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Gender, political representation and symbolic capital: how some women politicians succeed

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ABSTRACT

Increasing women's representation in national legislatures has become a priority for international organisations and aid donors in recent decades. Existing studies emphasise structural barriers, whether economic, cultural or religious, that inhibit women's participation in the public sphere. Little attention is paid to women who defy these barriers to win election in contexts that are hostile to their presence. This article addresses this gap. Using a Bourdieusian approach, it shows how three senior women leaders from the Pacific Islands translate symbolic capital into political capital. For donors and would-be reformers, the lesson is that institutional interventions must be implemented in ways which allow women's symbolic capital to be deployed as political capital, or which enhance women's control of various forms of capital. This message is particularly relevant for those interested in the capacity of quotas and other temporary measures to translate descriptive representation into substantive developmental gains.

Introduction

Women's representation in parliament has become a key development challenge in recent decades.[1] Normative arguments are twofold: (1) increasing descriptive representation empowers women and enhances the legitimacy of parliament as an institution by ensuring it reflects the main groups in society; and (2) institutions that are more representative of the different interests of society are likely to make substantively better (developmental) decisions. Many international organisations and bilateral aid donors have sought to increase the number of women Members of Parliament (MPs), using a combination of training programmes for women candidates, voter education and awareness, and parliamentary gender quotas. These efforts have been more successful in some contexts than others. The Pacific Islands region, for example, remains stubbornly patriarchal with most countries having only

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a handful of women MPs – some have none at all, including Papua New Guinea (PNG), which went from having three women to none in the 2017 election.[2]

The gender and development literature highlights a combination of factors that constrain women's representation.[3] Women lack sufficient financial resources to compete with men. Institutional barriers, including the electoral systems and weak party systems, favour male candidates. Finally, cultural and religious attitudes work against candidates by restricting their participation in the public sphere to 'traditional' roles and responsibilities. While structuralist accounts explain the disproportionate success of men relative to women, they do not explain how some women defy these barriers and get elected.[4] For donors, development practitioners and scholars interested in women's representation, the experiences of this latter group are significant because of their potential insights into the factors that contribute to women's electability.

This paper employs Bourdieu's theory of the various forms of capital to explain how some women have established successful political careers in hostile environments. Taking this theory as a hermeneutic tool we explore the careers of elite women and read their embodied leadership qualities, not as unique individual traits, but as symbolic capital that reflects broader societal structures, particularly the social field in which the 'game' of politics is played. While the women we study are elite, using this Bourdieusian hermeneutic highlights not only qualities that distinguish them from other women (eg family connections) but also qualities that they share with other women or that may be developed by less privileged women (education, international connections).

Bourdieu has had a mixed reception among feminists but many regard his core concepts of habitus, field and capital as useful, even indispensable, for a sophisticated analysis of the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity in any given society.[5] In this paper, we consider three Pacific senior women leaders who were the first to achieve the status they have – one president, one deputy prime minister and one leader of the opposition – and treat them as subjects who possess, amass and mobilise symbolic capital to their political advantage within social structures that privilege men. Irrespective of gender, these women are among the most successful political leaders –in both length of tenure and seniority – in a region resistant to women's representation.[6]

We adopt a life history approach to analysis. Our three subjects are: Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands; Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa; and Dame Carol Kidu, former Opposition Leader of Papua New Guinea. We argue that their accrual of various forms of symbolic capital has been the foundation of their ability to build support and win elections. Moreover, once in office, converting symbolic capital into political capital has been crucial to their career advancement.

We substantiate our argument as follows. First, we situate our study in relation to the literature on gender and development, with specific reference to the Pacific Islands region. Next, we outline our reading of Bourdieu and his emphasis on symbolic capital as filling an important gap in this literature. Third, we describe our methods and data sources, justifying our use of successful cases. Fourth, we provide three biographical portraits to demonstrate how Pacific women have employed symbolic capital to attain political leadership. Finally, we discuss the implications of our argument for debates about gender quotas.

Gender and development

The number of women in national legislatures has been an international priority since the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed to increase the 'Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament'. Their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), seek to 'Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life'. This commitment appears to be having effects, with the number of women elected to parliament across the world having doubled in the last 20 years.[7] The UNDP SDGs website proclaims that 'In 46 countries, women now hold more than 30 per cent of seats in national parliament in at least one chamber'.[8]

The policy emphasis on political representation is legitimised by both descriptive and substantive elements.[9] Descriptive representation – the number of women elected – is said to reflect the agency and empowerment of women in society. Substantive representation – that women will make better decisions, both for women and society in general – reflects aspirations to allocate resources more justly. Following the basic precepts of recent feminist institutionalist literature,[10] the common argument for why women do not get elected in the Pacific is that even though formal institutions do not prohibit their participation, informal institutions nevertheless represent key barriers. Academic analysis has therefore concentrated on describing and explaining the economic, cultural and religious institutions that act as barriers to greater participation.[11] Solutions tend to either emphasise the need for systemic cultural change via, for example, the mass education of women, or institutional quotas that provide reserved seats for women candidates. The latter is often viewed as an interim solution that will fast-track the process of systemic social change.

