



DLP Gender and Politics  
in Practice

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## BEING THE FIRST: WOMEN LEADERS IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS



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## ABOUT THE GENDER AND POLITICS IN PRACTICE RESEARCH PROJECT

How can a gendered understanding of power and politics make development work more effective? Many development programs tend to look at gender issues and politics separately. Through a series of case studies, this research asks what we can learn from more integrated approaches. It includes:

1. a literature review on thinking and working politically and gender equality
2. a context paper, and three in-depth studies that examine how gender and politics came together in social change processes
  - women political leaders in the Pacific
  - labour reform in Vietnam's garment industry
  - transgender empowerment and social inclusion in Indonesia
3. 14 short case studies of development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware, and a synthesis of their key insights

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# SUMMARY

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Recent policy and academic writing on women in the Pacific has focused on the barriers women in the region experience when seeking to participate in formal politics. This paper contributes to the small body of work that seeks to explain how some women defy these barriers, are elected to parliament and achieve high office.

The paper focuses on the experiences of three women: President Hilda Heine from the Marshall Islands; the Honorable Fiame Naomi Mata'afa from Samoa; and Dame Carol Kidu from Papua New Guinea. All have won senior leadership positions in their respective governments. As the 'first' women to reach the apex of parliamentary politics in the Pacific, their stories offer valuable insights for donors and other reformers seeking to address gender imbalance both in the Pacific and beyond.

## SEVEN 'RULES OF THUMB'<sup>1</sup>

From their experiences, we draw out seven 'rules of thumb' that they identify as being important to their political success. They are:

1. use your family resources wisely;
2. invest in education – it bestows both skills and profile;
3. keep your community close;
4. develop a reputation as an expert in a substantive policy area;
5. develop strategies for working in a male-dominated environment;
6. know how and when to take a stand; and
7. build strategic networks with the international community.

This paper's exploration of these insights is followed by a discussion of the critical reflections these leaders offer in relation to donor interventions. Their critiques offer a firm basis for assessing the best use of donor funding to support gender equity goals in the Pacific.

## REFLECTIONS ON DONOR PRACTICE

### CANDIDATE TRAINING

The relevance and effectiveness of donor-funded electoral candidate training initiatives is open to question. This kind of training can be ethnocentric in its understandings of local politics, misrecognising or ignoring important local actors, strategies and political processes. The tendency of donor-funded training to focus on campaigning techniques developed elsewhere ignores the resources of local people who have a deep understanding of the political context. Trainees may also find themselves accused of being proxies for foreign interference in domestic affairs.

While candidate training was seen as offering some benefits, a common criticism was that it often comes too late to help any serious candidate who would already have spent months planning, fund-raising and campaigning. Such training is also usually very short-term with little follow-up or continuity between elections. Nevertheless, events like mock parliaments can have longer-term effects in building women's political participation by bringing interested women together in numbers.

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines the phrase 'rule of thumb' as describing a 'method or procedure derived from practice or experience, rather than theory or scientific knowledge; a roughly practical method'. For a full discussion of the modern perception that ancient English common law permitted domestic violence against women, and that the phrase has its origins in this, see Kelly 1994.

In any case, according to our informants, no amount of training can substitute for the slow and steady engagement required to forge a reputation and a profile among a community, especially if the only real shortcut to political power in the Pacific – an enormous campaign budget – is not an option. It is a tougher, longer campaign for women to achieve prominence and be able to pursue substantive rather than descriptive representation. For our subjects, overcoming initial hostility during the period of election had helped prepare them for their subsequent hostile receptions in parliament.

## **THE NEED FOR CIVIC AWARENESS AMONG VOTERS**

Our informants were supportive of more civic awareness programs to educate voters about electoral systems and the role of politicians as representatives and legislators. They further suggested that rebranding initiatives designed to promote women's inclusion in political life as civic education would attract less opposition from men.

Part of the desire for more civic education comes as a reaction to the distributive role that Pacific Islands politicians are increasingly expected to play. Politicians, male and female, struggle to find ways of minimising constituents' expectations of personal disbursement. The immediacy of these demands makes it difficult to articulate a convincing alternative to the clientelism that many voters (and politicians) expect.

## **RECOGNITION OF WOMEN'S BROADER STATUS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

'Thinking and working politically' involves understanding the tension between donor agendas that privilege a particular rendering of gender equity, and politicians' own judgements about how best to position themselves in local political debate.

Our subjects recognise that politics is not an attractive pathway for many women, even taking account of the cultural, economic and political obstacles that prevent Pacific women from having better representation in their parliaments. In the absence of direct political representation, women have found other ways of making their voices heard and contributing to society – for instance, they may choose to support politically active relatives, or to work in the public sector where they feel their efforts make a difference.

Our informants argued that these contributions should not be devalued as donors allocate resources to formal political participation. A focus on formal politics, and particularly national politics, did a disservice to the many Pacific Islands women who have achieved so much behind the scenes. A broader approach to expanding opportunities for women will ultimately influence their capacity to participate in formal parliamentary politics. As our subjects' life histories show, achievements outside parliament – for example in higher education or professional roles – provide women with the credentials to seek office.

## **CONCLUSION**

**It is unlikely that there are shortcuts that will increase the numbers of women who are active in Pacific Islands politics.** Our subjects have reached the apex of Pacific politics through their own capacities and in their own way. Their experiences have equipped them to be the leaders they are, yet donor interventions seeking to increase women's political participation in the Pacific remain focused on technical solutions such as campaign training and mock parliaments.

**Higher levels of women's political participation may be more effectively promoted by programming that takes a patient and long-term view of political and social change in the Pacific.** The life stories and political careers of the three women profiled here make it clear that family, education, experience, strategies for working in a male-dominated environment and relationships with international donors all matter for women politicians in the Pacific.

**The importance of support for girls' and women's education, and for informal ways in which women engage in social and political change, should be emphasised.** The findings of this paper point to the importance of providing opportunities for women to exercise their voice and agency in other domains of social life; investment in girls' and women's education, particularly tertiary education; and support for women's NGOs and women in the public service. These are all strategies that will help improve women's political representation in the Pacific.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Pacific Islands countries have some of the lowest levels of female political representation in the world (Fraenkel 2006; Baker 2014; 2017; Corbett and Liki 2015; Huffer 2006; McLeod 2015; Spark and Corbett 2016). There are a number of explanations for this trend, including cultural, economic and religious barriers to equal participation. Explaining these barriers to participation and advocating the types of institutional mechanisms, including temporary special measures, that might overcome them have dominated the limited literature on women's political participation in the Pacific region (e.g. Zetlin 2014; Wood 2015). By contrast, the experience of those women who defy these barriers to get elected remains under-theorised (Domingo et al 2015: 92; McLeod 2015: 11). More importantly, the literature is almost entirely silent on the experience of the select group of Pacific women who have held high office.

This research paper seeks to fill this gap. Empirically, it documents the experience of three high profile Pacific political leaders. Before going any further it is necessary to introduce these three exceptional women.

