



WOMEN, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC: KEY ISSUES

Gender, Civil Society and Political Participation

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Introduction: Gender, civil society and political participation

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Equal access to political participation is considered to be essential to democracy and by extension to political and social stability and economic development. In reality, political participation and access to decision making are strongly influenced by local perceptions of gender, race and religion. Although these issues, individually and collectively, are crucial to understanding politics in the Pacific region, they are often neglected in policy and aid debate as 'social' factors that are at best marginal to politics. The papers in this section suggest that rather than being marginal, these factors are central to understanding the practice of politics in Pacific Island countries. The papers consider political participation from a variety of perspectives including the personal stories of Pacific Island women and men who have been involved in local government, civil society and as political candidates in national elections. It also includes the results of recent academic research undertaken by political scientists in Melanesia. The papers concentrate on how the issues of gender, race and religion impact on access to political participation. Underlying these themes there is consideration for the ways they may be linked to growing political instability and ethnic tension in the region.

Many of the papers in this issue were presented at the symposium *Political participation in the Pacific: issues of gender, race and religion*, held at Parliament House in Canberra on 17 July 2002, and followed by a one-day workshop at the Australian National University on 18 July. The major issues and recommendations that emerged from the discussion at the symposium and from the workshop are included at the end of this introduction. Major issues to emerge from these papers are:

- the irrelevance of the nation state to most of the population in small, multiethnic, clan based societies;
- the difficulties associated with democratic political processes based on liberal values and human rights when they overlay traditional values based on authoritarian forms of male leadership; and
- notions of a 'divine right' to leadership and the political use of religion and the sacred to gain or maintain power.

These papers suggest that politics in many Pacific Island countries, most particularly Melanesia, now share a number of characteristics with cargo cults and millenarian movements. Together these papers highlight a widespread cultural prejudice against women's political involvement, women's political 'invisibility', the economic difficulties and often physical intimidation or violence women face in wanting to cast their own vote, let alone standing for election. In Melanesia, politics is still considered 'men's business' just as religious leadership is also considered 'men's business'. However, women are recognised across the region as making an important contribution to peacemaking and reconciliation. Religion, most particularly Christianity is a critical factor in political formation and has been a defining factor in Pacific Island education, health, civil society and values. In all Pacific Island countries Christianity has become enshrined in national constitutions and can to some extent provide one of the very limited national unifying factors that cuts across clans, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. On the other hand, the recent introduction of a large number of fundamental Christian denominations can now have the opposite effect. It is not coincidental that a large number of Pacific Island politicians are or in the past were Christian pastors or priests. The moral values

associated with Christianity are now widely used by aspiring politicians and the power of prayer is seen as an efficacious way of gaining votes. Differences in ethnicity, language and location together remain critical factors in what constitutes political participation in most Pacific Island countries.

In her overview paper Bronwen Douglas discusses growing fundamentalism in Melanesian countries which includes Christian revivalism. Christianity is one of the few widely shared values and is formally enshrined in national constitutions and symbols. She maintains that Christianity is arguably the key national symbol in Pacific states and is often seen as a force for moderation and reconciliation in political crises. She also questions the concept of ethnicity in Pacific Island societies and how Pacific Island people see people of different racial groups and to what extent ethnicity underlies political conflict.

Religion and political participation

In Fiji, the political power of the Methodist Church and its very close links with the traditional Fijian power structure have led Fijian nationalists to use the divine right argument to justify their claim over land and state power. Methodism is regarded by some Fijians as the 'church of our ancestors' and is strongly connected to indigenous Fijian culture, moral values and political discourse. Afu Billy, a candidate for East Malaita in the last elections in the Solomon Islands, found that her marital status - she had been divorced - was an issue frequently raised by the electorate. Her opponent was a religious and dedicated follower of the South Seas Evangelical Church and campaigned as such. In Vanuatu, in the early days of independence many members of parliament were also church pastors and today, women have almost no representation in national, provincial or municipal government because of deeply held traditional and religious beliefs that focus on men as the heads of households and all secular and sacred decision-making.

Gender and political participation

In Pacific Island countries women are seldom represented in national politics either as political leaders or decision-makers or as voters who have made independent choices. In the recent national elections in Papua New Guinea, for example, only 41 of 2,875 candidates were women. There are numerous cultural, educational, locational and religious reasons for women's political 'invisibility'. However, as Abby McLeod points out women's political participation should not be measured solely in terms of their representation in national parliaments as this fails to provide an understanding of their role behind the scenes, in politicking and supporting men's election campaigns. It also fails to consider how rural women themselves define political activity and participation. She shows how Simbu women in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea consider themselves extremely important actors in local and national politicking.

Generally though, the political culture of Melanesian societies has not absorbed the idea of liberalisation and this continues to create barriers to women's participation. Orovu Sepoe shows that the system denies the majority of women in Papua New Guinea their economic, social and political rights. Since self government in 1972 only five women have succeeded in becoming members of parliament, however, a growing number are standing for election with support from the organisations Women in Politics and the National Council of Women. In 1977 there were 10 female candidates – in the 2002 elections there were 60.

Other systemic issues that make it more difficult for women than men are the difficulty women have in gaining political party nomination—many women are forced to stand as independents—and the growing financial cost of mounting an election campaign. Afu Billy, who stood in the recent elections in the Solomon Islands discusses her experiences and the cultural and cost issues involved. As she explains, she faced endless difficulties, not least with peoples' expectations of what they wanted her to provide for them once she was elected. Afu lost the election by one vote. She appealed but lost the court case.

Susan Setae of Papua New Guinea also discusses her experiences in standing for election and facing intimidation and violence throughout her campaign. She believes that bribery, the cost of campaigns, a campaign period of eight weeks, the unrealistic demands of voters and ethnicity are enormous hurdles for women politicians to overcome.

Women who were successful in being elected to national parliament were Lady Carol Kidu of Papua New Guinea, who was elected for a second term and is now the Minister for Welfare and Social Development and Isabelle Donald, the MP for Epi in Vanuatu. Both are the only women in their country's parliaments. Isabelle shows the importance of NGOs such as the Vanuatu National Council of Women and Vanuatu Women in Politics in providing the support women need in lieu of party nomination. The NGOs also helped raise women's political profile although they faced hostile opposition from both men and women. According to Isabelle the reluctance of political parties to nominate women is probably the single biggest barrier to women being elected to parliament in Vanuatu—without nomination they do not have the party machinery behind them. Another significant barrier for women is the 'first past the post' electoral system. Isabelle feels her success was due to being well organised, having a well organised campaign, having had some training in electoral processes, and being well known and respected and trusted by her community on Epi.

Lady Carol Kidu believes her initial success could be attributed to her being the widow of a very well known and highly respected Chief Justice and to his large close knit clan. Her first term in office showed her to be an honest member of parliament who fought tirelessly to improve the situation of the urban poor and to provide greater opportunities for women. Lady Kidu fought to get bills relating to violence against women and rape within marriage through parliament. She was returned with an increased majority. However, she states that the 2002 elections were desperate and dishonest and they disadvantaged women enormously.

Workshop: Major Issues and Recommendations

The following issues and recommendations are based on the ten papers presented at the Symposium held on 17 July at Parliament House in Canberra, discussion on these papers and decisions from a one day workshop held at The Australian National University on 18 July. The workshop participants included the speakers and key discussants from the Symposium. The process of developing the recommendations included identification of major issues, group discussion and group development of recommendations.

Major issues

The major issues raised were:

- In Pacific Island countries, most particularly in Melanesia, there are very limited opportunities for women to actively participate in political processes, even at

community level. While in all Pacific countries women have equal access in law to participate fully in political processes, there remains discrimination at all political levels, cultural opposition to their involvement, and in some instances violence and physical intimidation. In rural areas in particular women are unable to make voting decisions and lack the power to have their voices heard.

- Generally, there is a lack of gender sensitisation among leaders at all levels, among planners, politicians and community leaders. There are considerable difficulties finding an appropriate and acceptable balance between Western style democracy and indigenous political systems and processes. Democracy needs to be redefined and an acceptable Pacific/Melanesian model developed that considers the indigenous perceptions of rule of law, customary law, communal and individual rights. There is very limited knowledge of, or debate on, alternatives to the western model.
- The concepts of good governance, gender, the state, and transparency need to be discussed within an indigenous framework. Political and electoral processes and participation, including the right of the individual to vote, are not well understood in most rural Pacific communities.
- Young people in particular, have little or no knowledge of political processes. The parliamentary system, the role and responsibilities of members of parliament and the legal responsibilities of political leaders are not well understood by either politicians or the public. This has led to extensive violations of the system, including abuse of parliamentary privilege and widespread corruption. The public is largely unaware that they can hold politicians accountable for their actions.
- There is a need for organisations or processes, such as the Ombudsman, where political and electoral violations, and other human rights violations can be freely reported and fairly dealt with.
- There are deep-seated social and political divisions in Pacific island societies caused by identity, racism and religious differences. These divisions and their political impact need to be acknowledged.
- Intellectual and policy debate are not in tune with contemporary Pacific issues and their political implications—most specifically racism and religious division. This needs to be addressed.

Recommendations

The key recommendations from the workshop are that:

- Greater national and international support be provided for on-going formal and non formal education in good governance, political and electoral processes, and gender equality in electoral rights. This should be made widely available at community level through NGOs, church groups and others.
- Good governance topics to be included in primary and secondary school curricula.
- Greater support be given to non government organisations like Transparency International to work together to develop materials and carry out awareness programs on human rights and voting systems.
- Further research be undertaken into the role that gender, ethnicity and religion play in political processes and to find ways to ensure fair and equal access.
- Donors facilitate the equal participation of women and other disadvantaged groups in civil society and local and national government but ensuring political

- education for women, and requiring a gender balance in development-related projects.
- Policy recommendations are developed for national governments and donors that would support more equal access to political participation at community, provincial and national levels.
 - Gender sensitisation courses are a requirement of all donor-support programs. In particular these courses should be made available to leaders at all levels, provincial planners, religious and community leaders.
 - Greater effort be put into the empowerment of rural people and that empowerment programs include human rights, gender equality, literacy, knowledge of the constitution and political rights.
 - The non formal education system be strengthened; governments and non government organisations provide training programs for women and young people in leadership and assertiveness, and in the skills and knowledge required for effective participation in decision-making and decision-making bodies.

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Why religion, race, and gender matter in Pacific politics

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Introduction

Dominant political assumptions and values look universal to those who believe in them, but politics always has local hues. This article addresses a set of intersecting issues — religion, gender, and 'race' or 'ethnicity'—which loom large in politics and governance throughout the Pacific region. These issues are neglected by exclusively political or economic approaches and are often played down in international policy and aid discourses as merely social factors.

Many Pacific states face problems of relevance and legitimacy, especially in Melanesia where states are recent, artificial colonial legacies that have been imposed on assortments of small, highly diverse societies with no overarching indigenous polities. The great diversity of the Pacific region as a whole makes generalisation problematic. However, there are important commonalities and systematic contrasts to be drawn across the so-called 'arc of instability' to Australia's north, the region from East Timor to Fiji, which is the major focus of this paper.

The themes of religion, gender and race necessitate attention to mundane settings and non-crisis situations, as well as to more dramatic situations when violence and conflict seem like norms. Historical and cultural sensitivity is required to unravel complex, varied processes of local appropriations and practice of foreign ideas in diverse contexts of local modernity. I stress that ordinary Melanesians are not 'backward', 'primitive' or 'underdeveloped', but are our modern, relatively deprived contemporaries. Nor are they simply helpless victims of missionisation, colonialism, modernity, globalisation and multinational or elite bastardry, but have actual or potential agency in such situations.

Recognising religion in the Pacific

Why does religion matter in the Pacific region?: because Christianity is neither foreign nor imposed, but an indigenised daily spiritual experience and a powerful ritual practice. Religion and ritual have always been crucial in Pacific societies, and local religious beliefs and practices underpin conversions to Christianity. Pacific Christianities, as everywhere, have a distinctly local cast. Islanders take for granted the efficacy of prayer and mobilise it pragmatically to invoke the power of the Christian god and his earthly agents in support of a wide range of private and public goals, including national ones (Gibbs 1998).

'So what?', may be the response of secular, rationalist Westerners, who discount religious explanations as superstition, and are embarrassed by spirituality, especially the born-again, pentecostal or charismatic Christian variety that is increasingly popular in the Pacific. At best, the critical contributions of Pacific missions and national churches to the provision of education, health and welfare services have seen 'the church'

institutionalised in the international good governance agenda as a component of civil society and a reliable conduit for channelling aid.

The academic, policy and aid communities also underrate the ideological importance of Christianity in nation making in Melanesia. Most indigenous candidates for leadership in nascent Melanesian states from the late 1960s were mission-educated, and often ordained, professed Christians. As the four Melanesian states successively attained independence between 1970 and 1980, such leaders helped install Christianity as a traditionalised state or ethnic institution, along with Christianised custom.

In Fiji, Methodism—the denomination of around 80 per cent of indigenous Fijians who comprise just over 50 per cent of the population—is almost completely identified with indigenous tradition, and partly transcends the fault lines of class and region which fracture the ethnic Fijian community. Some Methodist leaders have colluded with ethnic Fijian religious and political fundamentalism by seeking constitutional ratification of Fiji as a Christian state in which taukei (people of the land) exercise paramountcy over non-indigenous communities, especially Indo-Fijians (Balawanilotu 1989, Weir 2000:50–51).

In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, adherence to Christianity is one of few widely shared values, and Christianity is formally enshrined, together with custom, in national constitutions and symbols where they serve as ambiguous bases for national unity and identity. The adjectives ‘noble’ and ‘worthy’, when applied to traditions and customs in Melanesian constitutions, themselves encode Christian values, since they refer to indigenous practices deemed acceptable by mainline Christian islanders.¹ In all three countries, Christianity is multid denominational but the mainline churches are relatively ecumenical, whereas custom is place-specific and therefore potentially divisive. Even with the recent proliferation of fundamentalist evangelical or pentecostal groups, which are usually sectarian, politically conservative and hostile to custom, there are far fewer Christian denominations than local versions of custom.

This makes indigenised Christianity arguably the key national symbol in these states, though regional cultural institutions such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre privilege custom. Christianity features largely in nationalist rhetoric but nonetheless resists nationalist appropriation. On the one hand, it is intensely local and parochial; on the other, it has long offered Melanesians membership in global moral communities that transcend the doubtful legitimacy of colonial and national states.

Though cultural and ideological aspects of the significance of Christianity in Melanesian identities and governance have been largely neglected, the churches have recently been acknowledged as a force for moderation, conflict resolution and reconciliation in political crises (Australian Council for Overseas Aid 2000). While church interventions can often effectively mediate and help reconcile conflicts in Melanesia, recent experience in the Solomons and Papua New Guinea also suggests that goodwill, courage and moral authority can come to grief in the face of undisciplined mobs of violent young men with high-powered weapons.

There are nonetheless signs that Christianity is often seen locally as an antidote to the collapse of internal security that has long plagued parts of Papua New Guinea and, since 1999, has obliterated civic order in the Solomon Islands. The home-grown millenarian God Tri Wan (Holy Trinity) movement in western Enga Province mobilised grassroots Catholic spirituality ‘to secure prosperity . . . by ceasing all tribal fighting and introducing an era of peace’ (Bieniek and Trompf 2000:124–26).

Invisible citizens: gender and governance in Melanesia

Throughout the Pacific region, Christianity is grounded in local congregations. From the earliest stages of Protestant missionary endeavour, women participated for their own reasons in regular gatherings of women promoted by female missionaries for moral and instructive purposes (Douglas 1999, 2002). Such meetings were prototypes for the local church women's groups, which missions began to establish from the early twentieth century (Forman 1984). Now indigenised, women's fellowship groups are the norm in rural Pacific communities and are often reported to be growing in structural, economic and moral importance, even in men's eyes (Douglas nd). However, the unfashionable conjunction of women with parochial Christianity means that such groups are seriously under-researched, while professional neglect is exacerbated by widespread local male (and even female) contempt for women's political capacities.

Pragmatically, women's groups are neglected because most are tiny, have mundane agendas, use cautious, low-key methods, and espouse a self-effacing ethos of service, voluntarism and self-financing that makes few coherent demands on international aid or attention (Pollard n.d.). Typically, they emphasise home economics and welfare issues in accord with their members' expectations. Women's preoccupation with the mundane can frustrate feminists, especially those involved in aid projects seeking to empower indigenous women, rather than reinforce their apparent domestication.

Yet ostensibly conservative, innocuous bodies like YWCAs and church women's organisations can endorse quite radical social agenda and programs (Scheyvens n.d., Dickson-Waiko n.d.). So, indeed, did similar Christian women's organisations during the first-wave of Euro-American feminism from the mid-nineteenth century (Marshall and Marshall 1990:105–20), though it is important not to see such analogies as literal precedents, or modern indigenous people as located in an earlier phase of a universal evolutionary trajectory. In Melanesia, women's involvement in collective action in the protected space of a village women's fellowship — with possible extensions to district, island, provincial, national or regional caucuses — provides their main opportunity to build solidarity, confidence and leadership or managerial skills that can help loosen hegemonic controls over their bodies and thinking.

