



Department of Pacific Affairs

Widows and Wives in Pacific Politics: A Reliable Pathway for Women?

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Understanding women's pathways to political leadership remains a critical area of academic and public policy focus in the Pacific. In this In Brief, we consider an alternate and potentially rather 'macabre' pathway (Kincaid 1978), albeit one which sheds light on the cultural and political economies of elections in the Pacific and which we believe requires further elucidation: the election of wives and widows of former members of parliament.

In December 2019, a by-election was held in the Solomon Islands constituency of East Makira following the death of Charles Maefai, a first-time member of parliament (MP) who had only been elected three months earlier. His widow, Lillian Maefai, won the by-election by a significant margin over her competitors, becoming the country's fifth female MP in its post-independence history, and the third woman elected to the current parliament.

Maefai is not the first widow to follow her husband's footsteps towards political leadership in the Pacific. The second woman elected to the Samoan parliament, Masiofo La'ulu Fetauimalemau Mata'afa, won the seat of Lotofaga in 1975 after her husband, Samoa's first prime minister, died in office. More recently, Pelenike Tekinene Isaia in Tuvalu in 2011 and Agnes Helen Armstrong in Cook Islands in 2019 have entered politics through this pathway, and Janet Hatimoana came very close to winning her late husband's seat in the 2014 Solomon Islands election.

Wives have also been successful in winning a seat lost by their husband in electoral disputes across the Pacific. In Tonga, 'Akosita Lavulavu became the sole woman MP in 2016 when she ran for the seat vacated by her husband following charges of bribery. Similarly, in Solomon Islands, Lanelle Tanangada replaced her husband in Parliament when he was removed through a court challenge in 2018. In both cases, these women managed to retain their seats in the subsequent general elections.¹ Tanangada, in fact, was the second woman to win her husband's former seat in the Solomon Islands: Vika Lusibaea also won a by-election following Jimmy Lusibaea's assault conviction.

The critical question here is why wives and widows are

regarded more favourably than other women in electoral contests across the Pacific.

Explaining the pathway

The 'widow effect' (Solowiej and Brunell 2003) was originally conceived to explain the significant number of women who replaced their husbands in the United States House of Representatives and Senate.² These women MPs were understood to be either 'placeholders' or 'financial beneficiaries': placeholders were intended to keep the seat warm until a more suitable (male) candidate could be found and supported to contest the next general election; financial beneficiaries were able to draw on the family income previously generated by their late husbands. Below, we present some possible explanations in the Pacific context that require further investigation.

Sympathy votes?

A sympathy vote may be given out of respect for the husband's leadership; he may have been a particularly popular leader in the community, and his wife or widow could be a secondary beneficiary of that respect. Tanangada's by-election win in the Solomon Islands, for example, was credited to her husband 'being widely popular' (McDonald 2019). Wives may also receive sympathy votes from voters who are not convinced of the allegations of the husband's wrongdoing. This effect can extend to widows of respected leaders more generally. In Papua New Guinea, Carol Kidu — the widow of a highly respected former chief justice — has claimed that 'the sympathy vote' was a key factor in her 1997 election win (quoted in Spark et al. 2018:4).

Keeping the system intact?

In clientelist political systems, such as in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, electoral politics can be understood as [a system of patronage](#) between elected representatives and voters. In such a system, electing a widow or a wife may be an extension of existing patronage relationships. In systems where an MP's primary role has become the distribution of development funding to constituents, these relationships

become especially important. After her by-election win in 2012, Lusibaea said 'I only came in so he could continue all the work ... so we have someone sitting in his chair' (quoted in Hawkins 2012:32). The election of wives and widows — as well as sons, daughters and other relatives — is also a way of maintaining political power within elite families.

Marriage as political teamwork

Much of the Pacific region has weakly institutionalised party systems. In the absence of strong parties with consistent policy agendas, the voter's choice of candidates operates largely on an individual level. Yet the election of widows and wives suggests a more collectivist understanding of representation in the Pacific. When elected, the individual may be chosen as part of a team — and in this case, a married couple. Where husbands and wives are known to discuss politics and local community concerns at home (some citizens refer to women's political influence as 'pillow talk' in the Solomon Islands), voters may be casting a vote for the couple rather than an individual. This could work equally for the husband or the wife.

Shifts in gender norms?

The election of widows of politicians is a common initial pathway to politics for women in new democracies; the first women elected to the New Zealand Parliament and the Australian House of Representatives were both widows of former members. In this way, an explanation may be that it is a democratic rite of passage, to be displaced as attitudes towards women in politics evolve over time. The election of wives and widows — and particularly their re-election — has, in some quarters, been regarded as itself a shift in public opinion about women's political leadership. In winning a general election, these women demonstrate that they are more than 'placeholders'. Yet shifts in gender norms would surely see the election of many more women — not just wives and widows — across the Pacific. For this reason, we suggest that this remains an unlikely explanation for the election of widows and wives, and that there is still more work to do at a societal level to encourage women's political representation.

Conclusion

A central theme in the research on women's political representation in the Pacific revolves around the role of husbands: for women to succeed, they require the support of their husbands. A less well-researched area is the support husbands give *in absentia*. Wives and widows are taking the place of their husbands on the political stage and in many cases part of their legitimacy derives from their husband's legacy. This suggests that more research is required to explore voters' perceptions of the 'leadership collective' created between husbands and wives.

Notes on authors

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Endnotes

1. 'Akosita Lavulavu was later charged with fraud and is no longer a member of the 2017 parliament.
2. Between 1923 and 2017, 47 women were elected or appointed to fill congressional vacancies created by the deaths of their husbands (CAWP 2017).

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