As President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Dr Hilda Heine is the first woman to head an independent Pacific Islands state. She is one of only three women in the 33-member Nitijela (parliament). Heine became President in January 2016 supported by 24 senators, including two of her cousins. Her brother, the late Carl Heine, was a politician who served multiple terms in the Nitijela. Heine was the first Marshallese to be awarded a doctoral degree. She has had a distinguished career in education at senior levels in the Marshall Islands and, for twelve years, at the University of Hawai'i, before returning to the Marshalls to enter politics, becoming Minister of Education. The Hawaii and US connection is central to Marshallese politics, both because of the large diaspora population and the remittances it provides, but also because Marshallese typically undertake their tertiary education overseas. Heine was a co-founder of Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), a vibrant and well-established women's NGO that runs a range of programs designed "to advance the causes and improve the lives of Marshallese women and their families" ([www.wutmi.com](http://www.wutmi.com)).

Dame Carol Kidu is Australian-born and became a Papua New Guinean after marrying Buri Kidu who later became the first indigenous Chief Justice. Integrating into her husband's Motu society, she had four children and worked as a teacher while involving herself in local organisations, including the Business and Professional Women's Club in Port Moresby which she founded in the 1980s (Spark 2016). Three years after the premature death of her husband, Kidu sought permission from his family to run for parliament. She determined that she would complete a maximum of three terms, a commitment she upheld when she retired from politics in 2012, having been a Member of Parliament (MP) since 1997. During the 2002-2012 periods, Kidu was the only female MP and served under Somare as the Minister for Community Development. When Peter O'Neill displaced the Somare government in January 2012, Dame Carol became the leader of the Opposition, making her the first woman to occupy this role in PNG's history. She is quick to point out that she is not PNG's first female parliamentarian.

In 2016, the Honorable Fiame Naomi Mata'afa became the first woman to be appointed to the role of Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) of Samoa. Her credentials both within traditional Samoan society as well as a parliamentarian are perhaps unmatched in this context. As the daughter of the country's first Prime Minister who was also a high chief, in her twenties she earned the title Fiame, one of the highest ranking matai titles in Samoa. Leaving university in New Zealand to take up the responsibilities of the title in her district of Lotofaga, she entered politics in 1985 and has held various cabinet portfolios since then, including serving as Education Minister for fifteen years. In addition to her current role as DPM, Fiame is the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, a role she gained partly as a result of her outstanding reputation in the regional and international spheres. Like her mother before her, Fiame maintains strong links with local women's groups including the Samoa National Council of Women.

Our three subjects have been selected because of their success in achieving high office and for the insights that this vantage point offers for debates about gender and politics in the Pacific. However, they are not intended to be representative of Pacific politics as a whole. Indeed, the three countries they come from have as many differences as similarities. As such it is important to note that there is great variation between these three Pacific cases, although the three

countries share deeper historical experiences of German colonialism and Christian missions and participate in shared regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community.

This paper charts these women's rise to power, their experience of holding high office, and their views on the gendered dimensions of political practice. We tease out seven rules of thumb that these leaders identify as important to the success of their political career. These 'rules of thumb' are not necessary and sufficient preconditions but they do provide a sense of what thinking and working politically means for women in high office in the Pacific context. They are:

1. Use your family resources wisely
2. An education involves both skills and profile
3. Keep your community close
4. Develop a reputation as an expert in a substantive policy area
5. Develop strategies for working in a male-dominated environment
6. Know how and when to take a stand
7. Build strategic networks with the international community

The paper's focus on the strategies that leaders employ as they move in and through their political careers shifts the focus from structural barriers that inhibit women from participating in formal politics, to one in which their agency is acknowledged and affirmed (Corbett 2013; 2015a; Corbett and Liki 2015; Spark and Corbett 2016).

Both the empirical and theoretical dimensions of this paper are important to the ongoing work of the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP). McLeod (2015) identifies a gap in our understanding of the impact that women leaders have on policy making. She also argues that there is relatively little research that compares the experiences of women from different countries of the Pacific. This paper fills both gaps. Similarly, Fletcher (2015) calls for greater attention to the way gender identities intersect with other identities, while Fletcher et al (2016) highlight the way gender-focused coalitions can influence political traditions and existing power relations. Both Hodes et al (2011) and Tadros (2011) highlight how 'backstage' or informal politics can be more effective for gender activists in male-dominated policy environments. All of these findings are supported here but we also extend them by highlighting the limited, and long-view role for donors in each of our cases; and by unpacking the common strategies (rules of thumb) that these women used to achieve their political ends. While we expect that this research will be of interest to donors, we also hope that the paper will resonate with aspiring women MPs, both in the Pacific and beyond.

The argument unfolds over three sections followed by a conclusion. First, we outline the methods used in this paper. Specifically, we highlight the importance of qualitative, biographical data as a way of gaining insight into how a select group of exceptional women 'think and work politically'. Second, in the main body of the paper we propose and illustrate seven rules of thumb that these women identify as important in their experiences of political life. Acknowledging that our use of the term 'thinking and working politically' (TWP) differs somewhat from the way donors currently use it, we argue that this disjuncture is potentially important for the way TWP is operationalised in a programming environment. Third, we focus on these leaders' critical reflections about donor interventions in relation to gender in the Pacific. Finally, we conclude by returning to the question of the lessons that can be learned from this research, including by focusing on both the theoretical and empirical implications of our findings.

## 2 METHODS

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This research has been collaborative from conception to design and conduct. At the design stage, the proposal was shaped in consultation with collaborators at the DLP and in response to feedback from staff in the Gender and Governance teams at Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The authors proposed to focus on case studies of 'Being The First', a title we borrowed from the collection by Pollard and Waring (2009) which tells the stories of 14 women from the Solomon Islands who achieved senior leadership roles. While Hilda Kari was the only parliamentarian in that book, we have included women politicians from three other countries in the Pacific. Looking ahead, we hope to continue this work by conducting additional case studies from other countries to form an inclusive Pacific collection.

Our rationale for these case studies can be summarised in the following way.

1. Each of these women's stories is worth understanding and documenting in their own right. Each has significant records of achievement within male-dominated contexts and has been the 'first' to hold a particular high ranking position within this context. While there is some publicly available material about each of the women represented here, this is the first time these individuals have been the subject of a focused investigative study designed to consider the relationship between gender and TWP.
2. Focusing on in-depth explorations of these women's accounts of achieving high office enables us to consider the extent to which we can extrapolate lessons for other women in the Pacific. To that end it was particularly important to draw on examples from different parts of the region (i.e. Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia).
3. In-depth interviews with each of the three women enabled us to ask them about their thoughts on donor investment in women's political participation in the Pacific and the best ways to support more women to get elected in these contexts.

To conduct the research, we employed a mixed methods approach which involved a desk audit of material already available in online, media and academic publications. In addition, we re-examined interviews conducted by Corbett (2015a) as part of his larger project on political leadership in the Pacific. In the case of the publicly available material and the interviews, we revisited this material to examine it in relation to the respective women's perspectives on thinking and working politically. We particularly considered the degree to which they were able to contribute to dialogue and policy that advanced gender equity.

