



## Why Can't Women Win? Impediments to Female Electoral Success in Solomon Islands

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### Executive Summary

This paper discusses impediments to female candidate success in national elections in the Western Melanesian country of Solomon Islands.

Increased female representation in parliaments is desirable both for reasons of gender equity and because evidence suggests such increases come coupled with development benefits. Yet, while numbers of women members of parliament (MPs) are increasing globally, trends of improvement are much less in the Pacific. At present, Solomon Islands has only one female MP. What is more, the majority of women candidates who have stood in national elections in Solomon Islands have not polled well and, on average, women candidates in Solomon Islands elections are becoming, if anything, less competitive over time.

Reflecting gender imbalances in Solomon Islands society, women candidates suffer a number of significant obstacles as they try to win elections. Yet, surprisingly perhaps, the foremost of these does not appear to be strong voter preferences for male candidates. Survey data as well as interviews suggest that, in some abstract sense, the typical Solomon Islands voter would be willing to vote for a female candidate.

Rather than taking the form of gendered voter preferences, the major impediments faced by women candidates are:

- Women are held to different standards of behaviour in Solomon Islands society, and this is a tool that opponents use (to apparent effect) to call into question the character of women candidates.

- Having money to spend is an integral aspect of electoral success in Solomon Islands elections, and women candidates generally want for this resource.
- Votes in Solomon Islands are usually won with the support of influential local figures (brokers), and predominantly patriarchal local-level leadership in Solomon Islands makes it harder for female candidates to gain the support of strong brokers.

In terms of what can be done to increase numbers of women MPs, efforts to date have focused on electoral quotas and candidate training. Having a quota law passed, which mandated a proportion of Solomons parliament be women, would be a very effective way of increasing numbers of female MPs; however, the domestic political economy provides few incentives for sitting MPs (who, except for one MP, are all men) to pass such legislation. Meanwhile, training, while being of potential use if well designed, is unlikely to significantly increase numbers of women MPs on its own.

Providing funding to women candidates is one potential means of increasing their chances of winning; however, given practicalities and sensitivities, it would be very difficult for external actors to do this effectively. Working over time to strengthen networks that link potential women candidates to voters, on the other hand, would be less problematic and, while not a magic bullet, given the nature of electoral competition in Solomon Islands and the need for local interlocutors, offers some promise of success.

## Introduction

Having more women MPs elected in Pacific island countries is desirable for a range of reasons. Gender equity alone provides a compelling case, while available evidence from elsewhere in the world suggests more women in parliament will also deliver broader development benefits.

Cross-country work shows countries with more women MPs tend to experience less corruption (Dollar et al. 2001). Increases in numbers of women MPs appear to lead to subsequent improvements in economic performance (Jayasuriya and Burke 2012). And countries with more women MPs also devote, on average, more government spending to health and education (Knack and Sanyal 2000).

Experimental evidence suggests exposure to women leaders positively changes gender perceptions (Dasgupta and Asgari 2004). And evidence from a natural experiment involving local-level political leadership in India shows interaction with female leaders improves perceptions of women's ability to lead and reduces negative gender stereotypes more generally (Beaman et al. 2009). Evidence from the same natural experiment also shows exposure to women leaders caused families to invest more in, and to have enhanced aspirations for, girls and teenage women (Beaman et al. 2012).

Globally, the proportion of women serving in parliaments is rising. However, a trend of improvement is almost completely absent in the Pacific. As Figure 1 shows, not only is the Pacific the region with the lowest proportion of female MPs, but it is also improving the slowest. Given the strong gender equity case for greater female representation and the associated development benefits, this is cause for concern.

Within the Pacific, the western Melanesian states of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have some of the lowest rates of female political representation in national parliaments. As of 2014, Vanuatu had no women MPs, there was just one woman MP in the Solomon Islands parliament, and three in Papua New Guinea.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion paper examines the case of one of these Western Melanesian countries: Solomon Islands. First, it details the history

and contemporary state of women's electoral contestation in the country. It then discusses the impediments women candidates face in competing in national elections. The paper argues the major impediments to women's electoral success are not primarily the product of gendered voter preferences, but, rather, lie in structural features, including access to finance and local powerbrokers. The paper's final section discusses what can be done to improve female representation arguing that, outside of gender quotas, the most likely means of enhancing woman candidate success rates in Solomon Islands is through strengthening networks that link women candidates to constituents.

While these arguments are based on the Solomon Islands case, the similarities between electoral politics in Solomon Islands and its two western Melanesian neighbours (as well as, to an extent, the rest of the Pacific) mean many of the lessons from Solomon Islands will be relevant more broadly.

## The Solomon Islands Electoral Context

Solomon Islands has had eight general elections since becoming an independent country in 1978. The Solomon Islands' unicameral parliament formally operates using the Westminster system: it has 50 MPs, presided over by a prime minister who chooses cabinet ministers from sitting MPs (Steeves 2001; Moore 2010).

MPs are elected using a single-member district plurality system in which voters cast one ballot upon which they indicate a single preference for their electorate's MP, and the candidate who wins the plurality of votes becomes the electorate's member (Steeves 2001). All Solomon Islands citizens over the age of 18 have suffrage and there are no legal restrictions on women voting or standing as MPs.

Elections are energetically contested, although generally free of large-scale electoral violence. Procedurally, recent elections appear to have also been free of major electoral fraud (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010; East West Center 2010; PIFS 2010). Vote buying is common, however (Dawe 2013), and at least some voters experience an element of coercion (Scales and Teakeni 2006; Wood 2014).

Candidate numbers are usually high and winning candidate vote shares low. The median

