

GUEST EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Gender, politics and development in the small states of the Pacific

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Abstract: Gender has been a key focus of donor activism, domestic politics and academic commentary in the Pacific region over recent decades. The prevailing narrative highlights deficits, including the persistent absence of women from formal political representation, and the adverse consequences for economic and social development. This special section draws together papers that explore the nexus between gender, politics and development in the small states of the Pacific. Taken together, all the papers highlight the enduring need for a gendered lens in the study of politics and development in the region and beyond, while also complicating the deficit narrative by illustrating how gender relations are changing rapidly. In doing so the contributions reveal gaps and disjuncture in existing theoretical debates.

Keywords: deficit narrative, development, equality, gender, Pacific politics, small states, social change

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Introduction

This special section of *Small States & Territories* 3(2), 2020, explores the nexus of gender, politics and development in the small states of the Pacific. The worlds of politics and development have always been gendered spaces, defined by male leadership and masculinised norms of behaviour. Over time, critiques of women's absence from both political and development practice have moved from a focus on descriptive representation – 'just add women and stir' – to examining how women can make a substantive contribution to cultural change and outcomes in these fields. In both cases, however, the pervasive framing is of a region defined by its deficits.

Deficit narratives

The Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are the only United Nations member states with zero female Members of Parliament; all three are located in the Pacific region (IPU, 2020). Gender-based violence is reported to occur at endemic rates (ODE 2019), and the Pacific ranks below the global average in terms of women's access to economic opportunities. Only three Pacific countries achieved Millennium Development Goal 3, promoting gender equality and empowering women, with ten others getting a mixed report card, and Papua New Guinea failing. Gender equality has become more prominent as a regional development priority in the past decade: this is evidenced by the 2012 Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, and aid investment, including the Australian Government's 10-year Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program. However, activists have continued to critique a "legal-technocratic approach" to gender equality on the grounds that it ignores deeper structural barriers to gender justice (Slatter & Underhill-Sem, 2009, p. 206).

The deficit narrative is not restricted to discussions of gender (Corbett, 2013). Politics in the Pacific is regularly denigrated as clientelistic and 'disorderly' (May, 2003), with traditional forms of politics seen as subverting the aims of modern democratic reforms. The absence of women from politics in much of the independent Pacific is commonly framed as both a symptom and a cause of democratic disaffection (Baker, 2018). Yet, women are politically active, both engaging with and challenging formal political structures (Spark & Corbett, 2018). As leaders in social movements across the intersection of politics and development – including key figures such as Josephine Abaijah, leader of the secessionist Papua Besena movement; and Claire Slatter, co-founder of the global feminist network Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) – women have been active in promoting new ways of doing politics and alternative approaches to development.

If a deficit narrative is a ubiquitous descriptor of Pacific politics, it is even more prominent in discussions of small island development in the region. Pacific island states have long been said to face distinct development challenges (Bertram & Watters, 1985): including remoteness, small populations and the existential threat of climate change. Yet, the link between 'smallness', gender and development remains unclear. Progress in gender equality does not necessarily follow progress from or lead to developmental gains. Political rights and access to political positions do not automatically translate into social and economic empowerment for women (Rai, 2013). In thinking about the entry of women into politics, Fraser (1995) distinguishes between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution in pursuing substantive change. Conceptualising women as a group with universal and easily defined interests is of course problematic; widely divergent experiences of women, and how marginalisation can be compounded or transcended by race, tribe, class, sexuality and other social identities, must be acknowledged.

Despite these complexities, there are important patterns that appear to link the three themes that this special section addresses. Sub-national island jurisdictions in the region have both much higher levels of economic wealth *and* rates of female participation in formal politics, for example. The participation of women in formal politics in other regions comprising small island developing states, like the Caribbean, also tend to be higher than global averages. The distinct development challenges associated with being a small state clearly do not create gender-based inequality. But, as the articles in this special section show, they can magnify them. While eschewing a linear correlation, we show that a small state 'lens' can shed light on

questions about the relationship between gender, politics and development in the Pacific, just as Pacific cases can reveal gaps and disjuncture in existing theoretical debates.

Two ubiquitous aspects of politics in small islands appear relevant: conservatism and insularity (Baldacchino, 2006; Lowenthal, 2007). Small islands, both in the Pacific and elsewhere, have a tendency towards preserving the status quo, in part because “everybody knows everybody” (Corbett, 2015) and this intimate, face-to-face (Laslett, 1956) and highly personalised (Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018) politics favours consensus, which encourages compliance and stifles dissent (Lawson, 1996; Baldacchino, 2012). As a consequence, those opposed to prevailing power structures are often likely to migrate rather than face persistent marginalisation from key institutions and forms of employment (Wallis 2008). But using outmigration to manage intimacy further reduces the space for all forms of social change, including those related to gender.