Our analysis was biographical in nature: we sought to construct life histories of these women that qualitatively established their pathways in and through politics. This type of approach to the study of political leadership has been pioneered in the Pacific (e.g. Corbett 2015a; Corbett and Liki 2015). It enabled us to look beyond the types of cold facts and dead variables common to many studies of candidate characteristics, to present a humanised portrait of individual lives. Our qualitative approach was especially appropriate given the small sample size: President Heine is the first women head of government of a Pacific state while the list of women who have been deputy head of government or senior ministers is short.

Having established a focus on the interaction between 'the gender agenda' and TWP, the authors collaborated to craft the interview questions and determine those with whom we would seek interviews (alongside the three women who were the main subjects). We used a semi-structured interview schedule which ensured consistency across the three subjects but which also allowed participants to narrate their stories in their own way.

Interviews were conducted in March and April 2017. We conducted three interviews with Fiame Mata'afa, two with Hilda Heine and two with Carol Kidu. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations used below are taken from these interviews. In addition, to triangulate the data and ensure depth in our understanding, we conducted 36 interviews with their friends and colleagues as well as journalists, leaders in the public service and civil society and DFAT and UN staff who were in a position to inform us about the careers and work of the main subjects. While the three main subjects are referred to by name, the additional informants remain anonymous.

# 3 WOMENS LEADERS IN THE PACIFIC: SEVENS 'RULES OF THUMB'

## USE YOUR FAMILY RESOURCES WISELY

Politics in the Pacific is typically a family affair (Corbett 2015a). Because constituencies are small, extended families form a politician's main voter base. They also provide much of the financial resourcing for campaigns. It is therefore common for women MPs to follow their fathers or uncles into politics. Of the three leaders considered here, Fiame is the most obvious example of this pathway. Her father was the first Prime Minister of Samoa and her mother was also an MP and crucial mentor during the early stages of her political career.

Describing the mixture of traditional prestige and commitment to public service in her heritage, Fiame said family members on her father's side held high ranking titles within the traditional system while her mother's side, also members of 'high chief families', were public servants from the early stages. Fiame's maternal grandfather, for example, was the first Samoan registrar for internal affairs.

*My father was in government and he held the paramount titles. And my mother, she's the daughter of a high chief. She was a scholarship student, teacher by profession, and she was amongst the first group of scholarship students that went to New Zealand, and that whole idea was developing the skill sets required for a new nation. So their generation all they ever talked about was how are we going to develop our country. ...It's quite interesting that mix. Because that needs to gel to move the whole Samoan thing forward.*

While observing politics first hand as a child, Fiame absorbed 'the whole idea of service' and always knew that she 'was interested in politics'. But she says she learned from her mother that, first and foremost, politics is about relationships.

*I think what I learnt through her ... is that perhaps from the outside people think that you're respected, you're revered, whatever, because of your title. There is definitely that element because that's what the system is on, but what my mother taught me mostly is that it's actually the relationships that really make that strong. And so it's a real earning thing, as opposed to [an] entitlement thing.*

In other words, while family matters, it does not in itself guarantee success in politics. The key is how you utilise family resources and build and strengthen relationships to your electoral advantage.

Dame Carol Kidu was elected in part because of the profile and reputation of her late husband, Sir Buri Kidu. While Buri Kidu was not in office when he died, Kidu says she would not have been elected without the sympathy vote, commenting:

*... the sympathy vote in being Buri's widow was a huge thing in my win as well. There's nothing special about me. I had so many things on my side that made it possible for me to win at that time in the history of Papua New Guinea.*

Dame Carol is not alone in terms of the importance of the sympathy vote. Indeed, many women MPs in the Pacific are first elected on the back of a sympathy vote when their husband or father who is the sitting MP dies in office (Corbett and Liki 2015). In these cases they win the subsequent bi-election but most are not returned after that.

President Heine has a strong family background in education and engagement with public life in the Marshall Islands and Micronesia more broadly. The Heines are well known across the country but do not have chiefly status. Her brother, the late Carl Heine, served multiple terms as a senator in the Nitijela. President Heine remembers political discussions in the household from an early age and growing up in an environment where access to political systems was normal, seen as an extension of educational, moral and civic values taught in the home: a classic 'political apprenticeship' (O'Neil and Domingo 2016: 22).

Of the three, Fiamē is the only example of a politician who comes from a family of 'rank' with traditional leadership credentials. However, as she outlined, the link between chiefly title and electoral success is not always linear, especially for women (see also Johnstone and Powels 2012). That women particularly are required to have more than rank is evident, for instance, in Fiamē's story of being 'recalled' to Samoa after having been through court processes and gained the title of Fiamē. She had returned to New Zealand to finish her studies and says:

*I was there for a month, and I got a letter from the lands and title support that some people in my family were taking me to court for being an absentee title. ... I was told privately by the court that they'd gone out on a limb to give me my title, and if I was serious I should stay put. So I'm probably the only Matai ever in Samoa that has been given the hard word to stay in the country. There's so many other Matais that live somewhere else.*

Because the court had awarded 'a very high title to a young girl', the judges considered that Fiamē needed to demonstrate that she was taking this seriously, a demand that is not made of men with titles, as she observes.

Kidu also talked about the need to connect beyond family in order to gain the support to get elected. As she said, while familial support for her to run and the 'sympathy vote' were key factors, she 'worked very hard', making connections in the settlements during her campaigns and ensuring she sustained these once elected. She commented: 'I was very thorough, a very thorough campaigner and very strategic', noting also that this was important because the people standing against her had 'a lot of money'. Going from 'house to house' she distributed 'bags of knowledge' and made sure to connect with 'marginalised groups'. Discussing her message for intending candidates she says:

*And this is why I've been saying to the women, "You've got to look beyond the family, the clan and those things". You've then got to identify subgroups, so I focused on disability, I made sure that people, we would have a database where the disabled people were, who's going to get that person to the polling booth because otherwise they'd never vote. And so I was extremely thorough in that sort of way ... I don't know that many people go to that degree of thoroughness in their campaigning.*

## **AN EDUCATION INCLUDES BOTH SKILLS AND PROFILE**

Politicians in the Pacific tend to be better educated than their fellow citizens (see Crocombe 2008: 468; Corbett and Wood 2013). This pattern has been established since independence and is essentially uniform across the region. There are a number of reasons why education matters, including the career opportunities and financial resources that it provides (compare with IWDA 2014). At the most basic level, however, being educated overseas is a status symbol that helps a politician build their profile and reputation. This is particularly true for women MPs (see Crocombe 2008: 468; Corbett 2015a). Moreover, aside from providing them with the tools required to forge a political career, education also commonly serves to further ignite their interest in politics, with many becoming politically active for the first time at university.