Figure 1: Trends by Region in Female Electoral Representation

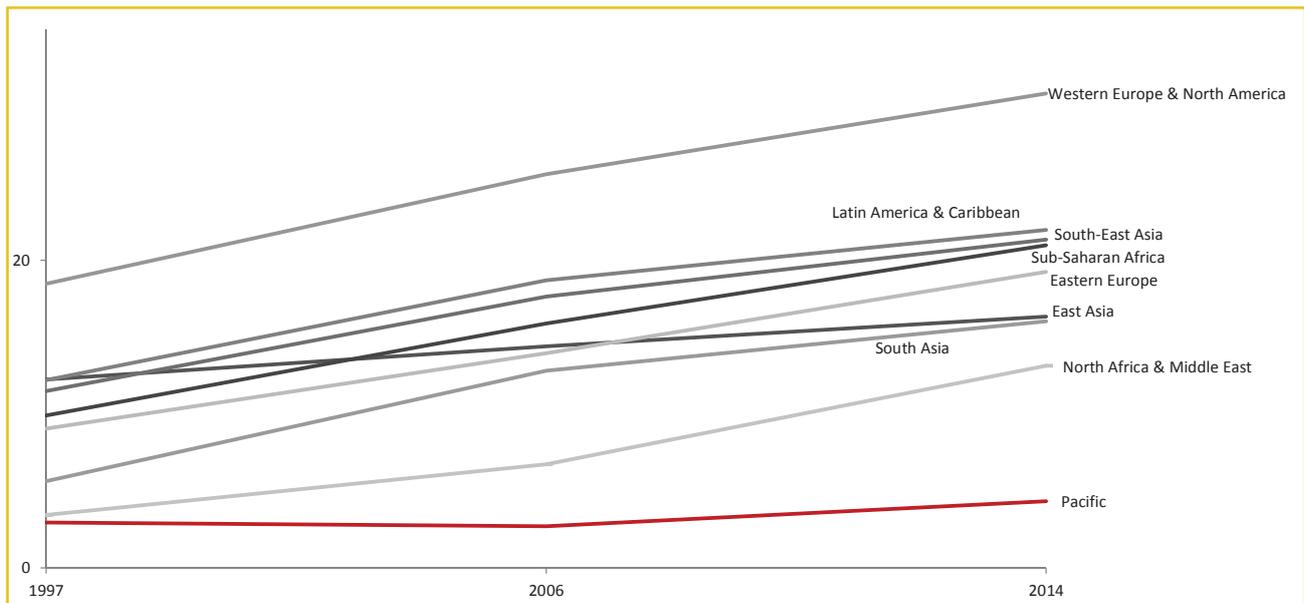


Chart notes: Figures taken from the International Parliamentary Union's website (see endnote 2 for the URL). Where countries have bicameral parliaments figures are averaged across both houses. The mapping of country and region is based on that used in the QoG Social Policy Dataset (Samanni et al. 2010). Following this coding schema, Australia and New Zealand are included in 'Western Europe & North America'. If the Middle East is separated from North Africa its performance worsens, although it still fares considerably better than the Pacific. Figures taken for 1997, 2006 and 2014, intervening years interpolated.

electorate (averaged over all elections since independence) has had seven candidates standing in it. The median winner vote share over the same time has been 33.6 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Tenure for candidates lucky enough to win is often short. Since independence, on average nearly half of incumbent MPs who have defended their seats have lost them in each general election.

While political parties exist in Solomon Islands, they are weak and lack ideological beliefs or identity bases around which to cohere (Dinnen 2008; Fraenkel 2008, 68). MPs change parties frequently. The most important function of parties is not as blocs of MPs with similar beliefs or policy preferences, but rather as vessels of patronage, which enable wealthy political actors to gain influence by distributing money to MPs (and aspiring MPs) in exchange for political loyalty. (For an example of a party providing money to candidates see Kama n.d., 5.) However, as the country's frequently shifting political allegiances suggest, financial patronage has not cohered into stable loyalty structures at the national level.

Electoral, weak political parties come coupled with voting that is almost exclusively based on candidate attributes, not party affiliation (Steeves 2011). Electoral politics in Solomon Islands are strongly clientelist, with voters typically voting for candidates they think most likely to provide personalised or highly localised benefits if elected, rather than on the basis of national issues or programmatic politics (Wood 2013).

### Women in Society in Solomon Islands

Although there is variation within the country (Dureau 1998), as a generalisation it is fair to state that the various cultural groups found throughout Solomon Islands are patriarchal in that they privilege men in a range of ways and afford men more power than they do to women (Morgan 2005; Whittington et al. 2006; Mcleod 2008). Leadership roles are usually given to men and men possess the most say in collective decision-making (Scales and Teakeni 2006; Whittington et al. 2006).<sup>3</sup>

These basic power imbalances are mirrored in women's social and economic lives. When surveyed

in 2009, 64 per cent of Solomon Islands women who had been in a relationship reported having been subject to physical or sexual violence at the hands of partners (SPC 2009, 3). At the time of the 2009 census, only 28 per cent of the of the 55,500 Solomon Islanders working in the formal economy were women (SINSO 2013, vi).<sup>4</sup> And 19 per cent of Solomon Island women aged over 12 had not completed any schooling, compared to 12 per cent of men (SINSO 2013, 85).

Despite such imbalances, it would be mistaken to conclude that Solomon Islands women are completely powerless or that they exert no agency amongst the country’s changing social structures. Women are increasingly working in senior civil service roles (Morgan 2005), and women are active participants in Solomon Islands’ civil society, involved in NGOs as well as in more traditional community women’s groups and church groups (Pollard 2003; Scales and Teakeni 2006). Nevertheless, in Solomon Islands, as in many countries, social context affords an unequal playing field to aspiring politicians — one which is, on average, tilted heavily against women candidates.

### Women’s Electoral Performance in Solomon Islands

Since independence, a total of 72 different women have stood in general elections.<sup>5</sup> Over the same period 1,696 men have stood. Figure 2 shows absolute numbers of women candidates (the right axis) and women candidates as a percentage of total candidates (the left axis) for each general election since independence.

As can be seen in the chart, until 2006 women candidate numbers had been slowly trending upwards, both in an absolute sense and as a proportion of total candidates. However, 2010 saw decreases.

Only two women have been elected to national government in post-independence Solomon Islands. In 1989, Hilda Kari won a by-election in the electorate currently known as East Central Guadalcanal (Frazer 1997; Pollard 2006; Whittington et al. 2006), and went on to win two general elections (1993 and 1997) in the seat, before losing in 2001.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, Vika Lusibaea — the Fijian-born wife of the former MP, Jimmy Lusibaea — won the by-election held in the North Malaita electorate after her husband was removed from

