International Feminist Journal of Politics

ISSN: 1461-6742 (Print) 1468-4470 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfjp20

Emerging women leaders' views on political participation in Melanesia

Ceridwen Spark & Jack Corbett

To cite this article: Ceridwen Spark & Jack Corbett (2018) Emerging women leaders' views on political participation in Melanesia, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 20:2, 221-235, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2016.1189680

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2016.1189680

INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST JOURNAL OF POLITICS, 2018
VOL. 20, NO. 2, 221–235
https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2016.1189680

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Emerging women leaders' views on political participation in Melanesia

Ceridwen Spark[a] and Jack Corbett[b,c]

[a]Centre for Global Research, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia; [b]Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; [c]School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

Existing explanations for why women do not get elected to parliament in Melanesia emphasize structural barriers to participation, including prohibitive costs and patriarchal norms. They are largely silent, however, on why those women who do conform to the profile of the "archetypal candidate," and thus have the best chance of overcoming these barriers, choose not to run. Drawing on an extensive qualitative dataset, including forty in-depth interviews with emerging women leaders from three Melanesian countries, we find that many women are pessimistic about the way electoral politics are conducted. Echoing longstanding critiques of political practice, this cohort conceptualizes their political activity as being conducted in a parallel public sphere, in contexts in which they consider themselves more able to pursue programmatic reform. Rather than focusing on structural barriers, we explore their decision to eschew parliamentary elections as an act of resistance against politics as usual in Melanesia. This new material adds to the literature on why women chose to run "from" rather than "for" parliament and therefore has implications for scholars and practitioners interested in improving women's parliamentary representation across the globe.

KEYWORDS Parliamentary representation; political leadership; Melanesia; archetypal candidates; acceptable difference

Introduction

Women's parliamentary representation in the Melanesian Pacific is among the worst in the world (Fraenkel 2006; Baker 2014; Wood 2015). Existing explanations emphasize a combination of structural barriers, including the absence of strong political parties, the prohibitive cost of election campaigns and patriarchal norms and values, both traditional and Christian (e.g. Zetlin 2014; Wood 2015). These barriers offer a powerful explanation for the ongoing success of male candidates and underpin much of the policy thinking and donor interventions seeking to boost women's representation (Corbett and Liki 2015). However, this approach pays little attention to whether or not women

CONTACT Ceridwen Spark ceridwen.spark@rmit.edu.au Centre for Global Research, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, 411 Swanston Street, Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia; Jack Corbett j.corbett@soton.ac.uk Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, University Road, Southampton SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom

display the key attributes of "archetypal candidates" and are viewed as "acceptable" (Durose et al. 2012) in the eyes of the electorate.

The main limitation of this dominant explanation is that it neglects to account for the agency of the women involved. As a result, it struggles to explain why some women are able to defy these barriers and get elected (see Corbett 2015; Corbett and Liki 2015) and why those women who do conform to the characteristics of an archetypal Melanesian candidate – above average education, successful and high-profile professional career, influential family, active community involvement and strong clan allegiances – choose not to run for office (see Huffer 2006; Whittington, Ospina, and Pollard 2006; Corbett and Wood 2013). We focus on this latter subgroup of women demonstrating both that they are "critical agents of social change" (Zetlin 2014) and the importance of women's collective action (Bayard de Volo 2003).

We find that many of these women are pessimistic about the way electoral politics are conducted. Echoing longstanding critiques of political practice (see most famously Steeves 1996) that emphasize the personalized and localized nature of resource distribution among local elites (commonly labeled "big man politics"), women conceptualize their political activity as being conducted in a parallel public sphere, specifically in contexts in which they consider themselves more able to pursue programmatic reform (Huffer 2006). We argue that their decision is best conceptualized as an act of resistance against politics as usual in Melanesian countries.

Melanesian women have tended to be well represented in informal and community politics but this has not translated to their finding their way into parliament (McLeod 2015). Our discussion of the disgruntlement this produces indicates two coexistent narratives. The first is that women become disillusioned with politics as a means to achieving change. The second and perhaps more subtle explanation is that women perceive that making themselves "acceptably different" offers the best route for political advancement. In response to political cultures that are hostile both to women and to feminism, they express what might be interpreted as "antifeminist" positions in order to be perceived as socially acceptable. This more nuanced explanation of women's political representation in the Pacific has implications for all scholars interested in why women chose to run "from" rather than "for" parliament (Fox, Lawless and Feeley 2001; Deo 2012).

For those interested in increasing women's parliamentary representation, the message is that structural factors only reveal part of the story (Tiessen 2008). Assuming the necessity of developing a more holistic explanation of why women are not elected to parliament, we argue that we need to pay closer attention to the agency of women themselves. While recognizing that the norms dictating the profile of an "archetypical candidate" in Melanesia limit the number of women who conceivably could win elections, we suggest that it is only by including the intentions of this subset of women that we can account for their decisions and actions and, by extension, develop appropriate policy responses.

