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**Archetypes, Agency and Action: Emerging women leaders' views on political participation in Melanesia**

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**\* A slightly revised version of this paper is forthcoming in the International Feminist Journal of Politics**

**Abstract**

Existing explanations for why women do not get elected to parliament in Melanesia emphasize structural barriers to participation, including prohibitive costs and patriarchal norms. They are largely silent, however, on why those women who do conform to the profile of the 'archetypal candidate', and thus have the best chance of overcoming these barriers, choose not to run. Drawing on an extensive qualitative dataset, including 40 in-depth interviews with emerging women leaders from three Melanesian countries, we find that many women are pessimistic about the way electoral politics is conducted. Echoing longstanding critiques of political practice, this cohort conceptualizes their political activity as being conducted in a parallel public sphere, in contexts in which they consider themselves more able to

pursue programmatic reform. Rather than focusing on structural barriers, we explore their decision to eschew parliamentary elections as an act of resistance against politics as usual in Melanesia. This new material adds to the literature on why women chose to run 'from' rather than 'for' parliament and therefore has implications for scholars and practitioners interested in improving women's parliamentary representation across the globe.

**Keywords:** parliamentary representation, political leadership, Melanesia, archetypal candidates, acceptable difference.

## **Introduction**

Women's parliamentary representation in the Melanesian Pacific is among the worst in the world (Fraenkel 2006; Baker 2014; Wood 2015). The literature on why women have been unsuccessful in their attempts to secure seats in parliament emphasizes a combination of structural barriers, including the absence of a strong party system, the prohibitive cost of election campaigns and patriarchal norms and values, both traditional and Christian (e.g. Zetlin 2014; Wood 2015). This focus on barriers has been offered as a powerful explanation for the ongoing success of male candidates and underpins much of the policy thinking and associated donor projects seeking to boost women's representation (Corbett and Liki 2015). However, this approach pays little attention to whether or not women display the key attributes of 'archetypal candidates' and are viewed as 'acceptable' (Durose *et al* 2012) in the eyes of the electorate.

The main limitation of this dominant explanation is that it neglects to account for the agency of the women involved. As a result, it struggles to explain two things: why some women are able to defy these barriers and get elected (see Corbett 2015; Corbett and Liki 2015) and secondly, why those women who do conform to the characteristics of an archetypal Melanesian candidate – above average education, successful and high profile professional career, influential parents and relatives, active community involvement and strong clan allegiances – choose not to run for office (see Huffer 2006; Whittington *et al* 2006; Corbett and Wood 2015). We focus on this latter sub-group of women in this article, demonstrating both that they are ‘critical agents of social change’ (Zetlin 2014) and the importance of women’s collective action (Bayard de Volo 2003). As such, we provide a more nuanced explanation of women’s political representation in the Pacific and one which has implications for international scholars interested in why women chose to run ‘from’ rather than ‘for’ parliament (Fox and Lawless 2001; Deo 2011).

Using the characteristics of the archetypal Melanesian politician (Corbett and Wood 2013) as our guide, we investigate why women who fit the established profile of a Melanesian MP – and thus could conceivably join the small number of women who do get elected – choose not to run for office. We find that many of these women are pessimistic about the way electoral politics is conducted in Melanesia. Echoing longstanding critiques of political practice

(see most famously Steeves 1996) that emphasize the personalized and localized nature of resource distribution among local elites (commonly labeled 'big man' politics), women conceptualize their political activity as being conducted in a parallel public sphere, specifically in contexts in which they consider themselves more able to pursue programmatic reform (Huffer 2006). Rather than structural barriers, we argue that their decision is best conceptualized as an act of resistance against politics as usual in Melanesian countries.

As has been noted in various discussions of women's leadership in Melanesia, women have tended to be well represented in informal and community politics but this has not translated to them finding their way in to Parliament (McLeod 2015). Our discussion of the disgruntlement this produces indicates two co-existent narratives among the emerging women leaders who participated in our study. The first is that women become disillusioned with politics as a means to achieving change. The second and perhaps more subtle explanation is that women perceive that making themselves 'acceptably different' offers the best route for political advancement. In response to political cultures that are hostile both to women and to feminism, they express what might be interpreted as 'anti-feminist' positions in order to be perceived as socially acceptable. In either case, and as we demonstrate here, their overall response in terms of engagement with issues and activities is the same, namely to participate in civil society and informal processes in

ways that they believe will more effectively advance social and cultural change.