The stress on barriers and quotas has led to a tendency to focus on why women fail to win public office – or why they choose not to run in the first place.[12] There is relatively little research on why some women do win office, despite the odds. Or, when it is undertaken, such research focuses on subsequent limitations women face in pursuing their political agenda once elected.[13] Consequently, the literature tends to understate how women express their agency in national politics, cultivating 'allies across a range of domains'[14] in order to achieve their ends. While much is already known about the barriers women face from informal institutions, there is a pressing need to know more about the women who do get elected in contexts that are otherwise hostile to their presence. Such women are 'positive outliers'[15] whose successes provide examples for other women and serve as models that expand academic and practitioner knowledge and expectations of processes of social change. Studying them also affords the opportunity to learn more about how women build 'strategic capacity' and agency to shape gender outcomes.[16]

Women are under-represented in political systems everywhere. However, the Pacific is consistently found to have some of the lowest rates of women's representation of any region in the world.[17] The exceptions are French and American territories of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and Guam. This relative success is often underpinned by gender equality provisions, particularly reserved parliamentary seats for women, which have been in place for some time.[18]

The under-representation of women in politics has become a major concern for international agencies and bilateral donors. The related questions of gender and inclusion are major concerns of the Australian aid programme, the largest in the Pacific. Relations between aid

donors and 'recipients' carry the weight of colonial history and metropolitan perceptions of gender inequality among indigenous Pacific Islanders have been a focus of relations of colonial domination in the Pacific.[19]

Studies of the pathways in and through politics taken by successful women in the Pacific region[20] reveal that profiles of female candidates are not markedly different from those of their male counterparts. Women politicians tend to come from elite families, be highly educated, have had successful careers, and have a history of community involvement.[21] In this sense they present as classic examples of what political scientists have termed 'acceptably different' candidates.[22] That is, aside from their gender, they conform to the standard profile of an MP.

While the existing literature reveals similarities between profiles of male and female MPs, it does highlight one important difference: women MPs are less able or likely to draw on extensive financial capital to fund their political activities. There are a number of possible reasons for this reduced control of financial resources – women MPs are less likely to have business interests. Women also struggle to mobilise financial capital from relatives and kin, in part due to the perception that it will be harder for them to get elected. Nevertheless, as we demonstrate in this paper, successful women combine particular types of symbolic capital to reduce this disadvantage.

Symbolic capital in the Pacific

Bourdieu's work on forms of capital is considerable, familiar to most social scientists,[23] and has been surveyed by numerous scholars.[24] Bourdieu distinguished three basic forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. When any of these forms of capital is socially legitimated or recognised, it becomes symbolic capital. The forms of capital valued in any given social field vary according to the context in which social actors find themselves. Fields such as politics may be patriarchal and resistant to change, but they are not fixed and so the 'rules of the game' can be played by some women to their political advantage. By seeing how successful elite women do this, it is possible to identify lessons for other women, as well as inspiration and even small shifts in the political field that make it easier for successors to operate.

In this paper, we apply a Bourdieusian understanding of symbolic capital to illuminate questions of women's political leadership in the Pacific. We use symbolic capital as an umbrella term that includes various forms of social and cultural capital, particularly when they are legitimated (eg family support, formal education).[25] As Bourdieu, Wacquant and Farage state:

> Symbolic capital is any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognise it, to give it value.[26]

Our field research with women leaders in the Pacific illustrates some of the ways in which their social and cultural (or simply symbolic) capital is valued in the political field, becoming a form of political capital. Led by their accounts of the political field in each country and how politics intersects with other fields such as education or traditional systems (such as the Samoan *matai* or chiefly system), we argue that accrual of symbolic capital and the ability to convert this into political capital is fundamental to the careers of successful women

politicians. We further suggest that understanding these gendered dynamics has important implications for women from less privileged backgrounds who wish to enter politics.

