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COOK ISLANDS

Balancing leadership: A pathway to parliament for Cook Islands women



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Introduction

Oral history from the Cook Islands indicates that women have held political leadership roles for generations, by way of a traditional system of inheritance. Genealogies were memorised by someone who was designated with this important responsibility until the written language arrived and this information became documented in courts for historical and succession purposes. The missionaries arrived on Rarotonga in 1821 and engaged with the Ariki (High Chiefs), many of whom were women. They were treated equally by the missionaries, whose objective was to introduce Christianity to the Cook Islands and to wipe out the pagan culture.¹ Missionaries encouraged the natives to become converts with material benefits, and then used them as policemen to ensure community compliance with the “Blue Laws”. Such was the influence of the church on the locals that, even today, any political aspirant is advised to put in plenty of “church time”.²

The first woman leader in a formal political organisation was Ariki Makea Takau,³ who was president of the early Council of Ariki from 1891 to 1901. After the Cook Islands became self-governing in 1965, the House of Ariki was formally constituted by the 1966 Cook Islands Act. A subsequent amendment in 1972 recognised traditional leaders and sub-chiefs and their status as advisors to the government on matters relating to custom and the welfare of the people, by establishing the Koutu Nui (a council of traditional leaders). Women have held the position of president of the House of Ariki on several occasions. The current president of the Koutu Nui is Turi Mataiapo, Maria Henderson, who was elected after the sudden death of former president Dorice Te Tika Mataiapo Reid in 2011. A majority of the current executive of the Koutu Nui are women.

Since self-governance in 1965, women have run for parliament 39 times – either in general elections, snap elections or by-elections – and have been elected 10 times.⁴ However, only seven women have ever been elected to parliament.⁵ Within a parliamentary context, the first woman to be elected to parliament with the advent of self-government in 1965 was Marguerite Story,⁶ sister of Sir Albert Henry,⁷ the first premier of the Cook Islands. Story was the speaker of the legislative assembly from 1965 to 1979 and was the first female member of the cabinet of the Cook Islands and the first woman in the Commonwealth to become speaker of parliament.⁸ The next woman to be elected to parliament was Fanaura Kingstone,⁹ a Cook Islands Party candidate, who was elected in 1983 to the overseas seat. More recently, Ngamau Munoko¹⁰ has held her Democratic Party seat in Nikao-Panama since 1996. The Democratic Party successfully campaigned in by-elections in 2012 and 2013 so that three women from the party currently hold parliamentary seats.¹¹ The constitution of the Democratic Party specifically supports “the development of women and (...) their rights to opportunity in development and decision-making.”

Challenging gender imbalances in politics

Studies conducted in the United States¹² have identified that although women leaders perform just as well as their male counterparts, they tend to lack confidence to run for office within an electoral environment that is usually very highly competitive and biased against female candidates. Male opponents frequently raise the conflict between career and family obligations¹³ as a high barrier for success for

4 www.cookislandsnews.com/2010/November/Wed17/other.htm#1011151423

5 Ibid.

6 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marguerite_Story

7 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Henry_\(politician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Henry_(politician))

8 Vom Bosch, W. et al. (1994) *New Politics in the South Pacific*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, p. 283.

9 www.guide2womenleaders.com/Cook_Islands.htm

10 www.parliament.gov.ck/members/munoko.htm

11 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cook_Islands_general_election,_2010

12 www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/2012-Men-Rule-Report-final-web.pdf

13 www.worldywca.org/YWCA-News/World-YWCA-and-Member-Associations-News/Overcoming-Barriers-to-Better-Gender-Representation-in-Politics

1 www.ck/religion.htm

2 www.ck/religion.htm

3 www.guide2womenleaders.com/cook_islands_parliament.htm

women entering politics. Women are expected to perform like superwomen, juggling their responsibilities to their electorates as well as to their families. Any deficiencies result in destructive criticisms.

Malaysia is one of the most developed countries in the Asia Pacific region, but is second to last with regard to women's political participation.¹⁴ Their barriers are both political and cultural and are heavily influenced by their religion, education and the media. Women entering politics in some countries in Africa are seen as a serious challenge to chauvinism. Women suffer public ridicule and name calling, and even physical threats.¹⁵ Ireland recently legislated¹⁶ that parties must ensure that at least 30% of candidates at general elections are women. The quota system is seen as a temporary measure to enable women to get to the starting post in terms of major decision making. Although the quota provides an opportunity for women to have a voice at the table, they are aware that "token" females could be selected to run in constituencies where they have no chance of winning. Quotas can be a way of accelerating women's political participation¹⁷ but they should only be seen as one step towards the balance of leadership.¹⁸

In 1994, the world organisation of national parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, developed a plan of action to correct the present imbalances in the participation of men and women in political life.¹⁹ A working group consisting of an equal number of male and female parliamentarians was formed to address the fact that "forty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, and despite undeniable progress, political and parliamentary life remains dominated by men in all countries." The IPU Plan of Action addressed the conditions needed for women to participate actively in political life, the legal basis for equality of men and women, and women's participation in politics at national level, including such issues as action to promote women's "political awareness", respect for the principle of equality in political parties, measures for affirmative action, the participation of women in elections and the sharing of political responsibilities by men and women. The Plan of

Action was conceived as guidelines to inspire and stimulate national action for women's participation in politics, and it is expected that governments, parliaments, political parties and organisations, as well as non-governmental organisations and the media will all contribute to this learning process.

