

In this paper we focus on an important aspect of preliminary findings from two research projects conducted in Papua New Guinea. The preliminary findings note the significance of women's status as mothers and the ways in which women draw on this role to construct new paths for themselves in the political and economic spheres.

Background and Context

The 2012 election in Papua New Guinea saw an unprecedented level of support for women's political participation. Various international, government and non-government agencies offered information and advice to prospective women candidates in the hope of an increased number of women representatives in parliament. This support is underpinned by global discourses about, and evidence of, the benefits of women's political and economic participation. Yet, as Haley and Zubrinich (2012) note in their discussion of the Pacific context:

Despite concerted donor efforts, especially in the area of candidate training (which has focused on improving individual women's capacity to run for parliament) and in support for the introduction of temporary special measures, the growth in women's representation has been much slower in the Pacific than in other developing regions, even though the number of women holding senior positions in other sectors is growing (Liki 2010; Fraenkel 2006, 2009). In some Pacific countries women's representation has in fact diminished.

In this brief note, we seek to contribute to discussion about the factors that promote success among female political candidates in the Pacific. We also consider the conditions that support women's economic empowerment. By doing so, we aim to highlight an overlooked aspect of women's identity that *is* important for voters and those who support women's increased involvement in

economic and political activities: namely, their role as mothers.

Mothers of All

In western liberal democracies, the fact that women are mothers has tended to be seen as irrelevant or marginal when it comes to considering and promoting their involvement in politics. However, this situation does not apply in Papua New Guinea, not least because feminism has never really gained traction in this context. Here, it is primarily through being 'good' wives, mothers and household managers that women become valued. This situation can leave young women and those who do not become wives and mothers with limited options for gaining respect and a voice, while potentially also constraining the opportunities for women to participate in other spheres (Cummings 2013).

However, in the current context of Papua New Guinea, there is emerging evidence that women's roles as mothers are relevant beyond the home. As our respective research shows, women (and others) are drawing precisely on their capacities as mothers and household managers to extend their influence in the economic and political spheres.

Research Findings: Women's Economic and Political Participation

In 2012 and 2013, Ceridwen conducted interviews with women in Eastern Highlands Province. Analysis of this material suggests that women who have proved they are 'good' wives and mothers are well positioned to gain the support of their husbands for independent economic ventures. Other women developing successful businesses are widows and divorcees; women in these categories tend to rely on the support of their families, especially their sons. In both cases, the families of these entrepreneurial women sanction their activities on the basis that they are good wives, mothers and household managers. These skills are often related to more 'traditional' tasks performed by women, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Women are better managers, we are better managers. ... If you look at the women in the village, they go into their gardens to do their gardening, they'll be going with water containers in their bag, with a couple of other bilums in their bag to go in the garden, they'll work, weeding, digging whatever, on their way back they'll be carrying water, they'll be carrying the food stuff to cook as well as firewood conveniently every time so they're good managers. Very organized ... so maybe that could be one reason why I can handle so many jobs and never get tired. I'm a mother, I'm a professional woman, I'm running my own business ... and at the end of the day we bring home a little money and then we share it with our family, we have food on the table (Linda, 46, businesswoman).

Theresa's research (Meki 2013) also emphasised the qualities that women are seen to acquire through their roles as mothers. Theresa conducted surveys and a Photo Voice workshop with young people in Lae and Goroka about their perceptions of women's political participation. Their responses highlighted women's status and abilities as mothers and providers. Theresa's findings highlighted that the most discussed topic during the Photo Voice workshop was the role of women as mothers. This included their competence managing the household in all areas from finances to general maintenance, their efficiency in meeting the needs of their children and husband, and their ability to multi-task. Participants also discussed commendable attributes that women are seen to possess, such as being considerate and responsible, God fearing and respectful. Eddie, one of the more vocal participants, expressed it this way:

Mothers are the first people to wake up and the last people to go to sleep at night, let us vote for a lot of women so they can go into parliament and change our country.

Another participant in Theresa's research took a photo of a woman with a *bilum*. He did so because he said that women always have something in their

bilums for everyone in their families. From this he concluded that if women can reach into their *bilums* and provide for all their dependents then if they were in public office and in a position to distribute government services, they would do this better than men.

While the limitations of any attempt to draw on a particular aspect of identity need to be acknowledged, these findings suggest the importance of engaging with the factors that Papua New Guineans see as powerful enablers of women's capacity to be politicians, businesswomen and change-makers. In this schema, there may be some value in engaging strategically with their roles in the home and as mothers in order to enable women to also go beyond these roles. Julie Soso, who emphasised women's roles as mothers in many of her campaign speeches, is now the governor of Eastern Highlands Province, a first in Papua New Guinea.

Author Notes

Ceridwen Spark is a Research Fellow with SSGM. She writes about changing feminine identities in Papua New Guinea.

Theresa Meki has just completed an Honours degree with the Centre for Social & Creative Media at the University of Goroka on the topic of young voters' perceptions of women participating in Papua New Guinea's national politics.

Endnote

- 1 A *bilum* is a string bag made and used by women in Papua New Guinea.

References

- Cummings, M. 2013. Looking Good: The Cultural Politics of the Island Dress for Young Women in Vanuatu. *The Contemporary Pacific* 35(1):33-65.
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