President Heine is the most prominent example from among our three leaders of a political career grounded in educational capital. President Heine has had a distinguished career in education, working for the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) program at the University of Hawai'i, and serving as a classroom teacher, President of the College of the Marshall Islands, and Secretary of Education. In her first term in the Nitijela (Parliament) Heine was Minister of Education. Her high level of education and record of professional achievement directly influences her political style. As a long-term observer of Marshallese politics (and an admirer of Heine) observed:

*(Heine) can be more academic with cabinet ministers. She raises their level of thinking. She's a visionary! She has a research-based approach. She is the calibre of person who could just do her own thing but she listens to your ideas. She is very open-minded.*

The key point in this case is that education is not just about key skills, it is a mark of status and prestige that can be leveraged to achieve political goals.

Fiams also benefited from overseas education, attending secondary school and University in New Zealand, although, as we have discussed above, her studies were cut short by the death of her father and the need to return to her village to build relationships after gaining the title of Fiams. In addition, like President Heine, Fiams was born into a family in which formal education was highly valued. As she noted, her grandfather grasped 'the power of the pen' and all of his eight children were awarded scholarships to study in New Zealand, including her mother, who went on to become a teacher. Fiams says she inherits the benefits of this belief in educating girls. Indeed, her mother was so determined to ensure that her daughter got the best education, she established a banana plantation to cover the costs:

*I think she wanted me to have every opportunity to participate and contribute ... and I think as a woman too. She ... understood what the odds were. ... She's the one who went off and organised for me to go to boarding school. ... She came back and she told my father and my father said "I can't afford to pay for that" ... and she said "That's alright, I'm going to set up a banana plantation".*

While today's politicians are perhaps more likely than their predecessors to have money and connections due to entrepreneurial success or lucrative jobs in the private sector, historically, politicians in the Pacific have achieved electoral success partly as a result of the perception that having 'been outside', they have the capacity and insight to take their countries forward.

This was certainly the case with Dame Carol's husband, Buri Kidu, who was being pressured to go into politics in the months before he died. Having been educated at a prestigious boy's school in Queensland and then serving as PNG's first chief justice, Kidu was considered an obvious candidate for election, despite having no apparent interest in politics. Indeed, had he not died, Kidu says 'contesting would have never have entered my mind. I would have made a good politician's wife'. While she got in on the wave of sympathy that her husband's death engendered, Kidu then went on to draw on her own long-term experience as a teacher in PNG to connect with her electorate. Over time, this resulted in her establishing Ginigoada, a foundation that provides education and training opportunities for marginalised and unemployed people. Through this and other initiatives including her work on the early childhood policy, Kidu became known for her commitment to supporting those who were disenfranchised from the political process. Indeed, she says that Moresby South became 'the guinea pig' for ideas that later gained traction.

## **KEEP YOUR COMMUNITY CLOSE**

Family connections, education and career help set politicians apart from their constituents, providing them with the profile that enables them to seek office (Corbett and Liki 2014; Corbett 2015a). In the past, many prominent politicians were elected despite rarely visiting their constituency (see, for instance, Kenilorea 2008). Instead, community leaders or 'gatekeepers' campaigned on their behalf (Corbett 2015a; Wood 2016). But being known is rarely enough anymore, especially if a candidate has spent years away from their constituency, living overseas or working in the capital. Building a reputation as somebody who contributes to community life is equally if not more important (Corbett and Wood 2013). Indeed, as public frustration and distrust of MPs rises across the region, face-to-face campaigning is one way that politicians bridge the gap.

Women candidates tend to emphasise that having a strong community presence is especially important for them, in part because it can offset the relative resource disparity between themselves and other candidates. Kidu thinks she campaigned differently to other (male) politicians in PNG, going 'house to house' and listening to people for hours. She notes however that this means women tend to carry a burden that men do not:

*It's much harder for women. You've got to really work it. Very emotionally draining, because you end up with all the people's problems, which male MPs don't necessarily end up with; they end up with financial requests and things, but not so much the burden of facing the problems that people face, and the fact that you feel powerless to help them, but you know they desperately need help. And I've never felt so powerless in my life as I did as a politician, because you see need constantly but you cannot respond to all that need, and it's not necessarily good to. ... I don't know how many men get that close to it all. I got very close to it.*

Developing a reputation in the community tends to mean participation in church activities and fundraisers; funerals and weddings; or simply housing and supporting family members who come to the capital for medical reasons or schooling. This runs deep. For instance, discussing the hospitality her grandparents offered, Fiame says:

*There are so many layers in the Samoan family, [so] they also had that responsibility of all their families, if they were coming in, that they would stay with them. So they were always meeting people, staying in their house and [had] room for them if they needed. And that really is the lot of many Samoan families and the responsibilities that those that are in leadership positions take up. It's just part of what they do. But for children of those families we come through ... so we see that.*

One of the reasons that it is important to 'keep your community close' is that for all politicians, regardless of gender, the challenge is how to simultaneously be 'above' the people, so you can lead them, but also 'of the people so you can understand them and connect with their issues (Kane and Patapan 2012; Corbett and Wood 2013; Corbett 2015a). As the preceding discussion highlights, family background and education set these women apart as exceptional. But to win and retain office they need to maintain close contact with the communities they represent.

One consequence of these competing terrains is that these leading women come to see their role as conduits, mediating between different scales: local, national and international (Corbett 2015b). References to the local level typically refer to the 'village' or 'island' as the most fundamental political unit in Pacific societies. References to the national level indicate the primacy of the bureaucratic state as a vehicle for policy development service delivery. References to the international reflect that these leaders come from aid-dependent countries and their belief that to do their job well at the local and national is contingent upon the way they represent their country overseas.

The leaders also relate how they had to prove themselves at the constituency level before they could contest elections. For example, Dame Carol reflects that:

*I went through all the cultural protocols which I think some women today perhaps are not observing; I went to the clan elder first, our family elder first and got him on side. Then I had to go and approach Buri's brothers, all his brothers; he was the oldest of six brothers. ...It was a risky game, of course ... but I said, "I won't expect any money from you or anything like that. I'll make sure that I do not embarrass the family in any way," because that was a concern, I think, that I might have been an embarrassment to the family.*

Similarly, Fiame who is often thought of as having inherited her title, actually went through detailed and challenging court cases in order to achieve her *matai* status and recognition in the village, a pre-requisite to formal political participation in Samoa.

Politicians have a degree of choice when it comes to deciding exactly which 'village' or 'island' community they will represent as kinship ties extend across the borders of formal constituencies. In President Heine's first attempt to enter the Nitijela, she was unsuccessful running for Jaluit, the island where she had been raised. In 2011, at the invitation of the retiring senator, she chose Aur, a smaller community of some 400 people, where she would have a stronger chance of winning because of family connections, despite never having lived on the island. Heine continues to work actively to build her connections with her constituents, making regular visits to Aur and setting aside some of her entitlements to fund scholarships.

Each of the three leaders highlighted the importance of being sensitive to context, including how to conduct themselves when presiding over arenas that were traditionally male-dominated. They also reflected on the importance of being strategic in their interactions with their local community: they know who their voter base is, including their familial linkages, land claims and so forth, and they channel their efforts into consolidating and expanding that base. In this sense, 'thinking and working politically' refers to their ability to distinguish between supporters and constituents more generally and to prioritise the former in their village activities.