It is nonetheless important not to romanticise women's groups and their selfless, consensual ideology or to exaggerate their energy and effectiveness. Working with women, says a Solomon Islands woman with long experience as a national women's affairs bureaucrat, can be exhausting and frustrating. Not only do shyness, inexperience and respect for the widespread Melanesian value of seniority make many women unwilling to speak up or take public responsibility, even in a women's group, but those who do so are often condemned for flouting the equally widespread Melanesian value of egalitarianism, or for failing to redistribute generously to followers in accordance with the fundamental value of reciprocity. Commitment to self-financing on the grounds of group ownership and self-sufficiency limits the resources available for projects, and places a heavy burden on the meagre finances and time of group members, especially leaders, in addition to their onerous gardening, domestic, childcare and marketing responsibilities (Macintyre n.d., Pollard n.d.).

Throughout Melanesia, women are recognised for their critical contributions to local production and for exercising practical and moral authority in the domestic economy, as well as in situations of conflict, fighting, peacemaking and reconciliation, such as in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands (Australian Council for Overseas Aid 2000:28, Douglas 2000, Fugui 2001:554). Yet even the churches are mostly run by men, and across the region women are largely excluded from meaningful participation in political

and national arenas and public affairs, except in domains such as women's affairs, health and education. They are excluded by virtue of male prejudice, lack of education and opportunity, and to some extent by choice: notoriously, women rarely vote for female candidates and most women, especially uneducated rural dwellers, agree with men that politics is men's business. Yet if Melanesian women have so far shown a limited disposition to assume wider public responsibilities, that is no justification for the systemic thwarting of those with the desire and the aptitude to do so.

Everywhere in Melanesia, women are the main objects of domestic and sexual violence, which is a serious and growing problem, although experience in multicultural New Caledonia and Fiji suggests that it is not only an indigenous problem (Dussy 2001, Lateef 1990). Violence against women and children and discrimination against women in the practice of justice and policing are properly important concerns of international donors and agencies. Rather less attention, though, is paid to the intractable and systemic problem of the political invisibility and suppression of women (along with young people) in Melanesian states, and the national waste and injustice that entails. The virtual irrelevance of national citizenship for most Melanesians—for nearly all women and all but the relatively few men who are actively involved in politics and administration—is a less dramatic problem than the regular explosions of violent conflict that have become a defining feature of this region. However, such irrelevance is both a breeding ground and a symptom of the instability and lack of moral credibility that plague national governments across the region.

Historicising race and ethnicity

At least since 1980, the region from East Timor to Fiji has registered in the Australian media and public imagination largely in terms of political violence or civil war. Across the region, the violent collapse of civic order has frequently been represented by insiders and outsiders alike as 'ethnic'. Unlike religion and gender, the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are notably untheorised and under-researched, and their local meanings or appropriateness in Pacific contexts are unclear. Race entered the region as a European scientific category but has also been indigenised, partly in self-defence against colonial racism, but also as it was locally reworked in conjunction with existing indigenous stereotypes about collective bodily and other differences.

There are many so far unanswered questions. What does it mean when a Bougainvillean calls another Papua New Guinean 'Redskin' or is called 'saucepan arse' (black) in return? What does anti-Sepik prejudice mean in Rabaul, anti-Chimbu in Port Moresby, anti-Indian in Fiji, anti-Malaitan in Solomon Islands, or anti-Wallisian amongst Kanak in New Caledonia? Are all or any of these racisms on a par with long-entrenched white demonisation of Africans, or are they more contextual and contingent? Is ethnic merely a euphemism for racial or does it connote fundamental differences in the nature of prejudice in Oceania compared with the West? How do gender and ethnicity intersect given women's reported efforts to mediate via exchanges across warring ethnic communities in Solomon Islands (Liloqula and Pollard 2000)?

What is clear is that the concept of ethnicity is usually more distorting than informative when it is applied to recent crises of state across Melanesia. By essentialising the contending parties, it obscures the immediate or ultimate colonial genesis of all such conflicts, together with the significant internal differences within so-called ethnic groups and the cross-cutting relationships of class, religion, region and gender that discredit simplistic dualistic notions of ethnic homogeneity and opposition (Kabutaulaka 2000, Regan 1999:8–12, Teaiwa 2000).

Seemingly racial ideas are entangled with religion in obscure and, for us, confronting ways with potent implications for the legitimacy and viability of modern Melanesian states. Anthropologists frequently report statements by indigenous people, especially from the Papua New Guinea highlands, categorising themselves as 'black' and as collectively inferior to 'whites' because they lack knowledge or self-control, or because the ancestors and Jesus Christ are held to be white. Local people may attribute the experienced deficiencies of the modern state to such perceived black inadequacies, while Christian millennial expectations often hinge on the promise that Melanesians or their maligned black nation will become equal to whites (for example, Clark 1988:45–47, 1997:73–75, Robbins 1998). It is important, though, not to take such statements literally but to investigate their ambiguities and local resonances, because they are often culturally specific and accompanied by a kind of perverse pride in indigenous masculine wilfulness.

Self-castigation for racial inferiority is a poor basis for nationhood, but such statements, however bizarre to outsiders, also represent a kind of claim to agency, a readiness by people to blame themselves for misfortunes or to take responsibility for failures, regarded as products of their own (reversible) actions and shortcomings (for example, Barker 1996:221–25, Strathern and Stewart 1998, especially 53). This tendency is not just a pathological hangover of guilt for having been colonised, but has widespread indigenous cultural antecedents in the strong, if varied, correlations drawn by Melanesians between religion and morality. Failures were accordingly attributed to spirits offended by improper human behaviour or to incorrect performance of ritual (Douglas 1998:227, Strathern 1979–80:92).

Conclusions

In conclusion, I suggest that a narrow state focus and a universalising, prescriptive political economy are inadequate bases for addressing either the crises of state in Melanesia or the human and social problems and aspirations of Melanesian citizens. Such phenomena as Christian revivalism, male domination and 'ethnic' conflict do not happen out of the blue. Rather, they have complex historical and cultural dimensions that must be grasped if we are to understand the phenomena in question and formulate informed prognoses about their likely sociopolitical implications. The framing and delivery of effective foreign policies and aid and development programs in this region demand cultural sensitivity rather than unreflective universalist presumptions and prescriptions. However, a doctrinaire cultural relativism is not the answer. Rather, Melanesian leaders, administrators and citizens should be encouraged to engage creatively and strategically with global discourses such as democracy, law and justice, and human rights, and to do so in humane, principled and culturally inclusive ways, rejecting fundamentalisms of all kinds.

Note

1. The constitution of Papua New Guinea invokes 'our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now'; that of Solomon Islands brackets 'the worthy customs of our ancestors' with 'the guiding hand of God'; that of Vanuatu refers to a republic 'founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles' (Institute of Pacific Studies 1983, II:97, 231, 305).

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Gender and race in post coup d'état Fiji: Snapshots from the Fiji Islands

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Introduction

This paper considers some aspects of the subtle intersections between race and democracy and their effects on the pursuit of gender equality for women in Fiji. As in most countries, women in Fiji are not defined only by their sex but by many forces and the interplay between them. In Fiji these forces include the consequences of colonisation and the British divide-and-rule policy, the loss of democracy and the vulnerability to coups, social and economic class, ethnicity, poverty, religious fundamentalism and race.

The women's NGO (non-government organisation) movement views political stability based on democracy as a precondition for the attainment of women's rights. Two massive political upheavals, seemingly racially motivated coups and the loss of democracy, in 1987 and 2000 have derailed feminist progress and given rise to questions of campaigning priorities in times of instability: gender versus the political.

Racial repercussions

The political crisis that occurred in May 2000 demonstrated the tenuous nature of multiracialism in Fiji and curtailed real progress for women.

For many months following 19 May 2000, many non-indigenous Fijians and some indigenous Fijians lived in fear of violence. Non-indigenous Fijians, especially rural Indo-Fijians, were the victims of targeted and orchestrated violence. There were allegations of rape and other forms of sexual violence by civilian groups against non-indigenous women.

Since the coup, racial inequality has been entrenched by both the interim government and the new elected government. A blueprint for affirmative action for indigenous Fijian was imposed by the interim regime without consultation and with no monitoring safeguards. The result has been widespread abuse and corruption.

Currently, there is relative stability and the rule of law is generally complied with. However, a new *Social Justice Act*, intended to legitimise affirmative action for mainly indigenous Fijians, passed into law on 24 December 2001. The state has attempted to prevent any challenge that would nullify this social justice legislation by stating that the legislation effectively overrides the 1997 constitution (section 8), a clear violation of constitutional principles and the rule of law.

The government has set up a Ministry of Reconciliation. With the exception of two Indo-Fijians, the staff is all indigenous Fijians. The national advisory committee that advises the ministry has representation from the Great Council of Chiefs, government, the Fiji Council of Churches, the powerful Methodist Church, the Anglican Church and a few other individuals. Races that are either Hindu or Muslim are effectively excluded. The main focus of the committee and ministry is reconciling indigenous Fijian groups, rather than addressing the real problems between the major ethnic groups.

Repercussions for women's rights activists

Demonstrations and even peace or anti-war marches are not allowed by the state. As recently as December 2001, the state denied the right to assembly to a group of peaceful protesters, the Coalition on Human Rights, who wished to protest against the war in Afghanistan.

In late 2001, the state deregistered vocal human rights NGO, the Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF) for challenging the legality of the government, and it has threatened to deregister NGOs that do not toe its political line. Activist women's NGOs are vulnerable to similar deregistration. As NGOs are the driving force behind improvements to the status of women, such restrictions, combined with the absence of a legal framework under which NGOs may register, have severely obstructed further work towards equality.

Economic repercussions

After the crisis, the tourism industry fell apart, 7,000 people lost their jobs and more than 20 people died. In a population of 850,000, such events have catastrophic consequences on the economy and on the people.

Poverty is a significant problem in Fiji. The 1997 *Fiji Poverty Report* (UNDP/Fiji Government), based on statistics from 1990–91, has stated that 25 per cent of the population lives in poverty and another 25 per cent are living very close to the poverty line, such that any personal or national crisis would send them into poverty. Since that time, a value added tax (VAT) has been imposed, the currency has been devalued, and there has been a large increase in the cost of utilities. The recent Save the Children Fund report, *Study of the Impacts of the Political Crisis on Children and Families in Fiji* (2001), notes that poverty and other problems existing before May 2000 are now considerably worse, seriously affecting women and children.

The role of women in democracy

Women and women's groups have been instrumental in defending the 1997 constitution and democracy in the Fiji Islands, and in bringing about a peaceful solution to the political problems. It is important to note that most women's organisations in Fiji are neither multiracial in composition nor feminist in outlook, but race based and traditional. They mobilise around traditional activities such as handicraft, or for religious or welfare service reasons. Some examples are the indigenous Fijian Soqosoqo Vakamarama (which is also class based and chiefly controlled by women) and the Indo-Fijian Sri Sewa Sabha (comprising middle-class Indo-Fijian women).

The number of organisations that are openly and challengingly multiracial and feminist can be counted on one hand. They include the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Femlink Pacific and, to a limited extent, the Young Women's Christian Association.

An example of women's role in peace building during the hostage crisis in 2000 was the work done by the National Council of Women, which sponsored a daily multiracial peace and prayer vigil. This fairly innocuous peace initiative grew into the Fiji Blue Ribbon Campaign, which grew into the Fiji Blue Democracy Campaign. The brains behind the democracy campaign were the Coalition on Human Rights and Democracy, an NGO made up of mostly women's NGOs and the CCF. This coalition of NGOs harnessed its enormous unpaid intellectual resources to fight an appeal challenging the abrogation of the 1997 constitution.

Race, gender, democracy and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement

The way Fijian women mobilised across race and class lines demonstrates the political maturity of the women's movement as a whole. An example of this is the work of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM). This feminist NGO has a commitment to feminism, human rights and democracy. The FWRM used to be a small but feisty player in the gender scene and the women's rights arena in Fiji. The two coups d'état of 1987 and the 2000 coup have contributed to its growth from a feminist NGO dedicated mainly to women's issues to an organisation which is regarded as a legitimate social and political commentator and a participant in debate on a variety of legal, political, social, cultural and economic issues.

FWRM was the first women's NGO in Fiji to become openly feminist. Ensuring that feminist issues have top priority has always been important for FWRM, but the issue of race, not always well understood by its members, has threatened to cause divisions within the organisation. During the 1987 coups, the FWRM membership polarised along racial lines. However, FWRM was committed to women's rights within the framework of democracy, so restoration of democracy was promoted. It refused to work with the illegal regimes that were installed in 1987 and again in 2000. This made its work extremely difficult, especially during the illegal regime of Sitiveni Rabuka, which gave Fiji its first Ministry of Women.

Indigenous Fijian women thought FWRM should focus on gender issues and leave democracy to other civil society organisations. Indigenous women members were seen to be 'disloyal to the Fijians and Fijian traditions' and, although many hours were spent discussing the issue and encouraging them to remain members, many resigned. To their credit most returned within two years. A coalition to fight for equal rights in the constitution was partly responsible for their crossing that racial divide again, so that FWRM could again focus on gender issues within the constitutional review process. Learning that gender issues unite women was a critical step in FWRM's development. Coalitions work when specific critical issues are identified and women can find the commonalities that unite.

However, despite the maturation of the women's movement as a whole between 1987 and 2000, FWRM had difficulties for the second time when the 2000 crisis happened. It worked with the Coalition on Human Rights and Democracy, and with the Fiji Blue Democracy Campaign to return Fiji to constitutional democracy. It also worked with other participants in the various legal challenges, while at the same time trying to hold its membership, staff and organisation together despite racial divisions.

In 2000–2001, most of FWRM's work focused on the restoration of democracy and constitutional rule. However, some of its members and staff failed to understand that democracy is a precondition for the attainment of women's rights, and that the organisation had little choice but to engage in the political arena to push for the return to constitutional rule. Partly because of this lack of understanding of the inextricable links between gender and democracy, FWRM lost one staff member and two long-standing key members who were both former directors of the organisation, an Indo-Fijian and an indigenous Fijian. The last two both emigrated in despair. They felt that they lacked the energy to struggle yet again for democracy, preferring to join other organisations dedicated to women's issues outside Fiji.

FWRM and the progressive NGO movement as a whole have learnt to focus on the common goals of democracy and human rights, and to be wary about the politics of race. As a nation Fiji has also become politicised, recognising that sanctioning illegal

regimes of any sort inevitably brings with it lack of good governance, corruption, state sponsorship of racism, cronyism, nepotism and a bigger and bigger divide between the rich and the poor. FWRM members have also matured politically, learning from the coups of 1987 that our salvation lies in staying united, showing that women of all races can work together despite the odds stacked against them.

FWRM overcame its racial differences by focusing on campaigns that all its members could all agree on. They could not all agree on racial issues, but they could agree that certain human rights were fundamental and that women must combine resources to ensure the continuity of these rights.

This does not mean that FWRM did not have its trials or that it will not continue to have them. At various times members and staff have questioned its commitment to democracy and some have been made to feel that, if they were supporters of democracy, they were therefore anti-indigenous Fijian or pro-Indo-Fijian. FWRM has learnt to celebrate its racial diversity and to rejoice that, despite the differences, members have more to unite them than to divide them. It is a pity the state does not learn from the women's movement.

The long-term implications of the conflicts in Fiji for women's rights

There are very compelling reasons to say that, whatever the backlash has been to the improvement in the situation of women, it has been heightened by the political crisis. It has happened in Fiji and in the Solomon Islands. These challenges demonstrate the very close connections between conflict, gender, race and democracy. If there was an opportunity before 2000 for women to mobilise across the racial divide, the coup did enormous damage to that possibility.

Every time we move forward and try to build a multiracial democracy, in which women can mobilise in an environment that is conducive to improving their status, a coup happens. The coup cycle reduces opportunities for action on gender issues because people become so racially polarised. These intersections, and the subtle and not so subtle interplays between them, affect women in every way. They go to the essence of what Fiji women are, and that is why gender issues cannot be analysed in isolation from democracy and race issues. They are all fundamental to the feminist analysis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is relatively easy for anti-feminist forces to derail a feminist campaign in Fiji by saying 'it is anti-Fijian' (that is, anti-indigenous Fijian). Immediately, it puts indigenous Fijian women on their guard, and prevents women of all races working together for women's rights.

Despite the huge forces working against it, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement has proven that women can cross the huge racial chasms to work together for democracy and for women's rights. I am attempting to persuade my own Indo-Fijian community that to embrace another's culture in the interests of genuine multiracialism is not to deny your own culture. In compromise lies our salvation, not our demise.