Symbolic capital, like financial capital, can be converted into other types of capital. It can be inherited but it must also be cultivated in order to have effects in the field. Women may accrue symbolic capital through various forms of labour but their capital is often severely constrained by male-dominated systems of value, particularly in fields such as politics: *Conversion of women's symbolic capital into political capital comes at a high exchange rate.* This is because politics is gendered as a male-dominated field where men's presence and position is accepted as 'natural' for them *as men*. Women, however, are required to justify their suitability for participation in the field *as women*. While men also accrue and deploy symbolic capital in their political careers, the symbolic capital that women have access to may not be valued as highly in the political field as men's symbolic capital, and therefore higher levels of achievement within other fields are required of women to compete with men. Women may thus have to reaffirm the legitimacy of their womanliness, as a desire to be involved in politics can be seen by men (and other women) as 'improper'. The complex and typically invisible ways in which gender operates within institutions means that 'political actors, traditionally men, have acted *as if* sex and gender are mapped on to each other, leading to the establishment of a "gendered logic of appropriateness" within institutional arenas'.[27]

And yet, as our interviews with three Pacific women politicians demonstrate, some women do amass symbolic capital and deploy it strategically as political capital. We further suggest that mastering processes of accrual, conversion and redeployment of various forms of capital is central to women's political success.

Viewing the life histories of three women through the lens of symbolic capital shows that individual qualities reflect broader processes of value production that are also relevant for other women. While informants' particular trajectories cannot be replicated precisely, when seen as symbolic capital their paths suggest ways in which other women might build up their own political capital. Significantly, our focus on symbolic capital shifts attention away from barriers faced by aspiring women politicians to factors that contribute to success. This shift opens up avenues for thinking about the voice and agency of less well-positioned women and how their capital might be developed. This finding is of particular interest for donors wishing to support women's political participation.

Methods and data

There are challenges associated with analysing the experiences of successful women politicians in a region that has historically been hostile to their presence in parliament. Doing so requires particular methods and data sources. Indeed, one of the reasons that the existing literature has neglected successful cases is that standard political science methods – attitudinal surveys and analysis of voting behaviour, for example – do not suit the study of a small number of exceptional cases.

Here we take a different approach. To explain how some women defy structural barriers to hold senior political positions over a long tenure we adopt an agent-centred life-history approach.[28] We intentionally focus on 'outlier'[29] or 'prototypical' cases.[30] Viewing the three leaders as intentional agents, we recognise their success as the culmination of decades of painstaking effort. Their election and longevity reflect choices about education, career, marriage, family and community involvement that precede participation in formal politics.

Following from this, we argue that the symbolic capital embodied in these choices is central to these women's political narratives and so cannot be adequately captured by attitudinal surveys, read from electoral behaviour or inferred from candidate profiles (gender, age, level of education etc.), common to studies of political socialisation elsewhere. A further distinctive feature of politics throughout the Pacific is the absence of durable political party systems, making politics much more personal in scale than in other regions of the world. Despite differences in formal institutional design, culture and country size, this shared context of personalisation means that the stories of these three women are comparable.[31] A life-history approach therefore allows us to explore these choices, providing a critical focal lens through which to view gender and development.[32]

The life-history approach is often criticised in mainstream social science for falling foul of the 'great person in history' aspects of biography and failing to adequately account for the causal significance of structural forces. To clarify, we are not arguing that power asymmetries between genders do not exist. Rather, we argue that these cannot be understood without paying close attention to the meanings and beliefs of those involved in negotiating these power relations. The agents whose lives we explore here are not autonomous – they both replicate and enact a series of embedded beliefs or traditions that reflect the process of socialisation in culture. It is this unique capacity of an individual life to reveal the dynamic relationship between field and habitus that makes Bourdieu's writings on symbolic capital so pertinent to the interaction between gender and development.

The empirical material in this paper draws on interviews with three highly successful women politicians: Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the first woman to lead an independent state in the Pacific; Fiame Mata'afa, the Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa; and Dame Carol Kidu, the former Minister for Community Development and first woman to be Opposition Leader in PNG. We conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the women concerned, as well as multiple interviews with their supporters and colleagues. We also drew on interviews conducted for a previous study of Pacific politicians.[33]

Our approach aims to identify similarities or patterns that contribute to success within one or more case studies. These similarities are significant because each leader is embedded within a particular social, cultural and economic context that the existing literature presumes will inhibit their political fortunes. On this basis, we claim that any similarities between them are likely to be applicable to other women in the Pacific region. We also expect that women politicians from elsewhere will recognise aspects of their experience in the life histories contained here. Furthermore, our findings that symbolic capital is created at the intersection of rank, class, ethnicity and education speak to ongoing debates about intersectionality in feminist scholarship.[34]

Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Marshall Islands

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a small island state of 55,000 people, with some 45,000 living abroad in Hawai'i, the mainland United States or other US territories. The American connection dominates Marshallese politics because of American federal funding and revenue from a US missile base on Kwajelein Atoll. The Marshall Islands was part of the United States-administered Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands until 1986. The legislature is unicameral, with 33 seats in the *Nitijela* (Parliament). There are no formal political parties in the Marshall Islands, and candidates contest elections as independents.

