do win party endorsement, they are unlikely to be favoured with the same levels of financial support as their male colleagues.²⁷

The bigman style of politics has become excessive in some political contexts and in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has evolved into what is commonly referred to as “money politics”.²⁸ Kerry Zubrinich’s observations, gathered during the 2012 national election, noted the practice of vote-buying to be wide-spread with votes traded between electors and candidates for amounts ranging from 5 Kina for individual votes to 10,000 and even 100,000 Kina for guarantees of block voting across a whole village or clan group. In PNG’s Highlands Provinces, Zubrinich also recorded candidates plying (male) electors generously with food, alcohol and even female sexual partners as part of vote trading.²⁹

Women candidates may try to turn this scenario to their advantage by promoting their commitment to anti-corruption principles and “clean politics”. Baker contends that this sort of campaign agenda assisted the fortunes of Josephine Getsi, the first woman to win an open seat in Bougainville’s parliament in 2015 (aside from the three seats reserved for women in this assembly).³⁰ More generally, it remains a difficult strategy for women to progress electorally and goes against the general expectations of voters who may expect “patronage” in exchange for their support.³¹ These kinds of pressures help to explain why only seven women have ever been elected to the national parliament of PNG since the country gained

²⁷ Kerry Zubrinich, 2014, Women in the 2012 National Elections in Papua New Guinea, Presentation to the Pacific Islands Political Science Association Conference, University of French Polynesia, 6 June.

²⁸ Kerryn Baker, 2018, “Great Expectations: Gender and Political Representation in the Pacific Islands”, *Government and Opposition*, 53(3), p. 554, doi:10.1017/gov.2016.54.

²⁹ Zubrinich, op. cit.

³⁰ Elise Huffer, “A desk review of the factors which enable and constrain women’s political representation in Forum Island countries”, in Elise Huffer et al., *A Women’s Place is in the House: The House of Parliament: Research to advance women’s political representation in Forum Island Countries: A regional study presented in five reports*, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva, 2006, pp. 1-56.

³¹ Pauline Soaki, “Casting her vote: Women’s political participation in Solomon Islands”, in Martha Macintyre and Ceridwen Spark (eds.), *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*. Acton: ANU Press, 2017, p. 107. Retrieved 27 July 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crwn.9.

independence in 1975. The 2012 national elections saw three women successfully contest seats in the 111-seat assembly and inclined regional observers towards optimism that women were becoming more electable. However, while the 2017 elections saw 179 women stand as candidates, none were voted into the national parliament.³²

Gendered violence, intimidation and the political process

While there is a dearth of literature on women's voting behaviour in the Pacific Islands, existing research tends to show that female voters are often reluctant to vote for women candidates. In part, this is because women are often not able to vote freely. Across the region there is a high tolerance of violence against women, a gendered social challenge that also shapes women's voting behaviour. Threats of violence or estrangement from male family or clan members are often used to enforce bloc voting in favour of a preferred male candidate.³³ Pauline Soaki's research in Solomon Islands has further shown that leaders with authority can also use coercive tactics to shape women's voter behaviour and deter them from voting for women candidates. She explains that in this context, women often describe the responsibilities of voting within a Christian rather than civic framework such that religious leaders are able to use the authority of the pulpit to direct voting behaviour.³⁴ This can sometimes also be coupled with religious leaders' "warnings" that families, or whole villages and clans, can invite punishment by natural disaster should they vote in ways that contravene the church's electoral advice (Soaki personal communication Honiara, August 2017). Women voters can therefore be persuaded by appeals to principles of Christian duty and obligation to vote in particular ways and to put their own political views to one side.

³² Nicole Haley and Kerry Zubrinic, "2017 Papua New Guinea General Election Observation Report", Department of Pacific Affairs: Australian National University. Canberra, 2018. Located at http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/news/related-documents/2019-05/png_report_hi_res.pdf.

³³ Kerryn Baker, "Great Expectations: Gender and Political Representation in the Pacific Islands", *Government and Opposition*, 53(3), 2018, p. 550. doi:10.1017/gov.2016.54.

³⁴ Pauline Soaki, "Casting her vote: Women's political participation in Solomon Islands", in Martha Macintyre and Ceridwen Spark (eds.), *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*. Acton: ANU Press, 2017, p. 107. Retrieved 27 July 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crwn.9.

