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PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN PACIFIC PARLIAMENTS: THE CASE OF NIUE

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Perceptions of Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments: The Case of Niue

Much has been said and studied about the poor representation of women in Pacific parliaments. Research has emphasised some of the obstacles that have impacted on women's chances of entering parliament. Some of those obstacles have included cultural and traditional mindsets and the belief that politics is 'a man's arena' and not for women; political obstacles in terms of lack of incentives and support for women; and institutional obstacles such as lack of legal protection for women in general. Other studies have identified that old laws inherited from the colonial era also often favour men, hence contributing to the low number of women elected.¹ Yet there seems to be a gap when it comes to acknowledging Pacific parliaments that do have relatively active women representation. This is for instance the case of Niue. The smallest populated Pacific nation, of less than two thousand people, currently has five women members of parliament in its twenty-seat parliament.

The concept of Temporary Special Measures (TSM) was introduced in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN-CEDAW) which came into force in 1979. This was further strengthened in 1990 when the UN set a target of 30% of women in parliaments. This momentum grew in much of the world with over fifty nations adopting some form of temporary special measures since that time. Many countries also effected constitutional changes allowing TSM. Among those, Samoa has been the only Pacific nation to have done so, setting a minimum of 5% of the seats allocated to women.

The rest of the Pacific countries have been slow to adopt TSM, which may be seen as a reluctance to improve gender equality in the region. The substantial resources and the commitment of regional development partners (i.e. Australia and New Zealand) to addressing the low representation of women in Pacific parliaments should also be acknowledged here. Such contributions included a 2012 initiative of the Australian government which committed \$320 million towards a ten-year

¹ Fraenkel, J. (2006). *The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments*. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva. See also: Huffer, E. (2006) Desk review of the factors which enable and constrain the advancement of women's political representation in forum island countries. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva

program ‘to empower women to promote gender equality in the Pacific’.² Yet while the attention of the international community is welcomed, some questions can be asked. Among those, whose agenda is it to increase women’s political participation in Pacific countries? Why are Pacific governments slow to adopt such measures as the introduction of TSM? Is it because what works in other countries may not necessarily work in the Pacific context? Are there other options to be explored rather than trying to fit this model into an environment that is resistant to it and that is unconvinced that more women in parliament will automatically transform women’s lives? Is it possible that women in the Pacific do not necessarily share the same motivations as women in other regions of the world? These questions guided a research project looking at Niue as a case study. Findings from the research are highlighted in this brief.

Women entering the parliament in Niue

Niue is a small country with a population of 1,591 according to the provisional results of the Niue Census 2017. The Niue Legislative Assembly is the national parliament with 20 members. Fourteen members represent the 14 village constituencies, and 6 common roll members are elected by voters across the whole island. Since attaining its self government from New Zealand in 1974, elections have been held every three years. From the very first, women have been successfully elected. Three women were elected through the common roll in the first election and since then there has been at least one woman in every parliamentary term. In 2008 this number rose to 4 or 20% of the seats before dropping again to 1 member (5%). In the 2017 elections, however, the percentage increased to its highest: 25%. Of these five women, two are from the common roll and three from village constituencies. This is important because until 1999 no women had successfully contested a village seat. The first woman to do so unseated the then Premier of the country which some may suggest motivated women in the villages to follow suit. And since then at every election, there has been at least one or two women holding village seats. This history of Niue women in politics prompted further investigation to find out why this small island seemed to be quite successful in electing women into parliaments (without the benefit of TSM).

It is first important to seek the views of the electorate regarding the concept of TSM. Should Niue adopt it to ensure a more gender balanced parliament? An exploratory survey asked a pool of Niue

² McCann, J. (2014) Electoral quotas for women: an international overview. Canberra: Government of Australia.

citizens about candidate preferences, influences over voting, the electoral system and their level of political motivation to seek election into parliament. This survey was complemented by interviews with key informants who were former and current aspiring women politicians. Interview questions included their familiarity with the concept of TSM and motivations to enter the political arena. Understanding their experiences during the election process, from campaigning to election outcomes, was crucial.

No to temporary special measures

The results revealed that the Niue electorate do believe in the ideal of a gender-balanced composition of parliament. However, 66% of the respondents do not believe the government should adopt any form of temporary special measures. The main concern revolves around the quality or calibre of candidates. This concern over the calibre of candidates was also revealed in a previous study conducted in 17 Latin American countries and which found that the women in those countries were suspicious of the intentions of their governments in introducing TSMs.³ Furthermore, in Niue, fears were expressed that elected women would be seen as token members of parliament rather than capable members who could contribute to the development of the country.

Niue women are politically motivated

Of the female respondents to the questionnaires on their level of motivation to enter politics, 75% of the women aged 18-34 indicated their interest in entering politics compared to 40% of women aged 35-49 years. Women aged 50 years and over also responded favourably, indicating interest in becoming MPs. This aligns with responses from key informants. Two of the women felt that they should have tried when they were younger. One of the former MPs was elected after retirement and in her sixties. She felt it was too late now to even consider re-election and encouraged women to try when they were much younger. One of the veteran women politicians was elected in her 30s and is still a member of parliament. This confirms that the level of motivation in women is there however motivation alone does not necessarily translate into votes from the electorate.

³ Zetterberg, P. (2009). 'Do gender quotas foster women's political engagement? Lessons from Latin America'. *Political Research Quarterly* 62(4), 715-730

Challenges and expectations

On the question of key influences in candidate selection, most respondents felt that they would select a candidate that they knew personally. This finding, to be expected for a smaller community like Niue, is reflected in the responses from the key informants who felt that making themselves known and building a strong social network was very important during elections. One of the current MPs indicated that she spends a lot of her time and resources serving the needs of her electorate. This means candidates have to draw on their personal time and resources, meaning a career in politics requires also financial resources and building on social capital.

Access to information was also considered paramount, especially for younger candidates. There were some concerns over the electoral system, and how it needs to be improved, with some of the key informants saying that there should be more information provided for new women candidates.

Conclusion

Temporary special measures are necessary to improve the representation of women in parliaments. However, this may not be the only option. As indicated in this research, Niue has gradually increased the number of women in parliament to 25% without special measures. While recognising the contributions of donors to address concerns about the Pacific being amongst the lowest worldwide in terms of women's parliamentary representation, this should not distract from the responsibilities of Pacific governments to help themselves. Knowing and understanding the motivations and attitudes of the people behind this phenomenon can help identify what may or may not work in the Pacific context. This research has indicated that while Niue may have the highest percentage of women in a national parliament in the Pacific the highest number of women in parliament, this is not without challenges. The general attitude is that TSM are not necessary in Niue and that women generally are motivated towards the political arena therefore it should be up to the electorate to decide. The results also show that in the case of Niue, there is a general acceptance of a gender-balanced parliament. Yet respondents do not believe any form of special measure is necessary to achieve this. There are concerns over the notion of tokenism and women certainly do not want to be seen as being given special treatment. Based on these results, it is plausible to believe that, at least in the case of this Pacific country, a gender balanced parliament may very well be a reality in due course.

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