For those interested in increasing women's parliamentary representation, both in the Pacific and elsewhere, the message is that structural factors only reveal part of the story (Tiessen 2008). Assuming the necessity of developing a more holistic explanation of why women are not elected to parliament, we argue for the importance of paying close attention to the agency of women themselves. While recognizing that the norms dictating the profile of an 'archetypical candidate' in Melanesia limit the number of women who could conceivably win elections, we suggest that it is only by including the intentions of this subset of women in our explanations of political behavior that we can account for their decisions and actions and, by extension, develop appropriate policy responses.

This article substantiates this argument in four parts. First we delve deeper into the theories of women's representation with particular reference to Melanesia. In doing so we outline the profile of an 'archetypal candidate' by reference to the prevailing political context. Second, we detail our approach and data collection methods employed to develop the unique theoretical contribution of this piece. Third, we provide an empirical examination of why the sub-group of women in three Melanesian countries – Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – that could conceivably win office, choose not

to run. Finally, we return to the theoretical discussion and outline the implications of our argument for scholars and policy makers.

Before elaborating on our approach, it is necessary to outline some research parameters. First, this article is primarily interested in those women who have not been elected to parliament rather than those that have. Obviously, our conceptualization of 'resistance' is less applicable to this latter group (which is incredibly small, see Table 1), although among those who have managed to get elected the claim to have entered politics reluctantly is not an unusual one (see Corbett 2015, chapter five). Our rationale for focusing on those who do not run is that their views have not been canvassed elsewhere (Corbett and Liki 2015). Consequently, our focus on this sub-group constitutes a significant contribution to the literature on women's political participation in the Pacific, particularly because of our focus on women between the ages of 20 and 40. In Melanesia, the combination of being young and female can doubly silence women who are viewed as having little to contribute to discussions and decision-making. We consider the implications of focusing on this cohort in the conclusion.

### ***Women's Parliamentary Representation***

Two theoretical concepts underpin the article. The first is taken from the literature on women's representation and the idea of an 'archetypal candidate' in particular. The second is derived from the literature on political practice in Melanesia, which emphasizes the personalized and localized

nature of parliamentary politics. The two are linked in the sense that the Melanesian context dictates what constitutes an 'archetypal candidate' in our three chosen countries: Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. By employing a concept from the women's representation literature in Melanesia we contribute to the small but growing discussion on women's representation in the region whilst also providing new and theoretically relevant cases of interest to a wider audience.

The term 'Melanesia' has a long and complex history (see Lawson 2010). Typically the definition includes five countries in the Western Pacific: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. For our purposes we focus on the first three as New Caledonia remains a French territory and thus subject to French parity law whilst Fiji only saw the return of democratic elections in 2014. By virtue of their colonial heritage, all three countries operate a unicameral Westminster-inspired parliamentary system. As outlined in Table 1, while there is some variation in electoral systems, the extensive literature on electoral politics in Melanesia demonstrates that socio-cultural context has been a more pervasive influence on political representation than institutional design (for review see Morgan 2005). The three chosen countries are among the most ethnically and linguistic heterogeneous in the world, with national boundaries and identities being the product of very recent colonial histories. This hyper-fragmentation is commonly identified as one reason why political parties play such a limited role in the mobilization of voters, and explains why Melanesian executives



tend to be unstable (the absence of strong parties means that governing coalitions tend to rise and fall at regular intervals between elections), with no-confidence motions a perpetual threat to their tenure.

<insert Table 1 here>

Within these ever-shifting contexts, the concept of the 'archetypal candidate' seeks to profile the type of person commonly elected to parliament. The emphasis is on the characteristics of politicians, including age and gender but also socialization. Typically, in long standing democracies this work emphasizes a shift from a time when politics was dominated by 'amateurs' – landed gentry or citizen activists – to the current era of professional politicians who make their way through the youth wings of party machines and dedicate their career to politics. In relation to women's representation, the common story is that to get elected a woman must be 'acceptably different' (Durose *et al* 2012). That is, they must follow the well-trodden pathway common to those who pursue politics as a career. In these circumstances, encouraging political parties to establish internal quotas, for instance, encourages 'archetypal' women to enter politics and can thus increase women's substantive representation (Childs and Krook 2009).

The assumption underpinning this model is that political parties play a significant role in determining what constitutes an appropriate candidate. In Melanesia, where parties are loosely institutionalized and have little bearing

on electoral outcomes, this set of assumptions does not hold. For this reason, advocates of greater women's representation have tended to favor parliamentary gender quotas (for discussion see Baker 2014; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2006). However, this is not to say that there is no 'archetypal' Melanesian candidate. Recent work on the profile of Melanesian politicians (Corbett and Wood 2013) finds a common profile among successful candidates: aside from being male, they are usually urban-based, overseas educated, and have had a substantial professional career background, often in the civil service. To gain grassroots support, however, they also tend to be heavily involved in local constituency activities, often via financial contributions to building projects, or church involvement. Based on election results, this combination of profile, financial wealth, and personal reputation reflects what voters want in their politicians (Corbett and Wood 2013). Despite some variation between the three countries – for example, politicians with commercial backgrounds have traditionally been elected in PNG – overall there are more similarities than differences.