In 2012, Asia Pacific parliamentarians predicted that it would take 50 years for gender balance to be achieved in the region if women's participation in parliaments remains at its current pace.²⁰ They proposed a six-step action plan to fast track women into politics – including constitutional reform which would expand women's rights to vote and to hold public office; electoral, campaign finance and party laws to regulate the nomination, campaigning and election process for entering parliaments; reserved seats and legal gender quotas; party selection rules and nomination procedures; capacity development policies and programmes, including candidate training, induction and mentoring programmes, as well as awareness campaigns that counter stereotyping of candidates according to their gender; and gender-sensitive rules and procedures in elected bodies to help women candidates to do their jobs once in office.

Tracking quotas online

While electoral quotas are meant to allow more women to be involved in parliamentary representation, their use raises issues about whether quotas actually do contribute to the political empowerment of women, or whether they violate the principles of liberal democracy.²¹ The idea is to recruit women into politics, via reserved or legal candidate seats which are legislated, or they could be included within political party quotas and therefore be voluntary. The latter is considered the more desirable outcome.

A total of 116 countries have joined the Quota Project,²² an online initiative which records and explains how quotas are contributing to the increase of women's participation, and the representation of women in decision-making bodies at executive and legislative levels over the past decade. The most successful countries in terms of the number of women in parliament among those whose political parties have opted for voluntary quotas (31 out of 116 quota countries) include Sweden (45%), Nicaragua (40.2%), Ghana (39.7%), Mozambique (39.2%)

14 www.themalaysianinsider.com/sideviews/article/womens-political-participation-in-malaysia-what-are-the-barriers-nazreen-nizam

15 www.pri.org/stories/world/africa/women-in-sierra-leone-face-high-barriers-to-participation-in-politics-12120.html

16 www.thejournal.ie/gender-quotas/news

17 www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?newsid=41445&cr=un#.Ub2kB_nVDng

18 www.thejournal.ie/readme/column-there-are-barriers-to-women-participating-in-politics-332330-Jan2012

19 www.ipu.org/wmn-e/planactn.htm

20 www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2012/09/20/undp-offers-six-point-plan-to-fast-track-women-in-politics-in-asia-pacific/

21 www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm

22 www.quotaproject.org/country.cfm

and the Netherlands (38.7%). Of the countries with legislated quotas, Rwanda has a minimum of 30% of their 26-seat Senate and 80-member Chamber of Deputies reserved for women. They also reserve another three seats for youth and disabled members. Rwanda is the only country with a female majority in its national Parliament (56.3%). Ireland²³ has recently introduced a bill that proposes to decrease state funding to parties by half if a minimum of 30% of their electoral candidates are not women at the next general election. Their required quota will be raised to 40% in the 2019 election.

In the Pacific, UN Women Pacific's Gender Equality in Political Government Programme²⁴ aims to promote more representation at the political level. Women's participation in decision making and women's representation in Pacific parliaments are among the lowest in the world, despite international commitments to gender equality in CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and regional commitments to the Pacific Platform for Action.

Samoa²⁵ proposes to legislate for a 10% quota for women, while Fiji already has a voluntary quota of about 10%.²⁶ The Cook Islands does not have a quota system and its representation by women currently stands at 12.5%, all in the opposition party. Just before the 2010 elections in the Cook Islands, the matter of special temporary measures was raised in a community consultation by the Pan Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA) Cook Islands.²⁷ Party leaders were non-committal at the time, but recent actions by the opposition Democratic Party affirm a commitment to women participants in the election process.

The Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012-2015)²⁸ was developed to address women's role in conflict prevention and peace building in the Pacific. Incorporated into the plan is "enhanced capacity of governments to adopt measures to increase women's representation and participation at all levels of leadership and decision-making." The plan is coordinated by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and proposes to increase existing knowledge-building and advocacy efforts to support women's political representation in the region, and to introduce new

measures to support an increase in women's representation and participation.

Women in the Cook Islands do not experience the same extreme pressures against standing for election as those in some other countries, because our history has demonstrated that women have been elected to leadership roles according to traditional custom in the past. So why are women today less inclined to take on leadership positions in government departments or in parliament? And how do we change people's traditional voting behaviours so that they will vote for a woman?²⁹

Using ICTs to support the participation of women in Cook Islands politics

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in Section J, emphasises the need to "[i]ncrease the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication."³⁰ The Geneva Declaration of Principles of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) affirmed that "development of ICTs [information and communications technologies] provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of and key actors in the Information Society." It also explicitly mentions the potential of ICTs to promote "gender equality and empowerment of women."³¹