**Figure 2: Number of Women Candidates and Women Candidates As a Percentage of All Candidates**

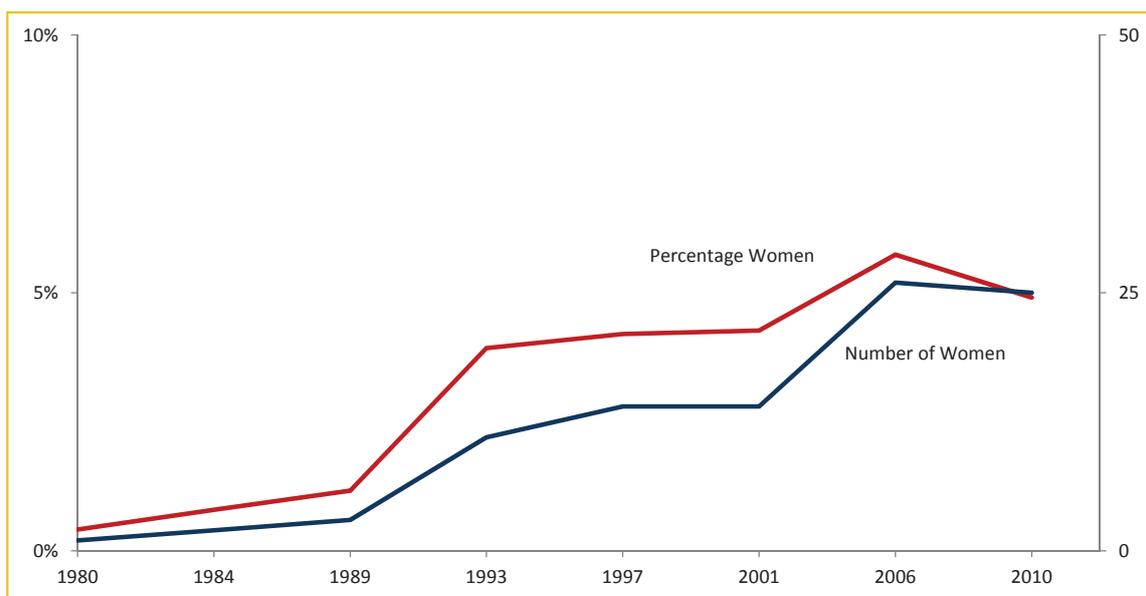
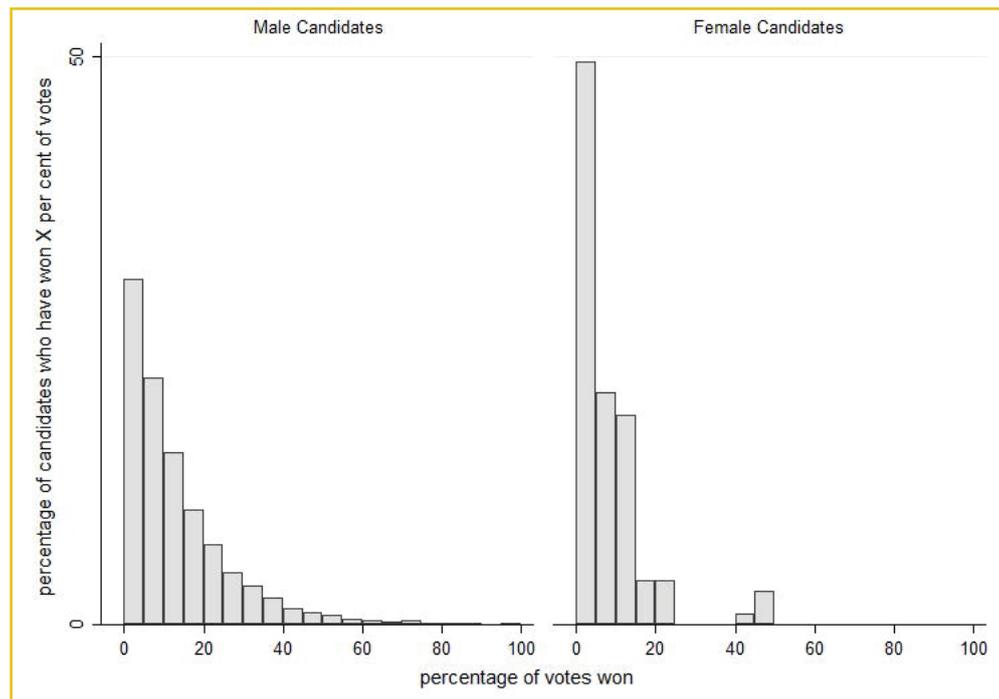


Chart notes: this chart and all subsequent charts are from the author’s results database (see endnote 3). A table of results for all women candidates can be accessed at: <<http://wp.me/aSqRs-zF>>.

Figure 3: Histogram of all Candidates' Vote Shares in Solomon Islands by Gender



office through a court challenge. While Kari won in East Central Guadalcanal through her community ties and status as a civil society leader, Lusibaea's victory was a different matter. Jimmy Lusibaea was a leader of a militant group during the civil conflict in Solomon Islands and Vika Lusibaea's support was drawn from almost identical polling stations to her husband. It is generally thought the foremost reason for her victory was her connection to him (see, for example, discussion in *Solomon Star* 2012).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the two winners, five women (including Hilda Kari in 2001) have finished second in national elections in Solomon Islands. One of them, Afu Billy, lost by only two votes in East Malaita constituency in 2001. However, while some women have polled well, the majority have not. Figure 3 below is a histogram, by gender, which plots on the Y axis the percentage of candidacies (as percentage of all candidacies for that gender since 1980) where the candidate in question won more than the vote share plotted on the X axis. (For example, the leftmost bar of the male chart shows that in approximately 30 per cent of all male candidacies since 1980 the candidate won between 0 and 5 per cent of the votes cast in that electorate in that election).

The histograms for both male and female candidates show that, regardless of gender, the majority of candidates who have stood in Solomon Islands elections since 1980 have won low vote shares, winning less than 10 per cent of the votes cast in their electorates. However, low vote shares are even more pronounced for women candidates. Almost 50 per cent of women candidates' attempts at contesting elections ended with less than 5 per cent of the vote. Slightly over 90 per cent of women candidacies ended with the candidate winning less than 20 per cent of the votes cast in their electorate.

To get a sense of trends across time, and in particular whether women candidates are becoming more competitive on average, a measure of candidate competitiveness for women candidates is plotted in Figure 4. Each individual point on the chart is a woman's candidacy. The X axis value reflects the year the candidacy occurred in. The Y axis is a measure, ranging from zero to one, which shows the number of votes won by the woman candidate in question as a proportion of the number of votes won by the winning candidate in that electorate in that election. A score of one means the woman candidate won. In

those instances where a woman won, her name is used to label her data point. Data are included for all general elections and those by-elections for which data exist (a large subset of all by-elections, although data for Kari's first win in 1989 are missing). The data point in 2001 that appears to have a value of one is Afu Billy's two-vote loss. The downward sloping black line on the chart is an ordinary least-squares fitted trend line for female candidate competitiveness. The dashed grey line is a similarly fitted line calculated for male candidates, included for reference.

As is suggested by the downward slope of the trend line for female candidates, women candidates are on average, if anything, becoming less competitive over time in national elections in Solomon Islands. It would be a mistake to put too much weight on the downwards trend, as the dashed grey line suggests a very similar trend is also present for male candidates, and for both men and women trends are driven, for the most part, by high numbers of particularly uncompetitive candidates in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the chart does not tell an encouraging story for those who hope to see increases in the number of women MPs in Solomon Islands.

