Small States & Territories, 3(2), 2020, pp. 359-374

Politics and Gendered Practices in the Pacific Islands: A Review and Agenda

Kerryn Baker
Department of Pacific Affairs
Australian National University
Canberra, Australia
kerryn.baker@anu.edu.au

Abstract: The everyday practice of politics is often difficult for the outside observer to understand and interpret. It is also gendered. In the study of women and politics in the Pacific, much attention has been given to women's under-representation as candidates and representatives, but far less to the gendered norms and structures that affect how politics actually works. This article makes the case for a research agenda on gendered practices. It contends that in the Pacific, as elsewhere, political spaces are overwhelmingly conceptualised as masculine, and this creates a constraint on feminised political expression. Everyday gendered political practices exclude and marginalise female political actors, impacting on the descriptive and substantive representation of women and entrenching broader gender inequalities. There is much scope for future research in this space, and the article makes the case for five key research strands that, taken together, could contribute to our understanding of political practice in the Pacific. I suggest the use of political ethnography is the most useful method for shedding light on the gendered practice of politics.

Keywords: gender, Pacific Islands, parliaments, political ethnography, practice theory, small states

© 2020 – Islands and Small States Institute, University of Malta, Malta

---

Introduction

The everyday practice of politics – how decisions are made, how coalitions are formed, and how influence is negotiated – is often opaque, involving processes that are difficult for the outside observer to understand and interpret. The move to address this gap in our understanding has generated a 'practice turn' in political science and international relations (Boswell et al., 2019; Bueger, 2014; Pouliot, 2008, 2016; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015; Vrasti, 2008). Building on the work of Bourdieu in particular, these scholars have foregrounded the study of practices, defined as "socially meaningful and organized patterns of activity; in lay parlance, they are ways of doing things" (Pouliot, 2016, p. 49). Practice scholars have theorised that collective meanings are established and shifted because of the existence of communities of practice (Adler, 2008); performances of recognised social conventions constitute the ways of doing things that form the basis of our social and political lives (Koivisto & Dunne, 2010; Leander, 2009; Pouliot, 2016), but "it is also from practices that social change originates" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 16).

The nascent practice turn has thus far overlooked gender, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Mackay & Rhodes, 2013; Jahnsen & Wagenaar, 2019). We would expect, however, that political practices are highly gendered, especially given the traditional male dominance of the field. Historically, women have been seen to represent a "kinder, gentler politics" to that of their male counterparts (Norris, 1996, p. 91). Female politicians are typologised as less aggressive, more conciliatory, and less likely to thrive in intensely adversarial systems. Studies

in the United Kingdom have shown that female politicians self-identify as practising a different style of politics to men, in behaviour, discourse and ideology (Childs, 2000, 2004; Mackay, 2001).

Understanding political practices is of particular importance in the Pacific context. In the region, the biggest body of literature is on elections (e.g. Baker, 2016, 2018c; May et al., 2013; Ratuva & Lawson, 2016), yet the study of practice often stops at the door of the legislature. How political decision-making happens within legislatures and executives is under-studied, and the impact of gender on political decision-making even more so. This fundamentally limits our understanding of how development and political change occur in the Pacific.

Women politicians and candidates in the Pacific, as elsewhere, tend to claim they practice a different style of politics (Baker, 2018b). Yet parliaments are masculinised spaces. As of March 2020, only three of 192 national parliaments had female majorities (IPU 2020). Parliaments are so coded as masculine that the study of political power has historically been the study of men. In this context, "women parliamentarians work within the confines of a gendered institution which impacts on their capacity to reform both parliamentary process and policy" (Palmieri, 2019, p. 173). In other words, even if women do represent a different style of politics, their capacity to express that is constrained by the masculinised cultures of parliamentary institutions. In such environments, feminised behaviour is undervalued (Crewe, 2014).

Within the Pacific, there is a pervasive bleakness to the discourse on women's political representation. It is not without justification; the independent states in the Pacific have consistently ranked as among the worst in the world in terms of the proportion of women in parliaments. As of March 2020, there were only three states in the world with no women in their national legislatures, and they were all found in the Pacific region (IPU, 2020). This picture, however, is not the full story. Despite having just nine per cent women's representation in its legislature, in 2016 Marshall Islands elected its first female President, Hilda Heine. Looking beyond the independent Pacific states, we find significantly more women in elected positions. In March 2020, the proportion of women in the New Caledonian Congress and French Polynesian Assembly is 52% and 53% respectively. The 2018 Guam election saw the election of a legislature where two-thirds of members are women.

The gendered face of politics in the Pacific is changing; but, is the practice of politics changing with it? This article seeks to delve into the mystery of how politics is practised. My aim is to establish a research agenda on the gendered practice of politics in the Pacific region. To articulate the case for this agenda, and provide an outline of what it might look like, the article is structured as follows: in the following section, I look at the global literature on gender, politics and parliaments and how it relates to the Pacific Islands. Then, I examine existing studies of how politics is practised in the Pacific, and the means through which it is practised, highlighting the gaps in our knowledge. Finally, I suggest five key areas for future research, and advocate the use of ethnographic approaches in the study of parliamentary and executive politics.