To maintain relationships with their constituencies, these women also employ loyal go-betweens who help to maintain their relationships in these contexts (Mausio 2002; Corbett 2015a; Wood 2016). Fiame, for example, employs her cousin, Pam, her one time 'protector' at school in New Zealand and now the face of Fiame's politics in the village. Pam helps to manage the requests of villagers when they come into town and advises Fiame about the needs of those in

Lotofaga. Similarly, Kidu employed a man who was ‘a wonderful campaign manager’ and with whom she made an agreement that he would run in Moresby South once she completed the three terms to which she had committed herself. Unfortunately, he died shortly after the campaign in which he came second. President Heine too has family members in Aur who keep her informed regarding sentiment on the island.

## **DEVELOP A REPUTATION AS AN EXPERT IN A SUBSTANTIVE POLICY AREA**

Being a politician is like any other job: it takes time to learn the ropes. Parliament has unique processes and procedures and there are challenges associated with becoming socialised into the routines and rituals. This is true for all politicians but because of the extent to which parliamentary politics in the Pacific is male-dominated, women politicians face unique challenges when entering this new workplace. These three leaders argue that it is important for women to be able to demonstrate their competence in a specific policy area. For some, such as President Heine, this competence is embedded in their education and career; nobody would question her credentials on education, for example. But not all candidates have such qualifications. And even for those that do, translating sector knowledge into the parliamentary realm is a skill that needs to be learned.

One strategy is to use the parliamentary committee system as a way of learning the ropes. Fiame, for example, recalls the importance of her committee work in the following terms:

*So, getting into parliamentary committees, it's very significant. That was my first term ... with the Bills Committee in parliament I was doing a lot of legislative work, looking at bills ... this was a key thing for my political parliamentary career.*

The key point about committee and advocacy work is that it enabled each of these women to develop a reputation among their colleagues as being competent and capable. This, in turn, led to their moving into more senior cabinet and leadership roles.

Over time, Fiame established her reputation as a ‘fixer’. She was the Minister of Education for 15 years and is well respected for her work transforming the school system and her important work with the National University of Samoa which had been established by her predecessor in 1984. She then did the same with Ministry for Women which was “not operating as a ministry”.

*In education ... we really did make the effort to fix things and put it on a new foundation to move forward, a sustainable one at that too. Then when I came to the Women's Ministry, the Women's Ministry is a lot like those mini social sectors, nice to have, show the world that you care about women and people with disabilities, but it doesn't really... get taken seriously or given resources. So when I got there, because it was essentially a social cluster ministry, so it had Women, Youth, it had the Village Communities, then they added the Disabled sector, and it was all very siloed. So the first thing we did when I got in was to say, “Okay, you're all acting these ways, but we're one ministry.” So we actually had to create a vision about what this ministry is and what it's supposed to do. So we probably spent the first six months working with the people that were there to try and get a collective idea of what they were about first of all, and seeing how we could then structure a vehicle that could really deliver on all those silo pieces that they had. So we got the internal stuff sorted out so we were all facing the same direction.*

President Heine served as Minister for Education in her first term of office and made significant changes to the way teachers are recruited by taking these functions out of the Public Service Commission and establishing a new Public School Commission, now headed by a woman. Like Fiame's example above, this required a consultative leadership style, which President Heine exercised also knowing that there is deference to her as a qualified educator. Where perhaps her reputation gives her sufficient status to push through her own agenda, she is always careful to bring people along with her. In the case of the Public School Service, she institutionalised this inclusive method by establishing an advisory board that allows parents and the broader community a voice.

## DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR WORKING IN A MALE-DOMINATED ENVIRONMENT

For each of the three leaders, 'thinking and working politically' means knowing how to work with male colleagues. This means being selective in their political goals and aims and, sometimes, choosing to play their politics differently. Dame Carol, for example, chose not to play politics 'like a man' and avoided direct conflict wherever possible, generally preferring to work behind the scenes.

Kidu also talked about taking things a certain distance and then handing them over when she knew it needed 'big man' backing. Kidu said she did this with numerous policies she worked on because she knew this would be more effective than if things were associated with her. But she did express concern that women may be at risk of being typecast as community development ministers in PNG – this was the portfolio one of the three incoming women was given in 2012 – and Kidu said she would like to see elected women being in finance and mining ministries, and not confined to roles associated with 'women's issues'.

With regard to men, Fiame also indicated she knows when to let men be associated with a particular agenda. She says she has been lonely in politics and has 'never made friends in parliament' because she has been 'very conscious' about her reputation as a woman among men. Fiame describes herself as getting her strength from 'friends and family' as well as her ongoing relationships with the women's groups in which her mother played an integral role. Nevertheless, it does frustrate her when she hears that women criticise her as not being able to represent them because she has never been married or had children.

*[That criticism] did matter to me when I was in the network of women, so called advocates for women's equality and so forth. I'd hear someone in that network say that kind of thing; it used to piss me off enormously because I'm thinking that we're all on the same page with these women. But somehow, it must be a human nature thing; people always want to put us into little slots and stuff like that.*

In her experience in parliament, however, Fiame says being unmarried has advantages because men can't construct her as someone's wife and thus subordinate.

In many ways, in the Samoan ways, being unmarried has served me well. Because in men's eyes, if you're married, they understand that because they're married as well. Right? And their perception is they're the head of the family and the wife is under their control. So their association with the married women, they sort of understand ... but with me, all they're getting is me.

President Heine too has tended not to be confrontational on gender issues but promotes an agenda of including both men and women. This is hard to argue against, particularly in the Marshallese context where senior women are highly respected:

*With women leaders, it is hard for men to criticise us because we are mothers and must be respected. So there are no personal attacks. Our culture helps women in this regard. They have a more cautious approach to a woman than they would with a male leader; they are more civil. I felt sorry for your [Australian] Prime Minister Julia Gillard with what she had to endure.*

When dealing with senior men, especially traditional leaders (iroij), President Heine observes respectful cultural protocols. However, she also uses her knowledge of cultural norms to create political space in modern domains:

*I'm a woman. I am not an Iroij but I come from a very low ranked clan. In my family I'm very young ... I know my place. I let them speak. That is the cultural grounding. I use that in the way I conduct myself.*

By showing appropriate respect, President Heine has developed an approach that has allowed her to build credibility:

*Sometimes we are more aggressive than we need to be. People notice what you do, not what you say. There are ways to be heard. If you are respectful to them, they will respect you back. I also try to do that with the other ministers... The perfect way to get your message out is by example.*

In relation to gender, the overriding message from the three women we spoke with for this research is that 'in politics you're just focusing on everything, and keeping an eye out for women' (Fiame). Indeed, as Fiame argues, when 'gender issues' come up, there are advantages in allowing male colleagues to take the lead:

*I have to be honest and say there are very few situations where it's been really gender-specific, but it's been about development for everyone. Most of the time I will talk to my male colleagues and just thrash out issues. It didn't worry me one bit if they were the ones that took it up. I wasn't necessarily interested in sort of projecting about what I thought. It was more about getting something through.*

Fiame observed that, for women in Samoa, allowing men to be associated with certain agendas has the advantage that these will not be seen as something championed only by herself as one of a small number of women in parliament. She said:

*As a Samoan woman, that's exactly the way to govern. Being a western woman, probably not the way to govern. But I do know, with the more experienced women politicians that I've come across, they know how to play the game. I don't think there are too many women politicians who are necessarily entrenched in gender feminist stuff. Very few.*

The Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa's focus on 'development for everyone' and 'getting things through' serves as a succinct reminder that women politicians are primarily occupied with the business of representing their electorates and, if they are in cabinet, supporting the ministries to do their work. For Fiame, 'all issues are women's issues when it comes to representation in government' (Maoate-Cox 2017).