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Pathways to political participation in Fiji: gender, race and religion in sustainable community development and nation building

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Introduction

This article is based on my involvement in the work of two women's groups operating at grassroots level to create common pathways towards peace and reconciliation. The article first examines the emerging conceptual frameworks that formed the basis for work with an indigenous rural women's empowerment project based in Tailevu province, Fiji. It then considers work with an urban-based multicultural women's group that grew out of the Blue Ribbon peace vigils in Suva. The final section considers the implications of this field experience for enhanced political participation, nation building and continued peace and stability in Fiji.

Emerging conceptual frameworks for gender and development

The rural women's initiative began 12 months before the coup and the ensuing political crisis in 2000. It took a strong proactive approach to gender and development, and later adopted a reactive position in the aftermath of the coup in March of the same year. The urban group emerged as a result of, and in response to, the coup. Since then, the urban group has become more proactive as it settled into a routine of ongoing reconciliation and peace-building.

Before the coup: March 1999 to the present

My involvement in rural women's empowerment began on my return to Fiji after completing doctoral study at the Australian National University in Canberra. Because I had a willing audience, a creditable background of prior experience with women and youth training in the communities, and easy access to seats of influence and leadership in the province, the task before me was not as daunting as I had initially expected.¹

To ensure that the project was successful it was crucial that certain assumptions about Fijian society formed the ground rules and, in turn, guided the process of rural women's empowerment on the ground. The social and political undercurrents following the election of the Fiji Labour Party suggested it was the right time to embark on a proactive approach that would focus on developing skills and building capacities in rural communities.

A five-year project called the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV) provincial women's project began in mid-1999. It had three broad aims:

- to develop a methodology of capacity building at grassroots level that incorporated issues of gender and governance aimed at empowering rural women;
- to document a rural model that would lay the basis for similar projects in the other 13 provinces of Fiji; and

- to develop the project's potential for transferability and adaptability among other small island states around the Pacific region.

After the first 18 months of this project a methodology had emerged (Nabalarua 2001). The move to the second phase of capacity building on a nationwide basis, using the Tailevu model, has been delayed because of funding restrictions.

The vision, conceptual framework, design and implementation of this project was initiated and coordinated by the author. The criteria that have guided intervention in both projects provide insights into the parameters of facilitating change at community level, and are discussed below.

Social impact

Using a multidisciplinary approach, this project aims to fulfill a range of learning objectives at different levels. At the level of applied research, it attempts to provide viable options for addressing rural women's drudgery and poverty through increased access to development opportunities. This has meant looking at development applications that integrate indigenous knowledge systems with conventional organisational practices adapted to suit the particularities of a changing rural subsistence economy.

At the level of the community, and among the women themselves, learning by doing and using empowerment approaches that facilitate and expand upon knowledge produced a greater commitment to the aims of the project. From the position of policymakers, development specialists, researchers, trainers and adult learners involved in community development, the documentation process would in turn form the basis of a case study rich in ethnographic data. This case study can provide significant information for policy-making and development intervention on the ground.

Target outreach

This project has been implemented within the framework of the largest indigenous women's group in the province, namely, the TSSV. All Fijian women may either choose to be members or, if they are registered as indigenous Fijians, they become members automatically. They may assume either active or latent membership status. Since the TSSV directs its services to women classified as household or group producers between the ages of 15 and 59 years, there are approximately 7,000 women whose lives are actively or latently influenced by the project.

Monitoring activities continue throughout the project cycle, and the year 2005 has been put aside for project evaluation. The impact of this project on the women of Tailevu province and their families will be measured by the number of new opportunities for income generation, the extent of poverty reduction, the extent to which income bases have been expanded, and the increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision making at provincial level.

Creativity and innovation

I was able to create a provincial model for rural women's empowerment because I could see the existing capacity gaps at provincial level. Money, or the lack of it, was not a determining factor in the evolution of the project, because the guiding principle was to first develop a creditable strategy that would warrant future funding support. With minor restructuring in the first six months, the TSSV has to date a little fewer than 200 TSSV officials on the ground servicing around 145 villages and settlements spread over the 22

districts that comprise Tailevu province. The project has put in place an organised network of women who have been trained in data collection, data processing and information dissemination throughout communities.

This project is an innovative landmark in many ways. In a project designed so that it can be replicated at local, regional and national levels within its life cycle, each phase feeds off, and relates to, the other. Such local, regional and national integration is seldom seen in many Pacific island development projects.

This is the first comprehensive project on rural women's empowerment in Fiji. In particular, it is the first of its kind to emerge from the grassroots at provincial level. It is also the first to develop a model for rural women's empowerment that will be replicable in the other 13 provinces of the country.

This is also the first indigenous women's project in which the documentation of a process of self-development has been managed and controlled by provincial women themselves. The project design incorporates new ways of organising and participating to separate traditional leadership from member-driven leadership. A strategic plan specifically compiled for the project is a key document for the women in the province, because it locates the current provincial demographic profile for health, education, housing and economic activity in a national context. It therefore provides significant indicators about priorities for development of which the women should be aware and that they should address.

The use of the Fijian language as the medium of communication and dissemination of information in all documents, with the exception of the strategic plan, is an important factor in obtaining local ownership of and commitment to the project.

Vision, goal setting and problem solving

The vision for the project was the empowerment of rural women, to make them effective in taking control of their lives and making a difference in their own communities. Training developed skills and involved widespread consultation. Group dynamics and teamwork were reflected in the processes of goal setting and problem solving. While it was the author's vision that originally initiated and activated the project, it later became the collective vision of the TSSV, once the project was endorsed by the organisation's leaders and members.

Replicability

With the project now going into its third year and the documentation continuing, it is ready to be replicated in Fiji's other 13 provinces.

Capacity building

Capacity building is the core of this project because empowering rural women, especially Fijian women, requires increased capacity as a springboard for raising awareness and exercising timely and informed choices. Newly acquired skills, self-esteem and confidence levels are reflected in the effective articulation and increased participation and representation of women at village and district meetings. This indicates an increasing recognition among women of the importance of exercising basic rights. The high attendance of the 44 women leaders at most of the meetings and the workshops in the province in the past 12 months indicates a willingness to take on new options accruing from learning opportunities and a commitment to a common vision.

Local ownership

The project was structured so its ownership has always been in the hands of the women themselves. This has proved valuable because, while the project architect has been living in New Zealand, the project is being sustained and monitored by the women leaders and the TSSV officials. Regarding the ownership of the intellectual property of the project, it has been my wish that, while this project has been turned into a TSSV project, the women of Tailevu should take pride in sharing knowledge and information and establishing networks with women in the other provinces.

It was suggested that a model that works is the most practical and valuable contribution to rural women's empowerment around the country that women in Tailevu could ever make. It would be a modest gesture on our part to provide this information to other provinces and one that would not be easily forgotten by women from those other provinces. A lack of funding is the only reason why the TSSV has not been able to replicate this project in the other provinces, despite repeated requests from provincial women and other leaders.

Development ethics in the field

I was constantly reminded by village elders of the need to ensure that dignity and integrity were acknowledged and respected throughout the development process. This was built into the methodologies and processes used. It meant walking with the people and creating self-determined spaces along the way where they could stand and belong.

The TSSV project continues, and has maintained a high profile in the province. Because the project was established before the coup in March 2000, it has been an important stabilising factor in the face of pockets of civil 'disobedience' into which many of the villages and communities were unwittingly drawn during the period of anxiety and social upheaval immediately after the coup.

After the coup: March 2000 to the present

This examination of the urban-based women's project that emerged after the coup, which used the same criteria as those above, attempts to show the extent to which the common parameters of the project can be replicated in different contexts.

fem'LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women is a Suva-based women's NGO committed to linking women with the media, bringing stories of women and their communities to the forefront, and sharing these stories with the rest of society. This initiative was born out of the Blue Ribbon peace vigils that occurred during the period of the coup, and has since been committed to increasing awareness of critical social, political and economic issues.

The movement provides a public means for promoting peace and reconciliation in Fiji, and it has continued to grow in terms of outcomes and outreach. Much of its work is funded by aid agencies. With the exception of project-funded staff, the five professional women who make up the collective, including the trustees, provide a voluntary service specifically for women. This organisation emerged at just the right time to maximise its ability to operate without burdensome bureaucratic restrictions.

During the 56 days in the immediate aftermath of the coup, when the predominantly Labour parliamentarians were being kept as hostages in Parliament House, the vigils assumed greater meaning day by day, and mobilised increasing numbers of people. The local and international press spread our faces across newspaper and television screens as a reminder to the rest of the world that a peaceful resolution was what many people

hoped for. The Anglican Church, which hosted the peace vigils, became the focal refuge point, the safety house, a place for peace and a haven of hope.

Social impact

This project's multicultural focus and its outreach to the wider community meant that a vibrant and fresh social consciousness emerged. This had wide appeal because the members of the group were articulate communicators whose interpersonal dynamics made their alliances cohesive and clear. Raising awareness through the appropriate media, and being media friendly, they developed a good social rapport with the public at large.

Creativity and innovation

The level of creativity and innovation lies in the group's professional expertise and the way it has been able to develop projects and obtain funding as a collective. Since fem'LINKpacific's inception, the group has produced videos for peace, reconciliation and nation building, and organised local, regional and national workshops on peace-related themes with other NGOs. They have worked with other women's groups in compiling the NGO report on the status of women in Fiji, and have maintained a regular electronic link with partners across the globe.

Target outreach

Because this organisation is media focused, its work has been screened in the large theatres in town, with smaller groups and communities having access to videotapes for group viewing, discussion and feedback. The work touches on the daily common struggles of women to meet basic needs and to achieve common goals, such as good education for their children, decent housing and good health care. The group's output emphasises the collective right of women to have a quality family life, and to strive towards peaceful coexistence and harmony. The project was also part of a national children's art and literary workshop for peace, run in conjunction with Fiji TV and primary schools.

Vision, goal setting and problem solving

The vision of bringing the stories of women and their communities to the forefront of media exposure in order to raise social awareness is the main reason for fem'LINK's existence. The use of multilingual media programs to empower women by raising awareness has meant that the project's multicultural focus is being addressed and sustained.

Replicability

The fem'LINK project has been arranged so that it is replicable throughout island nations in the region in terms of its social appropriateness, cultural sensitivity and cost effectiveness. The use of some of its programs in other Pacific Island countries has been anticipated, and where requests have come through, such initiatives have been endorsed by the Management Collective of fem'LINK in collaboration with the requesting agencies from around the Pacific.

Capacity building

Raising capacities by using the media means that the pace of learning is faster than it would otherwise be. Focusing on human rights, communication for peace and making

informed choices allows fem'LINK to reach different communities at different levels, because each community responds to common gaps in knowledge that need to be consistently filled.

Local ownership

The collective takes ownership of all the planning, implementation and evaluation of project activities. Decisions are collectively based and there is a sense of equality in the work ethos of fem'LINK.

Development ethics in the field

The professional calibre of the collective and the trustees demands a high level of accountability and transparency in all activities. Because fem'LINKpacific works largely with women in communities, there is an expectation that its team will show and earn respect while working in the field.

The implications of these experiences for political participation in Fiji

Overall, the impact of the rural women's project on development is reflected in the high profile that this project has among indigenous Fijian institutions, among other women's groups outside the province, and among indigenous Fijian women themselves. The women of Tailevu province see that they own something special in the form of this project. In a strategic context, their willingness to offer their services as facilitators in the replication of this project is an indication of its value and importance as cultural and intellectual property.

Current social and political instability in Fiji has shown that there is a glaring gap between the levels of fundamental skills and knowledge at national and community levels in areas such as basic human rights, indigenous rights and women's rights. Women often don't understand electoral systems and the functions of a constitution, and often don't understand that they can exercise political choice. Aspects of governance and its application at provincial level, coupled with gender concerns and leadership for social change, are new development ideas that are known only to those who have had tertiary education. This is being addressed by fem'LINKpacific.

While the central focus for both projects has been on capacity building through awareness raising, advocacy and application, the main issues that have been integrated and addressed in this process include:

- empowering women by skilling them and enhancing their existing knowledge base;
- increasing women's participation and representation;
- gender and development issues;
- strengthening structures of microgovernance at community level;
- developing leadership dynamics for social change;
- resolving conflict and building peace;
- human rights, women's rights, indigenous rights and the exercise of choice;
- environmental concerns and sustainability;
- addressing basic needs;
- alleviating poverty and providing equity of access;
- improving income-generating options in a household economy; and
- maximising human resource development for increased quality of life options.

These issues are common concerns nationwide. The rural women's project in Tailevu province shows that, in enhancing political participation on the ground, this multidisciplinary emphasis has paved the way for the emergence of a group of more informed and increasingly articulate individuals in the 145 villages of the province (Nabalarua 2001).

Both women's organisations have a strong Christian base and, while they served two totally different groups, issues such as service, survival and solidarity soon became the common ground for all women during the post-coup period. The experiences discussed here show us that the pathways to political participation can take many different forms. The differences between a largely conservative indigenous women's group and a modern, progressive multicultural urban women's group reflect important gaps in capacities that each has now filled. Both groups have achieved successful outcomes given their size and mandate and, I believe, they complement each other's development aspirations well.

Equally important is the fact that they have the potential to continue contributing towards peace, stability and reconciliation at the community level. In turn, this has the potential to continue to enhance political participation and nation building in the country as a whole (Nabalarua 2000).

Conclusion

These two women's groups, although different in their make-up, have shown that there is an urgent need to work at community level in promoting systems of good governance. There is no place for a process that is self-serving and self-perpetuating. If we continue operating with colonial constructs and processes that stereotype development experiences then our efforts will be futile and redundant because they will not respond to the changing aspirations and expectations of the new Pacific generation.

Note

1. From 1999-2000, the author was a women's representative on the Tailevu Provincial Council and deputy provincial leader of the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV), a predominantly rural Fijian women's group operating in the province. Although she has relocated for work purposes to New Zealand in 2001, she continues to maintain her links with both women's groups.

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To make a difference: Realities of women's participation in Papua New Guinea politics

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Introduction

Why is women's participation so important? . . . There can be no true democracy, no true people's participation in governance and development without the equal participation of women and men in all spheres of life and at all levels of decision-making (Karl 1995:1).

Women's involvement in a sphere of life can bring new perspectives and priorities into decision-making processes and make a difference. Persistent gender inequality in the national political arena does not reflect well on a state that claims to be democratic. As long as women are denied access to the corridors of power, the quality of leadership that is essential for effective and meaningful democracy, as well as for national welfare, is being stifled.

The two crucial components of a democratic system are a democratic state and a democratic civil society. The prevailing conditions in Papua New Guinea (PNG) do not allow such a system. The state is weak and the society is characterised by a great deal of turbulence. Without economic and social rights, political rights continue to be denied to a great majority in civil society. Women are by far the majority of those denied their political rights. This presents a fundamental challenge for PNG in the next decade or more.

Within this context, women are bargaining and negotiating access to power at the centre, with the hope of bringing about improvements in the lives of their families and society as a whole. In PNG, this is happening on two frontiers, both within the state and outside it.

This article looks at women's attempts to enter national decisionmaking forums mainly through electoral contest, legislative reforms to increase women's participation in decision making, and collective action by women. Despite women's persistent losses in successive PNG national elections since 1977, their struggle is relentless and their spirit has not been stifled. Ever-increasing numbers continue to negotiate access to decision-making structures. The impact of women's struggle to gain access to the corridors of power is also evident in the recent legislative reforms.

Women's participation in electoral politics

Three women candidates contested the first PNG House of Assembly election in 1964. Elsewhere it has been reported that no women contested the 1964 and 1968 elections (Brouwer et al 1998, AusAID/Government of PNG 2000, Kamau 1997). My own research (Sepoe 1996) revealed otherwise.

Table 1 Women in national elections, 1964–1997

General elections	Number of women candidates	Number of women elected
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1964	3	0
1968	1	0
1972	4	1
1977	10	3
1982	17	1
1987	18	0
1992	16	0
1997	55	2

Source: adapted from Sepoe 1996

The first PNG national woman ever to contest an election was Ana Frank from Pari village, while the other two were expatriates: Mrs Mckeller, who was married to a district officer in Madang and who contested the Madang Open seat, and Mrs Ascroft-Smith, who was married to a public servant in Port Moresby and who stood for the central special electorate. The second House of Assembly election in 1968 drew only one woman candidate, Mrs J Wilkinson, married to an Australian planter-trader, who contested the Esa'ala Open seat in Milne Bay. All women were unsuccessful.

At self-government in 1972, four women candidates, all nationals, stood. Only one, Josephine Abaijah (now Dame), succeeded at the polls.