Gender, politics and parliaments

Feminist political science has long been interested in the impact of women on political decision-making, particularly around how the increased presence of individual women might translate into positive benefits for women as a group. Yet the potential gains from women's increased access to political spaces have always been tempered by the masculinised nature of these spaces. For example, we know women might not be able to substantively act for women's interests as political actors, even when they have the political will to do so (Celis, 2008). The issue facing women in politics is what Carol Pateman (1988) termed 'Wollstonecraft's dilemma' – in a political space where masculine behaviour is the default, women can be accepted as political actors only to the extent that they act like men.

In a male-dominated political system where a feminised approach to politics is undervalued, women face the choice to either assimilate to or resist the prevailing (masculine) parliamentary culture (King, 1995). To resist, of course, costs political capital and risks a curtailed political career. Thus for women, especially those with relatively few female colleagues, success in such systems has often meant adjusting to masculine norms of behaviour (Childs, 2004). Assimilation also carries risk, with female politicians also being judged for adopting masculinised behaviour. This remains true as more women enter parliaments and even as they become the majority in some. In 2019, a female member of the Tasmanian Parliament – which then had 52% female representation – was rebuked by the (female) Speaker for demonstrating "unladylike" behaviour by interjecting while the male Premier spoke (Humphries, 2019).

The hostility of parliamentary cultures to women is an issue that has been raised frequently in recent years, by academics and political leaders. In a parliamentary debate to mark the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern made this point,

> Our young women may no longer question whether society will accept them in Parliament, but they may very well question whether Parliament is something they will accept, if it's where they want to be. This is not an attractive place of work, and I would argue that for both men and women. Measures of success aren't based on how many constituents you've helped but on how many scalps you've claimed. It's not about the policies you've progressed but the amount of gotcha moments you've managed or dodged. Now, there's no one to blame. It's a Westminster system, Mr Speaker, as you well know, and it's robust, but how many find it an appealing career choice? But we need it to be, and not just for women but for people from all walks of life. (Hansard, 19 September 2018)

Legislatures can be unsafe spaces for women, in terms of explicit violence and threats of violence (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019), but also more subtly in terms of the pressure to assimilate to uncomfortable modes of political expression (Childs, 2004).

Masculinised styles of behaviour are reinforced by networks that promote and reward newcomers who are able to assimilate successfully to the political norm. Elin Bjarnegård (2015, p. 24) uses the concept of 'homosocial capital' to examine masculine dominance in politics. She states that,

> [I]nterpersonal capital needs to be built up before an individual is included in a political network and … there are gendered aspects to this interpersonal capital: it is predominantly accessible for other men as well as more valuable when built between men.

Power is related to the accumulation of homosocial capital, and processes of accumulation are biased towards those with privileged identities: elite men, predominantly. For women in politics, a lack of access to the networks through which homosocial capital is accumulated is one of the major barriers to influence.

Practising politics in the Pacific

How politics is practised in the Pacific is influenced by a number of factors, including institutional structures, voter expectations, cultural norms, and personal relationships between key actors. As elsewhere in the world, the floor of parliament is only one site for the practice of politics and not necessarily the most important one; Jack Corbett's study of Pacific politicians noted that "the most important politicking occurs on the sidelines, in the lounges over lunch, or in the bar before being funnelled through the chamber" (2015, p. 90). This section will review existing literature on practising politics in the Pacific – what we know, and the gaps in our knowledge of political practice. While the region is highly diverse, not least in terms of political systems and sovereign status, this section will focus on the practice of politics as it relates to three commonalities that link many Pacific states: smallness, weakly institutionalised party systems, and cultural norms that restrict women's political expression.

Smallness

The Pacific Islands has the world's largest concentration of small states, creating a context in which politics is intensely personalised (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2017). Informal norms of kinship and consensus politics are also very important in the Pacific context. Cultivating familial and kinship ties is essential to the practice of politics, as is embracing the cultural value of consensus (Corbett, 2015). These norms – of hyper-personalisation, kinship and consensus – all have gendered ramifications.

In literature on Pacific elections, the importance of gaining support for family and kin is considered paramount for a successful election campaign, particularly so given the size of Pacific electorates often mean these kinship connections might constitute a majority of voters (Corbett, 2015). This is equally true of female and male candidates; however, the political ambitions of women are often subordinated to those of their male relatives. Afu Billy (2002, p. 59), recounting her first foray into Solomon Islands politics, told of how she was expected to stand aside when a male in-law expressed his wish to stand,

> My traditional obligation as a woman in a situation where a very strong in-law, and an older man, also wants what I want is to surrender it to him, as a sign of respect. In practice, it was not easy to conform … The situation placed me in a rather awkward position but I decided that, as much as I would like to fulfil my cultural obligations, there was no way that I could now give up. Personally, I felt that culture was being used to promote the male ego…

Billy ultimately continued her campaign, but lost the election narrowly to her male relative.

The impact of kinship ties in campaigning, and the gendered barriers to exploiting these ties successfully, are well-studied; far less is known about the impact of kinship for politicians after they are elected. Family dynamics are not only present in terms of politician and voter, but also amongst politicians. In small countries, the likelihood of politicians serving in parliament with relatives is high. This dynamic is complicated by cultural norms in some parts of the Pacific that strictly regulate how male and female relatives interact. How these kinship ties impact on political networks and the practice of politics is an area for future research.