Dr Hilda Heine was elected president in January 2016, making her the first woman to head an independent Pacific Islands state. She entered the Nitijela in 2011 and became Minister of Education. Heine is one of only three women out of 33 senators in the Nitijela.

Heine was the first Marshallese to be awarded a doctoral degree (in education). She has had a distinguished career in education at senior levels in the Marshall Islands, including as a classroom teacher, as President of the College of the Marshall Islands and as Secretary for Education. She also worked for 12 years at the University of Hawai'i on a regional educational programme. Heine's family have been active in public life since the 1950s, providing a classic 'political apprenticeship' in public affairs.[35] Her uncle Dwight Heine was the first Marshallese to become a District Commissioner within the United States Trust Territory, which administered Micronesia after the Second World War. He was among the first to raise concerns about the health impacts of nuclear tests in the Marshalls. Hilda's Heine's brother, the late Carl Heine, served multiple terms in the Nitijela, including as Opposition Leader.

Heine's family background and connections, and her high level of education, professional achievements and engagement with women's groups, provide her with reserves of symbolic capital. Her educational capital is both inherited from her family and achieved through her studies and career.

Bourdieu regarded education as a durable form of cultural capital that translated well across fields. In the Pacific (and for many colonised populations), educational qualifications demonstrate mastery of the coloniser's systems of knowledge. Education elevates people's cultural capital and allows access to systems of knowledge and power. Educational capital therefore translates well into political capital. As a long-term observer of Marshallese politics (and admirer of Heine) observed: '[Heine] can be more academic with cabinet ministers. She raises their level of thinking … She has a research based approach. She is the calibre of person who could just do her own thing but she listens to your ideas'.

As with all forms of symbolic capital, educational capital implies the adoption of a particular embodied disposition that confirms the individual's command of the 'rules of the game'. When Heine is commended for listening to people's ideas instead of simply imposing her own authority, her educational capital is embodied in a way that allows her to achieve her goals within the Marshallese political field. As Goetz and Jenkins argue, 'women's advances in education or employment' can be interpreted as threatening to 'patriarchal foundations'.[36] Consequently, while being able to harness educational capital in nuanced ways is imperative, it is sometimes necessary for women to do so in ways that differ from those used by their male counterparts. The embodiment of symbolic capital is always gendered, as is conversion of one form of capital to another. Arguably, women have to spend more symbolic capital to achieve the same political results as men. How that symbolic capital is deployed depends on normative gender roles. Women politicians may decide that challenging set norms is too costly in terms of available political capital.

Heine is adept at negotiating gendered cultural norms. When dealing with senior men, especially traditional leaders (*iroij*), she observes respectful cultural protocols. However, she also uses her Marshallese cultural capital to create political space:

> I'm a woman. I am not an *iroij* but I come from a very low-ranked clan. In my family I'm very young… I know my place. I let them speak. That is the cultural grounding. I use that in the way I conduct myself.

In showing respect to elders, Heine could be misread as acquiescent to traditional social structures where she is subordinated as a woman of inferior pedigree (her family is not of a chiefly line). However, her comment that she uses 'the cultural grounding' reveals how Marshallese cultural capital can be deployed, illustrating the importance of framing political issues.[37] Even as a 'commoner', in demonstrating that she knows the correct cultural protocols Heine reaffirms her cultural capital in both traditional and modern fields. Were she unable to demonstrate cultural competence in dealing with traditional authorities, her modern cultural capital accrued through education and career would be at risk of being discounted or dismissed.

Modern cultural capital can lack legitimacy without due attention to social relations. Alternatively, traditional cultural capital can be perceived as lacking relevance in the contemporary world. Heine shows how possession of both types of cultural capital makes each more effective. Her mastery of Marshallese cultural capital is effective politically and also allows her to promote cultural norms that she sees as protective of women. Indeed, she contrasts Marshallese customs of respect for women with the misogyny found in many countries where women are represented in higher numbers in the legislature:

> With women leaders, it is hard for men to criticise us because we are mothers and must be respected. So there are no personal attacks. Our culture helps women in this regard. They have a more cautious approach to a woman than they would with a male leader; they are more civil. I felt sorry for [Australian] Prime Minister Julia Gillard with what she had to endure.