The national election of 1977 was the first for a newly independent nation and, in the euphoria, women who contested that election saw their challenge as paving the way for others. A total of ten women contested the 1977 election, which was, and remains, the most successful attempt at winning seats by women in PNG. Three women candidates, Nahau Rooney, Waliyato Clowes and Josephine Abaijah, triumphed in this election. Their victory, however, did not ensure the success of those who were to follow.

In the 1982 national election, 14 women, plus Clowes, Rooney and Abaijah, contested. Only one, Rooney, was elected, but only after a successful Court of Disputed Returns hearing. In the 1987 and 1992 national elections, 18 and 16 women respectively contested, however, none were elected to parliament.

Throughout 1996 and 1997, 'getting women into parliament' became the main theme in the activities undertaken by women activists. In workshops attended by provincial and community leaders of women's organisations throughout PNG, Women in Politics (WIP) and the National Council of Women (NCW) took up the challenge of training potential candidates about aspects of the political system, and in capacity building for leadership at the national level and in local-level governments (LLGs). A total of 55 women contested the 1997 election and only two, Lady Carol Kidu and Dame Josephine Abaijah, were elected.

The political culture of PNG has not readily absorbed the notion of liberalisation (Anere 2000) and it does not understand that women continue to be casualties of this system (Sepoe 1996 and 2000). In contemporary PNG, women's status has diminished. Yet, in the past, PNG culture had a different attitude towards women. They were recognised as playing a crucial and complementary role in economic production and resource management (Brouwer et al 1998, Sepoe 2000). However, 'because women played a less public persona it was concluded that women had relatively little influence in family or community decisionmaking' (Brouwer et al 1998:3).

Gender issues in electoral politics

There are many hindrances to women's effective participation in electoral politics. Some of these problems have persisted since the first parliamentary election. Others have emerged under the changing economic and political circumstances of the late 1990s and the new millennium. Any meaningful attempt to understand gender issues must be cognizant of regional variations or differences, as well as account for common experiences. For instance, women in the Highlands of PNG encounter more violence during elections than women in coastal areas, the islands and the New Guinea mainland. In terms of commonalities, nationwide women experience immense constraints on the resources they need to run election campaigns.

Changes are required in several areas so that women can be actively and meaningfully involved in the electoral process. A survey (AusAID and Government of PNG 2000) conducted in 1999 identified these priorities for change:

- review current legislation, especially regarding Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government (OLPLLG) nominated members;
- change the voting system to preferential;
- improve common roll and polling practices;
- make Electoral Commission staff more gender inclusive;
- provide support for women candidates; and
- provide voter education.

In addition, the most fundamental issue is that of culture and perceptions about women's access to power. Women's struggle for power is often perceived to be on equal terms to that of men. However, women's struggle for power is not geared towards obtaining possessive or extractive power, but rather 'power to empower'. This type of power is inextricably linked to female gender roles in society. Therefore, the decisions that they would make in the public sphere will very much reflect the type and quality of decisions that are made within the context of families and households. This is the difference that women in PNG are striving to make in the formal and institutional spheres of politics.

With the poor conduct of the elections, the increasing incidence of electoral violence and general insecurity; the prevalence of corruption; the loss of confidence in elected members of parliament; the continuing deterioration of basic infrastructure; the continuing economic crisis and increasing poverty, the role of women in PNG has largely been to 'subsidise' a weak state unable to provide for its citizens. This vital role remains invisible to those in control of resources.

The behaviour of PNG voters resembles that of marketplace activity: selling votes and buying favours from intending candidates or political parties. As long as this behaviour continues, the state will operate as the marketplace. Vested interests will conspire to get the best deal out of this political market activity. Consequently women's vital role and their voices continue to be submerged in the competition for power.

Legislative reforms

Two crucial laws, the *Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government* (OLPLLG) and the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* (OLIPPAC or Integrity Law), are intended to include women in decision making, however, there is

a problem with implementation. Poor implementation is partly rooted in the varied cultures of PNG (Okole and Kavanamur 2002) and the pre-eminence of communal–primordial sentiments over legal–liberal requirements.

Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government: The OLPLLG is an initiative of the government, under pressure from women’s organisations, that will encourage more women to participate in decision making in provincial and local-level governments. By law, there should be 566 nominated women in all 296 LLGs nationwide, two in each rural LLG and one in each urban LLG. In all 19 provincial assemblies (Bougainville and the national capital district are exempted), there should be one appointed woman. It is not known how many women are in LLGs at present, but it is a well-established fact that LLGs have failed to implement the provision on nominated women.

Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates: The enactment of the OLIPPAC in 2002 was a direct response to the problems of political instability, frequent votes of no confidence, party fragility and party hopping in PNG politics. Having a weak party system that consists of loose alliances of individuals has had a tremendous impact on the life of parliament and the life span of successive governments.

The prime objective of this legislation was to bring about political stability and discipline within parties, to build a strong party system with clear and coherent political manifestos on which voters can base their decisions. Continuity in governance of the party in power would also ensure continuity in policy making and implementation. The OLIPPAC is a major legislative instrument with which the government of PNG has demonstrated affirmative action in relation to increasing women’s participation in national level decision-making forums.

Table 2 Party allegiances of women candidates

General elections	Number of women candidates	Party affiliation	Independent
1977	10	1	9
1982	17	0	17
1987	18	7	11
1992	16	0	16
1997	55	12	43
2002	60	40	20

Source: adapted from Sepoe 1996 and Anere 2000

This law requires a member appointed by the NCW to serve on the central fund board of management, and this provision has been fulfilled. A more substantive provision encourages parties to endorse more women by giving a 75 per cent refund of electoral expenses to any party that endorses a woman candidate in a national election if the candidate receives at least 10 per cent of the votes in her electorate.

Women in Politics has called for a quota system in OLIPPAC: it wants 30 per cent of candidates endorsed by political parties in national elections to be women (WIP 2000). This amendment met with stiff opposition and the minister responsible at the time did not appear to be aware of women’s concerns.²

Impact of OLIPPAC: preliminary observations: To appreciate the impact of OLIPPAC, it is worth looking at the party allegiances of women candidates in the past national elections in PNG.

Most political analysts agree that parties have existed as nothing more than parliamentary factions, primarily operating as vehicles for formation of government in parliament and professing no commitment to gender equality. Yet the 2002 election has seen more women candidates endorsed by parties. In that election, political parties responded quite positively by endorsing far more women candidates than ever before. Out of the total of 60 women candidates, 40 women were endorsed by political parties (see Table 2).

It could be argued that female candidates were endorsed by political parties as a source of funding from the public purse. However, this argument falls short of findings from past elections that political parties endorse the candidates that are most likely to win (King 1989). Accordingly, women who have been endorsed in this election are probably the most promising candidates from the perspective of political parties. It can be deduced from this reasoning that political parties have responded to the call of women for increased participation through OLIPPAC.

In previous elections, most women contested as independent candidates, but this election was different. There is some indication of a slow and gradual shifting of boundaries in PNG politics that allows for women's participation in the formal decision-making forums. However, party structures are still male dominated. Only a handful of executive officers of registered parties are women. However, the importance of the positions they hold indicates the significance of their role, as can be seen from Table 3.

Table 3 Women executives in political parties

Name	Position	Political party
Susan Haro	Treasurer	PNG Labour Party
Mary Karo	President	People's National Congress Party
Nerri Sumati	Treasurer	People's Democratic Party
Kila Rumery	Treasurer	People's Action Party
Nolin Pivini	President and	Papua New Guinea First Party
Jeanette Kuman	Public Officer	People's Welfare Party
Jenny Artango	Secretary	Pan Melanesian Congress Party
Dorothy Tekwei	Treasurer	Melanesian Alliance Party

Source: National Gazette 2002

Women's organisations and civil society

Women worldwide participate in politics mostly in the context of collective action (Karl 1995). This is very much the case in PNG (Sepoe 2000). The nature of women's political activities can be either 'oppositional' (against the system) or 'supportive' (for the system) (Waylen 1996). Women in PNG engage in both, but much more in political activities that support the system, such as:

- the voter education undertaken by the NCW and affiliated groups in 2002;
- the WIP regional workshops for potential candidates in national and LLG elections in 2002; and
- an alliance between Transparency International and the community coalition against corruption in 2002.

Various activities of key women's organisations have attempted to build and strengthen the capacity of women and empower them, to increase their participation in the formal political arena and to provide effective leadership. These include:

- a consultative workshop, PNG Women in Decision Making in 2001;
- Good Governance and Effective Leadership, a training workshop for women members of LLGs in 1999; and
- a workshop on political awareness of the OLPLLG in 1999.

In the 2002 election, WIP and the NCW emphasised LLG leadership by encouraging more women to contest local elections. The underlying premise of women's participation in politics is making a difference. The quality of their leadership, in contrast to the predominant male style of leadership in PNG, reflects respect for state authority and a commitment to non-violence, holding community and family welfare above personal interests, efficient management and use of scarce resources, recognition of the democratic principles of people's participation and empowerment, and equitable and sustainable development.

Conclusion: to make a difference

Increasing numbers of women candidates have pursued their collective desire to make a difference in PNG politics, and women are slowly entering the mainstream political arena. In essence, women's participation has attempted to connect their private sphere of decision making with the public sphere.

Patterns of political behaviour displayed by women are a reflection of their role in society as carers and nurturers of human lives, more than anything else. These are qualities that women feel are needed in the public decision-making arena. Women's desire is to make a difference on the basis of their gender roles; it is their concern for human lives, more than power for its own sake, that increasingly brings women into the institutional sphere of politics.

A concerted effort from women, the government and donor agencies is required to sustain and expand the level of political consciousness among grassroots women. To help curb the increasing abuse of public power and resources for personal gain and to satisfy the parochial interests of wantoks (relatives) or friends, and to ensure responsible leadership for the common good, more effort is needed to reach out to the vast majority of women and the general populace to facilitate a certain level of mass political consciousness.

It is clear that women's participation is essential for building a sustainable and democratic society and government. Women are half of every community, therefore they are half of the solution to problems encountered in society and in governance. Women believe they can make a difference to their lives, the lives of their families and the nation if they are supported in their efforts.

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Where are the women in Simbu politics?

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Throughout the world, women are perceived to participate in politics less than men. While attention is paid to their involvement in women's organisations and local level government, in aid rhetoric (UNIFEM 1999, World Bank 2001, UNDP 1999a) women's political participation is framed largely in terms of representation in parliament, a key indicator of the United Nation's Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) (UNDP 1999b: 12). In developing countries such as Papua New Guinea, the disparity between male and female representation in parliament is particularly marked, with only one of one hundred and nine parliamentary seats being currently held by a female. This disparity is greatest in the Highlands region, where women are yet to gain representation in Papua New Guinea's parliament.

If women's political participation is measured in terms of their representation in national parliaments, Pacific women indeed exhibit extremely low levels of political participation. Such an indicator however, fails to provide a complete understanding of women's political participation and influence. For example, in the Highlands province of Simbu, despite the fact that only eight women contested the Papua New Guinea 2002 National Election, Simbu women were active participants in the national electoral process. Like Simbu men, Simbu women participated in decision-making at the local level, contributing to their residential group's choice of National Election candidate. In addition, throughout the immediate pre-polling period, Simbu women avidly discussed their political views and played a fundamental role in sustaining electoral campaigns. Significantly, on polling day, Simbu women lined up to vote.

While no women contested the Kerowagi District open seat in Simbu Province, Kerowagi women played a fundamental role in local electoral politicking during the Papua New Guinea 2002 National Election. Further, given the blatant disjunction between external representations of women's political participation (based upon figures of their election to parliament) and the way in which local women characterise themselves as politically active, it is suggested that a broader approach to gauging women's political participation would more accurately reflect the ways in which local peoples experience the political.

Women and politics

Increasing women's participation in politics occupies a prominent position on the agendas of international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, being touted as an issue of human rights, and also of development. Primarily, they argue that in the absence of women's participation in political decision-making, national legislatures fail to account for the specific needs and aspirations of women, consequently further entrenching the feminisation of poverty and continuing male dominance in nominal positions of authority (UNIFEM 1999). Central to this argument is the notion that the state (or state institutions such as national legislatures) has the capacity to effect social change, and moreover, that political participation be framed in reference to the state. A necessary corollary of this argument is the demarcation of

politics as a domain of state action, as distinct from local politics and the purportedly distinct 'private' domain.

Despite the attempts of organisations such as UNIFEM (1999) to facilitate Pacific women's involvement in politics, formal politics remains predominantly the preserve of men. Papua New Guinea fares particularly poorly relative to its smaller Pacific island neighbours, whereby a population of some 4.5 million has seen only four women in parliament since 1975. In comparison, the small island state of Fiji currently boasts eight female members of parliament (UNIFEM 1999).

The impediments to women's participation in the formal political arena are many and varied, being personal, social and economic in nature. At the personal level, women's lack of confidence in the public realm has been offered as an explanation for their under-representation in national politics (UNIFEM 1999). In addition, social factors such as gender roles, the pervasiveness of masculine political cultures, violence against women, the lesser social mobility of women and the fewer educational opportunities available to women impinge upon their political participation (UNIFEM 1999, Sepoe 1996). These overarching impediments are further entrenched by economic considerations, primarily women's inadequate access to the financial resources imperative for political campaigning.

Such impediments inevitably contributed to the gross gender imbalance of candidates in Papua New Guinea's 2002 National Election, with only 41 of 2875 candidates being female, a mere 1.4 per cent. In Simbu Province, of 494 candidates contesting six Open seats, only six were female, one from Chuave, two from Kundiawa, and three from Sinasina-Yonggamugl. In three electorates—Gumine, Karimui and Kerowagi—all candidates were male, and of 41 candidates contesting the Chimbu Regional seat, only two were female. No female candidates were successful in obtaining either an Open or Regional seat in Simbu Province (Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission 2002).

In attempts to understand this disparity, prior to polling I asked approximately fifty adult Simbu to discuss the likelihood of Simbu women candidates being elected. Both male and female Simbu claimed that while some female candidates possessed exemplary educational qualifications, financial resources and requisite oratorical prowess, Simbu women were less highly respected as public speakers than men. Discussants however, optimistically noted changing attitudes towards women's participation in the formal political arena, with one man's observation that 'women know how to run families well thus they are capable of looking after electorates too', gaining broad support. Furthermore, while ongoing notions of sexual antagonism contribute to perceptions of women as weak and polluting, there was no question of women's actual ability to undertake the tasks for which politicians are responsible.

Unfortunately, such rhetoric lent little favour to female candidates such as Sarah Garap, who featured prominently in a media program on the 2002 National Elections (ABC Television 2002). In that program, Sarah, who was contesting the Sinasina-Yonggamugl Open seat, said that she was prevented from voting and threatened with violence. It is worth noting however, that while media coverage focused upon the difficulties experienced by women during the actual polling process, such difficulties were by no means gender specific, with male candidates being similarly threatened with violence and prevented from voting. This does not deny the existence of the extra barriers faced by women attempting to enter formal politics. However, my own observations suggest that such representations do not accurately convey the nature of the gender specific impediments faced by women, as previously discussed.

In light of these aforementioned difficulties and constraints against women candidates, it is hardly surprising that few Simbu women mobilised the support and resources necessary to win a seat in parliament, or even nominate for the 2002 National Elections. Significantly however, while women's representation in national parliament is a key measure of women's political participation, the under-representation of women in parliament does not negate women's participation in other forms of political action. Nor does it follow that grassroots women define political activity and participation in relation to direct parliamentary representation. Let us then examine the ways in which Kerowagi women discussed and enacted their notions of politics during the Papua New Guinea 2002 National Election.

Simbu women and politics

Simbu Province lies in the heart of the Papua New Guinea highlands and has a population of approximately 184,000 people (National Statistical Office 1993). While distinct linguistic groups exhibit varying cultural identities, cultural practices and beliefs are relatively consistent throughout Simbu (Brown 1995:13). The people amongst whom I have lived and worked are known as the Bari, a tribe of some 3,000 people, belonging to Kerowagi District, Kup Subdistrict. Throughout 1999 and much of 2000, I came to know the Bari while undertaking doctoral research. I returned to Simbu in June this year, with the aim of documenting the participation of three Bari candidates in the 2002 National Election. More specifically, I paid particular attention to the role of women in the campaigns of male Bari candidates.

While no females nominated as candidates for the Kerowagi Open seat, discussions with women suggested that they viewed themselves as important actors in both local and national politicking. For example, Bari women actively participate in community dispute resolution forums, women's groups and church groups. In addition, they play a public, if not oratorical role in exchange ceremonies. In this context, the adage 'behind every good man is a woman' rings particularly true, for while men announce pigs to be given in exchange and subsequently accrue status, it is publicly known that it is women who raise them. Moreover, women have strategic interests in advancing the status of their men, and exert considerable influence over the ways in which family resources are deployed. On occasion I have witnessed women *straik* (protest) against their husbands by refusing to support their attempts to gain status via the distribution of pigs.

