

The percentage of women elected to parliament in the Pacific region is amongst the lowest in the world. Culture, both traditional and Christian, is one commonly cited inhibitor, but other socio-economic factors, including the costs of elections, are also considered restrictive. This trend has generated significant interest, especially as in some instances female representation is declining, defying conventional wisdom and the growing number of women holding senior positions in other sectors (see Fraenkel 2006; Huffer 2006; Liki 2010). Interventions that aim to address this dynamic include donor programs designed to train female candidates, and positive discrimination measures, including reserved seats, for women politicians.¹

In this *In-Brief* we do not intend to revisit these debates, but instead seek to identify a common profile of successful women MPs in the Pacific by looking at two countries where they have been relatively well represented — Samoa and Kiribati. Samoa currently has two women MPs (previously four) in its 50-member parliament, including the Pacific's longest serving woman — Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa. Kiribati currently has four women MPs in its 46-member parliament, including Vice-President Teima Onorio. Based on interviews and other publicly available materials, we identify a number of characteristics that *matter* for women MPs. These are not rules — we do not mean for this to be used as a rigid set of criteria — as some women see some characteristics as more influential at certain times than others. But, as a way of mapping the terrain, we think this is an important starting point.

The most obvious difference between these two countries is that in Samoa all MPs must be *matai* title holders, whereas Kiribati does not have the same tradition of customary rule enshrined in its constitution. Women are under-represented among the ranks of *matai* in Samoa. According to 2011 figures, just over 10 per cent of *matai* are women, and there are about 10 Samoan villages that do not allow female *matai*. While having a ranking title is

necessary for women to be elected to parliament in Samoa, it is not the only factor at play.

Family matters

Politics in the Pacific is largely a family affair and this is of particular importance for women MPs. Coming from a large and influential family provides an important 'base vote', willing campaign helpers, and potential financiers. Women MPs also tend to come from political families. That is, one or both of their parents, uncles or brothers have tended to have been in politics and they often act as patrons and mentors. In Samoa, most of the initial group of women parliamentarians in the 1970s had husbands who were current or former MPs.

Ron Crocombe (2008:468) argues that often those women from the region who have succeeded in politics have also had foreign husbands and few children. There are cases to support this assertion, but it is not a rule. Certainly spousal support helps — both men and women candidates — and increasingly the costs of running for election privileges older (and wealthier) candidates (Corbett and Wood 2013). We might say that these factors are relatively *more* important for women, but this is difficult to substantiate.

Education matters

Crocombe (2008:468) also argues that women MPs tend to have above-average levels of education — usually from overseas (see also Corbett 2012). This is certainly supported in both of the countries discussed here, with most women MPs having spent time overseas for either secondary or tertiary education. Where MPs have been educated overseas, it is usually in Fiji, New Zealand or Australia, or a combination of all three. This trend is broadly common to both men and women in the Pacific.

Career matters

Historically, the most common pre-political background for Pacific MPs is the public service. This is changing as career trajectories broaden

amongst new-generation MPs (see Corbett and Wood 2013), but the trend remains. For women MPs, this often means a background in teaching or other 'caring' professions (for example, nursing). But, as above, this is not a hard and fast rule. Such professions provide women with a profile that can aid their election chances.

Community involvement matters

Along with a profile, having a good reputation is important for any prospective candidate in the Pacific. There are all manner of community events — weddings, funerals, birthdays etc. — that could be included here, but most of these revolve around church activities. Many MPs, including women, hold leadership positions with local churches and derive a reputation for community involvement on this basis; indeed, it is often on the strength of this engagement that they are approached to run.

Campaigning matters

There are a number of campaign strategies open to MPs in the Pacific, but two in particular stand out. Firstly, for those with a large national profile and significant financial resources, involvement in day-to-day community events is often unnecessary — they largely win on the basis of being well known. Secondly, most women MPs in the Pacific tend to form part of a group of waged elites who retain connections with their constituency while working away in the capital and who return and contest on the strength of that reputation. This requires years of hard work, but those who do not put in the time and effort are unlikely to succeed.

By-elections matter (especially in Kiribati)

Reflecting all of these trends, one common entry point for women MPs is via by-elections where their husband, brother, father or uncle passes away, leaving their seat vacant. In the vacuum, supporters look around for a suitable candidate who possesses many of the attributes listed here. These candidates are then elected on the strength of a 'sympathy vote' (for example, Masiofo Laulu Fetauimalemau Fuatino Mataafa, who was elected in 1975 after her

husband — Samoa's first prime minister — died in office). However, in most cases, these women are not returned at the subsequent general election. Tangariki Reete is one MP who bucked this trend at the last Kiribati national election.

Notes on authors

Kerryn Baker is a PhD candidate at SSGM. Roannie Ng Shiu is the Pacific Studies Outreach and Research Fellow Outreach Fellow at SSGM. Jack Corbett is a Postdoctoral Fellow at SSGM.

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Endnote

- 1 To date, only the Autonomous Government of Bougainville has three reserved seats for women in its 39-member parliament. Samoa has recently adopted a ten per cent gender quota which will be in place from the 2016 election.

Acknowledgement

Aspects of this analysis, along with other material collected as part of previous studies into the life stories of women MPs in the region, will appear in a forthcoming article co-authored by Jack Corbett, and Asenati Liki Chan Tung from the University of the South Pacific.