Heine has accrued modern cultural capital from her work and study abroad. Returning from study in the US in the 1970s, Heine and other young educated women – many of whom have had distinguished careers – co-founded the first Marshallese women's group not focussed on church or handicrafts, *Jined Ilo Kobo*, meaning 'Women are the mothers who shape the child'. This legacy continues through Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), a women's rights non-governmental organisation (NGO) that runs programmes designed 'to advance the causes and improve the lives of Marshallese women and their families'.[38] Strong women's movements make it more likely that women will be elected to high office.[39] The WUTMI example also illustrates Heine's grasp of international development rubric, which is a highly valued form of modern cultural capital in developing countries.[40]

Pacific cultural capital is not indexed to the French 'highbrow' culture privileged in Bourdieu's educational writing. Pacific cultural capital can manifest as traditional cultural capital, or as the mastery of modern educational and bureaucratic systems, including the ability to liaise with powerful outsiders such as foreign governments. Such connections are important for the gender equity agenda, given Htun and Weldon's finding that transnational women's movements influence policy when combined with strong local feminist movements.[41] Hilda Heine's political career has flourished because of her ability to mobilise both traditional cultural capital and modern educational and developmental capital within the political field in ways that demonstrate her suitability for high office as a 'modern' expert and as a 'proper' Marshallese woman. As such she gently pushes, while also being seen to uphold, the acceptable boundaries of femininity 'at work' in political institutions. Thus, while as Chappell and Waylen argue, gender norms are indeed 'sticky', they can be subverted by women such as Heine who are hard to construe as 'outsiders'.[42]

Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Deputy Prime Minister, Samoa

Samoa is a small island state of 200,000 people. Similar numbers of Samoans live in Australia and New Zealand. The country obtained independence from New Zealand in 1962 and has a unicameral legislature (the *Fono*) of 49 seats. Since 2016, this number can fluctuate as the Constitution stipulates that women must hold at least 10% of seats. If they do not win five seats at regular elections, additional seats are added on a 'best loser' basis. Samoan politics has been dominated for three decades by the Human Rights Protection party, with smaller opposition parties winning some seats but never holding government.

In 2016, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa became the first woman to be Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa. Her credentials within traditional Samoan society and as a Parliamentarian are unmatched. In her twenties, as the daughter of the country's first Prime Minister (also a high chief) she received the title Fiame, one of the highest ranking *matai* (chiefly) titles. Leaving university in New Zealand to take up the responsibilities of the title, Fiame entered politics in 1985. Since then she has held various Cabinet portfolios, including serving as Education Minister for 15 years. In addition to being Deputy Prime Minister, Fiame is Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, reflecting her outstanding reputation in the regional and international spheres. Like her mother, Laulu Fetauimalemau Mata'afas, before her, Fiame maintains strong links with women's groups, including the Samoa National Council of Women.

As Reay reminds us, for Bourdieu, 'cultural capital exists in conjunction with other forms of capital'.[43] As such, Fiame's significant traditional cultural capital deriving from her title must be understood in relation to 'other forms of capital, economic, symbolic and social capital, that together constitute advantage and disadvantage in society'.[44] This is a helpful formulation in that it enables an answer to the question often pondered in relation to Fiame – namely, how much of her authority is 'inherited' and how much earned? Politics in the Pacific is typically a family affair, but without the dynastic politics of, for example, South Asia.[45] Because constituencies are small, extended families form a politician's main voter base and provide much of the financial resourcing for campaigns.

It is not uncommon for women MPs to follow their fathers or uncles into politics. Fiame's father was the first Prime Minister of Samoa and her mother was also an MP and crucial mentor during the early stages of her political career. Describing the mixture of traditional prestige and commitment to public service in her heritage, Fiame said family members on her father's side held high-ranking titles within the traditional system while those on her mother's side, also members of 'high chief families', were public servants from the early stages.

> My father was in government and he held the paramount titles. And my mother, she's the daughter of a high chief. She was a scholarship student, teacher by profession, and she was amongst the first group of scholarship students that went to New Zealand, and that whole idea was developing the skill sets required for a new nation. So their generation, all they ever talked about was how are we going to develop our country. … It's quite interesting that mix. Because that needs to gel to move the whole Samoan thing forward.

Fiame's mother had a profound grasp of social capital, including understanding that this is generated 'through social processes between the family and wider society and … made up of social networks'.[46] While observing politics first hand as a child, Fiame absorbed 'the whole idea of service' and always knew that she 'was interested in politics'. But she says she learned from her mother that, first and foremost, politics is about relationships.