### Impediments to Women's Electoral Success

Given Solomon Islands has had so few MPs and given women candidates continue to poll poorly, a key question is obviously 'why?' What is preventing women candidates from performing better? Writing on the constraints faced globally by women candidates, Krook and Norris (2014, 4) detail a commonly used sequential model of stages in the candidacy process and discuss it with regards to the challenges faced by women:

The political recruitment process is most commonly conceptualized as a sequential model: (1) those eligible to run for office; (2) those who aspire to run for office; (3) those nominated [via a party] to run for office; (4) those elected to office. If no mechanisms of distortion are at work, the characteristics of individuals at each of these stages should be similar ... . In women in politics research,

this model has given rise to debates as to whether women's under-representation stems primarily from gender differences in ambition that cause fewer women than men to consider running for political office, biases in the recruitment practices of gatekeepers that lead them to select fewer female candidates than male candidates, or prejudices on the part of voters who prefer to elect men over women.

The basic model of the candidacy process does not fit the Solomon Islands case well. As there are no formal legal impediments to women running for office in Solomon Islands, point (1) is not relevant. Similarly, as parties are very weak in Solomon Islands and as most candidates stand independently of political parties, point (3) is also of limited relevance. However, the broader concept of a sequence of potential barriers provides a useful tool for thinking about women candidate performance in Solomon Islands. And Krook and Norris's subsequent taxonomy of impediments covered in debates in women in politics research adds considerably to this.

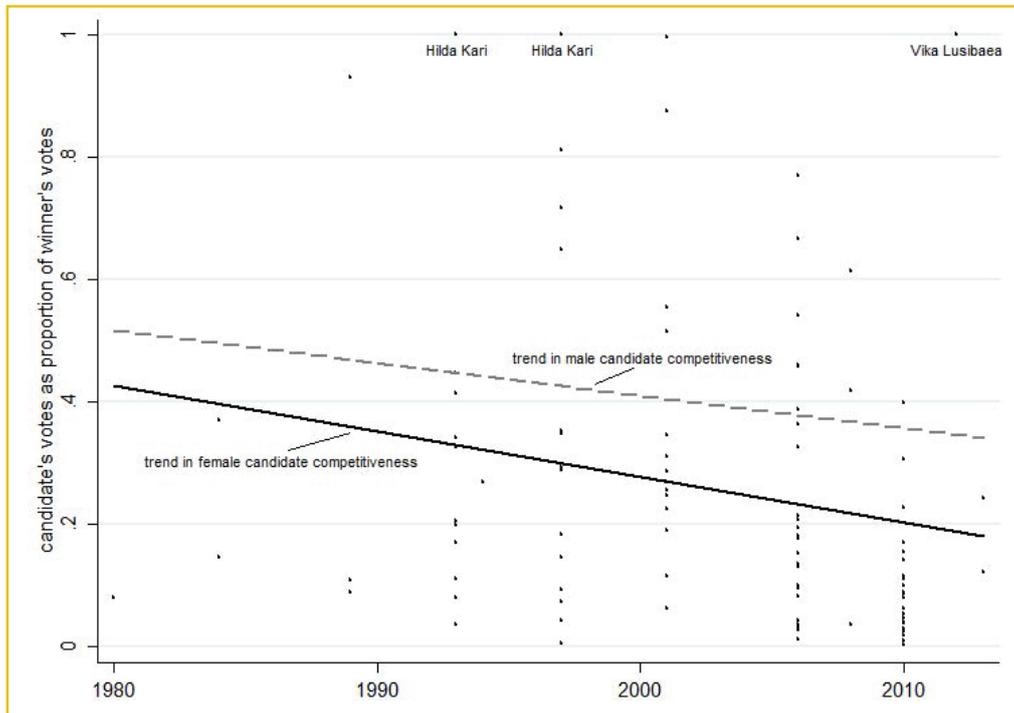
In this section, I borrow from their taxonomy in the process of creating a sequential model adapted to the Solomons context. In my modified model, I identify and discuss the following sequence of potential barriers:

1. Barriers to do with women's aspirations and beliefs about standing as candidates
2. Barriers to do with gender prejudiced voter preferences
3. More structural impediments including: the indirect impact of gender norms on the evaluation of candidates, gendered imbalances in access to money for campaigning, and gendered access to gatekeepers in the form of local vote brokers.

### Aspirations and Deciding to Stand

In any country where women possess the legal right to stand in elections, the first potential impediment to women becoming MPs comes in the form of social or psychological barriers that prevent women from choosing to attempt to enter politics. Given only slightly over four per cent of all the individuals

**Figure 4: Competitiveness of Women Candidates in Solomon Islands Elections Over Time**



who have contested elections in Solomon Islands since 1980 have been women, barriers at this level are clearly important.

When thinking about what might prevent women candidates from deciding to stand, it is useful to distinguish between whether aspirations are constrained by women's beliefs about whether they *should* be MPs, or whether aspirations are constrained by women's beliefs about whether they *could* be MPs.

Constraints at the level of 'should' are normative constraints associated with gendered norms about the appropriate role of a woman in society. If a cultural group strongly proscribes women from adopting leadership roles, and if these norms are internalised by women, it is possible that women might not stand as MPs because they believe doing so is ethically wrong. Even if they do not subscribe to such norms themselves, women in a society where female candidacies are viewed as wrong still might decide not to contest elections for fear of community opprobrium.

Given the patriarchal nature of Solomon Islands society discussed above, such normative impediments appear a likely explanation of

women's under-representation as candidates.

However, available evidence suggests they are not as important as might be anticipated. In particular, data from the annual People's Survey, which has been conducted by the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands since 2007, suggest social proscriptions against women standing as candidates are not so strong as to be able to explain a significant proportion of the gap in male and female candidate numbers. McMurray (2011, 6–8) summarises survey responses from the years 2007–10 to the question 'Should there be women MPs in parliament?' Responses to this question, disaggregated by gender, are shown in Table 1.

As might be expected, in both instances a higher proportion of women gave responses indicative of support for female MPs (the difference between men and women is statistically significant at the one per cent level for every year except 2007), but the responses of a significant majority of both men and women are favourable. If they can be taken at face value, such data stand at odds with a situation where women choose not to stand in elections in Solomon Islands because doing so violates social norms.

**Table 1: Percentage of Respondents Who Thought There Should be Women MPs**

	2007	2008	2009	2010
Men	76.7	81.4	81.9	79.6
Women	77.5	90.5	85.9	85.8
n	5,154	4,304	5,035	4,921

There is one potential methodological reason why People's Survey data might not be able to be taken at face value. This is the issue of social desirability bias — respondents giving responses they think interviewers want to hear. Social desirability bias is a well-documented issue in survey research (for a discussion of the problem, see Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012), and were it present in this instance it could mean the results above fail to fully reflect the extent to which women's candidacies violate social norms. Moreover, there is some qualitative evidence suggesting cultural proscriptions against women standing are present, at least to an extent. For example, when interviewed by the *Solomon Star*, Catherine Pule, a candidate in the 2010 election, stated that: 'during my campaign some men told me that it's against our custom and the church for a woman to be in parliament' (Maka'a 2010, 13). And women community members whom I interviewed in Small Malaita constituency told of how local custom was appealed to in preventing a woman candidate, Rose Paohu, from campaigning in their village in 2006.