This sentiment was echoed by Dame Carol who said that once, when a senior politician shouted that she would never get the credit for implementing the law on reserved seats for women [which was not in fact passed], she 'yelled back': 'I beg your pardon, I never claimed this law, it doesn't belong to you, it doesn't belong to me, it belongs to the women of Papua New Guinea' (Maoate-Cox 2017). On the other hand however, she does see it as problematic that major changes that she initiated in the social sector were 'owned by ... male colleagues' (Corbett and Lal 2015: 126), a situation which she sees as problematic 'in a nation where there are still not enough women in politics and the role and ... capacity of women is still questioned' (ibid.).

For the most part though, Dame Carol says that 'direct confrontation with male colleagues was counterproductive, a waste of energy' (in Corbett and Lal, 2015: 126). Telling the story of her first day in parliament she writes:

*The Opposition Leader acknowledged me with the comment: "People in this House wear pants not skirts" ... The next day I dressed in a trouser suit and made sure that most men were already present before I entered the caucus room. With a cheeky smile, I stood to attract their attention then kicked one leg in the air to display my trousers. "Am I welcome now?" I joked with the leader. My point was made. A small act of defiance but delivered with a smile.*

In the Pacific, seeking changes that advance gender equity usually involves operating under the 'radar' as opposed to being vociferous or stridently 'feminist' (see Spark 2016). Our subjects have sought to build broader support on a range of issues by presenting the problem as a question of inclusion where both women's and men's voices need to be heard in order to address issues of national importance.

Recent domestic violence law reforms in the Marshall Islands demonstrate the value of linking women's parliamentary representation with work being done by senior women public servants and civil society advocates. Using research funded by Australian Aid (Jansen and Takala Abraham 2014), women's rights advocates were able to introduce the issue to key decision-makers as a national priority that required action. In building such coalitions, explicit gender equity objectives need not be at the forefront.

## KNOW HOW AND WHEN TO TAKE A STAND

The above description of working with men does not mean that these leaders do not stand their ground when required—they would not have reached the positions they did if this was the case. Rather our conversations reveal that they are intentional about what they do and do not tolerate from their male colleagues. Fiaame, for example, recalls:

*So when I first got in, I was 27. Right? How do you pitch the relationship? First and foremost, I always make sure they understood I was Fiaame. Not in any uppity sense ... But I would always make sure to call them by their titles and behave accordingly. The message there was 'I expect you to reciprocate'.*

Similarly, when Fiaame was in her second year of university in New Zealand, her father Fiaame Mata'afa Faumuina Mulinu'u II, the first and serving Prime Minister of Samoa, died. Shortly afterwards, Fiaame returned from her studies to seek her extended family's support to claim the title of Fiaame of Lotofaga, one of the three traditional titles her father had held. A few years later, having achieved the title, she was in the village in a meeting with various leaders, all of whom were men of lower ranks. The meeting commenced with a kava ceremony. The man who was the fourth ranking person tried to get the first cup, which should have gone to Fiaame by virtue of her higher rank:

*I immediately recognised that this was something I needed to take a stand on and if I didn't it would be very, very difficult. So I said to him, "Why have you stopped my cup?" and he said, "Well you're the newest chief coming on". I said, "Yes, I understand that, but what you need to understand is that I'm the new Fiaame and Fiaame's number one and then you are number four, and why are you doing this? Do you think first of all that I'm stupid or this village is stupid? And while I'm saying this, why are all you other people quiet? And you, the leading Orator, why is your mouth shut? Why are you not correcting what is happening here? Do you think because I am a girl and I'm young that I don't know?".*

The now seasoned politician told this story in the context of describing the process of finding her 'voice' and specifically knowing when to use what she calls her 'Fiaame voice'. While she told this story with humour, there was also truth in the categorisation for, as is clear of politics in Samoa, rank matters and the title of Fiaame is one of the country's highest-ranking titles. Consequently, as Fiaame pointed out to her fellow *matais* in this instance, being 'a girl and ... young' was irrelevant.

Dame Carol Kidu was also a reluctant leader in terms of her path to becoming the Opposition Leader and says she did so only because she 'did not have a voice'. Michael Somare, the Prime Minister under whom she served as a minister, had been deposed by Peter O'Neill in what was later deemed an unconstitutional move by the PNG judiciary. Hence, the members of Somare's cabinet were boycotting the floor. Kidu however refused to do so on the basis that she had been elected to represent the people on the floor of parliament:

*I was part of the Somare cabinet and I kept identifying with them but I said to them, "I am not going to boycott the floor of parliament. I'm an elected member, my duty is to be on the floor." So I guess in a way that was standing up for what I felt, you know.*

Because the speaker, a partisan supporter of the newly self-installed Prime Minister O'Neill, refused to allow Kidu to speak she determined that the only way she could be heard was by becoming the Leader of the Opposition.

*I had no voice at all, the speaker would not allow me to speak, would not recognise me, and I got up one time, "Point of order, Mr Speaker," ... and I started to do the Equality Participation Bill, "Point of order, Mr Speaker, this legislation did start from my side. I would like to be allowed to speak in it." And he told me to sit down. I need to read Hansard to see exactly what was the exchange but he shut me up because the speaker was just awful.*

While on one hand Kidu sees this as 'having outsmarted them all' and certainly as an instance in which she took a stand, she adds that it was not a happy or positive experience but rather 'a mess' out of which it was difficult to extract anything positive.

## DEVELOP STRATEGIC NETWORKS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

For this final rule of thumb, we focus on how these leading politicians navigate their relationships within international settings. This is especially important for the small number of women MPs who are regularly asked to attend meetings and speak at workshops because of the international community's emphasis on having a gender balance at such meetings. All of the leaders described how this was a mixed blessing: it provided important networking and in some cases interesting and rewarding work. But international work also took them away from their support base and allowed critics to label them as foreign-oriented.