Consensus, reified in what Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara termed ‘the Pacific Way’, is often considered a cornerstone of Pacific (or at least Polynesian) politics, but, as Corbett (2015) notes, it can act to dissuade political dissent. As a political process, it can favour the most privileged voices in the room, which are almost always senior men. While consensus-based decision-making can impede women’s access to politics at both the local and national levels, research in Samoa has shown that some women – albeit usually elite, educated and politically connected women – can negotiate these structures to gain political positions (Baker, 2018a). Yet how female political actors in the Pacific negotiate consensus politics and expressing disagreement within legislatures is largely unknown.

Consensus can also be a political ploy to encourage a dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ forms of politics (Lawson, 1993), without acknowledging they are not static and draw much from each other. In this dichotomy, the participation of women is construed as ‘modern’ and not a requirement of the more legitimate ‘traditional’ form of politics. Consensus politics is celebrated as ‘traditional’ and valid without interrogation of how the power dynamics therein might privilege some voices and disempower others.

In examining homosocial capital in the Pacific, the intensely personalised nature of political networks in the region cannot be ignored. In microstates, the saying ‘the personal is political’ takes on a different meaning. Research on, for example, the trend towards authoritarianism in Nauru highlights that an important, but underexplored, explanatory factor is the personal relationships amongst the political elite (Firth, 2016). Such relationships are often cultivated in male-coded spaces – bars, kava circles, or customary male-only sites of political discussion – thus entrenching homosocial networks and the exclusion of women.

In the US and Australia, EMILY’s List is one attempt to support female candidates financially and in the process cultivate women-driven political networks. While the explicitly pro-choice framing of the organisation would make it hard to introduce into the largely anti-abortion political cultures of the Pacific, other forms of women’s networks have had some success. In Samoa, the Women in Leadership Advocacy Group (WINLA) consists of high-level female leaders including members of Parliament and CEOs in the public service. WINLA has driven efforts not only to increase the numbers of women in leadership but also to effect policy and legislative change on gender issues. The effectiveness of such networks, as well as the influence of donor organisations on these networks, is underexplored in the literature on politics.

Party and political systems

In the Pacific, where with a few exceptions parties are weakly institutionalised, parties have limited impact on the practice of politics. In some Pacific countries, no parties are represented at all in their legislatures; in others, parties are loose and easily fragmented coalitions that exist in political contexts described as “disorderly” (May, 2003) or “unbounded” (Steeves, 1996). Parties are often the gatekeepers that facilitate women’s exclusion from politics. Weakly institutionalised party systems in the Pacific might provide opportunities for individual, usually elite, women to negotiate political access in the absence of formalised candidate selection systems, but they rarely provide a fully open and equal political playing field (Baker, 2018a). This is because an absence of institutionalism allows for other, informal (and gendered) political rules and norms to prevail (Waylen, 2000). These can include clientelist practices, elite capture, and the integration of customary leadership selection practices into formal politics.

The impact of these weakly institutionalised party systems on the practice of politics is perhaps exemplified by the horse-trading that occurs between an election and the selection of the executive (Steeves, 1996). Without strong parties, these negotiations can resemble a free-for-all. Politicians often feel pressure from their constituents to lobby for a ministerial portfolio during this time, and in the absence of party structures, personal relationships and powerful networks dictate success. While these networks are gendered and may privilege male political actors, we know that women politicians in the Pacific tend to be relatively successful in these negotiations, being represented in Cabinet in higher proportions to their representation in parliament. How women exercise power in these executive-forming negotiations is an area that merits future research.

In these weakly institutionalised party systems, the relevance of Western political systems has often been questioned. Historically there has been significant debate over whether democracy is relevant to and appropriate for Pacific cultures. In much of the Pacific, independence was an uncontested and largely exogenously-driven process, resulting in political systems that were not indigenised or altered with regard to the political context. In a 1994 article, Peter Larmour quoted a Fiji Times letter to the editor which asked if democracy was a “foreign flower” that might be unable to take root in Pacific soil. In the Solomon Islands context, Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka (2008) has criticised the Westminster political system, in particular its adversarial design, commonly seen as antithetical to cultural traditions of consensus in the Pacific, and the disconnect between the vote on election day and the selection of prime minister and cabinet. This disconnect has sometimes prompted riots when the selection of prime minister is announced, as seen in Honiara in 2006 and 2019. Of course, gender, power and institutions are mutually co-constitutive concepts, and as we consider the call from Kabutaulaka and others to consider how modern political systems could be indigenised in the Pacific, we equally must consider how they could be reshaped to reflect contemporary Pacific societies in terms of the full participation of women.

In the non-Westminster systems of the Pacific, the gendered nature of political structures also merits consideration. In countries with institutions based on the US political model, federalised systems provide multiple levels of political access; Palau, for example, has 16 state assemblies as well as a bicameral national legislature, for a population of around 20,000. Yet women’s political representation is not guaranteed, and a plethora of sub-national options may in fact further restrict women’s access to national level politics. While a handful of women have been elected to state legislatures in the Federated States of Micronesia, as of

March 2020 it remains the only country in the world to have never had a female member of its national legislature.