However, it is unlikely that social desirability bias would skew responses to the People's Survey so dramatically as to misrepresent a situation where most Solomon Islanders think women should not stand in elections as one where they are actually supportive of female MPs. People's Survey enumerators are themselves Solomon Islanders, which ought to lead to the norms steering peoples' answers to reflect the norms of Solomon Islands society, making the answers to the questions summarised in Table 1 genuinely representative. And in the case of the experiences of women candidates discussed above, while they show attempts to use gender norms to oppose the

candidates in question, suggesting such norms exist to some extent, they are not evidence the norms are actually strong enough to prevent women from standing; Pule still stood, and the women interviewees who told me about the Paohu case clearly thought the norms being drawn upon were unfair. Moreover, the majority of candidates (both men and women) who stand in Solomon Islands elections are educated urban elites (Corbett and Wood 2013), and if any subset of the population is least likely to have internalised norms associated with tradition it is this group. For all of these reasons it does not appear that, on their own, culturally born proscriptions on women standing as candidates in Solomon Islands are sufficient to explain a major share of the gender gap in candidate numbers.<sup>9</sup>

A more plausible explanation of low numbers of women candidates in Solomon Islands stems not from whether women think they *should* stand, but whether they think they *could* stand. Or, more specifically, whether they could stand successfully.

Assuming candidates are wary of futile runs (a reasonable assumption given election campaigns are expensive), a likely explanation for low numbers of women candidates is that women do not stand because they view their chances of winning as low. This likely occurs through a form of demonstration effect (by virtue of the fact so few women have won thus far, potential candidates conclude their chances of winning are low) and also because women lack financial and other resources they know to be necessary for victory. While quantitative data are not available to systematically test women's perceptions of their chances of winning, qualitative data on candidate experiences make it clear that at least some potential candidates do factor such challenges into their decision to stand or not. Billy, for example, (2002, 58) describes her initial incredulous reaction to suggestions she stand, and does so in a way which suggests she thought her chances of winning were slight.

### Voter Preferences and Voter Prejudices

Fewer women stand in Solomon Islands elections than men, but this fact alone is not sufficient to explain the low numbers of women MPs in

Solomon Islands. Of the 2,556 male candidacies in general elections since 1980, 358 (14 per cent) have been successful. Of the 96 female candidacies in general elections since 1980, two (2.1 per cent) have been successful.<sup>10</sup> Fewer women stand, but those women who do stand are also substantially less likely to win, suggesting something is happening in the course of campaigns to impede women candidates.

The most obvious explanation of women candidates' poor performance in Solomon Islands elections is a form of voter prejudice, in which patriarchal culture comes coupled with voters' (or a substantial majority of them at least) beliefs that men are better suited to political power than women. Such beliefs would lead directly to gendered voter preferences and a situation where most voters prefer to vote for male candidates simply because they are male.

Even if the gender norms of Solomons' society are not strong enough to prevent women from standing they could still be strong enough to steer voters away from voting for them. It is clear from various published accounts of women candidates' experiences that women candidates are exposed to sexism from rival candidates and their supporters while campaigning (Billy 2002; Whittington et al. 2006; Maka'a 2010; Kama n.d.). And if such sexism comes coupled with a strong gender bias in the preferences of the average voter, this would provide a plausible explanation for the poor performance of women candidates.

However, it is not inevitable that sexist rhetoric used by political opponents necessarily has a base in the beliefs of the typical voter. While Helen Clark was prime minister of New Zealand, some of her political opponents resorted to attacks based on her gender. Yet these did not appear to resonate with the large proportion of the New Zealand voting public who voted for her party in successive elections. And in the Solomon Islands case, the significant proportion of survey respondents who replied they thought there should be women MPs — summarised above in Table 1 — suggests that in an abstract sense Solomon Islands voters are not opposed to women MPs. Table 2 summarises responses to another People's Survey question:

**Table 2: Percentage of Respondents Who Said They Would 'Vote For a Good Woman Candidate'**

	2007	2008	2009
<i>Men</i>	86.0	80.3	81.1
<i>Women</i>	91.7	91.9	86.0
<i>n</i>	5,154	4,304	5,035

whether the survey respondent would themselves vote for a 'Good woman candidate' (a question asked in 2007, 2008 and 2009; data are from McMurray 2011, 7).

The high proportion of respondents who said they would vote for a 'good woman' candidate suggests voter preferences for male political representatives over women are not the primary impediment to female electoral success in Solomon Islands. Of course, once again, social desirability bias could be causing survey respondents to understate their aversion to voting for women. However, as discussed above, the effect is likely minimised through the use of survey enumerators from Solomon Islands.

Moreover, while many women candidates reported at least some sexism whilst campaigning, little in the data available from my own interviews with candidates and voters, and women candidates' discussions of their candidacies in other sources (Billy 2002; Maka'a 2010), suggests that women candidates themselves felt like they suffered significant disadvantage as a direct result of voters not wanting to vote for women per se. While women candidates give a range of explanations for their losses, and while gender played an important indirect role in these, in recent years they have not normally ascribed their losses directly to voters being unwilling to vote for women candidates under any circumstances. Summarising her own qualitative work, Kama (n.d., 9), who interviewed women around Solomon Islands in the wake of the 2010 elections, concluded that culturally mandated prejudices against women candidates were 'diminishing' and that 'factor[s] other than cultural attitudes' were thought by her interviewees to be more significant barriers. These facts, combined with the range of survey data suggesting Solomon

Islands voters are not opposed to women MPs or voting for a woman candidate, everything else being equal, suggest explanations for the poor performance of women candidates lie elsewhere.

### Structural Impediments

Yet everything else is not equal, and, importantly, the question asked in the People's Survey about voting for a woman was asked in the abstract: a hypothetical question about candidates, devoid of information on any other features that might be important in winning voter allegiance. As such, it was a question at least one degree removed from the realities of campaigning in Solomon Islands, and from the social and material structures of power which are crucial in electoral success. There are three key ways in which more structural impediments are decisive in preventing women candidates from winning.