Changing gender relations

In exploring these connections, the articles in this special section, both individually and when read together, complicate the pervasive deficit narrative by illustrating how gender relations are changing rapidly in the evolving social environments of the Pacific. Processes of urbanisation and globalisation are altering the way people in the Pacific live, with both positive and negative outcomes for women (Spark, 2014; 2017). The ‘ICT revolution’ is impacting on and changing modes of communication and the nature of public spaces, with young women taking advantage of these innovations to engage more assertively in the political sphere and promote their interests (Brimacombe, 2017). Climate change advocacy has attracted global attention to the Pacific Islands, with women playing leading roles in the movement. These are new and emerging avenues for social change; but they draw on a long tradition of Pacific women working to achieve change, often within conservative social and political structures (Douglas, 2003; Scheyvens, 2003).

By highlighting these changes, and the ways they create variation between countries and scales – local, national, regional and international – this special section presents a nuanced view of a dynamic context, exploring the gendered aspects of issues such as climate change, political leadership and grassroots entrepreneurship. It also seeks new directions in gender and development research in the Pacific.

Six papers

In the opening paper, Nicholas Halter and Anawaite Matadradra use the case study of the Vunilagi Book Club as an example of grassroots transformative female leadership. They argue that women act as key drivers of change at the community level, highlighting the importance of a gender lens in development studies. Also clear from this case study is the importance of empowering local voice in community development (Halter & Matadradra, 2020).

Jale Samuwai, Eliala Fihaki and Yvonne Underhill-Sem also take a community approach, examining how Pacific women in Tuvalu and Chuuk (Federated States of Micronesia) experience climate finance impacts. This paper again demonstrates the urgent need for a gender lens in development practice. Ensuring that climate finance contributes towards creating more equitable societies, rather than entrenching existing inequalities, is an ongoing challenge (Samuwai, Fihaki & Underhill-Sem, 2020).

Moving from the local to the global, George Carter and Elise Howard explore the experiences of Pacific women in climate change negotiations, particularly during the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. They examine the formal and informal structures that limit the articulation of women's perspectives during these negotiations. Making the case for further research, they raise important questions of whether senior women negotiators have the opportunity and the will to substantively act *for* women, and whether the 'rules of the game' of international diplomacy provide space for transformative agendas (Carter & Howard, 2020).

Parts of the Pacific have strong and proud histories of women's leadership, as Sylvia Frain reminds us in her study of gender and politics in Guåhan (Guam). The tradition of women's customary authority carries into the formal political space, as seen in 2018 when two-thirds of all legislative seats were won by women, and Lou Leon Guerrero was elected as the first female Governor of Guam. Yet, politics and development in the region are shaped by enduring imperial legacies; the status of Guam as an unincorporated territory of the United States creates a particular political context where local power is limited. Frain argues that the ability of women leaders – be they at the community level, in territorial politics, or in the military – to transform politics and development in Guam is fundamentally constrained by these colonial structures (Frain, 2020).

John Cox, Jack Corbett and Ceridwen Spark profile another trailblazing Pacific woman politician, Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands, who in 2016 became the first – and to date, the only – female head of state in the Pacific Islands. By documenting the key strategies that Heine used during her term as President, this paper provides an important window into the practice of women's leadership in Pacific politics: the means by which women can effectively drive change, and also the significant structural barriers that they face. Insider accounts such as these are necessary and pivotal to our understanding of how politics is practised (Cox, Corbett & Spark, 2020).

In the final paper, Kerryn Baker proposes a new research agenda for the study of women and politics in the Pacific. Moving away from the traditional focus on women's under-representation as candidates and representatives, this agenda seeks to uncover the gendered norms and structures that underpin the practice of politics. While of clear academic interest, the study of gendered political practices is also of wider relevance. Understanding the everyday practice of politics – and how these practices are gendered – can arguably help promote more inclusive forms of politics and development in the region (Baker, 2020).

Conclusion

The particular dynamics of the Pacific make it a rich site of analysis, especially in examining the impact of 'smallness' on the interplay of politics, gender and development. Yet the themes that this special issue has illuminated are not unique to the region. They show the importance of women's leadership – at the community, sub-national, national and international levels – in driving politics and development. They also highlight how masculinised political spaces, embedded cultural mores and entrenched power dynamics work against gendered transformations. Taken together, all the papers highlight the enduring need for a gendered lens in the study of politics and development in the small states and territories of the Pacific region, and beyond.

Acknowledgements

The papers for this special section were first presented at a writing workshop held at the College of Micronesia in September 2019. The editors would like to thank the British Academy (WW19\100019) and the Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU, for funding the workshop. We would also like to thank Delihna Ehmes and other colleagues at the College of Micronesia for their support and co-ordination, and John Halgelgam for opening the workshop. We are grateful to Zag Puas, Juliann Anesi, Keith Camacho, Myjolyne Kim, Suzanne Gallen and Canita Rilometo for their contributions to the workshop and comments on the draft papers. Elijah Malifa deserves special thanks for her logistical genius. Finally, we would like to thank anonymous reviewers for being so responsive and constructive.

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