

State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Supporting Aspiring Women Candidates Better?

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This is the second In Brief of a series of eight developed as background papers for a three-day workshop titled 'Improving women's electoral chances through an evidence-based approach', hosted by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the Australian National University in Canberra, June 2016. The In Briefs are designed to accompany the [workshop synthesis report](#).

Existing development partner approaches to supporting women candidates, which have included providing technical support for temporary special measures; women's candidate training aimed at improving women's understanding of electoral processes; and programs to build the leadership skills of individual women, have not resulted in the gains expected or desired. Despite sustained activism and development partner support, women remain grossly under-represented as candidates and typically perform poorly in elections in the Pacific (Haley and Zubrinich 2015). The limited effectiveness of current development partner approaches stems from a range of factors, including the timing of assistance (late in the electoral cycle), the focus on leadership capacity building activities rather than campaigning, and limited engagement with structural obstacles, most notably resourcing challenges. Current analysis points to a gap between the nature of electoral competition and campaigning in Melanesia and the types of development partner support provided to women candidates. A more salient development partner approach would ideally seek to bridge this gap, by identifying new ways of engaging and new modalities for support.

Success for women candidates should not be judged solely on the basis of electoral victory. Instead, electoral success may involve increasing the vote share of women candidates, a narrowing of the success gap and an increasing number of credible women candidates running for office. These are important steps to long-term political visibility, influence and success. Nevertheless, increasing the number of women in elected office is an important goal in its own right

and the limited progress made in seeing more women elected to parliament in the Pacific suggests a different approach is required to strengthen women candidates' competitiveness in elections. While development support alone will never be decisive in helping more women get elected, how might such support be targeted to make more of a difference?

We have identified a number of issues that better-targeted support strategies would ideally engage with.

Better Candidate Identification

One way to improve the electoral prospects of aspiring women candidates would be to identify early those best placed to win local electoral competitions and support them over the longer term. Few development partners invest sufficient resources in candidate selection, meaning limited resources are often spread thinly, and tend to be focused on urban-based women who can more readily access training courses. The evidence suggests that such approaches miss some of the more competitive women candidates. One approach could involve identifying the metrics of success of victorious male and female candidates and developing selection criteria and processes to recruit women candidates who possess these attributes. Haley and Zubrinich (2016:6) note the need to 'learn from the experiences of women who are elected, and those who poll strongly but fall shy of being elected, in spite of increasingly aggressive electoral contests marred by heightened levels of electoral malfeasance and the proliferation of money politics'.

A tiered approach to training women candidates could begin with a broad pool of prospective candidates to help women interested in running to make realistic judgements about their electoral prospects and campaign strategies, before narrowing support to candidates with a greater likelihood of success and to support these candidates more effectively. Such an approach would require more research on factors influencing electoral performance of men and women and the development of new program delivery structures which can reach and support rural-based women over the electoral cycle.

Sustaining Support over the Electoral Cycle

Development partners have tended to provide candidate training and other forms of assistance late in the electoral cycle (often in the months immediately before an election). By this stage, participation is unlikely to improve electoral prospects. Credible campaigning requires a long-term approach, often over multiple election cycles. The concept of the electoral cycle is used by electoral authorities and development partners to guide election preparations, with electoral preparations and development support calibrated to the needs of different stages of the electoral cycle. Support for women candidates should follow a similar approach, focusing on candidate selection and strategic analysis of the local electoral context early on, followed by long-term support for profile building and community engagement before ramping up campaign support in the election period.

A Stronger Campaign Focus

Development partner support often lacks an instrumental focus on helping women mount more effective election campaigns. Support has tended to be general in focus — for example, on women's leadership rather than electioneering — and has treated women candidates homogeneously. More effective support would be focused on helping women assess and respond to the particular challenges they will face in running a campaign in their specific electorate. Two major priorities include:

Addressing resource imbalances: One of the biggest impediments women candidates face is overcoming significant resource imbalances. The increasingly moneyed nature of electoral politics in Melanesia makes campaigning expensive for all candidates and benefits incumbent (male) parliamentarians, who enjoy access to constituency funds. While development partners are limited in their ability to directly fund women candidates lest they be accused of interfering in domestic politics, helping women develop better resourcing strategies is a priority. There is room for innovation here, for example, with increasing interest on the part of women candidates in [EMILY's List](#)-type crowdfunding strategies (Zubrinich 2016).

Politically responsive campaign support: There is also a need for more politically attuned forms of support that better help women win elections at the local level. Winning candidates need to mount persuasive campaigns to convince a plurality of electors to vote for them. This requires responding to voter interests and incentives in campaigns. Ironically, much support for women candidates has been avowedly apolitical, pitched at a very general level, often with an emphasis on

leadership rather than elections. This approach reflects the limited local knowledge development partners tend to bring to support programs — resulting in a reliance on generic training programs — and their appropriate concern not to interfere in electoral outcomes. An important distinction should be drawn between support that is politically astute and responsive and that which is partisan. Politically astute support would help women candidates better understand and respond to the local political economy context in which they are contesting elections, and focus on the development of local campaign strategies. Such support could be operationalised through individualised research and campaign mentoring to help candidates work through local challenges that arise throughout the electoral cycle, and training focused specifically on campaigning issues tailored to a local context such as broadening support coalitions, securing finances and building effective campaign teams.

Haley and Zubrinich (2016:8) observe that 'women's leadership and decision-making in the Pacific is most visible at the local level, and it is here that gains have been the greatest' regarding electoral success. Bridging the current gap between candidate support programs and electoral outcomes requires a stronger focus on early identification of women candidates best positioned to run strong local campaigns, and then working with them over the course of the election cycle (or better still over several election cycles) to build their profile and to convince voters to elect them.

Author Notes

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References

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