This article substantiates this argument in four parts. First we delve deeper into the theories of women's representation with particular reference to Melanesia. We outline the profile of an "archetypal candidate" by reference to the prevailing political context. Second, we detail our approach and the data collection methods employed to develop the theoretical contribution of this piece. Third, we provide an empirical examination of why the subgroup of women in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu that could conceivably win office, choose not to run. Finally, we return to the theoretical discussion and outline the implications of our argument for scholars and policymakers.

Women's parliamentary representation

Two theoretical concepts underpin the article. The first is taken from the literature on women's representation and the idea of an "archetypal candidate." The second is derived from the literature on political practice in Melanesia, which emphasizes the personalized and localized nature of parliamentary politics. The two are linked in the sense that the Melanesian context dictates what constitutes an "archetypal candidate" in our three chosen countries. By employing a concept from the literature in Melanesia we contribute to the small but growing discussion on women's representation in the region while also providing new and theoretically relevant cases of interest to a wider audience.

The term "Melanesia" has a long and complex history (see Lawson 2013). Typically the definition includes five countries in the Western Pacific: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. We focus on the first three, as New Caledonia remains a French territory and is thus subject to French parity law while Fiji only saw the return of democratic elections in 2014. By virtue of their colonial heritage, all three countries operate a unicameral Westminster-style parliamentary system. As outlined in Table 1, while there is some variation in electoral systems, the extensive literature on electoral politics in Melanesia demonstrates that sociocultural context has been a more pervasive influence on political representation than institutional design (see Morgan 2005). The three countries are among the most ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous in the world, with national boundaries and identities being the product of very recent colonial histories. This hyper-fragmentation is commonly identified as one reason why political parties play such a limited role in the mobilization of voters, and explains why Melanesian executives tend to be unstable.

Within these ever-shifting contexts, the concept of the "archetypal candidate" seeks to profile the type of person commonly elected to parliament. The emphasis is on the characteristics of politicians, including age and gender but also socialization. Typically, in long-standing democracies this reflects a shift from a time when politics was dominated by "amateurs" – landed gentry or citizen activists – to the current era of professional politicians who make their way through the youth wings of party machines and dedicate their career to politics. In relation to women's representation, the common story is that to get elected a woman must be "acceptably different" (Durose

Table 1. Melanesian political systems.

Country	Population[a]	Colonial power	Electoral system	Members of Parliament/ women MPs[b]	Sociocultural divisions
Papua New Guinea	6,600,000	Independent from Australia since 1975	FPP since 1972, limited AV from 2002	111/3	More than 800 language groups spread across more than 600 islands
Solomon Islands	610,000	Independent from Great Britain since 1978	FPP	50/1	More than 60 distinct language groups spread across more than 900 islands
Vanuatu	267,000	Independent from Great Britain and France since 1980	Single nontransferable vote	52/0	More than 100 distinct language groups spread across more than 80 islands

[a]Population figures retrieved from the CIA World Factbook (http://www.cia.gov).
[b]Statistics on Women's parliamentary representation can be found here: http://www.pacwip.org/women-mps/national-women-mps/

et al. 2012). That is, they must follow the well-trodden pathway common to those who pursue politics as a career. In these circumstances, encouraging political parties to establish internal quotas, for example, encourages "archetypal" women to enter politics and can thus increase women's substantive representation (Childs and Krook 2009).

The assumption underpinning this model is that political parties play a significant role in determining what constitutes an appropriate candidate. In Melanesia, where parties are loosely institutionalized and have little bearing on electoral outcomes, this set of assumptions does not hold. So advocates of greater women's representation have tended to favor parliamentary gender quotas (see Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Baker 2014). However, this is not to say that there is no "archetypal" Melanesian candidate. Recent work on the profile of Melanesian politicians (Corbett and Wood 2013) finds a common profile among successful candidates: aside from being male, they are usually urban-based, overseas-educated and have had a substantial professional career background, often in the civil service. To gain grassroots support, however, they also tend to be heavily involved in local constituency activities, often via financial contributions to building projects, or church involvement. Based on election results, this combination of profile, financial wealth and personal reputation reflects what voters want (Corbett and Wood 2013). Despite some variation between the three countries – for example, greater numbers of candidates with commercial backgrounds have traditionally been elected in PNG – overall there are more similarities than differences.

This personalized and localized candidate profile conforms to the prevailing dynamics of Melanesian politics, in which state services are characteristically limited and infrequent. In this climate, the ability of politicians to pursue programmatic representation is undermined by the absence of resources and limited capacity to implement policy programs via the bureaucracy. As a result, politicians tend to bypass the state altogether and personally deliver resources to their constituents in the form of projects or handouts (Corbett 2015). To finance this practice they either draw from their own resources – hence the growing emphasis on electing wealthy politicians – or constituency funds, which provide MPs with discretionary spending allocations for use in their electorates (Fraenkel 2011).

This combination of practices is regularly criticized, both domestically and by international donors, on the grounds that it does not meet the ideal-type of Weberian legal-rational government in which the state is impersonal and functionally separate from society. Indeed, donors have invested considerable resources to "build" state capacity in Melanesia in order to stymie these types of political practices (Dinnen and Firth 2008; Fukuyama 2008; Hameiri 2009; Allen and Dinnen 2010). However, these efforts have had little effect. As a result, Melanesian countries tend to score poorly in global rankings, such as Freedom House or Transparency International's Corruption Index, that view these practices as nepotistic and corrupt. Locally, they are often explained as the continued influence of traditional leadership practices in the parliamentary sphere – a form of "big man politics" or gift exchange (for more on this debate see Morgan 2005).