There is in fact a puzzle in terms of women in politics in the Pacific, with non-sovereign states – territories and self-governing countries of France, New Zealand, the UK and US – tending to out-perform the independent states on this metric. Quota systems are one explanation for this divergence (Baker, 2019), but do not tell the whole story. Understanding the power dynamics within and between legislatures and states, and what this means for women's representation, is important to gain the full picture of women's representation in the Pacific.

Gender, culture and politics

Women face a double oppression in terms of customary and Western political norms that emphasise both male leadership and a masculinised decision-making space. This is often expressed in the argument that campaigns for increased women's representation act to force women into an aggressive and unsuitable political sphere. Opponents of the introduction of the French parity laws in New Caledonia stressed their respect for women as a reason to not support increased numbers in politics, as they would not be culturally suited for politics (Baker, 2019).

Both disrespect and respect can be used as forces of exclusion for women in practising politics. Dame Carol Kidu (2015, p. 126), who served in the Papua New Guinea Parliament from 1997 to 2012, spoke of the hostile reception to her as a woman member of Parliament by the Leader of the Opposition when she was first elected,

> I did not anticipate the welcome I would receive when I entered the caucus room. The Opposition Leader acknowledged me with the comment: 'People in this House wear pants not skirts.' He was a friend of my late husband but uncomfortable about my presence in the sacred modern men's house where there had not been a woman for 10 years before 1997. I smiled and sat down. The next day, I dressed in a trouser suit and made sure that most men were already present before I entered the caucus room. With a cheeky smile, I stood to attract their attention then kicked one leg in the air to display my trousers. 'Am I welcome now?' I joked with the leader. My point was made. A small act of defiance but delivered with a smile – I knew that direct confrontation with my male colleagues would be counterproductive, a waste of energy. I had to learn how to operate in an environment that was uncomfortable about female participation.

In Fiji, Opposition Whip Lynda Tabuya was criticised at the first session of parliament following the 2018 election for her choice of outfit, a Calvin Klein white sheath dress, with critics arguing traditional Fijian dress would be more appropriate. She responded that parliament was not a customary space: "I represent a good section of women in Fiji who are the modern women who like to dress up, but who also know where it is culturally appropriate to wear a sulu-i-ra and Parliament is not one of [those places]" (quoted in Bolanavanua, 2018).

Cultural norms of respect for women can also conversely act as barriers to women's participation in political life. Cultural norms that prevent men from criticising women are relatively common (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2019); one of the first female members of the Papua New Guinea Parliament, Dame Josephine Abaijah (2000), expressed that she felt she was put on a "pedestal" as a woman in a male-dominated environment. While these norms are often seen as a positive for women, they can also be tools for their delegitimisation as political actors,

as they are seen as not able to fully participate in the robustness of political debate and thus not suitable for the political environment.

One method that has been used successfully in the Pacific Islands to negotiate increased political access for women is the utilisation of cultural norms of matrilineality. In Bougainville, the campaign for the inclusion of reserved seats for women in the 2004 constitution rested on the idea of shared partnership in decision-making due to Bougainville's largely matrilineal land tenure systems (Baker, 2019). In Pacific countries with matrilineal traditions, this can be a political tool to negotiate access to politics, although it is rarely a guarantee of access to formal politics on its own.

We know that informal sites of politicking in the Pacific tend to be coded as masculine. Women candidates in Tonga have cited the favouring of kava circles as sites of political discussion as a barrier, given that they tend to be patronised almost exclusively by men (Baker, 2018b). Female-dominated communal activities, like sewing groups, are not politicised in the same way. These informal sites of political influence extend into post-election politics. Corbett (2015) notes that non-drinkers tend to miss out on networking opportunities in Pacific politics, and gender norms mean women may especially feel uncomfortable participating in, or be excluded from, informal activities involving alcohol or kava with their male parliamentary colleagues.

There are female-dominated sites that are of significant economic and community value. Markets, for instance, are the economic hubs of urban centres in the Pacific and a huge proportion of market vendors are women, yet the interests of these informal sector workers are seldom recognised in political discussion (Barbara & Baker, 2020). At the grassroots level, women's groups can be very important and influential institutions, but the power these groups wield tends to dilute at the higher political levels, with the National Councils of Women in Pacific Islands states often marginalised in national-level politics. Female-dominated institutions, and leadership within these groups, is not valued to the same extent as other mainstreamed, male-led institutions including religious and traditional institutions.

The practice of politics is gendered in other implicit ways. Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau, who entered the Samoan Parliament after the 2016 election, has written that entering politics in Samoa requires learning a different language: "I did not understand or know how to speak that formal oratorical language. When you can master that language, everyone thinks that you can represent them in Parliament" (Tuuau & Howard, 2019, p. 9). The style of speech used in parliament is a particular form of Samoan used exclusively by *matai*, or chiefly titleholders. Women only make up around 10 per cent of *matai* title-holders, and where women are given titles it is often in recognition of professional or educational achievements, with little expectation that they will participate in village governance and learn these patterns of speech. This means that even for women who fulfil the formal requirements of parliamentary candidacy – that is, being a *matai* title-holder – the informal rule of learning the language required to engage in politics is yet another gendered barrier.