> I think what I learnt through her … is that perhaps from the outside people think that you're respected, you're revered, whatever, because of your title. There is definitely that element because that's what the system is on, but what my mother taught me mostly is that it's actually the relationships that really make that strong. And so it's a real earning thing, as opposed to [an] entitlement thing.

While social capital matters, it does not in itself guarantee success in politics. The key is how politicians utilise family resources and build and strengthen relationships to their electoral advantage. In this regard, and regardless of the prestige conferred by her high-ranking title, Fiame's activities provide a model of success for other women seeking election. Interviews in her constituency reveal the deep and ongoing ways in which she remains connected to her family, village and constituency. An active member and leader of her church in Lotofaga, she is also part of the women's committee and attends village council meetings whenever she is available. Discussing the significance of this work, Ianesi Fasisila, the only woman *matai* other than Fiame on the Lotofaga village council, comments:

> She doesn't lead from afar. She's actually involved, she's at the village council meetings probably two-thirds of the time and the other third of the time she's not in the country but when she comes she's there and she's visible, and that's very significant for Samoan communities especially for *matai* because if you see them and you feel their presence it's credible. She has credibility in that sense as a leader because she's there, she's always in the community, in the church.

Fasisila sees Fiame as a 'role model' who has set 'a path for everyone'. Such comments reveal that while traditional symbolic capital can help get women elected, women need to work in their constituencies to make a mark in politics.

Dame Carol Kidu, (former) Opposition Leader, Papua New Guinea

With some eight million people, the population of PNG is much larger than those of its small island neighbours. Having become independent from Australia in 1975, it has a unicameral legislature with 111 seats. PNG has a fragmented, multiparty system where shifting coalitions and allegiances are commonplace. Since 2011, there has been considerable debate about parliamentary gender quotas, led by Dame Carol Kidu, but without implementation. The 2017 election saw the number of women in parliament decline (from a previous high of three to zero).

Dame Carol Kidu is an Australian-born woman who became a PNG citizen after marrying Buri Kidu, PNG's first national Chief Justice. Integrating into her husband's Motu society, she had four children and worked as a teacher while involving herself in local organisations, including the Business and Professional Women's Club in Port Moresby which she founded in the 1980s.[47] After the premature death of her husband, Kidu sought permission from his family to run for Parliament. From 2002 to 2012, Kidu was the only female MP and served as the Minister for Community Development. With a change of government in January 2012, Dame Carol became Leader of the Opposition, making her the first woman to occupy this role in PNG.

Kidu was elected in part because of her late husband's profile and reputation. While he was not in office when he died, Kidu says she would not have been elected without the sympathy vote, commenting:

the sympathy vote in being Buri's widow was a huge thing in my win as well. There's nothing special about me. I had so many things on my side that made it possible for me to win at that time in the history of Papua New Guinea.

According to Reay's feminist reading of Bourdieu, social capital is 'generated through social processes between the family and wider society and is made up of social networks'.[48] Before seeking election, Kidu shored up her social and cultural capital within her late husband's family. Describing how she sought their permission, she notes:

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

The social capital Kidu had as Sir Buri's widow was augmented by cultural capital she possessed as a white foreigner who had made her home in PNG. Following the legacy of Australian colonialism, many Melanesian Papua New Guineans regard whites as more modern than themselves.[49] This is often expressed in moral terms as admiration for the personal discipline white people supposedly exercise, reflecting racially coded Christian ideas of sinfulness.[50] Nevertheless, in order for her white cultural capital to be convertible into political capital, Kidu also had to demonstrate her Melanesian cultural capital. Although she herself says of this that it was not self-sacrifice, but love for Buri,[51] her willingness to embrace the role of a Motuan wife is often interpreted as evidence of her commitment to PNG and its citizens.

On the wave of sympathy that her husband's death engendered, Carol Kidu used this symbolic capital and her experience as a teacher in PNG to connect with her electorate. Establishing Ginigoada, a foundation that provides education and training opportunities for marginalised and unemployed people, Kidu became known for her commitment to the disenfranchised. Kidu says that Moresby South was 'the guinea pig' for ideas that later informed policy.

Regardless of gender, the challenge for politicians is how to simultaneously be 'above' the people, so they can lead them, but also 'of' the people, understanding them and connecting with their issues.[52] Kidu's family connections, whiteness, education and career had already set her apart. But to win and retain office she needed to maintain close contact with the communities from which she sought to gain support. Male politicians often employ financial capital to build a reputation as somebody who contributes to community life. In contrast, women candidates emphasise that having a strong community presence is especially important for them, in part because it can offset the relative resource disparity between themselves and other candidates.