The important point is that a woman seeking to enter politics as an "acceptably different" candidate must conform to these prevailing practices. In terms of increasing women's representation, one problem is that many of those with the profile and reputation to enact this Melanesian version of parliamentary leadership do not wish to do so. Emerging women leaders tend to want to represent issues, rather than electorates. Parliament is not always seen as the best place to do so.

Research method and participants

This article is based on a combination of data types, including interviews, observation and textual analysis. The main dataset is forty in-depth interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 with emerging women leaders in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The interviews provide insight into women's perceptions and experiences, including how they see their familial, educational and career backgrounds as shaping their activism and contributions to civil and political society. Some of the women elected to be identified for this research while others chose to remain anonymous. The textual work includes analysis of media sources, both print and online, personal correspondence with young women in the three countries and consideration of the aims and initiatives of the organizations and networks with which they are involved.

The women who participated were between the ages of twenty and forty, and thus conform to the profile of those considering or actively pursuing their first political campaign. Most were tertiary educated, including many who had completed schooling or a university degree in overseas locations. Because the research was conducted among women living in capital cities, it does not capture the voices of remote or rural Melanesian women. However, these biases are typical of archetypal candidates and thus represent a relevant sample. While some of the participants were politically inclined and interested, others were seen as leaders by virtue of their education, professional achievements and articulacy on issues affecting women or their volunteer work. The interviews demonstrate that young Melanesian women are taking a broad view of political activity and change and taking action where they can, rather than expending energy on entering the formal political arena.

The research was purposive in design and a network strategy was employed to recruit participants (Ritchie et al. 2008). The purposive sampling method enabled detailed exploration and understanding of our central themes and questions. The network sampling strategy was employed in all three contexts. The first author made initial contact with locally informed women and asked them to provide the names and contact details of those who met the criteria of being "emerging leaders" and might wish to participate in the research. Consequently, the research was informed from the outset by local Melanesian women's perceptions of their peers' status and capacities as emerging leaders. Bias was minimized by crosschecking names with at least two other locally informed women in each country. However, it is likely we missed interviewing capable individuals who were not connected with the women among whom we commenced recruitment. This may have affected the pool of participants by limiting the number of politically inclined women and overrepresenting candidates outside of governmental structures. We are therefore limited in our capacity to draw conclusions beyond those based on the women we included in this research.

There are a number of ways to explore why women do or do not run for office in the Pacific Islands, including, for example, surveys of their attitudes. However, the number of women candidates who could conceivably win a national election is too small to undertake this exercise meaningfully. Instead, we adopt an interpretive approach which is an established method for answering the types of questions explored here (see Corbett 2015; Corbett and Liki 2015). In particular, it provides a rationale for the type of in-depth qualitative work undertaken. It typically is based on constructivist-subjectivist rather than realist-objectivist assumptions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). It sees social practices as embedded within "webs of significance" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003,

2006). Explanations of social behavior are thus inferred from the meanings that the actors involved ascribe to what they do.

This emphasis on the explanations that agents give has been critiqued on the grounds that it fails to account adequately for the significance of structural forces. This critique is especially poignant given the gendered disparity in political representation. We are not saying that power asymmetries between men and women do not exist. Rather, we argue that these cannot be understood without paying close attention to the meanings and beliefs of those involved. Agents replicate and enact a series of embedded beliefs or traditions that reflect a process of socialization (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006). We further show how the belief that parliamentary politics are heavily gendered shapes young women's decisions not to run and forms part of their reason for thinking that they are more likely to make a meaningful contribution outside of formal politics. This emphasis on intentional agents is largely missing from the extant analysis of women's representation in the Pacific and elsewhere.

The extensive quotations used here are illustrative rather than exhaustive and have been selected on the basis of their "typicality" and capacity to illuminate. Not all of the women who participated in the research were averse to the idea of becoming politicians. Rather, most expressed reservations or the view that they probably would not pursue that path. We recognize that in some cases their perspectives may change, but maintain that their current views are revealing. When choosing quotes we were selectively interested in the emerging women leaders' desire to pursue agendas other than parliamentary representation. We also sought to represent a balance across the three field sites.

The politics of community development

Growing up in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands or Vanuatu entails coming of age in a world in which the idea of "development" informs most aspects of life, whether by its perceived absence or because the topic proliferates in the speeches of politicians. Being born in an urban area where aid and development organizations have their headquarters appears to heighten young women's commitment to "developing" their communities, as does the experience of being born to parents who work "in town." Such are the backgrounds of the women who took part in this research, most of whom grew up in towns rather than villages and many of whom are the children of the first generation of educated and formally employed Papua New Guineans, Solomon Islanders and ni-Vanuatu. Elizabeth, the daughter of a previous Prime Minister of Vanuatu, said:

> I grew up in Port Vila … and I had very little exposure to living in the village. My father had a very long history working first of all as a teacher but then he entered politics in the early 70s and was instrumental in the fight for independence for Vanuatu … I guess growing up in that environment and in that household really solidified my desire … to do something similar.