The first of these is the role of gendered norms of behaviour in shaping how actual (as opposed to hypothetical) women candidates are appraised. As in many societies, in Solomon Islands women are often held to different standards of behaviour than men — something used by male candidates and their campaign teams, apparently to good effect. While gender norms may not be enough on their own to stop women from standing, or enough to stop most voters for voting for hypothetical female candidates, they do appear sufficient to give considerable ammunition to those who seek to paint women candidates as unworthy of holding office. Afu Billy (2002, 60) recounts being asked repeatedly on the campaign trail how often she had been married, with questions appearing intended to suggest she was not a moral woman. It is not unheard of for male candidates to be subjected to similar attacks on their character, yet women candidates appear to suffer such attacks considerably more.

The second structural impediment relates to access to material resources. As they choose who to vote for, voters in Solomon Islands primarily appraise candidates with respect to their likelihood of delivering personalised assistance (Wood 2013). One major factor that contributes to voters' calculations in this is candidates' track records in

helping in the past (Wood 2014). 'Helping' means material assistance, and while this need not always be costly to provide, having access to money makes it easier. Also, vote buying is common (and costly) in Solomon Islands (Dawea 2013; Wood 2014). Indeed, some ability to vote buy appears necessary in many electorates simply to convince voters one's candidacy is credible.

Access to material resources for campaigning is a major impediment faced by women candidates (Scales and Teakeni 2006; Kama n.d.). Seven out of the nine women candidates interviewed by Maka'a (2010) highlighted material aspects of campaigning amongst the challenges they faced. One candidate, Rhoda Sikilabu, for example, stated (Maka'a 2010, 11) that:

The barrier I faced in the last election was [a] lack of money because people go for material things. One of the challenge (sic) was a lot of untrue stories were made against me, including I don't have the money to pay voters.

While a number of male candidates in 2010 owned logging firms or received support from logging companies, none of the women who stood in 2010 appear to have had access to these sorts of resources (Kama n.d.). What is more, wealthy patrons in Solomon Islands tend foremost to back candidates they think likely to win, and because women so rarely win it is harder for female candidates to elicit such patronage. Women candidates are not completely unable to raise funding: Kama (n.d.) describes women candidates receiving some funding from one of the political parties and Billy (2002) talks of fundraising, but, in both of these instances, the amounts involved were much smaller than the amounts typically spent by men in campaigns.

Inequalities in access to private funding are enhanced by constituency development funds — large quantities of state funding that incumbent MPs are given to spend in their electorates (Fraenkel 2011). While, as the high incumbent turnover rate suggests, such funds do not guarantee re-election, they still offer significant material advantage to sitting MPs. And in a country where almost none of these MPs have been women, this is a further gender imbalance.

The third structural impediment faced by women candidates stems from the crucial role played by local interlocutors in winning candidates votes. Such brokers (to use the terminology of Stokes et al. 2013) are not only a Solomon Islands phenomena, but have been found in clientelist politics throughout the world. In Solomons, as elsewhere, they are recruited by candidates and tasked with winning them votes, which they subsequently win through purchase, persuasion or coercion. In the Solomons case, the most effective brokers are usually local community leaders, heads of families and clans, and sometimes church group leaders. The *quid pro quo* for the votes they win is either money paid up front or resources given after the candidate in question wins office (assuming they win office) (Wood 2014).

Obtaining influential, loyal brokers is a significant challenge for most candidates, but it is a particular challenge for women. There are several reasons why. The first being that money is often required to purchase brokers' support (Scales and Teakeni 2006; Wood 2014) and, as already discussed, money tends to be a resource women candidates possess less of. Also important is that most influential local leaders, be they heads of families, clans, villages or churches, are male (Scales and Teakeni 2006), and patriarchal local leadership comes coupled with brokers' reluctance to work for women candidates. This is not an insurmountable obstacle: one of the clear strengths of Afu Billy's 2001 campaign (Billy 2002) was a strong network of supporters, many of whom appear to have been gained through family ties (she was from a large well-regarded family associated with the dominant church in the electorate). However, such ready-made networks are not automatically available to women candidates, and more typical was the situation of Judy Barty, a candidate who stood in the Malaitan Electorate of Aoke/Langalanga in 2010. During my fieldwork throughout this electorate, I found that Barty had no influential male brokers in the villages I visited. In one large village, I interviewed her broker who was an influential woman in the village but who had not been able to win votes in significant numbers (Barty won just three votes in the village

and won only 1.4 per cent of the votes cast in the electorate).

Combined, these three structural impediments serve as major hurdles to any woman candidate. While they are not strictly a product of a strong gender bias on behalf of Solomon Islands voters themselves, they do reflect the challenges that come with a gendered society — challenges which mean most women candidates are appraised in different ways, and also deprived of key social and material resources when they choose to stand in Solomon Islands elections.

### Helping Women Win

Taken together, the desire for more women MPs, the small number of women MPs in Solomon Islands to date, and the fact women candidates are not, on average, coming any closer to winning, suggest an obvious need to raise both numbers of women candidates and their chances of success.

Solomon Islanders themselves will be crucial in bringing about such increases. Yet, in this section — as I discuss potential mechanisms for increasing numbers of women MPs — I frame comments primarily for international actors, who, as external agents in possession of funding, have a particular need for research-based knowledge. This is the case because, while international actors have useful resources, they face the challenges that inevitably come with trying to understand the complexities of another country's political economy, as well as needing to engage while being cognisant of potential financial and political risks.

I start by looking at the core focus of most external efforts thus far: candidate training and gender quota rules. I then suggest additional approaches which could complement these.

### Candidate Training

Candidate training has formed the major component of donor engagement in attempts to increase women's political representation in Solomon Islands (Scales and Teakeni 2006; Kama n.d.). The typical candidate training has involved international trainers, with some local assistance, and the lessons taught have been a mix of campaign universals with some tailoring to context (see, for

example, Centre for Democratic Institutions 2010). Appraising training offered in advance of the 2010 election Kama (n.d., 13) notes it was:

[C]onsidered not very equipping for candidates to apply as campaign tools at community level. The trained skills and tools were not contextualized and were not well grasped by ... candidates and their campaign managers.

Confirming Kama's claim, available data do not suggest training to date has afforded women candidates discernable electoral advantages. Figure 5 compares the mean vote share of two sub-groups of the women candidates who stood in the 2010 election: those who received candidate training at a 2010 workshop run by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and those who did not (11 women received training and 14 did not).<sup>11</sup>

Figure 5 shows that, far from performing better, those women who attended the training event actually polled, on average, slightly worse than those who did not. However, care should be taken not to read too much into this finding. First, the difference was small and, as the 95 per cent confidence intervals plotted on the chart suggest, not statistically significant.

Second, while the woman who won the highest vote share in 2010, Rhoda Sikilabu, did not attend the 2010 training, she did attend a similar event in Canberra in 2009, and if she is coded as trained the average vote share of trained candidates becomes slightly higher than that of non-trained candidates, although once again the difference is not statistically significant.