This personalized and localized candidate profile conforms to the prevailing dynamics of Melanesian politics in which state services are characteristically limited and infrequent. In this climate, the ability of politicians to pursue programmatic representation is undermined by the absence of resources and limited capacity to implement policy programs via the bureaucracy. As a result, politicians tend to bypass the state altogether and personally deliver resources to their constituents in the form of projects or handouts. To

finance this practice they either draw from their own resources – hence the growing emphasis on electing wealthy politicians – or constituency funds, which provide MPs with discretionary spending allocations for use in their electorates (Fraenkel 2011).

This combination of practices is regularly criticized, both domestically but also by international donors, on the grounds that it does not meet the ideal of Weberian legal-rational government in which the state is impersonal and functionally separate from society. Indeed, donors in particular have invested considerable resources to ‘build’ state capacity in Melanesia in order to stymie these types of political practices (Fukuyama 2008; Dinnen and Firth 2008; Hameiri 2009; Allen and Dinnen 2010). By and large, however, these efforts have had little effect. As a result, Melanesian countries tend to score poorly on global rankings such as Freedom House or Transparency International’s Corruption Index that view these practices as nepotistic and corrupt. Locally, they are often explained as the continued influence of traditional leadership practices in the parliamentary sphere – a form of ‘big man politics’ or gift exchange (for more on this debate see Morgan 2005).

For our purposes, the important point is that a woman seeking to enter politics as an ‘acceptably different’ candidate must conform to these prevailing practices. In terms of increasing women’s representation, one problem is that many of those with the profile and reputation to enact this Melanesian version of parliamentary leadership, do not wish to do so.

Emerging women leaders tend to want to represent issues, rather than electorates. In the Melanesian context and for reasons we outline here, Parliament is not always seen as the best place to do so.

### **Research method and participants**

This article is based on a combination of data types, including interviews, observation and textual analysis. The main dataset is 40 in-depth interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 with emerging women leaders in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG. The interviews provide insight into women's perceptions and experiences, including how they see their familial, educational and career backgrounds as shaping their activism and contributions to civil and political society. Some of the women elected to be identified for this research while others chose to remain anonymous. The textual work includes analysis of media sources, both print and online, personal correspondence with young women in the three countries, and consideration of the aims and initiatives of the organisations and networks with which they are involved.

The women who participated were between the ages of 20-40 and thus conform to the profile of those considering or actively pursuing their first political campaign. Most were tertiary-educated, including many who had completed schooling or a university degree in overseas locations. Because the research was conducted among women living in capital cities it does not capture the voices of remote or rural Melanesian women. But, these biases

are also typical of archetypal candidates and thus represent a relevant sample for the purposes of this study. While some of the participants were politically inclined and interested, others were seen as leaders by virtue of their education, professional achievements, outspokenness on issues affecting women or their volunteer work, to name but some of their areas of contribution. Reflecting this diversity, the interviews demonstrate that young Melanesian women are taking a broad view of political activity and change, and taking action where they can, rather than expending all their energy on entering the formal political arena.

The research was purposive in design and a network strategy was employed to recruit participants (Ritchie *et al* 2014). The purposive sampling method enabled detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and questions we wished to study; including, how do tertiary-educated and employed Melanesian women choose to demonstrate their leadership? The network sampling strategy was employed in all three contexts. In the first instance, the first author made initial contact with locally-informed women and asked them to provide the names and contact details of women who met the criteria of being an 'emerging leader' and might wish to participate in the research. Consequently, the research was informed from the outset by local Melanesian women's perceptions of their peers' status and capacities as 'emerging leaders'. Bias was minimized by cross-checking names with at least two other locally-informed women in each country. Ultimately though, because the research drew on a purposive sample, it is likely we missed

interviewing capable individuals who were not connected with the women among whom we commenced recruitment. This may have affected the pool of participants by limiting the number of politically inclined women and over-representing candidates outside of governmental structures. As such, we are limited in our capacity to draw conclusions beyond those based on the women we included in this research.

