



RESERVED SEATS FOR WOMEN: ENCOURAGING FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE PACIFIC

Women's political representation in the Pacific remains an ongoing issue for Parliaments in the Region. While some would argue that the issue of reserved seats for women has helped to increase female political participation, the Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Pacific Region Steering Committee suggests it could in fact be having the opposite effect, leaving many women to be regarded as second class citizens.

Hon Elizabeth Burain, MP

Ms Burain was elected in 2010 to one of Bougainville's three reserved women's seats, brought in under the constitution in 2004. She is the current Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, Pacific Region Steering Committee.



Hon. Elizabeth Burain, MP

International Women's Day (8 March) provides an important opportunity for all men and women Parliamentarians to reflect on how much has been achieved to increase women's political participation and the significant work ahead. I believe that it is incumbent upon those who have achieved leadership roles to provide support, mentorship and inspiration to those young women who are emerging leaders in our communities.

Coming together as the Pacific Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) provides a significant platform to share experiences and to discuss how we

have responded to challenges. I am extremely proud to be the current Chair of the CWP Pacific Region Steering Group and to have the company of many talented women MPs in the CWP.

Women's political participation in the Pacific region

Female parliamentary participation rates within the Pacific are amongst the lowest in the world (sitting around four to five per cent). While women's representation within the Pacific region fluctuates, this is well behind the global average figure of around 20 per cent, and the commonly accepted target of 30 per cent. It is clear that we must make progress. The view of the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships Submission to the Pacific Plan Review 2013 was spot on by stating that:

"There has been little positive change in women's political representation in the Pacific region in the past decade. Increasing women's participation in democratic processes, at both central and local government

levels, is crucial to their democratic development and sustainability. Systemic, institutional and cultural barriers inhibiting participation must be removed if gender equality in the Pacific region is to be achieved."

The Pacific region faces a number of challenges: a geographically vast and isolated area, both from each other and from the rest of the world. Of the member Parliaments, only New Zealand is not a developing country. Only Papua New Guinea and New Zealand have populations over one million, some have less than 100,000, some less than 20,000.

One of the goals of the Pacific region is to lobby for the creation of a CWP group in every Parliament, even in those with no women Members of Parliament. The belief is that if the group exists in theory, even though not in reality, its presence will serve to normalise the representation of women and the expectation that women will and should be members. Another key part of this belief is that meaningful change cannot occur without the backing and recognition of male Parliamentarians.



The entrance to the Parliament building of Papua New Guinea.

the first session of the CWP in Johannesburg in 2013, a holistic approach is needed for change to accelerate. Attitudes towards women and girls must change in the home – boys and men need to be educated about women's rights. If we do not, we risk depriving our Parliaments – and countries – of the skills and talents of our women.

The benefits of gender diversity are widely recognized to lead to better performance, and of particular benefit to the Parliament, better decision-making, financial accountability and risk-management. It is well accepted that achieving a critical mass of women MPs means that there will be greater prioritization of women's issues on the political agenda and in policy development. From my own experience in Bougainville, women also play a pivotal role in peace processes and political stability.

As Chair of the CWP Pacific Region Steering Group I support the view that promoting and increasing women's political participation will not be achieved without clear strategies and priorities or without a coordinated action across the region. Factors which are critical to our success in increasing women's participation include:

- Strong networks to support women who are currently in decision-making positions and seeking parliamentary election; and
- Ensuring women in the Pacific are aware of how they can access support, mentoring and encouragement.

I am heartened by the way our mission to increase women's engagement and participation in politics has brought women from the Pacific and Australian CPA Regions together. I am encouraged by the continued cooperation and synchronicity in our work programmes to ensure effective capacity building and gender-sensitive Parliaments.

I was very pleased to attend the CPA and New Zealand Branch-hosted Gender and Democracy Seminar for the Pacific Region in

The barriers to women entering leadership positions are not unique

to the political sphere; we experience them in the domestic and private

business spheres as well. As I impressed upon participants during



Increasing women's engagement and participation in the Pacific region remains an ongoing struggle: Left: women in Papua New Guinea; Right: The Parliament of the Solomon Islands, which committed to a policy of ten reserved seats for women in 2012.