Familial connection to politics was also important for Grace from the Solomon Islands, also the daughter of a one-time Prime Minister:

> Having the political kind of family that I was brought up in I thought maybe I could help in some ways where I could. So that's how I started with the Young Women in Parliament group … Being

> educated to the level that I've come up, I feel that I can give back to the country or to the community.

Sue, who worked as a researcher in Papua New Guinea rather than in Australia where she had studied, was equally passionate about contributing to development:

> I feel proud to take my place beside other Papua New Guineans to work in whatever small way to contribute … Maybe it won't even be a meaningful contribution, but I just refuse to sell my country short.

The desire to improve the lives of others, including in rural and remote areas, unites the young women who took part in this research. Reflecting a postcolonial solidarity with men more than an explicitly feminist perspective, these young women position themselves in ways which indicate more commonality with Indigenous movements than with the global women's movement, which has tended to be constructed as imported and foreign (cf. Bauer and Burnet 2013; Corbett and Liki 2015; Hughes and Tripp 2015).

Conceptualizing social change

In September 2014, Kristina Sogavare, a 31-year-old Solomon Islands woman, spoke to Radio Australia's Richard Ewart about the importance of pap smears. A member of the Young Women's Parliamentary Group (YWPG) in Honiara (and the daughter of the current Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare), Sogavare discussed the group's decision to make a media event of getting these checks:

> There was a lot of criticism that we broke cultural customs and cultural norms by getting in front of the media and letting the country know about this issue but our motto says "Fight like a girl." We have to fight, to start somewhere in order to empower women because this is to save lives.

For Sogavare and the other members of the YWPG, the FIGHT LIKE A GIRL campaign is deeply personal. In 2014, one of the YWPG members died at the age of 27 from cervical cancer, a largely preventable disease. Where talking about "checking a woman's private parts" is taboo, the YWPG's decision to publicize their pap smears was deeply political. The group has since produced a pamphlet about cervical cancer.

Despite the inherently political nature of their actions, Marisa Pepa, who facilitates the YWPG in her role as the Parliamentary Civic Education Officer, represented the group's focus on addressing the challenge of cervical cancer as a "community" rather than a "political" issue. Her emphasis echoes that of other Melanesian women as acknowledged and discussed by Pacific scholars (see Douglas 2000; Waiko-Dickson 2003; McLeod 2008; Liki 2010, 2013). However, the literature is largely silent on the extent to which these women's choice to be community rather than parliamentary leaders is a strategy designed to influence political change (see Whittington, Ospina, and Pollard 2006). In contexts that are generally hostile to women's involvement in formal politics, taking the route of community involvement is an attempt to be "socially acceptable" and to get things done.

YWPG members perceive the efforts of their older counterparts to institute reserved seats for women in the Solomon Islands to be counterproductive in that this stigmatizes women and constructs them as being opposed to men. Discussing the group's attempt to "to connect with the Members of Parliament in a more positive way," Pepa said:

> So instead of say looking at politics, we look at health, we look at bus routes, we look at cervical cancer – so those things that directly affect communities.

Such comments indicate a strategic sleight of hand wherein young women's political activities are reconfigured as "community" issues so as not to raise the ire of MPs, who Marisa says resist reform efforts that are too obviously about gender inequality. Stating "we are trying to get everyone to work together instead of against each other," Marisa suggests that, for YWPG members, "working together" involves taking a broad view of political activity and change and taking action where they can, rather than expending energy on getting more women into parliament. Crucially, given widespread resistance to changing gender norms and women's involvement in politics, the young women's strategy involves trying to cooperate with male leaders, rather than challenging them directly (Huffer 2006). Grace supported this, saying that it is necessary to take a "fresh approach" rather than repeat what she and others perceive to be the more combative style of women in the past. Grace's mention of a fresh approach references this generation's desire to distinguish itself from the Solomon Islands National Council of Women, who have been seen as "advocating for women's liberation and feminism associated with the Western world" (Whittington, Ospina, and Pollard 2006, 21). In Grace's view, the focus on quotas has locked the older generations of male and female leaders into conflict and is of secondary importance to more inclusive and broad-ranging attempts to include women in the political process. Both she and Marisa appear to want to be seen as socially acceptable (and thus contribute to social change), rather than by an avowedly antifeminist philosophy.