There are a number of ways to explore why women do or do not run for office in the Pacific Islands, including, for example, surveys of their attitudes. However, based on the profile outlined above, the number of women candidates who could conceivably win a national election is too small to undertake this exercise meaningfully. Instead, to fulfill the aims of this paper – namely to explain why those women who could conceivably win choose not to run for office and explore how they see political roles and their own capacity to exert influence – we adopt an interpretive approach. Interpretive research is an established method for answering the types of questions that we explore here (see Corbett 2015; Corbett and Liki 2015). In particular, given our emphasis on intentional agents, it provides a rationale for the type of in-depth qualitative work that we have undertaken. An interpretive approach is typically based on constructivist-subjectivist rather than realist-objectivist assumptions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). It sees social practices as embedded within ‘webs of significance’ that actors draw upon to explain their actions (Bevir and Rhodes 2003; 2006). Explanations of social

behavior are thus inferred from the meanings that the actors involved ascribe to what they do.

The emphasis on the explanations that agents give for their actions in this tradition has often been critiqued on the grounds that it fails to adequately account for the casual significance of structural forces (see Marsh 2009 in particular). This critique is especially poignant in the context of this research given the gendered disparity in political representation. To be clear, we are not saying that power asymmetries between men and women do not exist. Rather, we argue that these cannot be understood without paying close attention to the meanings and beliefs of those involved in negotiating them in a Melanesian context. So, agents replicate and enact a series of embedded beliefs or traditions that reflect a process of socialization (Bevir and Rhodes 2003; 2006). We further show how the belief that parliamentary politics is heavily gendered shapes young women's decision not to run and forms part of their reason for thinking that they are more likely to make a meaningful contribution outside formal politics. This emphasis on intentional agents is largely missing from the extant analysis of women's representation in the Pacific and elsewhere.

In presenting this material we draw on extensive quotations. They are illustrative rather than exhaustive and have been selected on the basis of their 'typicality' and capacity to illuminate the perspective of this cohort. It is important to note that not all of the women who participated in the research

were averse to the idea of becoming politicians. Rather, most expressed reservations or the view that they probably wouldn't pursue this path. We recognize that in some cases their perspectives may change but maintain that their current views are revealing. In choosing material we were selectively interested in the emerging women leaders' desire to pursue agendas other than parliamentary representation. We also sought to represent a balance across the three field sites, hence the material moves between discussing the voices of women from PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

### **The politics of community development**

To understand the defining characteristics of the cohort, it is worth noting that growing up in PNG, Solomon Islands or Vanuatu entails coming of age in a world in which the idea of 'development' informs most aspects of life, whether by its perceived absence or because the topic proliferates in the speeches of politicians. Being born in an urban area where aid and development organisations have their headquarters appears to heighten young women's commitment to developing their communities, as does the experience of being born to parents who work 'in town'. Such are the backgrounds of the women who took part in this research, most of whom grew up in towns rather than villages and many of whom are the children of the first generation of educated and formally employed Papua New Guineans, Solomon Islanders and ni-Vanuatu. Elizabeth, the daughter of a previous Prime Minister of Vanuatu, said:



I grew up in Port Vila ... and I had very little exposure to living in the village. My father had a very long history working first of all as a teacher but then he entered politics in the early 70s and was instrumental in the fight for independence for Vanuatu ...I guess growing up in that environment and in that household really solidified my desire ... to do something similar.

Familial connection to politics was also important for Grace from the Solomon Islands, also the daughter of a one- time Prime Minister:

Having the political kind of family that I was brought up in I thought maybe I could help in some ways where I could. So that's how I started with the Young Women in Parliament group ... Being educated to the level that I've come up, I feel that I can give back to the country or to the community.

Not only politicians' daughters were motivated to help their countrymen and women. Sue, who worked as a researcher in PNG rather than in Australia where she had studied, was equally passionate about contributing to 'development':

I feel proud to take my place beside other Papua New Guineans to work in whatever small way to contribute. ... Maybe it won't even be a meaningful contribution, but I just refuse to sell my country short.

The desire to improve the lives of others, including in rural and remote areas unites the young women who took part in this research. Reflecting a

postcolonial solidarity with men more than an explicitly feminist perspective, these young women position themselves in ways which indicate more commonality with Indigenous movements than with the global women's movement which, in these contexts, has tended to be constructed as 'imported' and foreign. (cf Hughes and Tripp 2015; Bauer and Burnet 2013; Corbett and Liki 2015).

### **Conceptualising Social Change**

In September 2014, Kristina Sogavare, a 31-year-old Solomon Islands woman spoke to Radio Australia's Richard Ewart about the importance of pap smears. A member of the Young Women's Parliamentary Group (YWPG) in Honiara (and the daughter of the current Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare), Sogavare discussed the group's decision to make a media event of getting these checks.

