

Political Economy Analysis in Supporting Women's Electoral Candidacy: Lessons from Nauru

Sonia Palmieri

In Brief 2021/4

With elections expected in Samoa and Tonga in 2021, and Papua New Guinea in 2022, development partners will have already turned their attention to women's inclusion in those electoral processes as a means by which to reach international democratic standards. Political economy analysis (PEA) — an evidence-based assessment of the political dynamics between structures, institutions and actors in a given context, used to inform policy and programming (DFAT 2016) — has become a fundamental part of program design and implementation, but remains underutilised in the particular area of women's electoral programming. In their 2016 review of women's candidate training, Barbara and Baker pointed to the importance of individual women candidates conducting their own localised political economy analyses, preferably at the micro or 'electorate level' (p. 2). This In Brief presents a related, but separate form of gender-sensitive PEA, undertaken by a development program to inform the design of a candidate training workshop prior to the general election held in August 2019 in Nauru.¹ Three key lessons for gender-sensitive PEA are presented.

Building gender advice into electoral support programs

In 2018, the governments of Australia and New Zealand funded [an electoral program](#) managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the small island state of Nauru. Among other things, the program aimed to enhance women's electoral participation. To that date, only three women had successfully contested elections since Nauruan independence in 1968.

I became the project's gender adviser six months before the election was held, acutely aware of my own limitations: I had never been to Nauru and knew little of its political economy; I had no previously established network of contacts on the ground and no understanding of who the 'usual suspects' were (Booth and Unsworth 2014:18); and I was unfamiliar with the specific work environment and culture of the Nauruan Electoral Commission (NEC). Like innumerable

gender advisers before me, I was 'parachuted' into a situation without a briefing on gender and politics in the specific country context, and with all the consequent risks and challenges that entails (see Kunz et al. 2019:34). Perhaps my one advantage was a familiarity with the evidence on candidate training in the Pacific, which has critically described much of the course content as 'irrelevant', with a tendency to set women up 'to fail' (Barbara and Baker 2016; Haley and Zubrinich 2015).

The 2015 UN Women/UNDP [Guide to Inclusive Electoral Processes](#) includes, as an annex, a comprehensive list of questions by which 'to review the status of gender equality in electoral processes and institutions' (p. 106). The first step in designing a localised workshop agenda was to work with NEC staff to identify appropriate questions and stakeholders, in order to collectively map the gendered landscape of elections in Nauru. Focus group discussions were set up with NEC staff, church leaders, community leaders and previous candidates (both male and female), including the two women who had most recently run successful electoral campaigns (Charmaine Scotty and Gabrissa Hartman).

Gender-sensitive PEA of elections

The electoral gender mapping uncovered the following key points:

1. The Nauruan policy and legal framework presented well-known obstacles for women candidates; equally well known was the resistance of political elites to remove them.

Previous election observation reports (including by the [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat](#) and the [Commonwealth Secretariat](#)) had recommended the legal requirement that candidates resign prior to the election be abolished. Observers considered the law a key obstacle to women's candidacy given their strong representation in the Nauruan public service, including at senior levels. Requiring women — often primary breadwinners — to resign three months ahead of an election, without any certainty around its actual date (this being determined at the discretion of the head of state), would significantly jeopardise

the livelihoods of many families. The gender mapping was useful in identifying policymakers' continued resistance to implementing this recommendation, including to suggestions that aspiring candidates be granted leave without pay or that unsuccessful candidates be reinstated in the public service.

2. Faith-based organisations approach the question of women's leadership very differently.

The mapping also uncovered a more nuanced understanding of women's leadership across the various faith-based organisations in Nauru. Some organisations continued to preach more traditional conceptualisations of women's roles: women were seen as the 'mother and the carer of our house',² welcome as leaders of the choir or fellowship group, but not of sermons. Other faith-based organisations, however, noted that they were actively working — albeit with varying degrees of success — to shift those social norms: 'we have tried to deny the culture of women coming last — ladies have to speak, men have to feed themselves — but we are struggling on this'. In some churches, women were able to 'preach from the pulpit', contribute to decision-making and run their own 'outreach programs'. This analysis was useful in identifying those organisations the project could work with — particularly in a context devoid of non-government organisations — and the support bases that women candidates might have in the lead-up to the election.

3. While social norms across the Pacific often legitimise men as political leaders, Nauruan-specific norms add a further element of difficulty for aspiring women leaders.

As an island state, with a total of 30 kilometres of road, electoral districts are small and accessible by foot (noting that the heat and wild dogs present reasonable impediments). While this differs significantly from the documented candidate experiences of women in larger Pacific states (e.g. Papua New Guinea or Solomon Islands), the proximity of people's lives in Nauru poses different obstacles: 'the term "wang" — meaning you're jealous — gets used a lot [about women]'; 'it's a small island — we don't like seeing women succeed'; 'they think it's not fair if she gets there and I can't'. Nauruan political culture also affects women's ability to cultivate important sources of financial and political support. Focus group discussions pointed to women's 'hidden networks' in contrast with men's 'open networks; drinking networks'.

Lessons for women's leadership programs in the Pacific

Three key lessons arise from this analysis for similar activities in the Pacific.

1. Gender-sensitive PEA work must be done well in advance of an election. The gender-sensitive PEA is not a focal activity, but rather a means by which to determine the

appropriate entry points, actors and knowledge required to support women's candidacy more effectively.

2. Global toolkits require translation into local contexts.

While global generic tools are useful in terms of the normative guidelines they outline, local partners are essential in translating these into locally appropriate tools that can uncover contextual specificities.

3. A flexible and adaptive approach to electoral assistance programs is required. With good team leadership, new deliverables — including gender-sensitive PEA — can be designed and retrofitted into rigid project implementation plans. Development organisations, including the United Nations, have an opportunity to reconsider the skill sets of their electoral program team leaders, and recruit more adaptive and politically sensitive managers.

Democratic governance and electoral strengthening programs need to take a more culturally attuned and longer-term approach to women's political participation to reflect the gendered pathways to politics in the Pacific.

Author note

Sonia Palmieri is a gender policy fellow with the Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University.

Endnotes

1. With a population of just over 10,000, Nauru is one of the world's smallest island nations. It has strong cultural ties to its two closest neighbours, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia (see also Lauti and Fraenkel 2006).
2. Quotes used in this In Brief are taken from an unpublished report to the UNDP.

References

- Barbara, J. and K. Baker. 2016. *Improving the Electoral Chances of Pacific Women through an Evidence-Based Approach*. SSGM report. Canberra: ANU.
- Booth, D. and S. Unsworth. 2014. *Politically Smart, Locally Led Development*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). 2016. *Political Economy Analysis: Guidance Note*.
- Haley, N. and K. Zubrinich. 2015. *Improving Women's Political Representation in the Pacific*. SSGM In Brief 2015/31. Canberra: ANU.
- Kunz, R., E. Prügl and H. Thompson. 2019. Gender Expertise in Global Governance: Contesting the Boundaries of a Field. *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 2(1):23–40.
- Lauti, A. and J. Fraenkel. 2006. Developing a More Facilitating Environment for Women's Political Representation in Nauru. In Elise Huffer (ed.) *A Woman's Place is in the House — The House of Parliament*. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat: Suva.