While the outside observer may see women's role in supporting men's political interests as perpetuating male dominance and entrenching women's domestic role, Bari women do not equate pig production and distribution solely with the domestic realm, but rather, they characterise it as an integral aspect of local politics, negating the existence of clearly defined domestic and public or political realms. Furthermore, women exercise agency by offering and withdrawing support in accordance with their own priorities and needs. Like 'traditional' or local Highlands politics, national politicking in the Highlands involves the exchange of wealth, thus Bari women played a fundamental role in the 2002 National Election by supporting their chosen candidate's campaign via the provision of prestige food items and pigs.

In Kerowagi District, campaigning primarily involved hosting campaign nights in 'campaign houses' within each candidate's home territory, and also travelling to other regions in order to network and deliver campaign speeches. Irrespective of the location in which campaigning occurred, candidates were at all times required to provide food to members of their audience. On only one occasion did I witness a woman complaining about the extra demands placed upon her by the campaign process, with many women

exhibiting pride in their ability to contribute to the provision of food items and pigs. In this respect, it is worth noting that like men, Bari women may achieve varying degrees of public status, and indeed there are local language terms specifically pertaining to women's status. Interestingly, the primary patron of one Bari candidate was a woman who exerted considerable influence over the way in which that candidate campaigned, and ultimately controlled the way in which he deployed resources.

In addition to playing a central role in the provision of resources to chosen candidates, Bari women actively participated in discussions pertaining to campaign strategies and avidly discussed their political views. Significantly, while 'campaign houses' were interchangeably referred to as 'men's houses', both men and women spent their nights in such houses discussing political strategies and hosting visitors. Primary contributors to these discussions were men, however many women also offered suggestions relating to campaign strategies. When speaking of elections, women expressed the same aspirations and priorities as men, claiming that their primary expectation of candidates was the provision of services, particularly infrastructure improvement, health care and free education.

While women expressed a desire to see Simbu women elected, localism reigned supreme, with women's primary commitment being to electing a member from their own tribe, thus facilitating their access to Electoral Development Funds (EDF). Women did not explicitly associate the election of a woman candidate with improved attention to women's specific needs, and when I suggested that I would vote for a female regional candidate because I wanted to support a woman, I was told that it was more important to vote for someone from the Kup Subdistrict than to vote for someone on the basis of gender. Furthermore, while some male candidates paid explicit homage to women's issues, as per established voting norms, women were more interested in electing a representative from their own region than in electing a representative on the basis of issues raised by that candidate.

In attempts to assist candidates from their own region in gaining widespread support, women consciously facilitated their husband's and brothers' networking by activating affinal links. In this sense, women were key resources for politically ambitious men, however they also characterized their role in exploiting affinal links as a conscious participatory act. The fact that one Bari candidate gained more than 70 per cent of his votes from outside of his base area illustrates the importance of such links. Other studies have similarly noted that 'Most of the candidates believed that they would receive votes from their wives' clan or village' (Yasi 1996: 267). In many ways, the role of women in assisting men in obtaining electoral support is therefore continuous with the role of women in assisting men to obtain status as 'traditional' big men, primarily by way of helping them in amassing the material wealth necessary to succeed in exchange and also by emphasizing affinal associations.

Another important and publicly visible role played by women was the composition and leading of election campaign songs. Throughout the pre-electoral period, campaign songs were plentiful, being sung from the back of utility trucks by supporters sporting megaphones, by those travelling by foot on the campaign trail and by supporters gathered in campaign houses throughout the night. While men partook in the singing, the songs of men were significantly different and less prevalent than those of women. Primarily, men sang songs in a quasi-'traditional' fashion, espousing the virtues of their chosen candidate through minimalist song texts. Women however, composed a plethora of songs with extensive narrative texts in a choral style emulating modern church compositions.

According to women, the express purpose of these songs was to elevate the name of the candidate, to signal to others that the candidate was approaching and to put down the claims of opposing political candidates. Song texts included references to the credentials of the candidate (e.g. educational achievements, appealing physical characteristics), elements of the candidate's campaign (e.g. party affiliation, electoral promises, campaign strategies) and place names with which the candidate was associated. In addition, songs targeted specifically at competing candidates rebuffed those candidates' claims to suitability and made comparisons between the relative merits of candidates. These songs played a significant role in the maintenance of group sentiment, assisted people in remaining awake throughout the night while campaign planning was occurring, and basically served as a unifying source amongst the supporters of each candidate. Moreover, campaign songs constituted deliberate threats against opposing candidates by damaging their reputation in attempts to force them to resign their candidacy. Women appeared to relish their role in antagonising opposing candidates and were not deterred by the occasional rock thrown in their direction. In this sense, women saw themselves as central to the maintenance of group support and in the deterrence of opposition.

Perhaps the most salient indicator of women's interest and participation in the 2002 National Election is the fact that like men, women voted. While voter statistics are as yet unavailable, previous studies in other regions indicate that women comprise 50 per cent of voters (Pokawin and Rooney 1996: 138). In Simbu, like men, many women voters were threatened with violence but persisted in voting. All discussions in which I participated suggested that women were just as interested as men in voting and they similarly schemed about ways in which to interfere with the polling process so as to gain greater support for their chosen candidate. At one point, a woman jokingly spoke of the way in which she would '*grisim ol poling ofisa*' (use her sexuality to persuade the polling officer) to assist in the rigging of votes. Thus women, like men, showed great interest in the polling process and were similarly eager to advance the interests of their chosen candidate by casting their vote.

Conclusion

The above discussion provides a snapshot of Kerowagi women's participation in the 2002 National Elections, suggesting that while Simbu women have not yet achieved the desired 'ends' of the electoral process, they are actively implicated in the 'means' through which parliamentary participation is achieved. Certainly, such participation differs markedly from participating in politics at the senior decision-making level. However, women's discussion of candidate choices, their contributions to community candidate selection, their promotion and support of selected candidates and ultimately, their participation in voting also constitute political participation.

As noted by Sepoe (1996: 120), this suggests that 'It is necessary to recognise the fact that not all women in Papua New Guinea share the view that women must gain political power at the national level, or at the lower levels of government.' Indeed, given the weakness of the Papua New Guinean state, it is reasonable to question whether parliamentary participation is the primary means through which the specific needs and aspirations of Papua New Guinean women will be advanced, for '[a]fter all, decision-making does not just take place in public offices' (Sepoe 1998: 281). Thus, while it remains important that more Papua New Guinean women enter the formal political realm, it is similarly important that the political actions of grassroots women are recognised and promoted.

The fact that Kerowagi women categorise themselves as political participants poses a challenge to commonly held assumptions about political participation, as embodied in aid rhetoric. In arguing that Kerowagi women actively participate in both the national electoral process and politicking at the local level, I have offered a small example that mitigates external conceptions of Melanesian women as apolitical and dominated by masculine political cultures. This does not justify the continual exclusion of women from national parliament or other high offices. It does, however, suggest the existence of broader conceptions of political participation.

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Gender and perceptions of political power in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

It is extremely difficult to generalise about any group of people in a country as socially and geographically diverse as Papua New Guinea (PNG). As have women everywhere, the women in PNG have had different life experiences, but they do have one thing in common: they are one of the most disadvantaged groups in their society.

In October 2001, the Women in Politics symposium was held in Madang. The main focus of the seminar was to encourage women to stand for the local-level government elections, as well as the national elections that were being held simultaneously. There was a determination among the women who attended — the 2002 election was going to be the turning point for them. Women seemed more united and focused than ever.

However, as the 2002 election results unfolded, it became clear that women's representation in national politics had not improved. As a facilitator at the symposium in Madang, I had the opportunity to meet women who had contested previous elections and those who were intending to be candidates in 2002. It is through their voices that I was able to obtain a picture of women's growing interest in being involved in politics prior to the 2002 election, despite the almost insurmountable problems they faced (several of their comments are cited in this article).

Culture, custom and power relationships

The most common explanation given for why women in Papua New Guinea are not recognised as equals in the society is 'cultural factors', or the term more commonly used in the Pacific, 'custom' or 'pasin bilong mipela'. Custom is a very important part of PNG society and even for those who have received a Western education or who live mainly in the urban areas, there is little escape from what is considered customary ways. They take on an almost sacrosanct significance and anyone who dares to ignore them is soon ostracised.

Women spoke to me of the importance of culture in their lives, and the need to feel a sense of belonging, yet they were critical of the way in which men are using culture as an excuse to do what they consider is good for themselves. Custom has been deployed by political elites for their own particular purposes. 'Anything that appears to be of great antiquity can be portrayed as carrying greater authority in the present' (Lawson 1997:2). This criticism is not of tradition as such, but rather of the way in which the idea of tradition is sometimes used in the South Pacific. Because something is considered of traditional significance, its preservation is automatically perceived as essential. In this way, democracy is often viewed as being embedded in the West, when in fact it is a relatively new concept.

Many women in PNG view tradition or culture to be unchangeable, and therefore accept the subordinate role as inevitable. Kanjaljit Soin argues that 'when women believe that differences in status are part of the "natural order of things", they are less likely to challenge how society is organized to benefit men more than women' (Soin 1998:10). In the 1980s, PNG's parliament hotly debated whether to make wife-beating a crime under the Criminal Code. A number of members denounced the bill, arguing they

had paid bride price and therefore had the right. Lady Kidu, member for Port Moresby South, encountered a similar reaction in the October 2001 sitting of parliament when she tried to have a private member's bill on rape in marriage accepted in parliament. The reaction of many members was that what occurred in the home was not the concern of anyone else.

Yet there are many women in PNG, who are not prepared to accept this attitude any more, and groups such as the National Council of Women and Women in Politics are encouraging women to vote for a candidate of their own choice, who will be sympathetic to women's issues (Hopkos 2000). Through the determination of politicians such as Lady Kidu, the whole package of legislation on rape, sexual assault, child sexual protection, and new rules of evidence — particularly for women and children — was passed in the last sitting of the national parliament prior to the 2002 election. One woman spoke of how much her culture meant to her:

Culture has played an important part in my life as I feel I have to have my roots; otherwise, I would be someone without a tribe . . . I value the customs and even though I am exposed to the gender concept at the same time, as a traditional woman, I also embrace my culture, because it maintains peace and harmony in our society.

Yet, the culture being referred to here is very different today from what it was 50 or even 25 years ago. Traditional cultures are being abused and the essence of culture is being changed. This view is supported by Sarah Garap, when she writes of the plight of women and girls in the Simbu province: 'There can be little doubt that women in Papua New Guinea society today are viewed and treated differently than their female ancestors were. However, it is hard to unravel genuine tradition from myth' (Garap 2000:162).

Women are becoming more and more aware that the custom that they value and respect is not the same today as it was when they were young. Women were respected in the society as wives and mothers and this gave them a certain amount of 'power', maybe not as a spokesperson but as a decision maker and a force behind the men in her household. Anthropological research (Barlow 1995, Fergie 1995, Maschio 1995) on the traditional role of women supports the view that women in many parts of the country used to have more power in their society than they have today.

It is important to note here that the traditional concept of power has a very different meaning to that of the modern sense of the word, which denotes political or economic control. The whole concept of politics, as it is practised in PNG today, is a foreign import. That is probably why politics has become so dysfunctional, and why the western concept of majority rule has taken on a completely different meaning there.

Colonisation, development and women's power

Colonisation and development have been major contributors to the decline in the status of women. The missionaries, with their Christian family models, where a woman's primary role is that of a wife and mother, may have added to this (Drage 1994, Wormald 1994). Certain aspects of modernisation, such as education and health services, liberated women, but issues of development altered their power. Women were excluded from taking a role in public affairs.

Post-independence governments, despite paying lip service to gender and development policies and being signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have also pursued development strategies that do not have a great deal to do with gender equity (Connell 1997). Instead, they have promoted male dominance in politics and used culture and

tradition to legitimise their actions. As a consequence, women have been excluded from major decision making, and issues of importance to women have been ignored.

Religion and women's power

Despite the role that religion has played in the demise of women's power, many consider the women's fellowships that they belong to as a central factor in their advancement as leaders within their communities. They are grateful for the educational opportunities that the mission has given them, the encouragement they received to pursue higher education, and the many employment opportunities in mission schools or health centres. Many women believe the roles they have played on church committees have given them valuable leadership experience and confidence. Their faith in God also has given them the strength to put themselves forward in politics despite the odds against them. Some women consider strong a Christian commitment to be a prerequisite for any aspiring politician.

One woman from the ethnic group Motu-Koita (centred in the heart of Port Moresby, the national capital) believes that the women in her area are more interested in church activities and they try 'to push politics away'. However, she thinks they do believe in using their influence with the men, while letting the men be the leaders. One woman said:

We do not have the desire or challenge to enter politics, unlike the sisters I have seen at this symposium. It has really taken my attention to see how involved the women here are in local-level government and community affairs and their aspirations of going into the political arena. On my side they are more involved in church-oriented activities. I have learnt a lot from this symposium with these women attending.

Women and political power

Yet women are becoming more and more convinced of the necessity to be represented in the national government. A man I interviewed in Port Moresby summed up the feeling:

I think there is just the need for a woman's point of view; a man can never do that no matter how much he tries. I think it is more of a gender balance, not so much for numbers' sake but I think there just needs to be a stronger voice and more women can do that.

American surveys suggest that:

even a few women in the Legislature have a good influence on the male politicians — women aspire to build consensus and create a harmonious workplace — and there has been a discernible shift in the men towards a more participatory, less autocratic style [Dysart et al 1996].

One aspiring female politician concluded:

that women will bring the balance that is so urgently needed. Men for too long have dominated the country and the country is in real trouble. It is important for men to realise that we want to work with them to improve the country.

Is it merely a matter of convincing the voters that women are needed in the political process or are the issues more insidious than that? The political system in PNG is inherently discriminatory and this greatly affects women's chances of being elected. The voting system is first past the post, and in the 1997 election there was an average of 21.8 candidates per electorate (Kauilo 1997:9). There is a tendency for people to vote along tribal lines, the winner representing the most populous tribe in the region. Wealth is another factor: 'People look upon successful wealthy people for help, guidance and

leadership without giving any consideration to other qualifications and qualities a leader should have' (Kaumba 1989:50)

Culture and political power

In many Papua New Guinean homes, women do have a strong influence; they make the important decisions about bride price and ceremonial activities. Their opinions are sought by their husbands or male relatives, especially during important occasions when decisions have to be made about which pigs to kill, or how many yams or bundles of sago to contribute. The woman is the decision maker behind the scenes. As one aspiring female politician from Madang commented:

That power of making decisions and influencing is the one advantage we can utilise and we can help to make women aware of this. Power sharing is one thing that is important. They have the power to influence their husbands and their brothers. This should be used.

An Engan woman commented on women having an influence behind the scenes: 'In certain parts of Papua New Guinea, women own the land and women are the great influences in the family. Men appear to make the decisions but it is the women who have influenced him before he comes out to say it.' However, to her this is not good enough. She intends to stand for election in Enga one day:

Women should be given an equal opportunity to participate in all levels of decision making in the country. Papua New Guinea has failed us a lot because it is a male-dominated government, which has not given equal opportunity to women.

Not everyone believes that culture plays such an important role in politics in PNG. One candidate commented that,

It is your opponents that use that culture trick and say that our culture says women should not take a lead in politics. Politics is a concept that has been introduced by the Western world. Our system has been based on the big man but he was a caring person, a person who was ready to defend his community. He was caring, loving. He made sure there was no poverty. He gave land for gardens because he did not want his community to suffer. We do not have this anymore. The male politicians have gone into parliament, they have forgotten about the culture, and what makes a big man. As a result we have leaders who go in there and they couldn't care less about their constituents.

She argued that that attitude should be restored and that it is women who possess that quality, although it has been dormant since PNG entered into Western political ways.

One woman, contesting a seat in Lufa in the Eastern Highlands, did not consider that culture would be a problem for her. She felt confident that her supporters respected her as a woman because it is said, 'Harim tok bilong mama, kos meri karim yu' (Listen to women because they gave birth to you and they should have your respect).

Another woman, contesting a seat in Popondetta in the Northern province agreed that her chances of getting into politics would not be hindered by culture, even though she came from an area where the man is the head of the family and owns the land. She believed that people are aware that they have been suffering for too long, there is a need for a change, and 'A woman is needed to make that change.' The men were also saying that a man had been doing the job for the last 26 years and there had been no development, so it was time to see if the women could do it.

Bringing about change

Transparency International (PNG), which is part of the global organisation against corruption, has suggested that 20 regional seats be reserved for women for ten years. Both men and women will still vote for the candidates in those seats. The chance of this being passed by parliament is slim, and some women are concerned that men will then exclude women from standing for other seats, as they will see that as an encroachment on their territory. Another alternative suggested is that an extra 20 seats be added to the present 109-member parliament and that these be reserved for women. Others have recommended that there be nominated seats for women as there are in the local-level governments, but many women are adamant that they will not be respected by male politicians unless they win the seats. Is affirmative action the answer? Are the obstacles in front of women too great to overcome?