Third, and most importantly, because training was not randomly assigned across women candidates it is impossible to estimate the true impact of training with any degree of certainty owing to issues of selection. Quite possibly, only less competitive candidates decided to attend the training session. If this has occurred, even though trained candidates polled more poorly than untrained, it may still have been the case that training helped: without it candidates may have fared even worse still.

Training may well, therefore, have had some worth. Nevertheless, the chart is suggestive as to its

potential — in its current form and unaccompanied by other measures — as a means of raising numbers of woman MPs. The average trained candidate in 2010 received three per cent of the votes cast in their electorate, a long way short of what was required to win.

In part, the problem with training may stem, as is suggested by Kama's comments, from a program not well designed for local context. However, there are also more fundamental issues with the training model, likely to limit the effects of any form of training offered. Not only are some of the impediments faced by female candidates — such as a lack of funding — not issues easily addressed through training, but also some of the important arts of electoral success (in particular vote buying) are not skills that can feasibly be taught by aid-funded external actors.

For these reasons, training on its own is not likely to substantially increase the number of woman MPs in Solomon Islands. This does not mean training should be abandoned: well-designed candidate training likely has a role to play, and existing efforts to tailor training to context should be continued. Such efforts should look both at the content of training — a greater focus, for example, on the network aspects of campaigning, as discussed below — and also its form. Potentially, to give one example, existing election-year workshops could be augmented with ongoing mentoring over much longer timeframes offered to potentially strong candidates. Such changes may increase the efficacy of training; although, even with these sorts of changes, it is unlikely that, on its own, training will be sufficient to significantly increase numbers of women MPs.

### Quotas for Women MPs

Legal quotas — in which a certain degree of female representation is mandated, usually either as a number of women candidates parties must stand, or as a number of MPs in parliament who must be women — have been shown to be an efficacious means of increasing female representation over short timeframes (UN DESA 2010; McCann 2013) and have been enacted in one form or another by over 90 countries worldwide (UN DESA 2010,

**Figure 5: Average Candidate Performance Comparing Trained Candidates with Non-Trained**



116). Quotas are not without controversy (Bacchi 2013), but they clearly deliver results (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Pande and Ford 2011).

Reflecting the appeal of some form of quota approach, both domestic reformers and donors have been advocating a system of reserved seats in Solomon Islands, which (as the proposal is typically put) would see 10 additional seats (one for each province plus Honiara) allocated to women, who would be elected in a parallel electoral process, coupled with the general election (Pacific Women in Politics n.d.). The proposed scheme has ostensibly been supported by at least two of the last three governments the country has had, yet underlying political will for change among sitting MPs appears to be much lower than intermittent political rhetoric would suggest, and the legislation required to enact the proposal has not yet made it to the floor of parliament, nor does it appear likely to in the short to medium term.

The reasons for this can be found in the country's political economy. As might be expected in a country with such weak political parties, governing coalitions in Solomon Islands are fragile and require considerable work from prime ministers to hold together. For most prime ministers, doing this becomes the central priority of their tenure, which makes expending political capital to pass legislation something they are likely to do only if there are strong incentives to act. Reward at the ballot box could be one such

incentive, yet, as voters do not vote along party lines, there is little chance a prime minister will see electoral rewards for passing such policy in the form of women voters voting for his party in greater numbers. Likewise, the main sources of money for political patronage in Solomon Islands are representatives of industries such as the logging industry who are unlikely to have any reason for tying funding to reform. And aid donors, who also have money and are broadly in favour of reform, are constrained in their ability to intervene, in particular because they need to be wary of being seen to meddle too heavily in the domestic political processes of another country. But being constrained is not the same as having no power whatsoever, and donors have played an important role in at least keeping the issue of quotas on the table. Yet as outside actors they are not a decisive factor, able to offer sufficient incentive to see legislation passed.

The one final, potentially potent, force for quotas is Solomon Islands women themselves, and women's groups have pressed for such reform. Yet in terms of active members, such groups are elite-based, and struggle to gain political leverage amongst a system where electoral success, and therefore the foremost concerns of most MPs, revolve around delivering material goods to supporters in rural constituencies.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, all these factors mean there is little pushing legislators to pass quota law, and so it languishes.

### Funding

One obvious means of assisting women candidates would be to give them money. While this appears at first blush to be precisely the sort of external assistance that would be too politically sensitive to be feasible, there are examples of donors doing this in other parts of the world (for example, UNDP 2007, 21). And given the role money plays in electoral politics in Solomon Islands, coupled with the fact most women candidates want for sufficient amounts of it, a successful funding program could have a worthwhile impact on women's electoral fortunes. Plausibly, it could be run by a multilateral donor, which might defuse some of the risk of one country being accused of intervening in the political affairs of another.

However, even with such care, there are likely major limitations to what donors can achieve by funding female candidates in Solomon Islands. First, the absence of meaningful parties in Solomon Islands means that the safest, least politically contentious funding option — making money available to all parties in proportion to the number of woman MPs they stand — is not feasible.<sup>13</sup> Second, the risk of abuse — women standing simply to get money and then not campaigning — would be high (and of particular concern to donors who need to dispense funding confident that it is not being misappropriated). And, third, many candidates in Solomon Islands elections spend considerably more than official campaign finance limits allow. They can do this as enforcement mechanisms are weak, but obviously donors could not give assistance in quantities that violate the law of the land. And yet if they do not, in an environment where many major candidates spend over the official limit, they may not be giving sufficient funding to dramatically improve women candidates' chances.

Yet, for all these constraints, some donor work in the broad area of funding may be possible. At the very least, donors can ask that candidate training exercises focus on the importance of money and the realities of obtaining funding. Donors could also look at providing seeding funding for locally run groups that then sought more money on behalf of women candidates as has been done in other countries (for a discussion of these kinds of approaches in practice see: UNDP 2007, 21, which discusses their use by donors in Bahrain). Also, plausibly, scheme administrators could come up with some form of merit based funding, based on track records of sustained community service, which might help target funding to more feasible candidates, while at the same time avoiding opportunistic candidacies aimed simply at getting money.

### Networks

Although voters in Solomon Islands typically vote in search of material assistance, and although vote buying often plays an important role in electoral contests, cash — particularly cash spent on the campaign trail — is rarely the sole determinant

of an electoral race. Voters are aware that a trustworthy MP who works in their interests over a four-year term can deliver more than is on offer in most attempts to purchase votes at campaign time. And while money helps, most candidates who do well do so for other reasons in addition to resources. In particular, my own interviews with voters and candidates (see Wood 2014, Ch.8), as well as People's Survey data (which I present in Wood 2013, 1) suggest that voters will often appraise candidates on their long-term track-record of helpfulness. Voters also factor in shared ethnic ties and similar relational ties (church ties, clan ties and ties through marriage) when they decide which candidate is most likely to help if they win (Corbett and Wood 2013).