There was a lot of criticism that we broke cultural customs and cultural norms by getting in front of the media and letting the country know about this issue but our motto says 'Fight like a girl'. We have to fight, to start somewhere in order to empower women because this is to save lives  
<http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/pacific-beat/young-women-in-solomon-islands-tackle-the-stigma-of-cervical-cancer-testing/1372115>.

For Sogavare and the other members of the YWPG, the 'Fight like a girl' campaign is deeply personal. In 2014, one of the YWPG members died at the

age of 27 from cervical cancer, a largely preventable disease. In a context where 'checking a woman's private parts is "taboo", the YWPG's decision to publicise their pap smears was deeply political. The group have since produced a pamphlet about cervical cancer which they will distribute in collaboration with Soroptimist Solomons.

Despite the inherently political nature of their actions, Marisa Pepa, who facilitates the YWPG in her role as the Parliamentary Civic Education Officer, represented the group's focus on addressing the challenge of cervical cancer as a 'community' rather than a 'political' issue. Marisa's emphasis on 'community' as opposed to 'political' activity echoes that of other Melanesian women as acknowledged and discussed by Pacific scholars (see Douglas 2000; Waiko-Dickson 2003; McLeod 2008; Liki 2010; 2013). However, the literature is largely silent on the extent to which women's choice to be community rather than political leaders is not an opting out but rather a strategy designed ultimately to influence political change (see Whittington *et al* 2006). In contexts that are generally hostile to women's involvement in formal politics, taking the route of 'community' involvement reflects both anti-politics and an attempt to be 'socially acceptable' and, as such, to get things done.

While interested in political change, the YWPG perceive the efforts of their older counterparts to institute reserved seats for women in the Solomon Islands to be counterproductive to the extent that this stigmatizes women

and constructs them as being opposed to men. Discussing the group's attempt to move away from arguing about reserved seats and 'to connect with the Members of Parliament in a more positive way', Pepa said:

So instead of say looking at politics, we look at health, we look at bus routes  
we look at cervical cancer so those things that directly affect communities.

Such comments indicate a strategic sleight of hand wherein young women's political activities are reconfigured as 'community' issues so as not to raise the ire of Parliamentarians who Marisa says resist reform efforts that are too obviously about gender inequality. Stating 'we are trying to get everyone to work together instead of against each other', Marisa suggests that for YWPG members 'working together' involves 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. Crucially, given widespread resistance to changing gender norms and women's involvement in politics in Melanesia, the young women's strategy also involves trying to cooperate with male leaders, rather than challenging them directly (Huffer 2006). 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 more combative style of women in the past. In particular, Grace's mention of a fresh approach references this generation's desire to distinguish themselves from those in the Solomon Islands National Council of Women who have been seen as 'advocating for women's liberation and feminism associated

with the Western world' (Whittington *et al*, 2006, 21). In Grace's view, the focus on temporary special measures had locked the older generations of male and female leaders into conflict and was of secondary importance to broader attempts to include women in the political process. Both she and Marisa appear to be motivated by a desire to be seen as socially acceptable (and in this way to contribute to social change), rather than an avowedly anti-feminist philosophy.

Discussing gender quotas, Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2006) argue that 'rather than using static concepts of "essentialism", the dilemmas and strategic choices of women in various contexts should be explored empirically'. Moreover, they suggest that it is necessary to 'empirically analyse which groups of women are involved in the promotion of quotas as well as their alliances with men'. Our research indicates that emerging women leaders are taking a different tack to their predecessors on both the issue of quotas and when cultivating strategic alliances with men. While women in Melanesia have a record of focusing on 'community' rather than 'political' leadership, historically the few women that have been engaged in political leadership have tended to be urban, educated and employed in the public service (Huffer 2006; Whittington *et al* 2006). Interestingly, the new group of urban, educated and employed women seem less inclined to mirror the political focus of their middle class counterparts and predecessors than they are to pursue social agendas and programs which reflect a community development focus commonly associated with 'grassroots' women leaders (Dickson-Waiko

2010; Sepoe 2000). This may be in response to the backlash against more strident expressions of women's rights and the concomitant need for women 'to make extra efforts to appear non-threatening and ... accommodate the patriarchal context' (Huffer 2006, 34). For these reasons – namely disillusionment with politics and the desire to behave in contextually effective ways - the young women emphasize a breadth of activities, signaling the need to look beyond parliamentary representation to consider the spectrum of activities in which women are actually involved (Garap 2004; Sepoe 2000; Liki 2010; 2013; Douglas 2003).

To this end, we turn now to consider other key arenas in which emerging women leaders see themselves contributing. This includes in their workplaces, through volunteer activities, in their personal lives and via their participation in online and face- to-face discussion and advocacy forums. As with the YWPG's decision to broaden their focus beyond the goal of getting women into Parliament through quotas, the breadth of young women's activities can be interpreted as a strategic shift away from 'Big Man' politics to small 'p' politics focused on social change.