The movement to encourage women to vote for women is gathering momentum although there are still a lot of issues with which to contend. It is not only the men who need to be convinced that women will be good representatives for them in government: women are not voting for women. An explanation for this is,

They have not been supporting women in the elections because of their husbands or relatives and cultural opinions. Tribal loyalty is a big issue. Women want to vote for a woman but if she is not from that tribe, then that makes a difference. These are the things we need to understand and change.

Conclusion

The majority view is changing, and men are no longer viewed as having the natural right to leadership in PNG. There is definitely a changing atmosphere and a shift in gender relations, particularly among the educated elite. Entrenched attitudes are changing as the role of women as partners in development is slowly being understood. Fewer women are accepting the situation as the 'natural order of things', and more are aware that it is essential for their growth and survival that they understand the changes that the country is going through.

People are hurting because of a lack of development and not enough people-centred government. They are demanding to be better represented, and women have demonstrated in local-level government that they are more than capable of taking on difficult issues. Many believe that women will bring to government the honest leadership and managerial skills that they have demonstrated in many community development programs. All they need is the opportunity to show what they can do.

Note

Comments cited in this article are from interviews in Papua New Guinea over two weeks during Sept/October 2001. They are included in the unpublished Master's thesis 'Women struggling for a voice in contemporary politics in Papua New Guinea', Victoria University 2002.

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Winning and losing in politics: Key issues in Papua New Guinea

Carol Kidu, Member for Moresby South electorate, Minister for Welfare and Social Development

Susan Setae, electoral candidate, Moresby North-East electorate

Winning in politics in Papua New Guinea: Carol Kidu

I entered politics by default after my husband's death, but have now won two successive elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Lots of congratulations have come my way, but mine is not the typical female experience. The reality in PNG is that the playing field is not level, and it is an uphill battle for women to win elections at both national and local level. What has made my situation different?

In the 1997 election, I campaigned hard and developed a specific and different style and strategy from the usual male approach. However, so have many other women, including Susan. There is no doubt in my mind that the deciding factor for my win in 1997 was the fact that I was the widow of Sir Buri Kidu, the highly respected Chief Justice of PNG. In addition to that, Buri's birthplace and home is an urban village in my electorate, so I had a family and clan base vote as a foundation for the numbers necessary to win.

Although I am sad to say that my skin colour was used against me by some candidates, it was also an advantage in some ways. On several occasions, both in 1997 and 2002, some men (and perhaps women) rationalised their decision to vote for me in spite of my sex by saying that, 'She understands these things because she is a "nao hahine"(expatriate) but we would not vote for our own women.'

I won in 1997 because of these special circumstances. I worked very hard in parliament, hoping that it would make the way easier for other women in 2002, but sadly it has not done so. The 2002 election was chaotic and desperately fought and it disadvantaged women enormously.

The majority of people in my electorate are of coastal origin, and the election was relatively smooth and peaceful other than in two areas where tribal politics of 'block voting' and intimidation were used. Susan's electorate, on the other hand, has a different ethnic composition and the election there was marked by violence and blatant abuse of the electoral process. My success, with an increased total and margin, was assisted by the ethnic composition of my electorate.

My chance of success was also helped by the fact that I was a sitting member of parliament, and had the benefit of having had electorate funds to leave my 'handmark' on the electorate. I used those funds honestly, but very strategically, to capitalise on my chances of re-election so that I could continue working on integrated community development to ensure its sustainability in the next five years.

It is very important that, during the next five years, we introduce strategies to ensure that other women gain access to the political process in 2007. They will then have the chance to leave their handmark and to demonstrate their capabilities as parliamentarians in our young and very fragile democracy.

Special circumstances have made it possible for me to have the privilege of entering the so-called 'men's house', so my experience is the exception not the rule. Susan will

now expand on the realities facing not only female candidates—and also many male candidates—who did not win seats in the election. It is a reality that must be changed so that entering parliament becomes a right for women, not a privilege.

It must be stated very clearly that Susan's loss will become a victory for the many youth who supported her as an 'honest mum' who gave them some hope, an 'honest mum' who has not deserted them or threatened them because of the loss, an 'honest mum' who is continuing to work with them and will most likely win the 2007 election if she chooses to stand again. However, being a mum is often a disadvantage because mums are always taken for granted. They are the backbone of PNG society—indispensable but too often invisible.

Losing in politics in Papua New Guinea: Susan Setae

I contested the recently conducted PNG national election with the endorsement of the same political party as Carol. I will try to cover my experiences as a losing candidate in one of the few political parties that actively sought female candidates. Although I had been considering it for some time, I actually only nominated on the very last day, and took people and the media by surprise.

Moresby North-East electorate in the National Capital District

As my electorate is in the nation's capital district, its people are from all the ethnic groups in PNG, but are predominantly people from the highlands region. The electorate is surrounded by a number of big settlements, most of which are unplanned and on traditional land, where basic government services are unlikely to reach the majority of the people. Many are unemployed, poor and illiterate. They are disadvantaged by poor housing and lack of basic services and infrastructure.

Likewise, the people living in the suburban areas cannot be disassociated from the problems faced by those living in the settlements. They also face unemployment and many are either retired or retrenched public servants living with their extended families in crowded state houses that are poorly maintained and lack basic service delivery. The extended family system plays a significant role in getting people who are unemployed to stretch their scarce resources to accommodate the needs of their less fortunate relatives in both the urban area and their home village.

Many people are disadvantaged and marginalised as a result of poor and unfair political and economic decisions, and they are vulnerable to political manipulation and bribery during national elections. Lack of political education also contributes to a low level of political participation that is often biased and economically excessive for both the candidate and the voter during the campaign period. Ethnic loyalty often takes precedence over the selection of leadership and good governance.

Key reasons for candidates losing elections in Papua New Guinea

The issues were identified during my experience of running a campaign with a dedicated team of volunteers who demanded nothing from me.

- Thousands of eligible voters were turned away at polling booths because their names were not on the roll. Unlike Carol, I did not have a base vote area that I could focus on to ensure that voters were registered. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) assistance in introducing a new system of registration and updating the common roll became a major problem at the polling booths.

- Bribery and vote buying is the biggest threat to an honest candidate. The failure to enforce the law on bribery and vote buying allows many candidates to abuse the law and walk away freely. Many voters have also developed a culture of bribing the candidates: 'If you pay me, I will vote for you or I will bring you this many votes.'
- Campaign period is a time of feasting, drinking and dancing. It is a financial burden to the candidate, and it creates an environment in which supporters move from camp to camp to get what they can. Just providing refreshments, without any feasts, is a huge financial burden.
- Eight weeks of campaigning is far too long and increases costs enormously. In addition, for many the focus of the campaign becomes a culture of feasting and negative oratory, rather than realistic platforms and policies.
- Many candidates capitalise on people's poverty and lack of education and make outrageous promises to their supporters. The promise of simple honesty and hard work cannot compete with the promise of sudden wealth and instant delivery of basic services.
- Ethnicity is a threat to democracy and the unity of a sovereign state. Increasingly aggressive groups are enforcing a tribal style of democracy that denies the right of individual freedom of choice. The custom of 'block voting' and controlling ballot boxes must be stopped.
- One-day polling, without proper management, proved to be chaos. Electoral officials and security (police) were unable to cope with the logistics. It has been possible in the past, but this election was chaotic with poor forward planning and dissatisfied polling officials who refused to work and insisted on being paid allowances before they finishing the counting.
- Election related violence: threats, intimidation and weapons were used to scare people into voting for particular candidates.
- The voting rates of people working in the formal sector are not high because they are apathetic. Thus election turnout in urban areas is often dominated by the unemployed and poor, who are more susceptible to corrupt practices.

The way ahead: some thoughts and suggestions

The electoral process

- Upgrading of the common roll must be a continuing process and should not rely on computerisation alone. Perhaps the village and community census books should be reintroduced to clean up the roll, because the complexities of naming systems in PNG can lead to inaccuracies and double entries on the roll.
- Procedures should be improved to ensure greater honesty at the polls (for example, finger marking with indelible ink, not just on the nail, to control multiple voting; and polling officials calling the names of voters so that scrutineers can hear and prevent voting on the names of the dead and wrong names.)
- One-day voting nationwide is possible, but needs more forward planning and would probably work out less expensive than this long chaos. (I observed one-day polling in Guyana, which faces similar problems of ethnic tension, a difficult physical environment and so on.)
- Initial counting should be done at subdistrict or district level (in safe areas it could even be done at the polling station in front of the scrutineers), then the

ballots should be returned to the boxes sorted into their bundles, the boxes could be sealed and then sent to the central tally centre.

- Security procedures must be improved, particularly with regard to the safety of supporters, especially women (separate polling booths for women should be considered).
- Specific legislation should deal with the practice of 'block voting', which denies the individual right of democratic choice. The legislation should be enforced by closing down polling stations and not counting ballot boxes from booths where the custom is practised. In addition, candidates who encourage 'block voting' should be charged with a criminal offence.

Affirmative action

- Seats should be reserved for women, for example, the 20 regional seats option at national level.
- Elected seats should be reserved for women in local-level government areas (LLGs), aiming to fill one-third of seats with women, rather than the present one seat nominated under the *Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government*.
- Political parties should play a *major* role by mainstreaming women in party machinery, as well as genuinely endorsing women and giving special attention to their needs (the efforts so far have not been genuine and the 'inducement' introduced under the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates*—a rebate on electoral expenses for those parties preselecting women candidates who get more than 10 per cent of the vote in their electorates—has no impact).
- Intensive and comprehensive mass education is required on good governance, development processes, democratic processes and so on by using 'picture talk' materials, drama and role playing to overcome the problem of low literacy levels.

Attitudinal issues

- Education for unity and nationhood must be given a *high* priority. We hope that it is not too late to reverse the movement to tribalism and parochial attitudes to politics and development.
- Gender education, especially on women's rights and attitudes to dominance and ownership, must also be given a high priority.
- Christian teaching should be more liberal in its interpretation of biblical texts. Denominational teachings about women's roles and status vary considerably. Some churches and church leaders have been very proactive in this regard and have become forceful agents for positive change.
- The rule of law must be emphasised and reinforced to counteract the increasing application of traditional practices in ethnically mixed communities.
- Strategies to balance individual rights and communal interests must be developed not only as a political issue, but also as a developmental issue.

Issues of definition and clarification

- We must define a Melanesian democracy. How can the noble principles of democracy be best implemented in the diversity of Melanesian cultures? What noble traditions can be incorporated successfully into democracy in the

contemporary society? An enormous amount of self-reflection is required in PNG to define an appropriate and workable way ahead, and a model for democracy in Melanesia.

- We have to clarify and redefine our parliamentary processes to reverse the movement towards an executive dictatorship—legislative and constitutional changes are needed as well as procedural change.
- We have to be more analytical with regard to the use of concepts in mass education, and address issues of semantics (for example, most people do not understand English concepts such as corruption, democracy and economy, and interpret such concepts very narrowly).
- We have to clearly define the development process in the Melanesian cultural context and adapt it accordingly to avoid enormous financial and resource wastage, and minimise the social breakdown that is occurring at a frightening rate. We must be proactive in ridding the nation of the 'dependency syndrome' and the cargo cult mentality, so that people participate meaningfully in our developing democracy.
- Education and genuine equality of opportunity is required for women and youth so that they can participate in the political and developmental processes of PNG.

Donald, I et al, 2002. 'Slo slo: increasing women's representation in parliament in Vanuatu', *Development Bulletin*, no. 59, pp. 54-57.

Slo slo: increasing women's representation in parliament in Vanuatu

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Introduction

In the recent general election (May 2002) Vanuatu elected its third ever woman (Isabelle Donald) to parliament. In 1987, Hilda Lini and Maria Crowby were the first women elected to parliament of Vanuatu. Hilda Lini served three terms and Maria Crowby one. During her term, Hilda Lini was also Minister for Health. From 1998 to 2002, Vanuatu had no women's representation in parliament, although equity is enshrined in Vanuatu's constitution, the Comprehensive Reform Program and Vanuatu's ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995.

The reasons women in Vanuatu are so under-represented in national, provincial and municipal governments are complex and include the reluctance, and in some cases direct opposition, of some (both men and women) to acknowledge women's rightful place in the decision-making processes of the country. These attitudes are deeply embedded in traditional custom and Christianity. Particularly in the early days of independence, many members of parliament were also church pastors and today many are chiefs.

Conservative attitudes, such as believing that the man is the head of the household, are difficult to change. For example, recently the president of the Council of Chiefs, Tom Numake, publicly stated that women of the island of Tanna had no place in either politics or the judiciary. Tanna women protested strongly, publicly berated Tom Numake for his statements and demanded he apologise (*Trading Post* 2002).

Attempts to change this situation in the past have been ad hoc and lacked a clearly planned and coordinated approach, as well as political will. However, this does not mean that nothing has been done to try to change this situation. In particular, NGOs such as the Vanuatu National Council of Women and Vanuatu Women in Politics (VANWIP) were active in the 1995 and 1998 elections, particularly when none of the political parties fielded women candidates. In 1998, as a political protest VANWIP put forward a number of women candidates. All stood as independent candidates, including Hilda Lini. VANWIP gave cross-party support and training.

VANWIP realised that its protest probably would not be successful in getting a woman elected to parliament. However, it was successful in raising women's political profile. The VANWIP women candidates experienced hostile opposition from both men and women (Molisa 2001).

The reluctance of political parties to nominate women is probably the single biggest barrier to women being elected to parliament in Vanuatu. If people stand as independent candidates, they do not have party machinery behind them. Candidacy is costly in terms of support, advertising and registration fees. Independent candidates have to raise funds

to cover the costs. If they stood as party candidates, women would recover these costs, in theory anyway.

Another significant barrier to women's representation is the 'first past the post' electoral system used in Vanuatu for national elections. The ten countries in the world with the highest women's representation in parliament all have proportional representation elections. Such systems provide an incentive for political parties to broaden their appeal to voters by adding women to their party lists. The results are significant, especially when the 'zebra' rule is applied, that is, every second seat goes to a woman (Inter-Parliamentary Union).

The plan of action

The plan of action undertaken by the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) in 2001 and 2002 to get a number of women elected to parliament in the 2002 general election was based on strategies found to be successful elsewhere in the world. For example, the strategies suggested by the Asia/Pacific 50/50 by 2005 Women in Government: Get The Balance Right campaign (Centre for Legislative Development 2001), and the lessons learned by VANWIP in their 1995 and 1998 election campaigns, informed the plan of action adopted by the department.

In 2001, in response to the mounting criticism about the government's lack of political will, the DWA completely overhauled its operations. Given its limited resources, the department acknowledged that alone it would be unable to make much difference. It also acknowledged that it was important to utilise the considerable commitment and expertise available in NGOs. In the past, it had been criticised for not working with NGOs, so it adopted a philosophy of working in partnership for equality (Department of Women's Affairs 2001a). This philosophy was to underpin all the work of the DWA, including all aspects of policy development and implementation. It did not include just NGOs, but other government departments, men, chiefs, pastors and other critical stakeholders.

The next stage was to prioritise areas for policy development. Because of the impending national elections in May 2002 top priority was given to the area of women in government. The first stage in the policy development process was preparing a discussion paper to be sent out to stakeholders for comment. When the feedback was received, the policy was finalised, translated into Bislama¹ and submitted in November 2001 to government for endorsement. To date that endorsement has not been received. Slow government processes are a major factor in the lack of progress in improving the status of women.

The policy included both long and short-term strategies, some of which could go ahead without government endorsement. The long-term strategies included a quota system that required eight seats in parliament to be reserved for women, and political parties being required to nominate women as candidates for a minimum of 30 per cent of seats. A proportional representation electoral system was also recommended (Department of Women's Affairs 2001b). The short-term strategies are discussed in detail below.

All these strategies involved working in partnership with key stakeholders. Projects were submitted to donors, who implemented these strategies on a small scale (Port Vila and Luganville only) and they were all successful. Only small-scale interventions were possible given the short lead time to the national elections. The DWA also wanted to test the effectiveness of the strategies so that the lessons learned could be considered when planning the long-term strategies for the 2006 general elections.

A task force was convened which included representatives of key stakeholder organisations. The task force met over a number of months to plan the implementation of the strategies. Representatives of the churches and the chiefs, although invited, did not attend the meetings. One chief who was keen to be involved was directed by an official of the Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri) not to be part of the task force.

Lobbying the political parties to nominate women candidates

In 2001, all political party presidents were approached to attend a meeting to discuss a 30 per cent quota system for women candidates. They were sent a copy of the DWA's Women in Government policy and asked to read it and discuss it within their parties, and particularly with their women members. They were also asked to bring a woman representative with them to the meeting. Out of nine parties invited, four attended the meeting and none brought a woman representative with them. The meeting proceeded and the quota of 30 per cent men, 30 per cent women and the balance of 40 per cent of candidates being of either sex did not receive support. It was also apparent that women had not been involved in a discussion of the policy paper and had not been invited to the meeting with their presidents. At the May 2002 general election, only two women were nominated by their parties; five women stood as independent candidates. Our lobbying of the parties was spectacularly unsuccessful.