One of the key reasons for the reluctance of women to participate in party politics is the lack of information about what they might be getting themselves into. They fear the unknown. They do not think that they are qualified to run for office. They are less competitive, less confident, and more risk averse.³² Our two women members of parliament in Titikaveka (on Rarotonga island) and Tamarua (on Mangaia) have proved that women can do it. But what is required is a campaign to raise awareness about women leaders and their capacity for leadership. Despite the slow uptake of the internet as a major ICT tool in the Cook Islands, the internet and related technologies are the means by which we can spread messages that will raise awareness amongst women, as well as the wider community. The community needs to be educated about political parties and about the electoral process – how to vote and how to become involved. The Pacific Islands ICT Policy 2002³³ focused on ICTs being used to inform and

23 www.quotaproject.org/uid/countryview.cfm?country=102

24 unwomenpacific.org/pages.cfm/our-programmes/advancing-gender-justice/gepg-design

25 www.pacwip.org/future-elections/samoa

26 www.pacwip.org/future-elections/fiji

27 ppseawacookislands.wordpress.com

28 www.forumsec.org.fj/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/Pacific%20Regional%20Action%20Plan%2001%2001%20Women%20Peace%20and%20Security%20Final%20and%20Approved.pdf

29 www.ndi.org/files/Global_Action_Plan_NDI_English.pdf - a set of practical recommendations to help political parties broaden their appeal by becoming more inclusive and representative.

30 www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/media.htm

31 www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html

32 www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/2012-Men-Rule-Report-final-web.pdf

33 CROP ICT Working Group (2002) *Pacific ICT Policy and Strategic Plan*.

connect Pacific island populations. Technology will play a major part in this strategy for change.³⁴ Fortunately, in the Cook Islands, technology is already an equaliser with just as many women as men working with ICTs, in both technical and governance areas.

Using technology to educate the community about voting is also important. Voting generally follows traditional patterns in the Cook Islands, and communities need to be better informed about making their own choices, and not simply voting the way that their parents or families vote. Fiji is introducing e-voting at a future election³⁵ which could help to solve privacy concerns. Social media are popular and could be the means by which information can be more widely disseminated via NGOs and other networks. During the 2012 by-election in Titikaveka, on Rarotonga, the Democratic Party demonstrated a more strategic use of popular media – radio and television – to get information out to voters about the candidates and their views on a wide range of issues. Television is available on Rarotonga (and privately on Mangaia), but radio reaches all the outer islands. Access to the internet is available at various levels of connectivity across the whole of the Cook Islands, but both major political parties have yet to develop communication strategies that will include the internet as a major medium for disseminating information about the electoral process and potential candidates. The Cook Islands’ changeover to O3B³⁶ satellite connectivity before the end of 2013 will provide faster and more reliable internet communications between the islands, and will narrow the communications divide between remote outer islanders and the main island of Rarotonga.

PPSEAWA Cook Islands has developed a new initiative which will combine skilled women, technology and social messaging in a single media project. Audiovisual material will be employed to influence community thinking about women as political leaders and to consider the importance and value of one’s vote at national elections. Television commercials will be produced by a group of emerging women filmmakers who will craft a response to the lack of women representatives in parliament by promoting the attributes that women bring to leadership and to political debate. A second set of commercials will highlight the negative voting patterns that have historically marked Cook Islands’ elections and promote the need for critical thinking when choosing political representation.

PPSEAWA will also run a workshop on campaign strategy for women candidates prior to the next election in 2014. The workshop will be filmed by the women filmmakers group for inclusion in a short film that will accompany an election handbook for women candidates. The film will promote the roles of women not only as political leaders but also as credible filmmakers and strong social commentators. Audiovisual materials, the handbook and progress reports on the project will be uploaded to PPSEAWA’s page on the Cook Islands Social Services website (the project of another NGO, the Cook Islands Internet Action Group)³⁷ so that it is widely available across the Cook Islands, to PPSEAWA International branches across the Pacific, and to the community at large. The short film will be made available for broadcast by Cook Islands Television and be put on the internet as a promotional YouTube presentation of women in politics in the Cook Islands.

Ensuring access to ICTs and providing information that meets their needs is critical for women in the Cook Islands, especially those in remote outer islands where isolation is a significant barrier to learning and being better informed about issues that could have a significant impact upon them. Our aim is to employ the internet and other technologies to take the message of representative democracy to all the people in the Cook Islands, and to encourage them to make informed choices about who is standing and who they will vote for in the next general election in the Cook Islands in 2014.

Action steps

As a lead up to the next election PPSEAWA aims to address the following actions from the Pacific Action Plan:

- Promote women’s “political awareness” – gain wide support amongst women’s groups and the community at large.
- Promote women in leadership and support women candidates in the outer islands.
- Lobby for equality principles to be endorsed and put into practice by political parties at every stage of candidate selection.
- Lobby for affirmative action by political parties to get them to voluntarily engage in the quota system and ensure that at least one third of their candidates are women, and that those women are supported by their chosen party in their stand for election. ■

³⁴ Bhagwan-Rolls, S. and Griffin, V. (2006) *Gender in Media and ICTs: A view from the Pacific Islands*, IT for Change.

³⁵ www.electionsfiji.gov.fj

³⁶ www.telecom.co.ck/content/page/o3b/m/4

³⁷ www.ciiag.org/index.php/about-us