A powerful example of women contributing on a daily basis to social change is provided by Wendy, a lawyer with a prominent women's organisation in Port Vila. Wendy said that she is committed to informing and advocating for women who are victims of violence despite her fellow graduates' criticism

that she should 'get a real job' in a corporate firm. Through her role she has learned to challenge men who use 'custom' to justify violence, saying 'I learned that they're just using custom as an excuse and ... I have the guts now to stand up and tell them what I think'.

Wendy's emphasis on challenging the culture of male dominance as evidenced through references to 'custom' is echoed by others who took part in this research. Fredah, who works for the Electoral Support Program in PNG, says her job enables her to model leadership and democratic participation by women. Passionate about ensuring improving PNG's electoral systems and processes, she cites her professional goal as being:

to build the electoral commission within Morobe Province ... get the electoral roll as accurate as I can and at the same time educate people on how to vote.

Women in the private sector also saw themselves playing a key role in transforming the lives of others. For example, Jacinta who has risen quickly through the ranks of Guard Dog Security to become the company's Human Resources Manager, says she has a drive to push others, especially women to reach their potential' because for her 'that's what empowerment's all about'.

Similarly, Susil, the President of the Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Club in Port Moresby says that having benefited from education, it has

always been important to 'give something back'. She does so by managing the club's highly successful scholarship program for girls' education.

Another powerful example of young women's activism is provided by Ella, a 22-year-old from the Solomon Islands. Ella has established a tourist resort on her father's island, thereby enabling her family members and other people from the village to gain employment. In addition to raising money for development causes including sanitation projects and a school fence, she has built a relationship with the prime minister since attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November 2013. Ella's activities and connections make her an ideal political candidate (Zetlin 2014). But Ella says she 'hates politics' and has no intention of seeking election, despite being encouraged to do so. Her position demonstrates that for at least some of these emerging women leaders, the goal of civic and political activity is not to enter Parliament but rather to create positive change in the lives of their families and communities, a role which despite its association with women's status as 'carers' is nevertheless political. In the next section, we delve deeper to explore why many in this cohort choose to act outside Parliament rather than within it. In doing so, we build on insights from the literature about the disincentives for women to run for office in Melanesia (Huffer 2006).

### **Running from Office**



Young women's disillusionment with politics and politicians is a crucial component underpinning their decision to expend their energy outside the formal political arena. For instance, discussing the gap between government rhetoric and the provision of actual support for victims of violence, Jacinta critiqued the role of 'government bodies' in addressing violence, saying:

How can a women believe in such initiatives, when she fronts up at her local police station only to be told that they can't help her due to lack of resources or that she has to wait because their division is waiting on funding?

Ella was similarly skeptical:

I don't really like the life of a politician in Solomon Islands. I think you can be a leader not in Parliament you can be a leader like people can look up to you as a leader. Even if you are as you are. It's just about helping them doing something that can benefit them as well and that's a leader. But if you want more money, then you can go into Parliament.

As this quotation shows, Ella sees becoming an MP as being about benefiting oneself and thus as unlikely to result in the creation of progressive social change. Conceptualising her tourism enterprise as more efficacious she reflects:

I think what women should do is ... go back to the community and give back what you can ... go back to the village and start from there like what I did. I did a lot of things in the village and people are saying

to me in the community oh you should run for election and provincial and I said no. I enjoy what I do now cause I help them a lot.

Implicitly critiquing the urban-based educated political candidates who retain only tenuous connections with their constituents, Ella indicates the need for women to maintain close relationships with their communities whether or not they seek election (Whittington *et al* 2006).

Jacqui, a 25-year-old Bougainvillean woman who started her own organisation called Rugby League Against Violence (RLAV) provides another example of young women's commitment to creating change outside Parliament. Through RLAV, Jacqui works with men and boys in PNG to address violence in communities. She has 'no plans to run for election' but states 'I think I can make a difference in my community wherever I am'. For Jacinta too, change was not going to happen as a result of politics.

At the end of the day I really don't care too much about politics and politicians. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". ... We need our women and young girls to see change in their daily lives.

For this cohort, neither 'good intentions' nor gradual (political) change are adequate. In the next section we discuss the ways in which emerging women leaders construct roles for themselves in the political process despite their ostensibly anti-political perspective.