Periods of political upheaval and conflict in some parts of the Pacific – Bougainville (1990s), Solomon Islands (early 2000s) and a history of coups in Fiji (1987 onwards) – have all shaped women’s experiences as would-be political representatives. In Fiji, for example, parliamentary statistics up until 2006 seemed to indicate a regionally unique acceptance of female representatives, with women making up 11% of the national legislature. However, political office here has come with a risk of exposure to violence. When civilian rebel forces invaded the country’s parliament in 2000, women MPs were detained for a number of days by coup perpetrators and subject to threats of violence. The military coup that occurred in 2006 again resulted in the dismissal of the national parliament and, later, city councils. Women within provincial councils, labour unions, and women’s civil society organisations, and women elected to the national parliament who voice criticism of the government, have been subjected to intimidation and threats of arrest.³⁵

Fiji’s most recent period of military rule ended in September 2014, in an election that saw women make up 16% of the 249 candidates standing for election. Some parties made a significant show of support for women by adopting 30% female quotas governing their preselection of candidates and appointing women as their party presidents.³⁶ At the conclusion of counting, eight women won seats in the new parliament, the opposition leader was a woman and all female members elected to the government benches were allocated ministerial responsibilities. Not all women who stood for election were treated kindly by the electorate or by those they opposed, however. One of the youngest women contesting the 2014 Fiji election, Roshika Deo stood as an independent with a strong background in advocacy for women. Her youth combined with her feminist politics

³⁵ Ro Teimumu Kepa, *Address by the Gone Marama Bale Na Roko Tui Dreketi: A Clarification of Rewa’s Perspective Regarding the Illegal Overthrow of the Fiji Government*. Delivered at the Bose Ni Yasana ‘O Rewa Burenivudi, Lamanikoro, Rewa, Thursday, 16 November 2011. Electronic version posted to Pacwin listserve, 18 November 2011. Nicole George, *Situating Women: Gender Politics and Circumstance in Fiji*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2012. Maggie Boyle, “Opposition MP Lynda Tabuya granted bail”. Fiji Broadcasting Corporation News, 20 March 2020. Located at <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/court/opposition-mp-lynda-tabuya-granted-bail/> [accessed 27 August 2020].

³⁶ Lynda Tabuya, “Pacific Women in Politics: experiences, attitudes, obstacles”, Presentation to the Pacific Islands Political Science Association Conference, University of French Polynesia, 5 June 2014. Fiji Sun, 29 March, p. 38.

made her a target of particularly virulent and sometimes intimidating campaigns, which included media harassment by personalities closely aligned to Fiji's post-coup ruling elite,³⁷ as well as intimidation and threats of violence directed at her via social media.³⁸ In the 2018 elections that followed, women made up 24% of the candidates and 10 women were elected to the 51-seat national assembly. Five of those elected as part of the Fiji First government were awarded ministerial or ministerial assistant portfolios. The remaining five were elected to opposition parties. One of the women voted to the opposition ranks was Lynda Tabuya, whose electoral popularity saw her amass a far greater share of the national vote than women elected as part of the Fiji First government. She was both the highest-polling female candidate in this election, and fifth highest-polling candidate overall.

Women's Political Contributions

Around the globe, women's capacities to make political contributions, even as elected parliamentary representatives, are limited because they are frequently sidelined from positions of political power within government. Global averages show gender parity in the executive arm of government to be a rarity, and women's ministerial responsibilities generally limited to social and welfare portfolios considered appropriate to their gender.³⁹ These patterns are particularly pronounced in the Pacific region. Fiji has three women ministers; Tonga, Samoa and Solomon Islands have two; Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Bougainville and Tuvalu all have only one woman holding a ministerial portfolio. Further in line with global trends, the majority of these ministerial appointments are of the sort typically distributed to women and focus on policy areas such as women, youth, family and cultural affairs, health, education, and development.

In some contexts women have played more senior roles, however. Most notable in this regard is Hilda Heine, who, between 2016 and early 2020, held the office of President of the Marshall Islands, the first woman of a self-governing Pacific Islands country to hold a national political

³⁷ Fiji Sun, 29 March 2014, pp. 45, 48.

³⁸ Fiji Times, 3 June 2014, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=270360>.