Discussing gender quotas, Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) argue that "rather than using static concepts of 'essentialism,' the dilemmas and strategic choices of women in various contexts should be explored empirically." Moreover, they suggest that it is necessary to "empirically analyse which groups of women are involved in the promotion of quotas as well as their alliances with men." Our research indicates that many emerging women leaders are taking a different tack to their predecessors, both on the issue of quotas and when cultivating strategic alliances with men. Historically the few women who have engaged in parliamentary leadership have tended to be urban, educated and employed in the public service (Huffer 2006; Whittington, Ospina, and Pollard 2006). This new group of urban, educated and employed women seems less inclined to mirror the parliamentary focus of their middle-class counterparts and predecessors than they are to pursue social agendas and programs that reflect a community or "grassroots" development focus (Sepoe 2000; Dickson-Waiko 2010). We can infer that this is partly a response to the backlash against more strident expressions of women's rights (Huffer 2006, 34), but the empirical point is that young women tend to emphasize a breadth of activities, signaling the need to look beyond parliamentary representation to consider the spectrum of activities in which they are involved (Sepoe 2000; Douglas 2003; Garap 2004; Liki 2010, 2013), including in their workplaces, volunteer activities, personal lives and via participation in advocacy forums. The breadth of young women's activities can be interpreted as a strategic shift away or even a rejection of politics as usual in Melanesia.

For example, Wendy, a lawyer with a prominent women's organization in Port Vila, Vanuatu, is committed to informing and advocating for women who are victims of violence despite her fellow graduates' criticism that she should "get a real job" in a corporate firm. Through her role she has learned to challenge men who use "custom" to justify violence, saying, "I learned that they're just using custom as an excuse and … I have the guts now to stand up and tell them what I think." Wendy's emphasis on challenging the culture of male dominance through references to custom is echoed by Fredah, who

works for the Electoral Support Program in PNG, and says her job enables her to model leadership and democratic participation by women. Passionate about ensuring improvement of PNG's electoral systems and processes, she cites her professional goal as being:

> … to build the electoral commission within Morobe Province … get the electoral roll as accurate as I can and at the same time educate people on how to vote.

Women in the private sector also see themselves playing a key role in transforming lives. Jacinta, who has risen quickly through the ranks of Guard Dog Security to become the company's Human Resources Manager, says she has a drive to push others, especially women, to reach their potential, because "that's what empowerment's all about."

Similarly, Susil, the President of the Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Club in Port Moresby, PNG, says that having benefited from education, it has always been important to "give something back." She does so by managing the club's highly successful scholarship program for girls' education.

Another powerful example of young women's activism is provided by Ella, a 22-year-old from the Solomon Islands. Ella has established a tourist resort on her father's native island, enabling her family members and other people from the village to gain employment. In addition to raising money for development causes, including sanitation projects and a school fence, she has built a relationship with the Prime Minister, since attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November 2013. Ella's activities and connections make her an ideal political candidate (Zetlin 2014). But Ella says she "hates politics" and has no intention of seeking election, despite being encouraged to do so. Her position demonstrates that for at least some of these emerging women leaders, the goal of civic and political activity is not to enter parliament but rather to create positive change in the lives of their families and communities, a role that is nevertheless inherently political.

Running from office

Young women's disillusionment with politics as usual underpins their decision to engage in political activities outside the formal public arena. Discussing the gap between government rhetoric and the provision of actual support for victims of violence, Jacinta critiqued the role of "government bodies" in addressing violence, saying:

> How can a women believe in such initiatives, when she fronts up at her local police station only to be told that they can't help her due to lack of resources or that she has to wait because their division is waiting on funding?

Ella was similarly sceptical:

> I don't really like the life of a politician in Solomon Islands. I think you can be a leader not in parliament, you can be a leader like people can look up to you as a leader. Even if you are as you are. It's just about helping them doing something that can benefit them as well and that's a leader. But if you want more money, then you can go into parliament.

Ella sees becoming an MP as being about benefiting self, and thus unlikely to result in the creation of progressive social change. Conceptualizing her tourism enterprise as more efficacious she reflects:

> I think what women should do is … go back to the community and give back what you can … go back to the village and start from there like what I did. I did a lot of things in the village and people

> are saying to me in the community oh you should run for election … I said no. I enjoy what I do now cause I help them a lot.

Implicitly criticizing the urban-based educated political candidates who retain only tenuous connections with their constituents, Ella indicates the need for women to maintain close relationships with their communities whether or not they seek election (Whittington, Ospina, and Pollard 2006).

Jacqui, a 25-year-old Bougainvillean woman who started her own organization called Rugby League Against Violence (RLAV) provides another example of young women's commitment to creating change outside of parliament. Through RLAV, Jacqui works with men and boys in PNG to address violence in communities. She has "no plans to run for election" but states, "I think I can make a difference in my community wherever I am." For Jacinta too, change was not going to happen as a result of politics:

> At the end of the day I really don't care too much about politics and politicians. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" … We need our women and young girls to see change in their daily lives.

For this cohort, neither "good intentions" nor incremental (political) change are adequate. In doing so she constructs a role for herself in the political process despite holding an ostensibly anti-political position.

Anti-politics and everyday resistance

In response to the question "Would you ever consider running for parliament?" Ruby from Vanuatu said:

> No. That is never my dream. I'd rather be in the public service to the position of a director or DG [Director General] where I can influence policy and lobby political leaders. In my view being a minister or an MP is just a position where you only make decisions or only vote in the parliament. You can be a minister voting but if you don't really understand the issue then there's no point.

Ruby sees the real work of change as something that occurs through debating ideas, the "groundwork." In her view, politicians respond as best they can to what comes before them but play a limited role in conceptualizing either problems or solutions.