Voter education for women

The Voter Education for Women workshops followed a 'training the trainers' model. The DWA worked with community theatre group *Wan Smolbag* to train key women leaders, representing a wide variety of church organisations, in voter education. These women underwent two days of training about, for instance, how to register and vote, the importance of women's representation in government, and their rights as voters and as female voters.

The women then returned to their own communities in Port Vila and Luganville to run similar workshops. In all, over 2,000 men, women and children attended the resulting workshops in the two municipalities. At the same time, *Wan Smolbag* was also running voter education workshops in some rural island communities.

Many women who attended the workshops did not realise they could vote independently of their husband's and chief's direction, or that their vote was secret. Many were also unaware of the importance of having women's representation in parliament and the power their vote carried to influence who was elected. This highlighted the importance of the workshops and the need to run them over a much wider area of the country.

Training workshops for potential women candidates

Two three-day workshops were run for potential women candidates, one in Port Vila and one in Luganville. Isabelle Donald was flown from the island of Epi to attend the Port Vila workshop. The workshops run for potential women candidates included such topics as what it is like to be a female MP, the electoral process, issues affecting Vanuatu and women, running a campaign and using the media.

Facilitators and presenters in the three-day workshops were both men and women from the business sector, the government sector and NGOs. They also included Hilda Lini and Maria Crowby, and current male MPs. The materials developed by UNIFEM (1999a, 1999b, 1999c) were extensively used in the workshop and all participants received copies. Almost 80 women attended the workshops.

Research

The final strategy was research. There are two ongoing projects:

- tracking the progress of women's access to senior government positions (including parliament), and their experiences in that process. This will provide important indicator information and data will have to be collected annually;
- tracking the progress of women in the national, municipal and provincial elections in Efate and Santo, including candidate nomination rates, votes won, seats gained and the experiences of the women in that process.

In particular, the information gained from the latter will be used when devising the plan of action to attain the goal of 30 per cent female members in national, provincial and municipal governments by 2006.

For the 2002 general election, seven women candidates stood for election out of a total of 257 (Electoral Commission 2002), so 2.7 per cent of the total number of candidates were women. Political parties nominated two women (the Vanuaaku Party and the Vanuatu Republican Party) and five were independent candidates. Some of the independent candidates chose to run under an independent coalition called the Vanuatu Independent Movement.

Isabelle's story

Isabelle was born on the island of Epi and has lived and worked there for most of her life. She is married with three children. Her husband is very supportive of her political aspirations. For the past 18 years she has worked in both the government and non-government sectors on Epi. Most recently she worked as the local coordinator of the Rural Skills Training program, work that brought her into extensive contact with women's and youth groups throughout Epi. She organised many training programs on Epi and ensured that all had an equal representation of men and women.

Why was Isabelle successful when the other candidates were not? What contributed to her success? In a comparison of how the seven female 2002 candidates polled, Isabelle was far ahead of the others. She captured 19.5 per cent of the valid votes cast in her electorate. The other six women obtained from .24 per cent to 4 per cent of the valid votes cast in their respective electorates (Electoral Commission 2002). Her story reveals that belonging to a political party, being well known and respected in the community, receiving training and being well organised made significant contributions to her success.

Belonging to a political party

Isabelle was supported in her nomination as a candidate for the Vanuaaku Party (VP) by the youth of her community, the women and a number of local chiefs, but her official nomination came from the Epi VP regional committee. Previous to her successful nomination, Isabelle had been a VP supporter. She said:

There is one big reason why I wanted to go into parliament—because I want to try and educate the male MPs about the needs of women. They think about big things and sometimes overlook the small issues. When we are planning a development we need to start small.³

She found the support of the party machinery invaluable in her campaign and recommends that women affiliate with a party so they gain a profile inside the party and understand how the selection process works.

Being well known and respected in her community

There is no doubt in Isabelle's mind that, because she was born on Epi and had lived and worked for most of her life there, she already had the trust of the voters, particularly young voters and women. In some ways, her unofficial campaign had started well before she actually stood as a candidate. Much of the hard campaigning work had already been done. Her advice to women who are thinking of standing for election in the future is to start now:

The next election is not long away—it is very close so they should start preparing now. They must build up trust in the community, but first your family. If you build up that trust in the community it will be easy when you come to campaign. Then you will feel surer of your success. If you don't build up that trust you won't make it. You must gain your community's trust before 2006.

Receiving training and being well organised

Isabelle found the training she received at the workshop invaluable. She shared the information and ideas she obtained with her campaign team and they used this in planning her campaign. In fact, while she was campaigning, she got feedback from the audiences she spoke to about how well her campaign was organised and how disorganised the other candidates were.

In Vanuatu, it is the custom for candidates to let other people, usually their campaign team, speak for them so they are seen not to praise themselves too much:

Talking politics was new [for me]. Before my campaign we organised that one person would talk about the qualities of an MP, another about the popularity of one candidate, also about the personality of the candidate you want, is she/he good or do you not like her/him. I answered questions that were hard for the other members of the team to answer. The first time I watched how it was done, what the format was but I answered questions. There weren't too many questions.

Isabelle also commented on how it was important for women in the outer islands to also receive support and training. As a rural woman she was keenly aware of the difficulties faced by other rural women:

Women in town have got greater access to workshops, but women in rural areas need workshops so they can develop too. I gained experience from the workshop I attended but many women can't attend workshops. So we need to provide them in rural areas too.

Another important difference between Isabelle's campaign and the campaign of the other candidates was that her campaign team consisted of both men and women. It was the first time that women were part of a campaign team.

Some of the difficulties

Isabelle faced a number of difficulties during her selection process and the campaign itself. Transport was a problem: rain made the roads very difficult to navigate. They needed two trucks and it was expensive to travel to remote rural locations on Epi. They were unable to let many villages know they were coming as the island has few telephones, so they just turned up and spoke to those who were available and willing to listen.

Financing the campaign was difficult as the Epi regional VP committee was not prepared for the campaign. Both local and national fundraising helped, but Isabelle also had to use her savings to fund her campaign.

Another major difficulty was dealing with the attitudes of the men in the other campaign teams. Five men who had not been selected as VP candidates chose to stand as independents. These men spoke out about how women had no place in politics and actively discouraged people from voting for Isabelle. Some men were abusive. One of these men openly challenged Isabelle's right to stand as a candidate. This was particularly ironic as he had previously been an MP and the minister responsible for the Comprehensive Reform Program, which has equity at its core. Isabelle and her team ignored them.

So what has been learnt?

Before the scheduled general election in 2006, there will be provincial and municipal elections. Vanuatu has a history of early elections so it could well be that another general election takes place before 2006. The women candidates must be prepared so that, once an election is called, they can quickly swing into their official campaigns. Training must start early and women should be encouraged to build up their profile in their communities and earn the respect of the voters. It could be that rural women have an advantage over their municipal sisters with their community profiles. We should consider a shift in focus to include more rural women in the training program, and to build those costs in when asking donors for funding.

Parties need to know that women with party support, and the right training and community background are very strong candidates who can help a party's prospects of governing. Well-trained women with a high positive community profile are assets, not liabilities, to parties. We must focus on persuading political parties to nominate women, and on encouraging women to work inside party machinery. We must continue with the Voter Education for Women program and expand it to rural areas.

Finally, we must encourage women to work within their political parties to achieve change, so they have an equal chance of selection. Selection criteria should be examined and women should build their credibility in and their knowledge of the party system. Selection processes must also be more transparent than previously. For years men have used the biased selection system to their advantage. Those systems should be changed to prevent discrimination against women.

Conclusion

Progress might be slow, but the experience of the last election has shown us that people are increasingly willing to work together to achieve increased female participation in parliament. There is a mood of optimism and a genuine delight among many, both men and women, that Isabelle has been successful. Donors have also indicated that they are willing to support a long-term action plan. We must keep the pressure up; persistence and patience will be needed.

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with a poem by the late Grace Mera Molisa who worked tirelessly for and with the women of Vanuatu.

Vanuatu Women
Teaching by showing
Learning by doing
Voicing our concerns
Sharing ideas
Actively participating
In empowering ourselves

To Assert our identity
To Make visible
To Improve our status
Health, Economics, Politics
To Achieve some measure
Of Freedom and Control
Of our own lives
Within our Environment
(*Grace Mera Molisa, 1995*)

Notes

1. Bislama is the lingua franca of Vanuatu. *Slo slo* is Bislama for slow.
2. *Wan Smolbag* has considerable experience in voter education. Their video, *Vot Blong Yu I Sekret [Your Vote is Secret]*, was used extensively in the training.
3. Isabelle was interviewed in Bislama for this article. Her interview was then translated into English. She checked the translation to ensure that her intended meaning was accurately captured.

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Fighting for a fair deal in national politics

Afu Billy, Consultant, Solomon Islands

Introduction

When two of my male cousins asked me if I would consider contesting the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat in the next national general elections, I gave a big laugh, looked at them and told them they were crazy.

'Why not?', they asked, not amused.

'Because', I replied, 'it is such an absurd idea.'

First, I am a woman and the idea of a woman contesting the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat was unheard of, and would probably be irritating to a lot of the people. Second, the constituency was dominated by two of the most conservative churches, the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists and both were very clear about where a woman's place was!

Third, I come from a very influential religious family in the area. My uncles and dad were the pioneers of the SSEC in East Malaita and other parts of Malaita and Solomon Islands. My sisters and many of our family members held responsible and respected church positions, and some were local and overseas missionaries. I was the opposite. I did not live according to the church rules and never attended church. Labelled the 'black sheep' of the family, I was the only one who had attended a government primary and high school.

Fourth, I had never lived in my island village long enough for people to consider me for anything as serious as representing them in parliament, and the majority of the constituents were bush people from the mainland who did not even know of my existence.

Last but not least, I was divorced, an unforgivable sin according to the beliefs of the SSEC. Furthermore, I was living in a de facto relationship with a partner from another province, of a different religion and race, whose customs were frowned upon by my kin. My infamous status was no secret. Those who did not know me personally had heard about the 'wayward' daughter of the Reverend Ariel Billy.

That conversation with my cousins happened in 1998. In 2001, it was announced in the local media that I was standing as a candidate for the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat. Why did I change my mind? There were several influential factors.

Influential factors

In 1999, two months of extended leave with my retired parents on the island made me realise that I was accepted and even respected by many relatives and the saltwater people. It was as if everyone was relieved to see the return of their prodigal daughter to her roots.

The national and local environment seemed right. The major political, economic and social crisis being experienced by the country was blamed on the unwise decisions and corrupt practices of a male-dominated national and provincial leadership base. The 'staleness' of the one-man reign that had existed in the East Malaita constituency for five consecutive parliamentary terms, with no visible and tangible developmental benefits,

relaxed people's biases to the extent that they were prepared to take a gamble and support a woman.

The position in question was neither a church nor a customary one, supporters argued, and even the prime minister of Solomon Islands and some parliamentarians were divorced. I had to convince potential supporters that I had sufficient knowledge of government and parliamentary affairs. My educational background and my experience working for non government organisations had enabled me to serve at the local as well as the grassroots levels. My association with aid donors and my personal and professional networks, both local and external, were also persuasive. Supporters saw an approachable woman who seemed to be fair, honest and simple, factors that were now overcoming the traditional and religious biases.

People's attitudes were changing: the idea of a woman representing their needs, and those of their families, at the national level became appealing. Despite this, I was still uncertain about entering politics. I had the welfare of my family to consider. A parliamentarian's salary is low. I thought about the loss of privacy and the constant hassles that a member of parliament usually has with voters and wantoks who expect monetary gains in return for their votes. It was a period of uncertainty.

My turning point

In early November 2000, my dad died. The turnout of mourners for his funeral from all over East Malaita and many other parts of Malaita and Guadalcanal was overwhelming. People showed the respect and love they had for my dad by attending the funeral, and by contributing food, money and labour to help my family ensure that the continuous stream of mourners was fed and accommodated for nearly a month. That was when I decided that my family owed these people something more than the customary exchange of gifts. I knew also that it was my turn to pay this debt. It would be impossible for me to carry on from dad as one of the great spiritual leaders of the area. However, it was not impossible for me to represent the needs of these people in parliament. I knew I could do it, and that I could do it well if I was given the opportunity, their confidence and their trust.

A visit to my island by a state delegation comprising the governor-general, his wife and several government officials, not long after my dad's death, helped to put my doubts aside. Our member of parliament was abroad and the provincial members weren't around, so, after the member of parliament for the neighbouring East Kwaio constituency asked me to organise the delegation's visit, I did so with assistance from the church leaders and chiefs of my island and the neighbouring sister island.

I was given the honour of making a speech on behalf of my island community. The ceremony was held in the island church. In a borrowed dress (my clothes were never appropriate church wear, according to my mum) and from the church pulpit—the 'holy men only' territory—I let this important person and his delegation know about what mattered to the people of my island, and what they wanted the government to hear.

Both the official delegation and the islanders were impressed. People were now openly approaching me to stand for the elections, and the governor-general's delegation was not secretive in telling the islanders that I would be a good choice for the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat. I decided to take the risk. I resigned from my very good job and commuted between Honiara and my island home on a regular basis to touch base with the locals.

Opposition

Things were progressing well until a very close in-law, married to my niece, decided he too wanted to contest the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat. The leaders of the island communities had approached him to be their chosen candidate for the national elections several times in the past. He had declined each time, saying he was going to undertake further studies overseas. His course ended and, by June 2001, he had confirmed his participation in the coming elections.

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. I had resigned from a very good job and a replacement had been recruited from Australia. Had this dear in-law of mine accepted the island leaders' initial proposals, I would never have decided to run in the elections, because I would not have expected to have a good chance against him. From a cultural and religious perspective, he was the perfect candidate. He was all that I was not. He was a man, a religious and dedicated SSEC follower, and a part of my known and respected family through his marriage to my first cousin's daughter.

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 and as an excuse for a lack of consideration, bad planning and last minute preparations, at great inconvenience to me.

This new development placed a permanent black cloud on my efforts. The two island communities' support was halved. My opponent easily obtained the support of those from the other island, because he was from that island. Close relatives of his on my island turned their support to him. My family was in a dilemma, because of my in-law's strong connection to us. For many of my family members, custom already had the answer. My niece was already married out of the family, so voting for her husband would mean voting outside of the family. With other members of my family there was a sharing of votes, so that some would vote for him and others would vote for me.

In addition, there had always been a mild competitiveness between the two islands and this was an important chance to prove which island had the better candidate. There was no turning back for me, and I still retained strong support from my island and from the bush folk. The religious biases against me resurfaced as the opposing supporters began their attempts to prove these points and to gain numbers, and didn't they try!

Preparations

It was hard work, but the support of the islanders and also of a growing group of bush people, made things bearable. A network was formed throughout the constituency that had been initiated by writing personal letters to influential community women and men, informing them of my decision to run in the elections and asking for their support and assistance during the official campaigning period.

A base committee was also formed with fair representation of men and women.

Introductory visits to the bush communities were made to enable people to meet this crazy woman who was going to contest the East Malaita elections.

Money had to be raised in preparation for campaign expenses. A successful 'dine and dance' at the Honiara Hotel raised about \$8,000. A week later the money was stolen, and the invitation cards were photocopied and circulated in East Malaita communities, with an interpretation of the function as immoral, and as having involved dirty dancing

and naked girls. As if that was not enough, this material finally asked, 'Is this the kind of person the people of East Malaita want to represent them in parliament?'

Starting to campaign

During the first week of the campaign period, a major gathering of approximately 100 bush and saltwater people was held on my island. For many it was the first time they had seen me or heard me speak, so I was strongly advised by my campaign managers to give it my best shot. I gave a speech emphasising why I wanted to represent the people of East Malaita constituency in parliament.

I spoke about how I thought development in East Malaita should address the real needs of the rural people, which should be communicated to me and a committee that would be representative of the people of the constituency. I told them that I would also be making personal needs identification visits to their villages. I was preaching about development resulting from the increased participation of rural people, during initial consultations and throughout the developmental process. Such development was to be fairly distributed, and its allocation and administration transparent and accountable.

I was affiliated to the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) Coalition, led by former Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu. I spoke on the SIAC platform, mainly addressing the deteriorating economic, political and social situation in Solomon Islands. The credibility of the previous SIAC government was emphasised, as was its excellent performance during its short period in power. The coalition had a good record of positive urban and rural developments, and it had produced honest leaders, and sound policies and practices based on good governance principles.

It was the kind of government I wanted to be a part of, and which I believed would do a lot for the people of Solomon Islands, including the people of East Malaita. The locals identified well with the platform because copra prices rose when SIAC was in power, and some of the prominent SIAC members were from the SSEC.