### **Anti-politics and everyday resistance**

In response to the question 'would you ever consider running for

Parliament?’ Ruby from Vanuatu said:

No. That is never my dream. I’d rather be in the public service to the position of a director or DG [Director General] where I can influence policy and lobby political leaders. In my view being a minister or an MP is just a position where you only make decisions or only vote in the Parliament. You can be a minister voting but if you don’t really understand the issue then there’s no point.

Ruby sees the real work of change as something that occurs through debating ideas, what she calls the ‘groundwork’. In her view, politicians respond as best they can to what comes before them but play a limited role in conceptualising either problems or solutions.

Another ni-Vanuatu woman, Sarah, also argued the importance of advocating for change outside Parliament, saying:

I believe strongly that in order for change to happen certain things need to occur simultaneously at different levels. The work I am currently engaged in at the policy and advocacy level is equally important for change as the ongoing education and advocacy at the grass roots level. These need to go hand-in-hand through a strategic and systematic approach. At this moment my contribution at this level is strong and this is where I would like to be right now.

Sarah also noted that ‘it is not enough having women ... in Parliament or at the Council level but that these women and men have a transformative agenda’. In making this point, she highlights an issue sometimes neglected by

aid and development practitioners and policy makers, namely that there are no guarantees that women will be agents of social progress if they do get to Parliament. Women's involvement in promoting gender equity and social inclusion has certainly been questioned in PNG since the three women elected in 2012 have spoken out against implementing reserved seats (Pacific Islands Report 2012).

It is partly because of these complications, that the YWPG have focused on bringing issues to the attention of Parliamentary members, and not primarily on getting women elected. Marisa emphasised the importance of young women's engagement at various stages of the political process, saying:

[The YWPG aims to engage] women so they see the connection between our everyday life and policies and then the government. You see how you can push to get things done. ...*This* is what we can do to influence government policies or legislation and so forth.

Grace, who serves as the Executive of the Solomon Islands International Forum mentioned the importance of the Forum's public contribution to debate through social media:

Forum is a platform where young educated Solomon Islanders have an avenue where they can just talk about issues, debate issues constructively and how we can help ourselves as well as maybe pressuring ... the government of the day ... to see things from just the normal people's [perspective].

Although Grace claimed that the group was ‘not political’, the very act of representing ‘the normal peoples’ perspective is of course inherently so.

Leina, former CEO of Vanuatu Netball and Former President of the National Youth Council was also involved in various groups including Vanuatu Youth Against Corruption, another forum hosted by Facebook and Vanuatu Youth Inter Agency Group (VYIG). Leina saw such groups as instrumental to the advancement of young people’s participation in politics, citing the VYIG’s role in lobbying the government to re-establish the Vanuatu National Youth Council in 2009.

We pushed the government to set up the National Youth Council  
...and we pushed for the government to change some policies for  
the youth, we also created the youth development policy.

As Leina points out, it is through groups such as these that women and youth have a voice.

Honour, a politically connected and overseas-educated Papua New Guinean is another ‘archetypal candidate’. But she too was passionate about remaining outside of government structures, saying she would not work for the government because it was too subject to external forces including directives from donor governments and large non-government organisations. Instead, she and a friend established the Youth Alliance in HIV/AIDS (YAHA) in 2009. As noted on its home page: ‘PNGYAHA is a youth-led organization that aims to represent the collective voices of young people in Papua New Guinea in the fight against HIV and AIDS’ (<http://www.pngyaha.webs.com>).

Committed to getting things done, emerging women leaders are focused on action rather than getting elected. Steeped in the culture of 'development' they seek to create positive change in the lives of others, utilising a breadth of approaches and connections that include multifaceted activist engagement at a range of levels, from the community to international meetings. To finish this empirical section, we quote Theresa, a 25-year-old Papua New Guinean who encapsulates the perspective of those with whom we spoke:

Sure women can rally and support more women getting into the Parliament but after all of that they (these women who supported) will still feel powerless because it will be hard to see the immediate result of their efforts. Sometimes a female political candidate can be a women's representative without really representing the desires and ambitions of the women who supported them. ... So definitely, if it has to do with training, getting a bill passed or a public march, I will do that to support women getting into Parliament but I will still have my own project on the side because I would be helping someone more directly.

## **Conclusion**

Explanations for the extraordinarily low levels of female representation in Melanesian countries have typically emphasized structural barriers to participation: the absence of parties, the cost of campaigning, and patriarchal norms. Implicitly, this literature conveys an image of Melanesian women as passive and powerless; unable to overcome the endemic barriers that stymie their participation. In this article we have focused on those

women who choose not to run for office despite being archetypal Melanesian candidates.