Nevertheless, demonstrating a mastery of modern systems and international standards and expectations are skills expected of political leaders. Corbett (2015a) argues that Pacific politicians derive their authority by projecting a sense of their capacity to successfully cross borders. That is, they are simultaneously from particular places and families while also being able to demonstrate community links and capital networks overseas that are often, as we have discussed above, the result of overseas education. Arguably, being a capable 'border crosser' is particularly important for women because it enables them to transcend some of the limitations that can be associated with femininity and gender roles as they are constructed locally. This 'transcendence' was alluded to by a senior figure in Samoa's international donor community who commented on Fiame's worldliness:

*Given that we're in a highly conservative traditional society, I find the persona of Fiame to be very refreshing in the sense that she has an enormous presence as a human being and as a woman leader. She is very worldly and, to me, somebody who is not afraid to articulate her feelings and opinions in an international setting. [And that is] very refreshing [and] progressive. ... Because she's been in this privileged position for so many years and travelled the world for over a quarter of a century, she is worldly. And she sees things from many different angles.*

Seeing things from 'many angles' and the associated ability to convey and translate international ideas 'back home' is a key part of being a successful border crosser. Moreover for a woman to do this well demonstrates an implicit and powerful challenge to the idea that women are best suited to operating in the domestic realm.

Another important advantage of working at the regional level is that this enables politicians to broaden their network of contacts and to build support around particular issues (George 2011; Brimacombe 2017). For Fiame and Kidu it was clear that operating in the international domain provided an opportunity to engage in interesting and rewarding work that is not possible at the national level. Describing some of her work with UNESCO, Fiame said:

*That's a whole other level of exposure. I've done a lot of Commonwealth, small task group type stuff, and one of the more interesting things I did with the Commonwealth was looking at the vulnerability index, especially for least developed countries. And it's quite interesting to see what kind of exposure people have ... to international global issues, significant issues. One of the really interesting things like that was I got nominated as the Pacific rep on a global taskforce to develop a global framework for delivering climate services.*

Fiame is involved at high levels with a range of international organisations and donor partners, including serving on the Executive Board of UNESCO, and she possesses an impressive record of working with the Young Women's Christian Association, *Pacific Women* Advisory Board (part of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative) and the Pacific Leadership Program. Both Kidu and Fiame noted the importance of conferences and workshops overseas for learning how international systems work and building relationships with key partners. Fiame said:

*Because a large part of the government is the donor community, you need to know how those dynamics work. But like everything else, it's also getting to know the people ... Quite often too, a lot of meetings would say that they require at least one woman to attend. So if I was the only woman, they had to pick me. So it's really also understanding the systems, learning how to work.*

The knowledge of international systems and access to programs, funding, ideas and personal support is invaluable for women in government. For this reason, Fiame ensures that she seeks to introduce incoming women politicians to members of this community, as was noted by her female parliamentary colleagues who appreciated her efforts to make these connections. Despite these important advantages, there was a sense that some male politicians did

not take these international opportunities seriously. As one of the three leaders said, male politicians who travelled overseas would often ‘disappear’ rather than taking part in events and meetings.

The influence of international relationships and ideas began early in President Heine’s career. She is part of a small cohort of Marshallese women who studied in the United States in the 1970s and who came home with a strong commitment to improving the lives of women. Together with other young educated women — many of whom also went on to have distinguished careers in the public service — Heine co-founded the first Marshallese women’s group not focused on church or handicrafts, *Jined Ilo Kobo*, meaning ‘Women are the mothers who shape the child’. This legacy is now continued through WUTMI, a women’s rights NGO that runs important programs for first-time parents and which has advocated successfully for changes to the law to address domestic violence (known in Majuro as the “WUTMI Law”).

Much of Heine’s professional career prior to entering politics was based in Hawai’i. As a result, she retains strong connections across Micronesia and was lauded in Palau when she attained the presidency. President Heine plans to convene a Micronesian women’s forum in 2018 and is committed to building a stronger women’s movement in the broader Pacific.

Heine is also a strong advocate for action on climate change and has recently addressed international audiences including the European Parliament, UNESCAP and at the Australian National University. However, she is well aware of the need to address local and national issues to show the Marshallese public ‘that we actually care and are looking for solutions’ (see also Corbett 2015a, chapter four). Raising the minimum wage is an example of the kind of initiative that Heine has taken to demonstrate this commitment.

# 4 REFLECTIONS ON DONOR PROGRAMS

So far, we have distilled seven rules of thumb for thinking and working politically, drawing on interviews with three Pacific women leaders. The aim, in each case, was to identify how these women saw themselves as thinking and working politically by identifying the factors that contributed to their success in moving in and through a political career. In this section, we give due attention to these experienced politicians' critical reflections on donor interventions designed to support gender equity in the Pacific. Their perspectives indicate that donors should be prepared to refocus on long-term investments in the education of women and girls, civil society organisations and women's leadership across the whole of society. This is not to dismiss the value of more direct interventions in political campaigning, civic awareness or constitutional reform but to draw attention to women's political representation as an issue that requires long-term societal change embedded in local people and institutions.

The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), together with external development partners such as UNDP and DFAT, have supported a broad range of activities and programs aimed at increasing women's representation in politics across the Pacific. These include measures such as training for women candidates, mock parliaments, mentoring of current politicians by women MPs in Australia and New Zealand, advocacy of reserved parliamentary seats for women and broader civic awareness (Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development 2017).

In general, the three leaders were sceptical of donor interventions designed to increase women's political participation. All agreed that donor programs were at best marginal in influencing their own political campaigning and success. Their critiques of donor initiatives focus on the limits of candidate training, insufficient emphasis on promoting civic awareness among voters; and inadequate recognition of women's achievements beyond the realm of formal politics. Their reflections below are not presented as a comprehensive review of donor programs but as empirical data that provide an inside perspective on such programs.

## CANDIDATE TRAINING

According to our subjects, candidate training has some useful elements but is very short-term in nature, with little follow up afterwards or continuity between elections. A common criticism was that these kinds of initiatives are often held so close to the elections that no serious candidate would benefit from attending as they would already have spent months planning, fund-raising and campaigning. Fiamé's summary is illustrative:

*... part of the program leading up to the election, UNDP was one of the agents that ran the program, so they did a program here together with UN Women. And they did candidate training, media training, they wanted to do a party, some kind of work with political parties, and they did the raising awareness like electoral education kind of stuff. I don't think it was very effective, and I think it's about how they design it. But the other thing too, it was all a bit late.*

The last point is key. As outlined above, each of these women spent considerable time, planning and resources to win elected office. It took years of hard work to reach their position. Indeed, as one of Fiamé's fellow women MPs discussed, she devised a ten-year plan to enter politics, ensuring that she had considered her family's needs and the reduction in salary that doing so would entail. No amount of training can substitute for the slow and steady engagement required to forge a reputation and a profile among a community. Indeed, in the Pacific, the only real short-cut is to spend enormous sums of money on a campaign (Corbett and Wood 2013; Corbett 2015a, ch. 3).

The three leaders argued that support provided by donors often focuses on learning campaigning techniques developed elsewhere, ignoring local resource people who have a deep understanding of the political context. Kidu advised:

*Use fewer people from Canberra and use people on the ground. ... I could put together a team of people, both political in nature and bureaucratic, which is important also with the way PNG is now, who could go out and do all the work on the ground; much less cost, no big travel allowances.*

This is an important caution for donors wanting to become more directly involved in women's electoral campaigning. Donors routinely overestimate the relevance and effectiveness of their initiatives. They can be ethnocentric in their understandings of local politics, misrecognising or ignoring important local actors, strategies and political processes.