Another Vanuatu woman, Sarah, also argued the importance of advocating for change outside of parliament, saying:

> I believe strongly that in order for change to happen certain things need to occur simultaneously at different levels. The work I am currently engaged in at the policy and advocacy level is equally important for change as the ongoing education and advocacy at the grassroots level. These need to go hand-in-hand through a strategic and systematic approach. At this moment my contribution at this level is strong and this is where I would like to be right now.

Sarah also noted that "it is not enough having women … in parliament or at the Council level but that these women and men have a transformative agenda." She highlights an issue sometimes neglected by aid and development practitioners and policymakers: that there are no guarantees that women will be agents of social progress if they do get to parliament. Women's involvement in promoting gender equity and social inclusion certainly has been questioned in PNG since the three women elected in 2012 have spoken out against implementing reserved seats. It is partly because of these complications that the YWPG has focused on bringing issues to the attention of MPs, and not

primarily on getting women elected. Marisa emphasized the importance of young women's engagement at various stages of the political process, saying:

> [The YWPG aims to engage] women so they see the connection between our everyday life and policies and then the government. You see how you can push to get things done … *This* is what we can do to influence government policies or legislation and so forth.

Grace, who serves as the Executive of the Solomon Islands International Forum, mentioned the importance of the Forum's public contribution to debate through social media:

> Forum is a platform where young educated Solomon Islanders have an avenue where they can just talk about issues, debate issues constructively and how we can help ourselves as well as maybe pressuring … the government of the day … to see things from just the normal people's [perspective].

Although Grace claimed that the group was "not political," the very act of representing "the normal people's" perspective is inherently so.

Leina, former CEO of Vanuatu Netball and former President of the National Youth Council, was also involved in various groups, including Vanuatu Youth Against Corruption, another forum hosted by Facebook and the Vanuatu Youth Inter Agency Group (VYIG). Leina saw such groups as instrumental to the advancement of young people's participation in politics, citing the VYIG's role in lobbying the government to reestablish the Vanuatu National Youth Council in 2009:

> We pushed the government to set up the National Youth Council … and we pushed for the government to change some policies for the youth, we also created the youth development policy.

It is through groups such as these that women and youth have a voice.

Honor, a politically connected and overseas-educated Papua New Guinean, is another "archetypal candidate." But she too was passionate about remaining outside of government structures, saying she would not work for the government because it was too subject to external forces, including directives from donor governments and large NGOs. Instead, she and a friend established the Youth Alliance in HIV/AIDS (YAHA) in 2009: "PNGYAHA is a youth-led organization that aims to represent the collective voices of young people in Papua New Guinea in the fight against HIV and AIDS."

Committed to getting things done, emerging women leaders are focused on action rather than election. Steeped in the culture of "development," they seek to create positive change in the lives of others, utilizing a breadth of approaches and connections that include multifaceted activist engagement at a range of levels, from the community to international meetings. To finish this empirical section, we quote Theresa, a 25-year-old Papua New Guinean, who encapsulates the perspective of those with whom we spoke:

> Sure women can rally and support more women getting into the parliament but after all of that they (these women who supported) will still feel powerless because it will be hard to see the immediate result of their efforts. Sometimes a female political candidate can be a women's representative without really representing the desires and ambitions of the women who supported them … So definitely, if it has to do with training, getting a bill passed or a public march, I will do that to support women getting into parliament but I will still have my own project on the side because I would be helping someone more directly.

Conclusion

Explanations for the extraordinarily low levels of female representation in Melanesian countries typically emphasize structural barriers to participation: the absence of parties, the cost of campaigning and patriarchal norms. Implicitly, this literature conveys an image of Melanesian women as passive and powerless, unable to overcome the endemic opposition that stymies their participation. We have focused on those women who choose not to run for office despite being archetypal Melanesian candidates.

Rather than being powerless or passive, these women are active political players undertaking change-oriented projects in their respective communities. Though aware that they have many of the credentials synonymous with prospective political candidates, they choose to shun formal politics. The reasons they give reference a deeply felt pessimism about their capacity to affect the types of change they envisage via the parliamentary system (Huffer 2006). Many see their extra-parliamentary activities as a form of resistance that challenges the status quo. Rather than an avenue for change, entering parliament is seen as a concession and thus represents acceptance of politics as usual. Their decision to act outside parliament is understandable when set against the tradeoffs they perceive between pursuing the types of programs they are passionate about and becoming subject to the norms and practices that dominate Melanesian politics.

