

Where are the women in Simbu politics?

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

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

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

Women and politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Simbu women and politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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