



Being the First: Women Leaders in the Pacific Islands

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 #genderpp



Introduction

Our research focused on women who have made their own way in politics, working within local systems. This can teach us a lot about the relative place of donor initiatives.

Three Successful Women Politicians:

Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Dame Carol Kidu, Minister of Community Development (2002-2012). First female leader of the Opposition (2012), Papua New Guinea.

Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) of Samoa.

Seven Rules of Thumb

1. Use Your Family Resources Wisely
2. Education Involves Skills and Profile
3. Keep Your Community Close
4. Develop a Reputation as an Expert in a Substantive Policy Area
5. Develop Strategies for Working in an All Male Environment
6. Know How and When to Take a Stand
7. Build Strategic Networks with the International Community

Keep Your Community Close

“I went through all the cultural protocols which I think some women today perhaps are not observing; I went to the clan elder first, our family elder first and got him on side. Then I had to go and approach Buri’s brothers, all his brothers; he was the oldest of six brothers. ...It was a risky game, of course ... but I said, “I won’t expect any money from you or anything like that. I’ll make sure that I do not embarrass the family in any way,” because that was a concern I think that I might have been an embarrassment to the family.”

Dame Carol Kidu.

Building relationships takes its toll

“That’s why I kept hammering them [women candidates]; “Your campaign starts from now for 2022, and you don’t even stop the whole time. You are building up a relationship.” It’s much harder for women. You’ve got to really work it. Very emotionally draining, because you end up with all the people’s problems, which male MPs don’t necessarily end up with; they end up with financial requests and things, but not so much ... the burden of that, of facing the problems that people face, and the fact that you feel powerless to help them, but you know they desperately need help”.

Dame Carol Kidu

Develop Strategies for Working in an All Male Environment

Key message: ‘in politics you’re just focusing on everything, and keeping an eye out for women’ (Fiame).

“I have to be honest and say there are very few situations where it’s been really gender-specific, but it’s been about development for everyone. Most of the time I will talk to my male colleagues and just thrash out issues. It didn’t worry me one bit if they were the ones that took it up. I wasn’t necessarily interested in sort of projecting about what I thought. It was more about getting something through”.

Develop Strategies for Working in a Male Dominated Environment (ctd.)

“As a Samoan woman, that’s exactly the way to govern. Being a western woman, probably not the way to govern. But I do know, with the more experienced women politicians that I’ve come across, they know how to play the game. I don’t think there are too many women politicians who are necessarily entrenched in gender feminist stuff. Very few” (Fiame).

“Sometimes we are more aggressive than we need to be. People notice what you do, not what you say. There are ways to be heard. If you are respectful to them, they will respect you back. I also try to do that with the other ministers... The perfect way to get your message out is by example” (Heine).

Reflections on Being the First

[The reporters said] “We just want to ask you how you feel”. I said, “I feel fine. I feel great”. ... If I was a man, they would have said, “so what are you thinking? What are you going to do”? But because I'm a woman, they said, “how do you feel”?... I said, if that's all you want to ask me, okay, we'll call it off. Thank you very much and good bye. So they said, can you tell us about what went on?

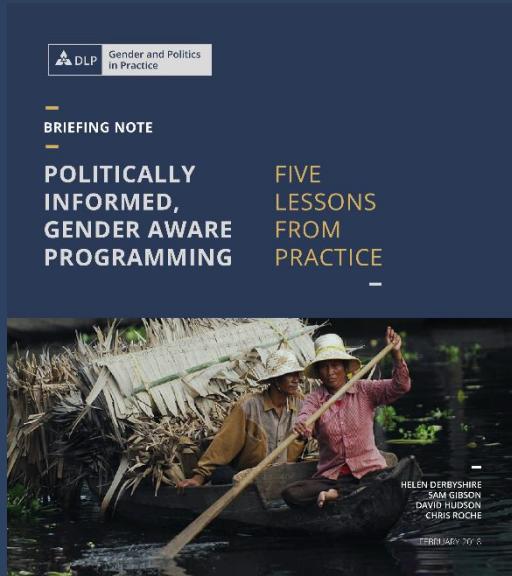
I said, you know what went on. We had a vote and I'm it [laughing]. ... I said, I don't know what you expect me to say. But if you're asking me about the new position, Deputy Prime Minister then what I have to tell you is that: do you know that I've been in parliament over 30 years and I've been in cabinet since 1991? So which position? I've acted as prime minister at different times. So this is not such a big step. It's nothing that I'm unaccustomed to. I feel perfectly fine about it [laughing].

Deputy Prime Minister Fiame Mata'afa

Reflections on Donor support

1. Humility in programming: donor investments may not be key to dynamics of social and political change;
2. Candidate training and civic awareness are still valued;
3. Long term investments in expanding women's agency 'fit' with these long term processes of change.

Briefing note



Being the First



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Thank you for listening

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