This finding is significant for a number of reasons. By elucidating the perspectives of emerging women leaders in Melanesia, we have highlighted that parliament remains a heavily-gendered domain, and is unlikely to improve in the near future. This is sobering. The hope has been that by initiating structural changes, with gender quotas being the most commonly-cited example, these barriers might be overcome. The aim of this article is not to argue that these types of institutionalized changes should be abandoned. Rather, our analysis highlights two important challenges to the assumption that the types of quotas that have worked elsewhere will automatically translate into better outcomes in Melanesia. The first echoes the observation of other scholars (see Huffer 2006; Baker 2014) that political parties play only a minor role in the mobilization of voters in Melanesian elections, and therefore parliamentary rather than party quotas are the only type that conceivably might succeed. The second is that even parliamentary quotas work on the assumption that, once initiated, the best female candidates will run and thus improve the substantive representation of women. Our analysis suggests that as long as "archetypal candidates" see the formal political sphere as offering limited scope to improve peoples' lives, this assumption may be optimistic. Melanesian women are more likely to continue to operate in the domain of civil society than formal politics, in part because this is perceived as offering more scope for contributing to positive change.

Parliamentary gender quotas have been a strong feature of the political debate in all three of our case study countries. PNG came the closest to implementing them, but the success of three women MPs in the most recent election has stymied that momentum, especially as all three have argued against adopting a quota. Here, we show that the decision of women to run "from" rather than "for" office (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001; Deo 2012) must be a key consideration for future attempts to implement institutional change. Currently, there is a strong view that women can win elections in Melanesia. However, if the views of the young women who took part in this research are

indicative, this is unlikely to eventuate because many women see little value in running. Views and opinions may change. For now, though, by representing issues rather than electorates, Melanesian women believe they are actively shaping their societies outside of the formal political arena, but in ways that are nevertheless inherently, and in some cases powerfully, political.

Among donors, parliamentary representation is seen as the most important step to improving gender relations. However, our analysis shows a quiet but significant revolution is underway in Melanesian countries in which emerging women leaders see their decision *not* to run as an act of resistance to politics as usual. Women see parliament as profoundly gendered but also substantively ineffectual. Rather than challenge this embedded set of practices, they are choosing to create a parallel public sphere that better conforms to their vision of meaningful social change. The question for donors and other would-be-reformers is whether emphasizing women's participation in formal politics risks delegitimizing the political activity in which women are actually engaged (Bayard de Volo 2003; Lombardo 2008). Moreover, focusing on the absence of women in the formal political sphere may increase the risk of donors overlooking women leaders within their communities (McLeod 2008, 2015). Again, we are not arguing that would-be-reformers should give up on the goal of increased parliamentary representation. Rather, we are demonstrating that it is only one of several distinct political spheres in which women are actively seeking change. With training programs for prospective women MPs, there is merit in supporting the activities that women see as having a direct and tangible benefit to the communities within which they are embedded. If the goal is progressive social change, and not only the creation of representative democracies, donors may need to "change their existing mental models of how development happens" (Unsworth 2009, quoted in Fisher and Marquette 2014). Taking emerging women leaders and their contributions seriously is a necessary first step in determining "actionable strategies" to support developmental change in Melanesia.

Notes

1. Emails asked initial contacts to suggest the names of women who were seen as emerging leaders. The only specification was that they be between eighteen and thirty-five years of age. This was later extended to include women up to the age of forty, reflecting a global trend in which people are experiencing an extended period of being perceived as "young people".
2. 2. In the Solomon Islands, the research was facilitated by the Young Women's Parliamentary Group, and in Vanuatu, by staff in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Port Vila. In PNG, the participants were contacted through the researchers' existing networks.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Kerryn Baker and Theresa Meki for reading an early version of this paper. We are grateful for a grant from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade which enabled the interviews to be conducted in Port Vila and Honiara.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Dr Ceridwen Spark is Vice Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Global Research at RMIT University. She researches and writes about gender and social change in the Asia-Pacific and has published in history, sociology, feminist and anthropology journals. At present, Ceridwen is engaged in funded research to produce film biographies of women in business in PNG and research on women's coalitions and networks for the Developmental Leadership Program.

Dr Jack Corbett is Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Southampton and an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Governance and Public Policy, Griffith University. He recently published *Being Political: Leadership and Democracy in the Pacific Islands* (Hawaii of Hawaii Press) and his work has appeared in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Politics and Gender*, and *Democratization*.

References

Allen, M., and S. Dinnen. 2010. "The North Down Under: Antinomies of Conflict and Intervention in Solomon Islands." *Conflict, Security & Development* 10 (3): 299–327.

Baker, K. 2014. "Explaining the Outcome of Gender Quota Campaigns in Samoa and Papua New Guinea." *Political Science* 66 (1): 63–83.

Bauer, G., and J. E. Burnet. 2013. "Gender Quotas, Democracy, and Women's Representation in Africa: Some Insights from Democratic Botswana and Autocratic Rwanda." *Women's Studies International Forum* 41: 103–112.

Bayard de Volo, L. 2003. "Analyzing Politics and Change in Women's Organizations." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5 (1): 92–115.

Bevir, M., and R. Rhodes. 2003. *Interpreting British Governance*. London: Routledge.

Bevir, M., and R. Rhodes. 2006. *Governance Stories*. London: Routledge.

Childs, S., and M. L. Krook. 2009. "Analysing Women's Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors." *Government and Opposition* 44 (2): 125–145.

Corbett, J. 2015. *Being Political: Leadership and Democracy in the Pacific Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Corbett, J., and A. Liki. 2015. "Intersecting Identities, Divergent Views: Interpreting the Experiences of Women Politicians in the Pacific Islands." *Politics & Gender* 11 (2): 320–344.