As we have shown, rather than being powerless or passive, these women are active political players undertaking change-oriented projects in their respective communities. Though aware that they have many of the credentials synonymous with prospective political candidates in a Melanesian context, they choose to shun formal politics. The reasons they give for their stance reference a deeply felt pessimism about their capacity to affect the types of change they envisage via the parliamentary system (Huffer 2006). Indeed, many see their extra-parliamentary activities as a form of resistance that challenges the status quo and the image of politics as usual. That is, rather than an avenue for change, entering parliament is seen as a concession and thus represents acceptance of politics as usual. As we have shown, their decision to act outside Parliament is understandable when set against the tradeoffs they perceive between pursuing the types of programs they are passionate about and becoming subject to the norms and practices that dominate Melanesian politics.

This finding is significant for a number of reasons. By elucidating the perspectives of emerging women leaders in Melanesia we have highlighted that parliament remains a heavily gendered domain, a scenario that is unlikely to improve in the near future. This is sobering. Previously scholars have made this argument on the basis of the types of structural barriers

outlined above. The hope has been that by initiating structural changes, with gender quotas being the most commonly cited example, that these barriers might be overcome. The aim of this article is not to argue that these types of institutionalized changes ought to be abandoned. Rather, our analysis highlights two important challenges to the assumption that the types of quotas that have worked elsewhere will automatically translate into better outcomes in Melanesia. The first echoes the observation of other scholars (see Huffer 2006, Baker 2014) that political parties play only a minor role in the mobilization of voters in Melanesian elections and therefore parliamentary rather than party quotas are the only type that might conceivably succeed. The second is that even parliamentary quotas work on the assumption that once initiated, the best female candidates will run and thus improve the substantive representation of women. Our analysis suggests that as long as 'archetypal candidates' see the formal political sphere as a highly gendered domain, this assumption may be optimistic. Melanesian women are thus more likely to continue to operate in the domain of civil society than formal politics, in part because this is perceived as offering more scope for contributing to positive change.

Parliamentary gender quotas have been a strong feature of the political debate in all three of our case study countries. PNG came the closest to implementing them but the success of three women MPs at the most recent election has stymied that momentum, especially as all three have argued against adopting a quota. Here, we show that the decision of women to 'run



from rather than for office' (Fox and Lawless 2001; Deo 2011) must be a key consideration for future attempts to instantiate institutional change that will improve women's representation. Currently, there is a strong view - both in the electorate and among women - that they can win elections in Melanesia. But, if the views of the young women who took part in this research are indicative, this is unlikely to eventuate because many women see little value in running. Views and opinions may change – our analysis captures meanings and beliefs as they stand not as they might be. For now though, by representing issues rather than electorates, Melanesian women believe they are actively shaping their societies outside the formal political arena, but in ways that are nevertheless inherently and in some cases, powerfully political.

Increasing parliamentary representation is generally seen as the most important step to improving gender relations. If we set this to one side, however, our analysis shows a quiet but significant revolution is underway in Melanesian countries in which emerging women leaders see their decision not to run as an act of resistance to politics as usual. In this interpretation, women see parliament as profoundly gendered but also substantively ineffectual. Rather than challenge this embedded set of practices head on, they are choosing to create a parallel public sphere that better conforms to their vision of meaningful social change. The question for donors and other would be reformers is whether emphasizing women's participation in formal politics, risks delegitimizing the political activity in which women are actually engaged (Bayard de Volo 2003; Lombardo 2008). Moreover, focusing on the

absence of women from the formal political sphere may increase the risk that donors overlook women who are seen as leaders within their communities (McLeod 2008; 2015). Again, we are not arguing that would-be-reformers should give up on the goal of increased parliamentary representation – but rather demonstrating through our analysis that it is only one of several distinct political spheres in which women are actively seeking change. Alongside training programs for prospective women MPs, for instance, this research points to the merits of further supporting the activities that women see as having a direct and tangible benefit on the communities within which they are embedded, such as supporting women’s reproductive and sexual health and interventions aimed at transforming gender norms. If the goal is progressive social change, and not only the creation of representative democracies, then donors may need to ‘change their existing mental models of how development happens’ (Unsworth 2009 in Fisher and Marquette 2014). Taking emerging women leaders and their contributions seriously is a necessary first step in determining ‘actionable strategies’ to support developmental change in Melanesia.

## **Endnotes**

1. Emails asked initial contacts to suggest the names of women who were seen as emerging leaders. The only specification was that they be between 18-35 years of age. This was later extended to include women up to the age of 40, reflecting a global trend in which people are experiencing an extended period of being perceived as ‘young people’.

2. In the Solomon Islands, the research was facilitated by the Young Women's Parliamentary Group and in Vanuatu, by staff in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Port Vila. In PNG, the participants were contacted through the researchers' existing networks.

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