Kidu thinks she campaigned differently to other (male) politicians in PNG, going 'house to house' and listening to people for hours. She notes that this means women tend to carry a burden in ways men do not:

> It's much harder for women. You've got to really work it. Very emotionally draining, because you end up with all the people's problems, which male MPs don't necessarily end up with; they end up with financial requests and things, but not so much the burden of that, yeah, of facing the problems that people face, and the fact that you feel powerless to help them, but you know they desperately need help.

Bourdieu describes 'practical and symbolic work which generates devotion, generosity and solidarity' as work that 'falls more particularly to women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships'.[53] Nowotny explored the concept of 'emotional capital' in relation to the 'private' sphere of the family, arguing that associations with family and children make converting emotional capital into cultural and economic capital difficult.[54] Nevertheless, the culturally and economically unique circumstances of Port Moresby enabled Kidu to convert her symbolic/emotional capital into political capital, thereby shoring up her reputation as a trustworthy, even morally superior, political candidate.

How some women politicians succeed in contexts hostile to their presence

These case studies of successful women politicians demonstrate how they transform social, cultural and symbolic capital into political capital. Each story is unique and shaped by context but nevertheless, we can identify patterns that are relevant for other women politicians, both in the Pacific and beyond. Specifically, each of these women (cf. Spark, Cox and Corbett)[55]:

1. Employed their family resources wisely: while family resources matter, knowing how to utilise these is integral. Each of these women drew on their family resources to advance their careers, and even Fiame had to make wise use of her family background to achieve success;
2. Invested in education: the skills and profile gained from education enabled each of these women to set themselves apart. As the first Marshallese woman to gain a PhD Heine exemplifies this most, but education is important to all three women;
3. Kept their community close: this is key in all three cases and goes a long way to explaining the longevity of these three leaders. As was especially clear with Dame Kidu, they remain actively involved in community activities which ensures their re-election. Longevity then enhances their authority;
4. Developed a reputation as an expert in a substantive policy area: each of these women has a reputation for mastering their portfolio and becoming a respected authority in their area of contribution, frequently outperforming their male counterparts;
5. Developed strategies for working in a male-dominated environment: navigating a male dominated context was an important consideration for all three women. This often manifests as knowing how to perform culturally acceptable versions of femininity while also pushing the boundaries gently.
6. Knew how and when to take a stand: each of these women has challenged the patriarchal system in which they operate. But they carefully pick and choose their battles and are intentional about what they do and do not tolerate from their male colleagues; and
7. Built strategic networks with the international community: while the international community was often more supportive of these women and their work than their domestic colleagues, each identified the need to be strategic in how they engaged so as not to spend too much time away from home (see point 3).

None of these strategies are necessary or sufficient conditions for success. But they point to the multiple ways these successful politicians have built strong social and cultural capital,

which, in turn, is accrued as symbolic and ultimately political capital. It is clear from their examples that no amount of training can substitute for these skills, or for the slow and steady engagement required to forge the reputation necessary to succeed. As the 'first' women to reach the apex of parliamentary politics in the Pacific, their stories offer valuable insights for donors and other reformers seeking to address gender imbalance in the Pacific and beyond.

Conclusion: gender and symbolic capital in the Pacific

In her departing speech, Julia Gillard, the first female Prime Minister of Australia, said:

> [Gender] doesn't explain everything, it doesn't explain nothing, it explains some things. And it is for the nation to think in a sophisticated way about those shades of grey. What I am absolutely confident of is it will be easier for the next woman and the woman after that and the woman after that. And I'm proud of that.[56]

Gillard's words have resonance in the broader region where, for more than two decades, increasing women's representation in parliament has been a priority. In the Pacific and elsewhere, increasing women's representation in formal politics is a goal for international organisations and aid donors. Supporting this, much scholarly and 'grey' literature has identified the barriers that prohibit women from getting elected. However, there is relatively little work on why some women do win office in contexts that can be construed as hostile to their presence. This article addresses that gap by showing how three senior women leaders translate symbolic capital into political capital in the Pacific. As such, we have highlighted how these women negotiate systemic barriers in the absence of gender quotas and other temporary special measures which, as George argues, seek to vary gendered cultural norms via institutional mechanisms.[57] While their capacity to overcome these barriers is in part dependent on their status as elites, we suggest that these women nevertheless act as vanguards for other women, by shifting norms, modelling strategies and building networks that are important for generating political support, locally, nationally and internationally. This finding was confirmed by an aspiring politician in Samoa who said of Fiame: 'The fact that she is the first Deputy Prime Minister in Samoa is a significant achievement for Samoan women. It gives all of us Samoan women hope and an inspiration to … achieve these leadership roles in future'.