Corbett, J., and T. Wood. 2013. "Profiling Politicians in Solomon Islands: Professionalisation of a Political Elite?" *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48 (3): 320–334.

Dahlerup, D., and L. Freidenvall. 2005. "Quotas as a 'Fast Track' to Equal Representation for Women." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (1): 26–48.

Deo, N. 2012. "Running from Elections: Indian Feminism and Electoral Politics." *Indian Review* 11 (1): 46–64.

Dickson-Waiko, A. 2010. "Taking Over, of What and from Whom? Women and Independence, the PNG Experience." Working Paper Number 10. Melbourne: Deakin University.

Dinnen, S., and S. Firth, eds. 2008. *The Politics of State Building in Solomon Islands*. Canberra: ANU Press.

Douglas, B. 2000. "Women and Governance from the Grassroots in Melanesia." State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2, 3–8. Canberra: Australian National University.

Douglas, B. 2003. "Christianity, Tradition and Everyday Modernity: Towards an Anatomy of Women's Groupings in Melanesia." *Oceania* 74 (1–2): 6–23.

Durose, C., L. Richardson, R. Combs, C. Eason, and F. Gains. 2012. "'Acceptable Difference': Diversity, Representation and Pathways to UK Politics." *Parliamentary Affairs* 66 (2): 246–267.

Fisher, J., and H. Marquette. 2014. *Donors Doing Political Economy Analysis: From Process to Product (and Back Again?)*. Developmental Leadership Program, Research Paper 28. Birmingham.

Fox, R. L., J. L. Lawless, and C. Feeley. 2001. "Gender and the Decision to Run for Office." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 26 (3): 411–435.

Fraenkel, J. 2006. "The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments." Report for the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat by the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development & Governance. Suva: University of the South Pacific.

Fraenkel, J. 2011. "The Atrophied State: A Supply-Side Perspective on Politician 'Slush Funds' in Western Melanesia." In *The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific*, edited by R. Duncan, 298–311. Mandaluyong City: Asian Development Bank.

Fukuyama, F. 2008. "State-Building in the Solomon Islands." *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 23 (3): 18–34.
Garap, S. 2004. "Kup Women for Peace: Women Taking Action to Build Peace and Influence Community Decision-Making." State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program Discussion Paper 4. Canberra: Australian National University.
Hameiri, S. 2009. "State Building or Crisis Management? A Critical Analysis of the Social and Political Implications of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands." *Third World Quarterly* 30 (1): 35–52.
Huffer, E. 2006. *A Woman's Place is in the House. Report 1: Desk Review of the Factors Which Enable and Constrain the Advancement of Women's Political Representation in Forum Island Countries*. Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.
Hughes, M. M., and A. M. Tripp. 2015. "Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010." *Social Forces* 93 (4): 1513–1540.
Lawson, S. 2013. "'Melanesia': The History and Politics of an Idea." *The Journal of Pacific History* 48 (1): 1–22.
Liki, A. 2010. "Women Leaders in Solomon Islands Public Service: A Personal and Scholarly Reflection." State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 1. Canberra: Australian National University.
Liki, A. 2013. "Leading the March for Gender Equality? Women Leaders in the Public Services of Samoa and Solomon Islands." In *Politics, Development and Security in Oceania*, edited by D. Hegarty, and D. Tyron, 39–146. Canberra: ANU Press.
Lombardo, E. 2008. "Gender Inequality in Politics: Policy Frames in Spain and the European Union." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10 (1): 78–96.
McLeod, A. 2008. "Leadership Models in the Pacific." State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program Discussion Paper 6. Canberra: Australian National University.
McLeod, A. 2015. "Women's Leadership in the Pacific." Developmental Leadership Program, State of the Art 4, June.
Morgan, M. 2005. "Cultures of Dominance: Institutional and Cultural Influences on Parliamentary Politics in Melanesia." State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2. Canberra: Australian National University.
Ritchie, J., J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls, and R. Ormston. 2008. *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.
Schwartz-Shea, P., and D. Yanow. 2012. *Interpretive Approaches to Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. London: Routledge.
Sepoe, O. 2000. *Changing Gender Relations in Papua New Guinea: The Role of Women's Organisations*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers.
Steeves, J. 1996. "Unbounded Politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and Party Alignments." *Pacific Studies* 19 (1): 115–138.
Tiessen, R. 2008. "Small Victories but Slow Progress: An Examination of Women in Politics in Malawi." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10 (2): 198–215.
Waiko-Dickson, A. 2003. "The Missing Rib: Mobilizing Church Women for Change in Papua New Guinea." *Oceania* 74 (1–2): 98–119.
Whittington, S., S. Ospina, and A. A. Pollard. 2006. *Women in Government in Solomon Islands: A Diagnostic Study*.
Wood, T. 2015. "Aiding Women Candidates in Solomon Islands: Suggestions for Development Policy." *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 2 (3): 531–543.
Zetlin, D. 2014. "Women in Parliaments in the Pacific Region." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49 (2): 252–266.