March of 2011. It was attended by women Parliamentarians from the Pacific regions, as well as the former Chair of the CWP Hon. Alix Boyd Knights, MHA, and Deputy Chair, Hon. Rebecca Kadaga, MP.

It was in Wellington, that the CWP Pacific Region Steering Committee was formed, with myself as Chair and Tangariki Reete, of Kiribati, as the Deputy Chair. Our recommendations included that countries with poor representation of women MPs need to review their electoral system and seriously consider temporary special measure of reserved seats.

Likewise, the inaugural meeting of the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships (PWPP) project, assisted by AusAid, in February 2013 has provided a valuable space for debating issues and inspiring action. The PWPP and CWP Australia Region initiatives for young women are extremely exciting, such as the w.comm forum which aims to connect young women with politics and the ideals of the Commonwealth.

Increasing women in politics

The member branches of the

CPA acknowledge the benefits of increasing women in politics – so how do we actually get there? Put simply, many of us have not made enough progress in ensuring gender-sensitive Parliaments. Throughout discussions at the various fora, two major themes in women's participation as Parliamentarians and parliamentary candidates in the Pacific emerge: first, the active encouragement of women to stand as candidates, and second, reserved seats for women.

Special workshops

Women's access to leadership positions is vital if Pacific women are to participate as equals in the democratic development of their countries. A number of elections have been preceded by special workshops for potential women candidates. These have aimed to encourage and assist the women in developing the relevant skills and knowledge to conduct successful election campaigns and to be effective members of parliament.

For example, in Bougainville prior to the 2010 election, the Centre for Democratic Institutions conducted

a three-day training workshop for potential women candidates. Seventeen women contested the three regional seats reserved for women. Five women stood in local constituencies; none had done so in 2005. Honourable Joan Jerome, Hon. Rose Pihei and I were elected from the reserved seats. Ms Pihei initially held the position of Minister for Community Development and currently holds the portfolio of Minister for Culture and Tourism.

Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are among those who have had similar workshops. I have no doubt that these workshops are of benefit to women considering entering into public office.

Reserved seats: experiences from around the Pacific

There is robust debate around the issue of reserved seats in the Pacific Region. Reserved seats are seen by some as a way to help women overcome the cultural barriers they face in attempting to win election to Parliament. Some see reserve seats as a mechanism by which to mitigate unconscious biases that result in no

women standing or being elected at all. This has certainly been our experience in Bougainville.

However, others raise concerns that women will find themselves restricted to reserved seats only, or that women elected to reserved seats may be regarded as second class MPs. Some Pacific women MPs support reserved seats, while others believe they are unnecessary and that women have shown they can compete with men.

Some question its democratic principle, for example with respect to the Parliament of Kiribati – Maneaba ni Maungatabu. President Tong said in 2012 that his government would encourage greater participation by women, which would happen of its own accord as women took on leadership roles in the community. He wondered, then, whether it would be democratic to put as a matter of law that women must have reserved seats.

In Papua New Guinea, the passage of the Equality and Participation Bill in 2011 amended the constitution to enable the creation of 22 reserved seats for women,



but in 2012 the Bill to determine the seats' boundaries failed to pass. Consequently there were no reserved seats in the 2012 election. Since the election all three women MPs have stated their opposition to the Bill, although PNG Member Delilah Gore would like to see four reserved seats, one for each region. The MPs said they had proven that politics is no longer a man's domain and that women should win votes on their own accord to show that they are capable.

I understand that Papua New Guinea's Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission completed its review of the Organic Law on Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates in April 2013 and presented it to Cabinet. Among the Commission's proposals was a requirement that ten per cent of a party's candidates must be women. The proposal was aimed at allowing gender equality in the decision-making process.

In the Solomon Islands, the Prime Minister announced in 2012 that the government was committed to its policy of ten reserved seats for women, but would take a

developmental rather than rights-based approach. He said that the idea of reserved seats must be in the context of the constitution, and be compatible with its spirit in terms of promoting equality for all citizens.