Religious norms that reinforce rigid gender roles and confine women largely to within the domestic sphere are pervasive in the Pacific. These norms must be transgressed for women to pursue a political career (Berman, 2005). There is a gendered double standard in how religious norms are deployed in politics, with the issue of divorce being a good example. In her campaign, Billy (2002) came under criticism for being divorced, which her supporters tried to counter by highlighting that she was not seeking a church or a customary leadership role, but

rather a political one. Other prominent male politicians, including the prime minister at the time, were divorced, but did not come under as much scrutiny as Billy.

Many women in politics, like the Billy and Tabuya examples above, seek to legitimise their entry into the public sphere by emphasising its separation from the customary sphere. This allows women space to claim political leadership positions even if they are excluded from customary leadership roles. Yet this separation is contested by male political elites who seek to use customary authority to shape political outcomes. Lawson (1993, pp. 20-21) labels this practice in the Pacific "the politics of traditionalism",

> Traditionalism is a method of idealizing the past and of judging and moulding the present by the assumed standards of a past era. The selective nature of representations of the past and the apparent ease with which these selections can be made by those who command the requisite symbolic resources make it especially flexible in fashioning contemporary political agendas.

In modern politics, custom can be wielded as a weapon by men who seek to achieve and maintain political power, even if such power exists in the sphere of the postcolonial state rather than customary politics. Traditional authority is a source of political authority, and religious authority often intersects the two (Lawson, 1993). These three spheres can seldom be fully untangled in Pacific contexts.

Custom is, of course, not immune to relational power disparities: "Customary practice is often tilted in favour of those who maintain more powerful positions within indigenous society" (Berman, 2005). For women who do gain political positions, these power dynamics remain salient. Pacific women who have risen to the highest echelons of political power, such as Heine in Marshall Islands or Déwé Gorodé in New Caledonia, find they need to separate their political positions from customary responsibilities. For Gorodé, this meant confining public speech to her political roles – which included leader of the Palika Party and Vice-President of New Caledonia from 2001 to 2009 – while accepting a more behind-the-scenes role in customary life (Berman, 2005). For Heine, as President of the Marshall Islands (2016-2020), it means observing cultural protocols when dealing with traditional leaders (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2019). This can arguably be framed as the clever use of cultural norms to work within traditional structures to achieve political goals. It must also be recognised that these cultural traditions are of high value to many women and there are elements of reciprocity therein. Yet, this deliberate disassociation of political and cultural roles is not something that male politicians are obligated to do.

In the Pacific, where women have succeeded in politics it is usually in small numbers dominated by women who could be termed members of the elite, although it must be noted that relationships between Pacific political elites and their constituents and wider networks is often very personal and involves layers of reciprocity that the term 'elite' fails to fully convey. While these 'elite' women can mobilise symbolic capital to achieve political success (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2019), and indeed to drive women's political issues onto the political agenda, they tend to accumulate this capital in ways that do not threaten or alter the political or customary status quo. Challenging norms necessarily requires expending political capital (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2019). Even if the cost in terms of political capital is equal for men and women, which is likely not to be the case, women still face a disproportionate burden to be disrupters in the political system (Baker, 2018b).

Uncovering the art of practising politics: a research agenda

This section sets out a proposed research agenda for uncovering the gendered practice of politics in the Pacific Islands. Why focus on the Pacific? The region is an important site for researching the significance of scale, institutions, and gender on the practice of politics. The Pacific has the world's largest concentration of microstates, and access to key political decision-makers can be easier in small societies. With relatively weakly institutionalised party systems throughout the region, processes of political decision-making are not necessarily obscured by structures of party machinery, and the absence of strong parties creates an interesting context for the study of political behaviour. In terms of women in politics, it is a region of contrasts, with some of the world's lowest and highest-performing legislatures for women's representation. The particularities of the Pacific Islands region in terms of smallness, the prevalence of weakly institutionalised or non-existent political party systems, and the diversity in terms of women's representation, mean it is both potentially a more open space for research and a space where findings could be of global interest. I propose a focus on five key research strands: norms of behaviour, the negotiation of political spaces, male political dominance, strategies for change and national-local political dynamics. Each is reviewed in turn below.

Norms of behaviour

The applicability of what Pateman (1988) termed 'Wollstonecraft's dilemma' has never been tested in the region – the idea that women can be accepted as political actors only to the extent that they act like men. Do Pacific women in politics 'assimilate', or do they seek to transform gendered norms of political behaviour? How does this change from legislatures with a sole female member, to those with a small group of women, to legislatures with a female majority? Does the introduction of gender quotas – and relatedly, the presence in legislatures of female members with an explicit mandate to act on behalf of women – change these dynamics? The Pacific is uniquely well placed to act as a 'natural laboratory' (Wesley-Smith, 1995) for a comparative study of this theory.