³⁹ IPU & UN Women, 2020.

leadership role. In the US territory of Guam, Lou Guerrero was elected as the first female Governor in 2018. The Honourable Fiamé Naomi Mataafa currently holds the position of Deputy Prime Minister in Samoa. In other Pacific countries, women members of parliament have won parliamentary support to assume the roles of Speaker or Deputy Speaker. Ms Tangariki Reete was elected as the first woman Speaker for Kiribati in May 2020, Dr. Jiko Luveni was elected for a second term as Speaker of the Fijian parliament in 2018, a position she held until her death in office, and Ms Niki Rattle has held two consecutive terms as Speaker in the Cook Islands parliament from 2012. Francesca Semoso has held the position of Deputy Speaker in Bougainville's parliament since 2015 and also held this post in her earlier parliamentary term from 2005-2010.

Promoting Electoral Reform

Quotas, Temporary Special Measures, Parity Provisions

The desirability of adopting electoral reforms that will assist women's political representation is hotly debated across the region. With the exception of Tonga and Palau, all other independent PICs have ratified United Nation Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (UNCEDAW), which allows lobbyists, activists and women's machineries in government to refer to the provisions of article 4 covering women's political participation as they lobby for gender-equitable reforms. As a result, there has been increased institutional activity on this question in many countries, but results remain mixed.

In Solomon Islands, a campaign to develop a bill establishing 10 reserved seats of women in the national parliament was initiated from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, and spearheaded by its Permanent Secretary, Ethel Sigimanu, in 2008. Despite recent survey data showing broad public support for reserved

seats for women,⁴⁰ these efforts did not win sufficient government support, with the result that the project appears to have reached a stalemate. At present, Solomon Islands has three women sitting in its 50-seat assembly. In recognition of women's ongoing marginalisation from electoral decision-making at the national and provincial level, three provinces moved to create Provincial Women's Councils in 2018 as an alternative forum that might increase women's ability to make their political concerns heard by elected representatives.⁴¹ Women leaders participating in this initiative were particularly frustrated by the poor state of road and transport infrastructure in most parts of the country, as well as by their inability to access national consultations on questions of land access and reform.

In 2011, Dame Carol Kidu, at that time PNG's only woman MP in the national parliament, led a campaign to create 22 reserved seats for that country's parliament. Her efforts won strong public support, and seemed headed for success when a constitutional amendment passed parliament in preparation for a later reading of the Temporary Special Measures (TSM) bill.⁴² The latter attempt failed, however, and the TSM bill has not become law. Sometimes, women MPs themselves resist these reforms. For example, Loujaya Toni voiced her opposition to reserved seats as an elected member of parliament in 2012, stating that women parliamentarians can only win respect by getting "your hands dirty like the guys".⁴³ This contrasted with Ms Toni's earlier apparent support for the proposition articulated in a poem entitled "Twenty Two Women".⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Women's Rights Action Movement and International Women's Development Agency, "Public perception of women as political leaders", WRAM and IWDA, 2019. Located at <https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Public-Perceptions-of-Women-as-Leaders-in-Solomon-Islands.pdf>. Christine McMurray, "National elections and women candidates in Solomon Islands: Results from the People's Survey", CDI Policy Papers, 2012. Located at http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.SI/2011-12/D/2011_12_RES-PPS9_SOLS_WMN_PPLS_SRYY_McMurray/2012_01_PPS_CM_SIPS.pdf [accessed 5 November 2012].

⁴¹ Nicole George, "Conflict transition, emplaced identity and the gendered politics of scale in Solomon Islands". *Cooperation and Conflict. In Press for Volume 3*, 2020.

⁴² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November 2011.

⁴³ Loujaya Toni, *ABC Radio Australia*, 13 August 2012.

⁴⁴ This poem was published on *PNG Attitude*, 18 January 2012, <https://www.pngattitude.com/2012/01/-twenty-two-women-.html>.