The campaign trail

Our campaign began in mid-November 2001 with a team comprising an island chief and a mainland chief, two elders, several young men, two young women and a dear old grandmother from the bush, who could walk better along the mountain tracks than any of us islanders.

The campaigning trail was tough, both physically and mentally. For two whole weeks, my team and I travelled to all the major villages in the East Malaita constituency. We climbed steep mountains, crawled down valleys and crossed rivers on precarious tree trunk bridges. Slipping and sliding in the mud, we trudged on.

Our meetings had to be held early in the mornings after church services, or late in the afternoon when the women and men returned from their day's field work. I was careful about what I wore, how I positioned myself when speaking, and how I addressed chiefs, elders and church leaders. Speaking in my mother tongue, I used simple examples to ensure their understanding of words such as the 'economy'.

Right from the start, I began receiving long shopping lists of what everybody wanted. It was difficult, as the wantok system in Solomon Islands does allow for the giving of money and other gifts to relatives—this is the practice that we grew up with. However, it was time to be frank with people and to tell them that being a member of parliament is not about giving money to wantoks and supporters, but about bringing constituents' concerns and needs to the government to be addressed.

I also had to tell them that it was their democratic right to vote for the person of their choice and that I, as well as the other candidates, would be presenting my ideas to them during meetings so that they could make informed decisions about who to vote for. No promises were made to the people. It was made clear right at the beginning that the government of Solomon Islands was facing major economic and financial problems, and that there would be very little money around when the next government came into power.

Constant hurdles

The opposition was also working hard. Misinterpretations and distortions of my comments and ideas lost me many votes, and stopped my team speaking in one village. On another occasion, a letter was written by major landowners to those living on and off their land instructing them to vote according to the landowner's wishes or else. Dirty campaigning and defamation was rife, and it was quite hard to repair any damage because it was difficult to go back to villages already visited.

I would be told in the meetings that never in East Malaita traditions had a woman sacrificed pigs to the ancestral spirits. My answer was already prepared, as I had been coached by a supportive male elder. Standing tall, I would say that, although the women did not do the actual sacrificing, there would not be any pigs to sacrifice if there were no women to raise and feed the pigs.

Another favourite statement was, 'You are married to a man from another province. Custom requires that you follow him to his province, so it would be of no use for you to stand for East Malaita, when you will be living somewhere else.' I replied, 'I agree, but that is the Malaitan custom. My partner is not from Malaita and has different customs, and in any case such determinations are influenced more by other factors such as employment opportunities and good schools for the children, and not necessarily by custom.'

They said, 'Your father was a great man. You could never replace him.' I would agree, but say that his was a religious calling while mine was not, although both reap benefits for the people of East Malaita in different ways.

Yet others asked how many times I had been married. The men in my team would answer on my behalf, saying it was more important to have honest leaders who are hard working and willing to represent the people well. My marital status was a personal issue between me and God, they said, and only God is allowed to judge people.

In other villages I would still be speaking when a verbal fight would erupt because another candidate's supporters did not want the village to attend my meeting. The support from ordinary village women in such situations was great. They would stand up and say, 'She is only a woman. Why are you men so frightened of her?' Such shows of bravery landed them in trouble sometimes. I learned from some of these women that they hadn't voted for me or had not bothered to vote at all, because landowners had threatened that they would lose their gardening land if they did vote for me.

Election eve

The Solomon Islands Electoral Commission had announced earlier in 2001 that people living in Honiara were allowed to return and vote in their home villages. This meant that people were arriving from Honiara on the day before the elections to vote.

On the eve of election day, a very big meeting was organised on my island to confirm people's support and for last-minute questions. That night I lost a good number of my

voters, as their Honiara relatives visited them later and said they would be forgoing the bags of rice and flour they received regularly from Honiara if they voted for me and not for the candidate of their relative's choice.

Election day

The Solomon Islands national general elections took place on 5 December 2001. A day later, the counting of the ballot papers began at the police station on the mainland. The results were announced at 9.00 pm. The winner was my in-law: he beat me by two votes. I did pretty well, everyone consoled me, considering the fact that I contested the seat against nine men. My island mourned the loss. The village women did not go to their gardens. The men did not put their canoes to sea. A year after the death of my dad, our home was again filled with mourners.

The petition

I learned later about alleged irregularities and corrupt practices happening during the elections, and I was urged to challenge the election results. The mother in me told me to forget it, but I was told that such practices were common in many past national and provincial elections. However, no one had been game enough to challenge the results or, if they were, they had been offered substantial amounts of money to shut up.

I returned to Honiara, taking the allegations with me. I spoke to people in high and low places, to friends, relatives, my children and professional acquaintances. The majority backed the idea of challenging the election results, because the allegations looked solid enough for a petition. However, I could not afford a lawyer: the affordable ones were not interested. Help came through: a lawyer friend soon drew up the petition which alleged that under-aged voters had participated, that someone voted in another person's name, and that a ballot paper stuck in the keyhole of one of my in-law's ballot boxes was validated and counted. I was asking for a recount.

Somehow the \$3,000 petition fee was paid and soon the news was announced in the local media. The people on the two islands organised a reconciliation service, but it was a flop when the other side learned that I was not going to drop the petition. The national head of the SSEC was called to the island to sort out election-related problems. However, his supporters would not allow my supporters to join in the major Easter church convention on the mainland, because mine had not yet been cleansed after voting for a sinful woman.

Conclusion

The petition was heard from 4 June 2002 to 9 June 2002 in my provincial town of Auki, Malaita province. My nephew, fresh from law school, sat next to me in court as a 'learned friend', to take notes on my behalf.

The High Court has not yet announced its decision. Maybe it was not for me to pay the family's debt to the people of East Malaita. Who knows, it may even be my in-law who is to carry out this obligation on behalf of his wife's family. Whichever way it is to be, my involvement in the elections had a huge impact on my people and I can no longer say that I am not known in the East Malaita constituency. I may even be remembered as that crazy woman always fighting for what she thought was right, and the one who tried to put a stop to all the dishonest practices that occurred in elections.

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Custom, chicanery and the myth of decolonisation in New Caledonia

Susanna Ounei, Kanak political activist, Fayawe, Ouvéa and Wellington, New Zealand

Introduction

This article uses my personal story to expose the sham of so-called decolonisation and provincial autonomy in Kanaky New Caledonia. The frustration and despair I and other Kanak have experienced in trying to obtain justice or legal protection from the customary institutions set up by the French government show that, 14 years after the Matignon Accords of 1988, Kanak remain colonised people. The Matignon Accords were signed between the French Government, the leader of the Kanak independence movement, and the leader of the main right-wing settler party. They were meant to put an end to the political violence over the question of independence that had caused so many deaths—mainly Kanak—during the 1980s. The Accords were supposed to fast-track the economic development of the Kanak people and increase local autonomy but they have done neither effectively.

Like all Melanesians, Kanak were colonised by a European country, in this case France. Other parts of the region were colonised by Great Britain, the Netherlands or Germany. Britain adopted a different approach to colonisation from the other powers, starting in Fiji where Sir Arthur Gordon developed a system to protect indigenous Fijians against exploitation by British nationals. That system was later extended to Britain's other Pacific possessions. It is not my intention to praise Gordon, but at least British colonial subjects had some form of official protection until the onset of decolonisation in the 1970s.

I also do not mean to dissociate the Kanak people from other Melanesians, because ethnically, culturally and geographically we are very close to them. However, politically our situation is different from that of the citizens of the independent nations of the region. New Caledonia is still under the French yoke and Kanak daily face one of the most powerful and sophisticated armed nations in the world.

This colonial political context does not allow us to take responsibility for maintaining good governance in our own country because, while most Kanak are struggling to restore our national freedom, there are always some ambitious people who prefer to lie to serve their own interests and end up serving those of France. Such behaviour suits the French, who are happy to use divisive tactics against Kanak political activists and feminists like myself to try to isolate us.

Although the struggle for independence from French rule is widely supported by Kanak people, these few individuals use trickery and dishonest methods to gain an advantage in the conflicts over land that are a feature of Kanak society today. Such people pervert *la coutume*, or custom, with arrogant French bourgeois values. As one of the main witnesses of and participants in the Kanak struggle since September 1969 (Ounei-Small and Gauthier 1995:41–42), it is my impression that conflicts over land are provoked more often than not by people who have stayed aloof from this struggle.

After the Matignon Accords were signed, such people tried to take advantage of the billions of francs thrown by the French government at New Caledonia in the aftermath of the tragic events at Gossanah, in Ouvéa, when 19 Kanak men were massacred by French military forces. Such people are all too ready to tell lies about who is whom in *la coutume*, and to claim land rights that they know little about in order to access government funding to set up their businesses.

Leadership, land and women in *la coutume*

Many factors have contributed to the destruction of the real freedom that many Kanak have been dreaming about and working towards for more than 50 years. Before and after France annexed New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands in 1853, the indigenous people had their own indigenous political structures, with chiefs exercising authority over different areas. Though district chiefs rule over the people, they do so in conjunction with the various clans, each of which represents a related group of people. Each clan has its head and its elders, who perform traditional roles long associated with particular branches of the clan. Chiefs and clan heads are mainly men and, in principle, are the first born, designated by their ancestors to take their place in the local hierarchy.

In Kanak society, nobody is worthless and everyone has an honourable role with a reciprocal duty towards every other person, even if it is to open the *bougna* (the traditional meal cooked in an earth oven) for the chiefs, or to chase away flies while the chiefs are eating. In war, the person whose role it was to defend the chief would be honoured to give his own life to save the chief's. Yet the district chief is entirely dependent on the person called *at hnyei*, the 'master of the land or real person of the country', who is well respected and taboo, and whose ancestors are reputed to have been in the land since time immemorial.

All the clans had their own land that was taboo and sacred to them and, until recently, people were frightened to violate another clan's land. If someone violated the land or usurped the rights to land that had belonged to another clan for generations, the people would say, 'The land will eat them. They think they are eating from the land but it is the land that is eating them'. Before the French colonisation of New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands, there were many wars, but no conquerors of actual territory because the land belongs not to individuals but to the ancestors. During life, we merely look after the land and it is only ours after death when we have joined the ancestors.

A woman has rank according to that of her father, her brothers and her husband. During meetings, women are part of the decision-making process, but indirectly. They do not have the right to stand up and speak publicly in front of everybody. This is the male role. However, in Fayaoué (a French mispronunciation of Fajawe in Iaai, the main language spoken in Ouvéa, the northernmost Loyalty Island), I saw a woman whose husband had died some time previously and whose responsibility it was to speak during customary meetings, even when men were present, since there was no one else to replace him.

In the past and still today in Ouvéa, although a woman does not speak publicly, she represents the land. Her blood is very powerful and taboo through her children. The children's blood must not be seen by their maternal uncles, whether it appears as the result of a serious injury or a small cut. If the maternal uncles do see the blood of their nephews or nieces, a large amount of compensation will have to be given to them, such as cars or boats, together with cloth, money and traditional foods such as yams, taro, pigs, fish, cows and so on. Much land changed hands in the past because a woman's blood was seen by her brothers through her children. A person's maternal uncles include

not only the biological brothers of his or her mother, but the mother's whole clan, which is paired with the person's own clan in a relationship of reciprocal respect and duty.

Manipulating *la coutume* in the post-Matignon colonial state

When a woman married, two of her children, a boy and a girl, would be given to the maternal uncles to replace her in her original clan. This was the case with my older brother and me. Not only were we given to my grandfather at his request to replace my mother in her clan but, because he had only three daughters and no sons, we were also given to him to inherit his land as his direct descendants—and therefore his sons in *la coutume*, even though I am a woman. My adoptive mother, also Susanna, the second daughter of my grandfather, married my adoptive father in Poindimié, on the east coast of the mainland, the Grande Terre in French. My grandfather called her back with her husband and gave them his land to look after because my brother and I were too young. They built their home in the tribe of Ouassadiou (Wasaujeu) in the district of Fayaoué (Fajawe).

In 1995, my adoptive mother died and before her funeral my uncle, who is now dead, discussed with my older brother his desire to call me back to inherit all my mother's belongings, including her *gîte*, a small tourist business situated on our ancestral land. At the time I was working in Suva, Fiji, as assistant director at the decolonisation desk of the Pacific Concerns and Resource Centre. A great deal of pressure was put on me to resign from my job and I was ordered to abandon everything I was doing overseas because I was needed to take over our land. My uncle even telephoned to ask me why I was wasting my time in Fiji or New Zealand, and insist that I come back as soon as possible. He had already informed all the clans and families of his decision.

On 23 December 1995, I landed in Ouvéa with my two children, a boy of eight years and a girl of 21 months. On 5 February 1996, a *palabre*, or customary meeting, was held at the residence of the chief of the tribe of Wasaujeu. In the presence of the syndics, or agents of customary affairs, an official document was signed designating me as the inheritor of all my mother's belongings, including the *gîte* situated on my grandfather's land.

However, on 10 February 1996 a man came from Nouméa, where he had spent most of his life, to make a claim on the land I had inherited. He was supported by his cousin, who had recently settled in Ouvéa for business purposes. They claimed that my grandfather's land belonged to the man from Nouméa on the grounds that his father was the customary brother of my adoptive mother, and that their father had given him the land before he died. Yet there was no blood link between us and neither my brother nor other members of the family had ever heard the story.

We found it strange that the father of this new claimant had never claimed the land when my grandfather and adoptive mother were alive. In fact, the motives of the two men were purely commercial, as they wanted to set up a tourist business and a petrol station on the land using a large grant of money received from France through the Matignon Accords. They saw owning the land as financially advantageous, because it is beautifully situated on a white-sand lagoon beach and is ideal for a tourist development.

For four years and four months after that day, the claimant and his nephews terrorised me and my children, stealing our property, destroying buildings, cutting down trees, using sorcery against us, and setting fires so that we regularly suffocated from the smoke. We were completely failed by the colonial legal system, both French and customary. On several occasions I complained to the gendarmes, but was told they could do nothing as they had to wait for a customary judgment by the chief of the district.

My older brother went to see the district chief who is directly related in custom to my biological father: Ounei is said to be the first occupant of the land and the one who nominated the chief of Fajawe. However, I could get no help from the customary authorities, neither those based in Ouvéa nor the Customary Senate (*Sénat coutumier*) in Nouméa, which the French originally set up as the Customary Council (*Conseil coutumier*) following the Matignon Accords, and which was reinforced by the Nouméa Accord of 1998.

The Customary Senate consists of chiefs from different areas of the country, but many Kanak are critical of it and argue that some of its members are not true traditional chiefs and have no right to make decisions, especially with respect to land. The customary senators are nominated and well paid by the French government. My brother went to see the Senate, but was told that they were very busy dealing with land problems. I personally telephoned the President of the Senate in March 2000, and was asked to be patient as they were aware of the issue and were thinking about addressing it. He asked me if the representative on the Senate from Ouvéa had been to see me, but he had not, though he often drove past my place in his fancy car.

By April 2000, I had had enough and the children were very depressed. I gave the keys to the property to my cousin and his wife and asked them to look after my place and our traditional lands, and to put his own cattle on the land. My cousin was so angry that I had been unjustly forced to leave that he called in other men from the tribe and they surrounded the property with barbed wire to stop the false claimant from moving in. Thus he was 'eaten' by the land he had tried to usurp.

Conclusion: the paralysis of custom and the illusion of autonomy

The lesson of my story is that Kanak have to try to solve their problems in *la coutume* without appealing to the Customary Senate set up by the French, or to other institutions that have supposedly ensured Kanak autonomy following the Nouméa Accord. Other Kanak with whom I shared my experience say that such problems are very common in Kanaky today (see Guiart 2001, Gorodey and Ounei-Small 1995).

This experience has made me think hard about how Kanak are to know who is whom and which land belongs to which person. Following the extension of French control over all land in New Caledonia after 1853, there was drastic expropriation of the land of indigenous people throughout the *Grande Terre*. Even in the Loyalty Islands, where most land remained in Kanak hands, there was severe interference with customary tenure and institutions. It is important to remember that the repression of Kanak in New Caledonia began only 60 years or so after the establishment of the modern bourgeois French state dedicated to the principles of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. However, the Kanak people were long denied even the limited rights and legal protections available to working-class French citizens.

I don't want to idealise traditional Kanak society, but the French created many divisions amongst Kanak and made existing ones worse. When I complained about my treatment to French officials, they asked me arrogantly if this is what independence would be like. Yet neither the man who wanted to steal my land nor his family was ever involved in the independence movement. At the moment in New Caledonia, it seems that neither *la coutume* itself, nor the institutions introduced by the French state, are acting to protect ordinary people against the manipulation of traditional history by the greedy to suit their individual ambitions. In fact, it looks rather as if such behaviour is surreptitiously supported by the French in order to persecute and isolate political activists of whom they disapprove.

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