Coming together in candidate training workshops and mock parliaments does have value for our subjects but it is less in the intended content and more in the social connections. The 2011 mock parliament in the Marshall Islands brought many politically active women together in the Nitijela and allowed for a collective revisioning of the place of women in that parliament. This attracted a hostile reaction from male senators who complained that they could not have women sitting in their seats. Women found this response ridiculous and still laugh about it years later. Nevertheless, only one woman was elected at the following election and a further two in 2015. From these results, it is tempting to claim that the 'evidence' shows that such interventions have no impact. However, President Heine and other women interviewed look back to the 2011 gathering as a watershed event and point to the increasing number of women entering local government as an example of the impact of this gathering.

Direct intervention in campaigns can harm women candidates who are perceived as proxies for external influence. It can also make them appear to be less locally engaged. Again, Kidu says she has been represented as an agent for foreign ideas and interests focused around gender:

*If you don't have your own independent funding you can be accused of being someone's stooge, and that you're running someone else's agenda.*

Part of the problem in building political momentum for women's leadership is that these initiatives happen as externally driven projects that are not embedded in a local institution. To some extent campaigns for reserved seats for women have fallen into this category in PNG and the Marshalls. The fourth Constitutional Convention was recently opened in Majuro and reserved seats for women were on the agenda. However, most informants were unenthusiastic or hostile to the proposal, fearing that it would attract opposition or lead to the election of women whose legitimacy would be questioned. Some Marshallese feminists also saw a risk of women being elected through reserved seats who might not have developed the political skills (through campaigning and other activities) that would allow them to be effective advocates for women.

Reserved seats might get women into parliament but our focus on those who achieve high office indicates that being in parliament is only one part of the battle. To achieve prominence and thus be able to pursue substantive rather than descriptive representation is a tougher, longer campaign. For our subjects, overcoming initial hostility during the period of election helped prepare them for their subsequent hostile receptions in parliament.

## **THE NEED FOR CIVIC AWARENESS AMONG VOTERS**

Our informants were supportive of more civic awareness programs to educate voters about electoral systems, the role of politicians as representatives and legislators, and the inclusion of women in political life. President Heine believes that if mock parliaments, for example, were re-badged as civic educational activities, rather than as political, they would attract less opposition from men. One of President Heine's confidantes who had previously stood for election noted that, in the past, the only civic education during elections had been provided through the NGO WUTMI, funded by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This suggests that there are opportunities for donors to support this kind of public education through women's NGOs.

Kidu reflects on the need for civic awareness to be embedded in local systems and community structures:

*... if we reactivate the community learning centres and the community district focal points, let's work out what is going to be the core materials? They become like an office of information and an area should be civic education, all those areas where people start to talk about these things at community level. And you have workshops about participatory governance and so forth. I use to do it in my own electorate, that's probably why I kept winning, because I had things like that going on and there were enough people who took part in it who weren't just waiting for the money handout. That's why I kept winning because some have said to me since, "We really miss the work you used to do with us."*

Part of the desire for more civic education comes as a reaction to the distributive role that politicians are increasingly expected to play around the region. Politicians, male and female, find the number of requests for assistance burdensome and struggle to find ways of minimising constituents' expectations of personal disbursement. The immediacy of these demands makes it difficult to articulate a convincing alternative to the clientelism that many voters (and politicians) expect (Cox 2009; Wood 2015).

## **RECOGNITION OF WOMEN'S BROADER STATUS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

Understanding the tensions between donor agendas that privilege a particular rendering of gender equity and women politicians' judgements about how best to position themselves in local political campaigns and debates is critical to successful applications of TWP. Our subjects recognise that politics is not an attractive pathway for many women, even taking account of the cultural, economic and political obstacles that prevent Pacific women from having better representation in their parliaments (see also Spark and Corbett 2016). As Fiamé puts it:

*When you listen to people talking about women in politics, you would think that all the women wanted to do this. In fact most women don't. Wouldn't touch it with a 40 foot pole!*

Indeed many Samoan women consider that they would prefer to support their husbands to run including by working in their home districts. Others, including those employed in the public sector, say they would rather remain in these positions because they perceive they have the capacity to do more in these roles than in parliament.

In the absence of direct political representation, women have found other ways of having their voices heard and contributing to society. Kidu believes these contributions should not be devalued as donors allocate resources to formal political participation:

*I think that there's been far too much focus on politics and particularly national politics. Women have been really great achievers in Papua New Guinea but it's often behind the scenes... And I think there's far too much focus on the politicians and it's doing a disservice to the many women who've achieved so much and ... we're just losing them in history.*

The experience of these three women in high office suggests that expanding the opportunities for women in society more broadly influences their ultimate capacity to participate in formal parliamentary politics. As our subjects' life histories show, achievements outside parliament are an important credentialing process for women seeking office. Experience developed through professional work can translate into political skills useful in parliaments, committees and in dealing with constituents.

We might expect women who have been 'the first' and have found their own paths into politics independently of external support to be sceptical of the merits of donor interventions in the political realm. Their political skills have emerged from local contexts and as political actors they relate to these contexts from positions of relative privilege with deep insider knowledge. As Fiamé put it, 'It was very interesting, none of us who got in participated in the UN program. I think I went to one workshop and that was it.'

These women who have reached the apex of Pacific politics have done so in their own strength and in their own way. With local advice, often supplied by family members, they have learned what strategies work and under what conditions. Over time their experiences have equipped them to be the leaders they have become. It is unlikely that there are shortcuts for other women.

# 5 CONCLUSION

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Drawing on multiple in-depth interviews with each of the three women, we have probed beneath the public account of their political rise to identify the factors that brought them to high office. As such the paper provides unique insight, moving beyond an analysis of the political and cultural obstacles to women's leadership to understanding and learning from the experience of successful senior female politicians. From them we have been able to glean important insights about how best to support gender equity goals in the Pacific.

Donor interventions seeking to increase women's political participation in the Pacific remain focused on technical solutions that aim to build the capacity of women to run for office. These include campaign training, mock parliaments and other activities such as media training. The success of these programs is usually measured in relation to the number of women standing for office or ultimately elected.

The life stories and political careers of the three women profiled here offer a critique of this focus. Their experience cannot be replicated, nor is it straightforward to dissect their experiences for 'lessons learned' that can then be applied by other women. Instead, by offering seven rules of thumb that these women describe as important to their careers, it has become clear that family, education, experience, strategies for working in a male-dominated environment and relationships with international donors all matter for women politicians in the Pacific.

From our work with these politically astute women, we draw the conclusion that donors must take a patient and long-term view of political and social change in the Pacific. Our subjects' life experiences point to the importance of providing opportunities for women to exercise their voice and agency in other domains of social life. For donors willing to take a long-term view, investments in women's and girls' education, particularly tertiary education (O'Neil and Domingo 2016: 34), and support to women's NGOs and women in the public service need to be considered important elements of strategies to improve women's political representation in the Pacific.

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