In Samoa, in 2013, the government passed a bill amending the constitution, and established a system of up to five floating reserved seats for women.⁴⁵ During the debating process, the bill's detractors argued that the provisions were undemocratic and amounted to Samoa "following orders from the UN".⁴⁶ Yet when the bill was passed into law, it gained widespread media support and prompted wider debate on other areas where women in Samoa still suffer serious discrimination.⁴⁷ The bill saw five women enter the Samoan parliament after the 2016 general election. It has since been described as a "uniquely Pacific" electoral mechanism designed to respond to "common criticisms that reserved seats are unfair" or give women "special treatment".⁴⁸

In the region's francophone territories, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna, parity provisions adopted in 2001 in metropolitan France have been replicated, albeit sometimes with resistance. These same laws also operate for municipal and regional elections and have contributed to a meteoric rise in women's political standing, such that women now outnumber men in both the New Caledonian and French Polynesian national parliaments. In New Caledonia, women's increased political participation has allowed them to mobilise state resources to fund a series of agencies specifically devoted to women's well-being known as "la secteur de la Condition Féminine". Women have also achieved high political office. Between 2004 and 2008, an indigenous Kanak woman, Déwé Gorodé, held the office of Vice President in New Caledonia, while two European women have held the office of President; Marie-Noëlle Thémereau from 2004 until 2007 and Cynthia Liegeard from 2014 to 2015. In 2013, Caroline Machoro, a Kanak woman member of the national assembly, was nominated as the leader of the Melanesian Spearhead Group's Foreign Minister's Meeting, the first time this regional body has ever given

⁴⁵ In the event that no woman wins a parliamentary seat in open contest, the five highest polling women candidates will win seats in the parliament; if one woman wins an open seat, the next four highest polling women candidates will be appointed, and so on.

⁴⁶ Levaopolo Talatonu, cited *Samoa Observer*, 5 February 2012.

⁴⁷ *Samoa Observer*, 26 June 2013.

⁴⁸ Kerryn Baker, "The 'Samoa model' adapts gender quotas to Pacific politics", *East Asia Forum*, 14 August 2019. Located at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/14/the-samoan-model-adapts-gender-quotas-to-pacific-politics/>.

this level of recognition to a female representative. Women's political advancement has followed a similar pattern in French Polynesia, where parity has also seen the number of women parliamentarians rise dramatically. In Wallis and Futuna, also a francophone territory, parity provisions work less effectively due to a more unstable party structure.⁴⁹ Yet, even with this challenge, the last elections in 2017 brought six women into the 20-seat Territorial Assembly.

Women have also benefited from parity provisions at the level of municipal elections in the francophone territories. The numbers of women placed at the head of party lists in these elections have risen with each election round, increasing both the number of women elected to municipal councils generally but also the number of women elected to the office of Mayor. In the 2020 municipal round of elections, five women were elected as Mayors, including Sonia Lagarde, who was re-elected as the Mayor of Nouméa, New Caledonia's capital, and Maryline Sinewami, who was elected as the first woman Mayor for the island municipality of Maré. Municipal election results followed a similar pattern in French Polynesia in 2020 with five women also elected to the position of Mayor.

Constitutional negotiations established Bougainville as an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea as part of the post-conflict reconstruction process at the end of a ten-year period of conflict. In recognition of the matrilineal structures of Bougainvillean society and the important role women had played in the peace processes that would end fighting on the island, three seats were reserved for women in the new territorial assembly, allocated to represent the three regions of the island territory. More recently, in 2016, a new community government act was established that requires parity representation of women and men in each ward, and women and men alternating in President and Vice President roles at each election.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ John Fraenkel, "The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments", in E. Huffer et al., *A Women's Place is in the House: The House of Parliament: Research to advance women's political representation in Forum Island Countries: A regional study presented in five reports*, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva, 2006, pp. 57-106.

⁵⁰ Nicole George, "Bougainville, Papua New Guinea: Gender and participation in the wake of a partially "gendered" peace agreement". *Monash Gender, Peace and Security*, September, 2018. Located at http://mappingpeace.monashgps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/PNG_Bougainville_v5-1.pdf [accessed 27 August 2020].

Elizabeth Burain, elected to the Bougainville assembly in 2010, has argued that the reserved seat provisions have encouraged wide acceptance of women parliamentarians.⁵¹ Few women contested Bougainville's 33 open seats in the early rounds of elections, but this number has increased in the intervening years. Some contend that Bougainville's voters are disinclined to support women campaigning for open seats, believing that the quota system gives them sufficient electoral representation.⁵² My own research conducted with would-be women parliamentarians in Bougainville in June 2014, indicates a strong determination amongst many women leaders to change this situation. Many of the women leaders I spoke to stated their frustration with the reserved seats system, arguing it was too difficult and costly for women to campaign effectively across their large regional electorates. They also declared that having women in only three parliamentary seats in a 39-seat assembly was insufficient and that more women needed to achieve parliamentary representation before real gains could be achieved. In 2015, this determination saw 12 women stand as candidates for open seats (in addition to the 23 women who contested the reserve seats) and one woman, Josephine Getsi, succeed in winning an open seat. This brought four women into the parliament. Bougainville's voters will go to the polls again in July to elect a new parliament to oversee negotiations on the territory's future political status. More than 40 women are standing for open seats and the three reserved seats. Two women are standing for the position of President.