These factors all appear to have played some role in the campaigns of the women candidates who have performed best in recent elections. Afu Billy benefited significantly from family ties and her family's church connections (Billy 2002), while Hilda Kari also had strong community ties. In Gao/Bugotu constituency, interviewees stressed that Rhoda Sikilabu performed as well as she did (she won the highest vote share of any woman candidate standing in 2010, running second against a very popular incumbent) owing to strong community ties, leadership of the local church women's association, and having been seen to have served the constituency well as a member of the Isabel provincial parliament. In Poro, the polling station where she won the most votes, she benefited (according to villagers I interviewed) from having cultivated ties to strong local advocates.

In terms of translating these lessons into improved future outcomes, the importance of these sorts of ties and connections should be emphasised in candidate training. In addition to this, the importance of gaining a reputation as someone who has helped constituents (since long before the electoral cycle) also suggests training itself should be geared to helping women cultivate support and connections over long timeframes and not just focus on the immediate election at hand.

The importance of networks and reputation is also an area where outside actors could seek to assist possible woman candidates more materially.

Funding could strengthen networks such as women's church associations and other local civil society groups, and elevate the profile of key women working in these. This would not be a short-term strategy, but it has the potential to speak to the way voters in Solomon Islands make their choices, while being less problematic than giving candidates money, and less reliant on sitting MPs than enacting quota legislation.

## Conclusion

Careful study of the Solomon Islands case offers insight both for scholars studying the intersection of gender and politics, and for practitioners seeking to increase numbers of women MPs in Solomon Islands.

For those whose interests are academic there are two key takeaway points:

First, standard sequential models of candidate entry, selection and competition do not fit well with a context in which formal features of the electoral process, such as candidate eligibility rules and party selection systems, play little role in determining numbers of woman MPs. However, a modified model still based on sequence of barriers to women succeeding as candidates has considerable utility in elucidating the ways in which women are impeded in electoral contests.

Second, although Solomon Islands society is patriarchal, the main mechanism through which this translates to fewer women MPs is not the most obvious one in which voters simply prefer having male leaders. Rather, two of the major impediments are structural: access to resources and the support of local brokers. These are still gendered issues — the products of a patriarchal society — yet they are different issues to voters simply preferring men. The third major impediment — women candidates being held to different standards — does reflect a more sociological form of gendered power imbalance. Although, once again, the issue is still more structural than it would be if it were simply a problem of gender-biased voter preferences, stemming instead from socially mandated norms of appropriate conduct, which reflect broader gender inequities.

For the practitioner, the key point is simply that training — the primary means used to date in

attempting to get women into power — is unlikely to achieve this, although it can still be of some use, particularly if tailored carefully to local context. At the same time, the mechanism most likely to get women into parliament — gender quotas — appears unlikely to be enacted anytime soon, owing to matters of political economy. However, more positively, the experiences of women candidates who have polled well do suggest at least one additional strategy for promoting women's success: working over longer timeframes to help strengthen networks that link prominent women to constituencies, and helping aspiring women candidates make use of such networks as a means of garnering a reputation as a candidate who can help and who is worth voting for.

## Author Notes

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### Endnotes

- 1 Data come from the International Parliamentary Union's Database, and can be found online at: <<http://ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>>.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, all election results data come from the author's Solomon Islands election results database. This database spans elections from 1967 to the present, and was compiled between 2010 and 2013 using results obtained from the electoral commission, Government Gazettes from the Solomon Islands Parliament Library, and newspaper records of results collected by Jon Fraenkel and Ian Frazer. A copy of the dataset can be obtained by email request to the author.
- 3 Matrilineal systems of land inheritance in parts of the country arguably afford women increased power where they are present; and a few women serve as community leaders/chiefs in parts of Isabel and Western provinces (Scales and Teakeni 2006).
- 4 The number of Solomon Islanders working in the formal sector was calculated by adding together the categories 'Employer', 'Employee' and 'Self-employed'.
- 5 This number increases to 77 if by-elections (for which data are available) are included. If pre-independence elections are included it increases to 79. Some women have stood more than once; there have been a total of 96 women candidacies (that is, individual attempts by women) in general elections since independence.
- 6 The cited authors all have Kari winning in a by-election, although I could not find any results data for the by-election in question and it is possible that when Waeta Ben, who Kari ran second to in 1989,

resigned his seat to become governor general, as second place getter she was automatically promoted to parliament.

- 7 The correlation between the number of votes Jimmy Lusibaea won at each individual polling station in the electorate in 2010 and the number of votes Vika Lusibaea won is 0.81.
- 8 When a locally weighted regression fitted trend line is added for women candidates to capture trends over shorter time periods, it shows a trend of increased competitiveness until 1997, with a subsequent trend of decreased competitiveness. A trend that becomes most pronounced between 2006 and 2010. If Vika Lusibaea, a high leverage outlier, is excluded from the analysis, the downward slope of the OLS fitted line for women steepens slightly, but the change is not dramatic.
- 9 Note that this is not the same as arguing that cultural norms do not impede those candidates who do stand. This possibility is discussed at length in a subsequent section.
- 10 My calculations here are for general elections because I possess a full dataset of these results, while I am missing some by election data. If available by-elections are included, and Kari's 1989 by-election is also added to the calculations, I estimate this percentage increases to just over three per cent.
- 11 As far as I am aware this was the only major candidate training event held in the immediate lead up to the 2010 elections in Solomon Islands. Results data in the chart come from the author's election results database. Data on training attendance were provided by CDI.
- 12 Another possible form of electoral change which could plausibly bring increased numbers of women would be a shift from a first past the post electoral system to some alternate model. However, not only does this change appear unlikely in the near future for many of the same reasons of political economy described above, but the two most likely alternative systems, those used in Vanuatu (multi-member constituencies) and Papua New Guinea (limited preferential voting), have come coupled with low numbers of women MPs, which suggests reform in this area would seem to offer little even if it did occur.
- 13 In Papua New Guinea, a government run scheme exists through which in theory reimburses the costs of women candidates who poll well. This is done via the candidates' parties. Yet despite Papua New Guinea having somewhat stronger political parties than Solomon Islands, this scheme appears to be plagued by operational issues and does not appear to be effective. Also, the Solomon Islands' 'Political Parties Integrity Bill 2014' which was in the process of being passed as this paper was written contains (as of the time of writing) a clause stipulating that 10 percent of all candidates stood by any political party must be women. However, the subsequent clause in the act effectively nullifies this requirement. The bill also stipulates a party shall be granted \$10,000SBD for every woman MP who is a member. However, this amount is too small to be a meaningful incentive to parties.



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