A Political Parties Integrity Bill was introduced in July 2013 with the aim of developing a strong, viable and transparent political party system to ensure stable government in the Solomon Islands. Included in its provisions was a requirement that, subject to demand by women for places, at least ten per cent of a party's candidates must be women. Parties could claim SBD\$10,000 to cover the campaign costs of each woman elected as an MP, and an administration fund of SBD\$20,000 would be payable annually to parties for each of their MPs. The Bill was highly controversial, for reasons other than the provisions relating to women, and was eventually withdrawn in October for further consultation.

The select committee to which the Bill was referred thought that the issue of women in politics should be addressed in its own separate piece of legislation. The suggestion was

made to reserve a certain number of seats for women. The committee acknowledged and supported the idea of bringing women into the Solomon Islands' Parliament, but said that the political will and motivation of all fellow male politicians was required to find an amicable solution to the on-going debate on the issue. Honorable Vika Lusibaea, elected in 2012 and the second woman in Solomon Islands political history to enter the National Parliament, has urged women to prepare early for the 2014 election and is confident that it is possible for women to win without having to request reserved seats.

In Samoa, women are now guaranteed a minimum of five seats in the Parliament from the next general election, after the constitution was amended in June 2013. If fewer than five of the 49 members elected are women, additional seats will be added to make up a total of five women. The additional seats will be allocated to the losing women candidates who gained the highest percentage of votes.

The Bill had been controversial. Supporters said it would help knock down the barriers to women entering Parliament and open up opportunities for them, while opponents thought that women in the reserved seats would be stigmatized as "gap fillers", not elected on their own merits. Both Samoan women MPs, Hon. Fiamé Naomi Mataafa, MP, and Hon. Gatoloaifa'ha Amataaga Alesana Gidlow, MP, supported the Bill. I am sure you will, like me, watch this process with interest.

The three reserved women's seats in our Parliament in Bougainville made a huge impact and helped change attitudes – it was increasingly recognized that women could and should take on public roles. We, the three women MPs, aim to have women contesting all of the 33 open seats in the next election in 2015. I look forward to updating the CPA of our success!

Looking forward to 2014

So what is next for the CWP Pacific Region? I am very excited that this year the region will be looking

into developing print and digital resources, in Pacific Island languages. We will undertake activities to raise awareness of the CWP and opportunities for women to participate in political life.

The Pacific Region wants to not only ensure current Members are well-connected, but also to encourage future Pacific women Parliamentarians.

In closing, on International Women's Day it is my hope that all men and women Parliamentarians take the opportunity to pause, reflect and commit to the work ahead.

Endnotes

1. Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships submission to the Pacific Plan Review 2013, para 5.
2. OECD (2012) Putting All Our Minds to Work: harnessing the gender dividend.
3. Governance and Leadership in the Pacific: Options to Increase Female Participation, Carly Stephan, The Foundation for Development Cooperation Briefing Note No.11 – July 2010.
4. Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships Project: Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Initiative.
5. PNG, Islands Business, 11 April 2013 <http://www.islandsbusiness.com/news/papua-new-guinea/845/news-rules-for-political-parties-less-than-five-me/>; Parties required to have women, *The National*, 26 June 2013 <http://www.thenational.com.pg/?q=node/51937>
6. Political Parties Integrity Bill 2013, 25 July 2013 <http://www.parliament.gov.sb/files/committees/bills&legislationcommittee/2013/Political%20Parties%20Integrity%20Bill%202013.pdf>; Bills and Legislation Committee, Report on the Political Parties Integrity Bill 2013, Sept. 2013 <http://www.parliament.gov.sb/files/committees/bills&legislationcommittee/2013/Report%20on%20the%20Political%20Parties%20Integrity%20Bill%202013.pdf>; Party bill sets for Solomon Islands parliament: PM Lilo, *Islands Business*, 18 July 2013 http://www.islandsbusiness.com/news/solomon-islands/1991/party-bill-sets-for-solomon-islands-parliament-pm-; Lilo backs down, *Solomon Star*, 4 Oct. 2013 <http://www.solomonstarnews.com/news/national/19043-lilo-backs-down>
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