Wives, Widows and Family connections

Around the globe it has been noted that women who are connected to families with a political pedigree often have greater capacity to garner electoral support than those from non-political families. The same is true in the Pacific but recent observations have also emphasised how women candidates have benefited more particularly from their marriage to former

⁵¹ Burain, cited *Radio New Zealand International*, 28 March 2011.

⁵² Norm Kelly, "Electoral Democracy in Post-Conflict Melanesia: The 2010 Bougainville and Solomon Islands Elections", CDI Policy Papers on Political Governance, CDI, 2010. Located at http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/AP/2010-11/D/2010_11_RES_PPS8_BGV.SOLS_Kelly/PPS_2010-02_NK_BGV_SI_FIN.pdf [accessed 16 November 2012].

MPs.⁵³ Specifically, the argument is that women married to men who lose their seat in parliament through some form of legal challenge, or as a result of death, often mount successful electoral campaigns in subsequent by-elections. While this is not an unknown phenomena, and was also characteristic of the ways some women achieved electoral success, in the early years of established democracies,⁵⁴ it has also featured as a prominent pathway into politics for women in Solomon Islands, Tonga, Cook Islands, and Tuvalu in recent years. Baker and Palmieri⁵⁵ suggest that while bereaved women may benefit from a “sympathy vote” in these instances, more complex motivations may also explain voter support for the wives or widows of former MPs. They include voter allegiance to a patronage network that they anticipate will continue if the wife is elected; and the idea that voters may view both the husband and the wife as the members of a representative team, and vote to ensure that team continues their political role.

Concluding remarks

Women’s electoral success across the Pacific and particularly in the region’s self-governing territories is persistently low but it is also consistently challenged by women who refuse to let go of their political ambitions. While it is concerning that the three countries in the world that currently have no women sitting in their parliaments are all from the Pacific region, this needs to be balanced with an appreciation of where and how women’s political standing is also improving. First, regional averages of women’s representation are slowly improving and have in fact doubled from 4% to just under 9% in the past five years. Second, the success of quota systems adopted in countries like Samoa, Bougainville and the French territories demonstrate that reform can be embraced and capitalised upon to increase women’s political visibility and agency. Third, recent instances

⁵³ Kerryn Baker and Sonia Palmieri, “Widows and Wives in Pacific Politics: A Reliable Pathway for Women?”, *Department of Pacific Affairs In Brief 2020/1*, 2020. Located at http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-02/dpa_in_brief_baker_palmieri_2020_01_final.pdf.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

of elected women also achieving high political office in Samoa, Marshall Islands and New Caledonia set critical precedents for women elsewhere in the Pacific. The fact that there are increasing numbers of female political candidates entering electoral contests around the region suggests that while women may be politically marginalised, they are not sitting idly by waiting for change, but working hard to create it.

Country	Year of Last Election	Number of Women Elected	Total Number of Seats	TSMs, Quotas etc. in Place
American Samoa	2018	1	21	None
Bougainville	2015	4	39	3 reserved seats – election due August 2020
Cook Islands	2018	6	24	None
Federated States of Micronesia	2017	0	14	None
Fiji	2018	10	51	None
French Polynesia	2018	30	57	Parity Laws
Guam	2018	10	15	None
Kiribati	2020	4	45	None
Marshall Islands	2019	2	33	None
New Caledonia	2019	28	54	Parity Laws
Nauru	2019	2	19	None
Niue	2020	3	20	None
Northern Mariana Islands	2018	3	20	None
Palau	2016	4	29 (two houses)	None
Papua New Guinea	2017	0	111	None
Samoa	2016	5	50	Quota of maximum of 5 reserved
Solomon Islands	2019	3	49	None
Tonga	2017	2	27	None
Tuvalu	2019	1	16	None
Vanuatu	2020	0	52	None
Wallis and Futuna	2017	6	20	Parity Laws