

# Emerging Women Leaders in Solomon Islands: The Aims and Activities of the Young Women's Parliamentary Group



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IN BRIEF 2014/21

## Introduction

My current research seeks to build a profile of young Melanesian women identified by their peers and fellow national citizens as playing leading roles in their families, communities and beyond. There is an enormous amount of attention given to getting women into politics, but we know comparatively little about how young women think about politics, and the ways in which they choose to engage with the formal political system. It is important to be alert to the ways in which young women demonstrate leadership outside the formal political system, for example, as entrepreneurs or through community or volunteer work.

This *In Brief* discusses preliminary findings from recent fieldwork in Solomon Islands, where I interviewed young women leaders. I was fortunate to be able to contact these dynamic women through the Young Women's Parliamentary Group (YWPG).

## The Young Women's Parliamentary Group

The YWPG was formed in 2011, and is funded by the United Nations Development Programme's Global Programme for Parliamentary Strengthening. At its launch, its patrons stated:

The idea of having a Young Women's Parliamentary Group came about due to the fact that in the history of National Parliament of Solomon Islands has only been one woman MP. This suggests work is needed on women's participation at a national level in politics. The group has grown from 20 members to 40 since it was established mid this year, and has gained the support of the Prime Minister; the National Parliament of Solomon Islands' Parliamentary House Committee; the Speaker of National Parliament of Solomon Islands and the Chairman of the National Council of Women who are all Patrons of the group (NPSI 2011).

Since 2011, the group appears to have stepped back from the apparent focus on increasing

women's political participation and advocating for temporary special measures in particular. At the meeting I attended in March 2014, 'the mission' was described as 'creating space for young women to participate in leadership' and the twofold vision was expressed as being to:

- recognise, allow and build emerging young women leaders to reach their full potential to positively influence their communities and
- networking young women with current leaders to enhance and develop young women in leadership.

These goals reflect a broader concept of leadership and reveal the importance of building young women's connections with existing leaders. Notably, they signal a strategic shift in the ways in which the young women involved in the YWPG want to deploy their agency.

The interviews contextualise this shift. Specifically, the research shows that young women are taking a broad view of political activity and change and taking action where they can, rather than expending all their energy on getting more women into parliament.

## 'Going Around' the System and 'Getting On With the Job'

My analysis involves exploring what these broader aims meant for the participants, rather than evaluating the effectiveness of the group in meeting explicitly political aims.

The idea that it was necessary to go around the system, rather than engage in oppositional politics, was articulated by Marisa.<sup>1</sup> Discussing the group's strategising she said:

On our Facebook page we talk about that a lot, you know how do we go around this ... how do we coat it nicely and bring it to our leaders so they can you know work with us ... we have to bring it in a way that looks appealing to them.

A key part of the YWPG's strategy is advocating on issues that matter to a wide range of people, rather than being focused, for example, on the introduction of reserved seats for women. Marisa said that the goal of the YWPG was 'to get Parliamentary members to see us as not a group that tries to push women into Parliament but a group that advocates for other issues that are affecting women.'

Grace supported this, saying that it was necessary to take a 'fresh approach' rather than repeat what she and other young women perceived to be the antagonistic and narrow approach taken by women in the past. For her, focusing on temporary special measures was of secondary importance to broader attempts to include women in the political process. One example of action taken by the YWPG was a campaign about the cost of fares on short bus routes. The women gathered hundreds of signatures for a petition and thus instigated a special parliamentary committee to report on this issue. Another was appearing before the Bills and Legislation Committee to give their views on the Political Party Integrity Bill. The YWPG is also advocating for injections to protect women against cervical cancer — a common and largely preventable problem in Solomon Islands.

As Grace saw it, the focus on temporary special measures has locked the older generations of male and female leaders into conflict. In contrast, Grace perceived great equality and co-operation between the younger generations of women and men with whom she works.

Another feature of the young women's activities was their dynamism. Ella, for example, while stating that she 'hated politics', had successfully established a tourist resort on her island, raised money for development causes including sanitation projects and a school fence, and built a relationship with the prime minister since attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November 2013. Because of this and her participation in the Commonwealth Youth Forum, Ella feels she can speak with members of parliament and 'even the PM about issues'. Her anti-political stance, far from representing disillusion

and defeat, constitutes a rejection of some of the formal established ways of doing things in favour of a multifaceted activist engagement at a range of levels, from the community to international meetings. Like her fellow YWPG members, she is interested in exploring various avenues for young women's advancement and not only or explicitly in getting women into parliament.

## Conclusion

This research shows that young women are working to advance women's participation and leadership in a range of ways and are not exclusively or even primarily focused on increasing women's representation within the National Parliament. The young women's intuition that they can achieve more outside or on the edge of the political realm than within it, provides an interesting perspective on how formal politics is viewed by young women in Pacific nations. While not giving up on the idea of getting women into parliament, the young women see a singular focus on this goal as potentially detrimental to their overall aim of advancing women's leadership and activism more generally. My future research will explore whether this opening up of conceptions of women's leadership and participation can contribute to overall advances for young women in Solomon Islands.

## Author Notes

*Ceridwen Spark is a research fellow in the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the ANU. Her research is focused on gender and leadership among young women in Melanesia.*

## Reference

NPSI (National Parliament of Solomon Islands) 2011 National Parliament Launches Young Women's Parliamentary Group. Launch statement 15/12/2014. <<http://www.parliament.gov.sb/index.php?q=node/613>>, viewed 2/7/2014.

## Endnote

- 1 I have used pseudonyms for some of the women in order to protect the participants from potential criticism about the views they expressed. Others chose to be identified.