Negotiation of political spaces

While we know that parliaments are just one site of politics, we know less about what constitutes a political space in the region. What defines a 'political space': where is it acceptable to talk politics and make political decisions? How do these delineations affect political participation for difference groups? Has the definition of political space changed with the rise of social media use in the region? And what are the ramifications for women and other marginalised groups of engaging in political spaces? Engaging with this idea, the Pacific is also an ideal site to further an emerging research agenda in the field of gender and politics, on violence against women in politics (e.g. Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019). Very little is known about the explicit and implicit forms of violence perpetrated against female politicians in the region, and especially the interplay with the rise of social media use. Organisations including the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians group have done some preliminary research on this issue in the New Zealand context (Wall & Hayes, 2019); this work could be extended out in the Pacific region.

Male political dominance

To understand the gendered practice of politics in the region, we must go beyond the study of the under-representation of certain groups, such as women, to also examine the dominance of other groups, such as elite men. How 'homosocial capital' (Bjarnegård, 2015) operates in the Pacific in less formalised networks outside of party structures is yet to be explored in the academic literature. Mapping the role of kinship relations in politics beyond elections will be a key aspect of this research.

Strategies for change

Past research on smallness and cultural norms and their impact on politics has largely neglected their gendered implications, with gender often relegated to a brief mention and its full impact unexplored. Specifically, too little is known about how women in politics work strategically within the confines of smallness and gendered cultural norms to participate effectively in politics. How does smallness impact on women's networks, both domestically and transnationally? How do women and other marginalised actors negotiate consensus politics and coalition-forming? How do women work within cultural structures to effect social and political change?

National-local political dynamics

There would also be great benefits to exploring the links between local, sub-national and national politics through a gendered lens. Too often the argument that sub-national politics is a 'pipeline' to the national level for women is put forward uncritically in the region, despite a distinct lack of evidence. In-depth research into the relationship between actors at different levels of politics can highlight its complicated nature: sometimes harmonious, sometimes highly antagonistic. Through a gendered lens, we can also explore how different levels of politics are more or less appealing for, or considered by voters suitable for, female politicians, as well as how these women in politics negotiate relationships with politicians at levels above or below them. Similar dynamics are also at play in different Pacific countries between local political institutions and those of the metropolitan states they have ties to: France, New Zealand, the UK and the US. How the representatives of different groups in politics negotiate these interactions has yet to be explored in the Pacific context.

Taken together, all these avenues for future research would contribute towards a greater understanding of gendered practices in Pacific politics. Everyday gendered political practices exclude and marginalise female political actors, in ways that affect the descriptive and substantive representation of women. In doing so, these practices also entrench broader societal inequalities and influence development outcomes. There is an obvious need for a greater understanding of everyday political practice in the Pacific that unravels the impacts of rules, norms and traditions for both marginalised and dominant groups.

An ethnographic approach to studying practices

A research agenda on the gendered practice of politics in the Pacific would shed light on the interplay of gender, power and institutions. Yet how politics is practised is difficult to study not only because of its elite and closed nature, but because practices – ways of doing things – can be hard to capture. Parliaments, as Emma Crewe (2018, p. 17) noted, are full of "traditions that seem so natural that they are scarcely noticed by those recreating them." To capture the

complexity and nuance of these intersections, I endorse a political ethnography approach to demystifying elite politics (Boswell et al., 2019; Crewe, 2018; Schatz, 2009).

The advantages of an ethnographic approach for the study of practices are the opportunity for direct, first-hand observation and the ability to engage with practitioners within the community of practice (Boswell et al., 2019; Pouliot, 2014). While ethnography is usually conceived as immersion through long-term participant observation, it can involve an eclectic range of methods brought together through an overarching sensibility, seeking to explore what people do and how this affects how they relate to each other and their wider social and political environments. Thus, a political ethnographer can be seen as "a bricoleur with an ethnographic sensibility" (Boswell et al., 2019, p. 61), taking advantage of multiple methodological tools. While participant observation is a key component of ethnography (Crewe, 2017; Pouliot, 2014), other methods that could inform political ethnography include qualitative interviews, analysis of archival material, and what might be termed 'e-ethnography', using digital connectivity to engage with research participants and political contexts (Boswell et al., 2019).

Understanding gendered practices in politics across the Pacific calls for a comparative approach. Yet, the Pacific is of course a region of immense diversity, and ethnographic approaches have traditionally been focused on in-depth single case studies. In taking a comparative approach, do we risk over-generalisation and sacrificing nuance? Yet comparative research can provide important insights on individual cases that may otherwise be obscured, as well as identifying policy implications applicable to sole or multiple contexts (Boswell, Corbett & Rhodes, 2019). While understanding context is critical to understanding practices, comparative research is also a way to 'decentre' our contextualised explanations and find the broader themes that can help us fully examine how gender, power and institutions intersect (Boswell, Corbett & Rhodes, 2019, p. 4).

'Studying up' (Nader, 1972) ethnographically – conducting research on closed, elite communities with a focus on the study of power – is not without its challenges, including access, ethical considerations and methodology. Yet, as Crewe (2005) and Rhodes (2011) have shown, these can be overcome. Parliaments are rich sites for ethnography, yet ethnographic research on parliaments has tended to eschew the study of newer and less tradition-bound parliaments as found in developing regions. Much of the established literature focuses on American and European institutions, although Shirin Rai and collaborators have extended the field to include institutions in the Global South (Rai, 2015, 2017; Rai & Johnson, 2014; Rai & Spary, 2019). The Pacific – with its strong informal institutions, young parliaments, and range in terms of gendered participation – is an ideal site for such political ethnographic research. In this way, we can illuminate the opaque, and gendered, processes of political practice.

Conclusion

The face of political representation and political leadership in the Pacific is changing as more women enter these traditionally masculinised spaces. Yet while trailblazers can open space for women in politics, they do not necessarily change the gendered practice of politics. When gendered norms are disrupted, are they truly dislodged or is the 'new normal' simply layered onto entrenched informal norms that perpetuate a masculinised politics?

This article sets out a proposed research agenda for the study of the gendered practice of politics in the Pacific region. While this work is important, it is not the full story. To better understand gendered practices in Pacific politics, we need to engage with the inter-

sectionalities of identity, and how these affect political participation, representation and behaviour: not only gender, but class, age, education, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and a myriad of other social fields. Understanding how politics is practised is an enduring challenge for researchers, and the research agenda above is one potential roadmap for bringing these processes a little more into the light.

Disclaimer

This article did not benefit from research funding.

References

Abaijah, J. (2000). *A thousand coloured dreams.* Frenchs Forest: Pearson.

Adler, E. (2008). The spread of security communities: communities of practice, self-restraint, and NATO's post-Cold War evolution. *European Journal of International Relations, 14*(2), 195-230.

Adler, E. & Pouliot, V. (2011). International practices: introduction and framework. In E. Adler & V. Pouliot (Eds.), *International practices* (pp. 1-35). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baker, K. (2016). *Pawa blong meri:* women candidates in the 2015 Bougainville election. *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2015/14*. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the Australian National University.

Baker, K. (2018a). Gender and candidate selection in a weakly institutionalised party system: the case of Samoa. *Australian Journal of Political Science, 53*(1), 57-72.

Baker, K. (2018b). Great expectations: gender and political representation in the Pacific Islands. *Government and Opposition, 53*(3), 542-568.

Baker, K. (2018c). 'What did the winning candidate have that I don't have?' Gender, politics and elections in Solomon Islands. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 56*(4), 427-445.

Baker, K. (2019). *Pacific women in politics: Gender quota campaigns in the Pacific Islands.* Honolulu HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Barbara, J. & Baker, K. (2020). Addressing collective action problems in Melanesia: The Northern Islands Market Vendors' Association in Vanuatu. *Development in Practice*. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09614524.2020.1763918

Berman, A. (2005). The law on gender parity in politics in France and New Caledonia: a window into the future or more of the same? *Oxford University Comparative Law Forum 2.* Retrieved from: https://ouclf.law.ox.ac.uk/the-law-on-gender-parity-in-politics-in-france-and-new-caledonia-a-window-into-the-future-or-more-of-the-same/

Billy, A. (2002). Fighting for a fair deal in national politics. *Development Bulletin, 59*, 58-61.

Bjarnegård, E. (2015). *Gender, informal institutions and political recruitment: explaining male dominance in parliamentary representation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bolanavanua, S. (2018, November 27). My dress symbol of modern woman: Lynda. *Fiji Sun*. Retrieved from: https://fijisun.com.fj/2018/11/27/my-dress-symbol-of-modern-woman-lynda/

Boswell, J., Corbett, J., Dommett, K., Jennings, W., Flinders, M., Rhodes, R. A. W., & Wood, M. (2019). State of the field: what can political ethnography tell us about anti-politics and democratic disaffection? *European Journal of Political Research, 58*(1), 56-71.

Boswell, J., Corbett, J., & Rhodes, R. A. W. (2019). *The art and craft of comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bueger, C. (2014). Pathways to practice: praxiography and international politics. *European Political Science Review, 6*(3), 383-406.

Celis, K. (2008). Studying women's substantive representation in legislatures: when representative acts, contexts and women's interests become important. *Representation, 44*(2), 111-123.

Childs, S. (2000). The new Labour women MPs in the 1997 British parliament. *Women's History Review, 9*(1), 55-73.

Childs, S. (2004). A feminised style of politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 6*(1), 3-19.

Corbett, J. (2015). *Being political: Leadership and democracy in the Pacific Islands.* Honolulu HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Corbett, J. & Veenendaal, W. (2017). The personalisation of democratic leadership? Evidence from small states. *Social Alternatives, 36*(3), 31-36.

Crewe, E. (2014). Ethnographic research in gendered organizations: the case of the Westminster Parliament. *Politics and Gender, 10*(4), 673-678.

Crewe, E. (2018). Ethnographies of parliament: culture and uncertainty in shallow democracies. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography, 7*(1), 16-30.

Firth, S. (2016). Australia's detention centre and the erosion of democracy in Nauru. *Journal of Pacific History, 51*(3), 286-300.

Humphries, A. (2019, July 31). Tasmanian Speaker Sue Hickey blasts 'political correctness' after MP complains over 'unladylike' comment. *ABC News.* Retrieved from: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-31/tasmania-speaker-unladylike-comment-blasted-in-parliament/11370914

Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU]. (2020). Percentage of women in national parliaments, March 2020. Retrieved from: https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=3&year=2020

Jahnsen, S. O. & Wagenaar, H. (2019). *Assessing prostitution policies in Europe.* New York: Routledge.

Kabutaulaka, T. T. (2008). Westminster meets Solomons in the Honiara riots. In S. Dinnen & S. Firth (Eds.), *Politics and state building in Solomon Islands* (pp. 96-118). Canberra: Australian National University Press.

Kidu, C. (2015). Reflections on *A remarkable journey*. In J. Corbett & B. Lal (Eds.), *Political life writing in the Pacific* (pp. 121-128). Canberra: Australian National University Press.

King, C. S. (1995). Sex-role identity and decision-styles: how gender helps explain the paucity of women at the top. In G. Duerst-Lahti & R.M. Kelly (Eds.), *Gender power, leadership and governance* (pp. 67-92). Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press.

Koivisto, M. & Dunne, T. (2010). Crisis, what crisis? Liberal order building and world order conventions. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 38*(3), 615-640.

Krook, M. L. & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2019). The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians. *Perspective on Politics*, Retrieved from: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/cost_of_doing_politics_analyzing_violence_and_harassment_against_female_politicians.pdf

Larmour, P. (1994). 'A foreign flower'? Democracy in the South Pacific. *Pacific Studies, 17*(1), 45-76.

Lawson, S. (1993). The politics of tradition: problems for political legitimacy and democracy in the South Pacific. *Pacific Studies, 16*(2), 1-29.

Leander, A. (2009). Practices (re)producing order: understanding the role of business in global security governance. In M. Ougaard & A. Leander (Eds.), *Business and global governance* (pp. 57-77). New York: Routledge.

Mackay, F. (2001). *Love and politics*. London: Continuum.

Mackay, F. & Rhodes, R. A. W. (2013). Gender, greedy institutions, and the departmental court. *Public Administration, 91*(3), 582-598.

May, R. (2003). Disorderly democracy: political turbulence and institutional reform in Papua New Guinea. *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2003/3*. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the Australian National University.

May, R.J., Anere, R., Haley, N. & Wheen, K. (Eds.) (2013). *Election 2007: The shift to limited preferential voting in Papua New Guinea.* Canberra: ANU Press.

Norris, P. (1996). Women politicians: transforming Westminster? *Parliamentary Affairs, 49*(1), 89-102.

Palmieri, S. (2019). Feminist institutionalism and gender-sensitive parliaments: relating theory and practice. In M. Sawer & K. Baker (Eds.), *Gender innovation in political science: new norms, new knowledge* (pp. 173-194). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pateman, C. (1988). The patriarchal welfare state: women and democracy. In A. Gutman (Ed.), *Democracy and the welfare state* (pp. 231-278). Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pouliot, V. (2008). The logic of practicality: a theory of practice of security communities. *International Organization, 62*(2), 257-288.

Pouliot, V. (2016). *International pecking orders: The politics and practice of multilateral diplomacy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pouliot, V. & Cornut, J. 2015. Practice theory and the study of diplomacy: a research agenda. *Cooperation and Conflict, 50*(3), 297-315.

Rai, S. M. (2015). Political performance: a framework for analysing democratic politics. *Political Studies, 63*(5), 1179-1197.

Rai, S. M. (2017). Performance and politics: an approach to symbolic representation. *Politics, Groups and Identities, 5*(3), 506-511.

Rai, S. M. & Johnson, R. (Eds.) (2014). *Democracy in practice: Ceremony and ritual in parliament.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rai, S. M. & Spary, C. (2019). *Performing Representation: Women members in the Indian Parliament.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ratuva, S. & Lawson, S. (Eds.) (2016). *The people have spoken: The 2014 elections in Fiji.* Canberra: ANU Press.

Schatz (Ed.). 2009. *Political ethnography: What immersion contributes to the study of power.* Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Spark, C., Cox, J. & Corbett, J. (2019). Gender, political representation and symbolic capital: how some women politicians succeed. *Third World Quarterly, 40*(7), 1227-1245.

Steeves, J. S. (1996). Unbounded politics in the Solomon Islands: leadership and party alignments. *Pacific Studies, 19*(1), 115-138.

Tuuau, A. A. & Howard, E. (2019). The long road to becoming a parliamentarian in Samoa: political apprenticeship, learning new language and pushing gender boundaries. *Department of Pacific Affairs Discussion Paper 2019/4*. Canberra: Department of Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University.

Veenendaal, W. P. & Corbett, J. (2015). Why small states offer important answers to large questions. *Comparative Political Studies, 48*(4), 527-549.

Vrasti, W. (2008). The strange case of ethnography and international relations. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 37*(2), 279-301.

Wall, L. & Hayes, J. (2019). Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians in New Zealand. *The Parliamentarian, 2*, 158-161.

Wesley-Smith, T. (1995). Rethinking Pacific Islands studies. *Pacific Studies, 18*(2), 115-137.

Wardlow, H. (2018). Thinking through intersectionality and gender inequality in Papua New Guinea. Keynote address at European Society for Oceanists Conference, London, 7 December.

Waylen, G. (2000). Gender and democratic politics: a comparative analysis of consolidation in Argentina and Chile. *Journal of Latin American Studies, 32*(3), 765-793.