Moreover, as existing scholarship on Pacific politics makes clear, virtually all politicians come from similarly elite backgrounds, regardless of gender. This means that the question of elitism and the question of gender are somewhat distinct: elite women can get elected to office in the Pacific but the ways in which they accrue symbolic capital and translate it into political capital is different. This does not mean structural barriers are removed. Rather, our point is that the barriers to election are not insurmountable for women and, further, that the experience and strategies that these women employ can offer lessons for other women who are in a position to deploy them.

Donors and other would-be reformers often focus on changing formal institutional structures, but our stress on how various forms of symbolic capital can be mobilised in the political field indicates that informal institutions are central to the 'game' of politics. We therefore argue that supporters of women's political representation ought to pay more attention to building up women's symbolic capital through education, support of women's NGOs and assistance in reframing debates and building coalitions for change.[58]

This is not to argue against campaigns for reserved seats. Rather, we highlight the importance of symbolic capital in building and sustaining women leaders. If reserved seats are to succeed in increasing women's substantive political representation, then their introduction must be implemented in ways that enhance women's control of symbolic capital, or which allow existing symbolic capital to be revalued so that it can be effectively deployed as political capital.

Even women who are politically active may resist measures such as reserved seats. Nevertheless, these supposed gatekeepers often nurture networks of women and encourage them to become politically active. Indeed, this resistance is better understood as a recognition that women politicians must be able to accrue symbolic capital and deploy it as political capital in order to be effective political actors. Moreover, some women leaders are concerned that women without the requisite capital (and the skills to use it strategically) may devalue the symbolic capital of more established women leaders.

Strategies for translating symbolic capital into political capital are central to any understanding of the relationship between gender and parliamentary representation. Having argued that accrual of various forms of symbolic capital provides the foundation of three of the most senior women leaders in the Pacific to build support and win elections, we further suggest that their ability to convert symbolic capital into political capital has been crucial to their career advancement. In doing so, we demonstrate that examining the life stories of successful candidates can reveal *both* the barriers that prevent women from winning offices, and the strategies that can be employed to negotiate and, in some instances, overcome them.

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Notes

1. Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment"; Kabeer, "Gender, Poverty, and Inequality"; Momsen, *Gender and Development*.
2. See Baker, "Great Expectations"; George, "Women in Politics"; McLeod, *Women's Leadership in the Pacific*; True et al., *Women's Political Participation in Asia*; Zeitlin, "Women in Parliaments in the Pacific Region."
3. See for example Bauer and Burnet, "Gender Quotas, Democracy, and Women's Representation"; Chant and Sweetman, "Fixing Women or Fixing the World"; Calkin, "Feminism, Interrupted?"; Childs and Krook, "Analysing Women's Substantive Representation"; Dahlerup and Freidenvall, "Quotas as a 'Fast Track'"; Lombardo, "Gender Inequality in Politics"; O'Neil and Domingo, *Women and Power*; Tiessen, "Small Victories but Slow Progress"; True et al., *Women's Political Participation in Asia*.
4. See Goetz and Jenkins, "Feminist Activism and the Politics of Reform," on the role of 'strategic choices' by feminist policy advocates.
5. Fowler, "Reading Pierre Bourdieu's Masculine Domination" and Skeggs, "Context and Background" provide sympathetic feminist critiques; see also McCall, "Does Gender Fit?"
6. This paper draws on our research and findings as published in Spark, Cox and Corbett, "Being the First." (http://www.dlprog.org/publications/being-the-first-women-leaders-in-the-pacific-islands.php).
7. Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*.
8. UNDP, "Sustainable Development Goals."
9. See Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment."
10. For example, Chappell and Waylen, "Gender and the Hidden Life of Institutions"; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, "New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens."
11. See for example Kamlongera, "Malawian Women's Participation"; Trasi and Orza, "Leadership for Women's Health."
12. Deo, "Running from Elections"; Spark and Corbett, "Emerging Women Leaders' Views."
13. See for example, Curtin, "Women, Political Leadership and Substantive Representation"; Devlin and Elgie, "Effect of Increased Women's Representation."
14. Goetz and Jenkins, "Feminist Activism and the Politics of Reform," 731.
15. Andrews, "Explaining Positive Deviance."
16. Goetz and Jenkins, "Feminist Activism and the Politics of Reform," 732.
17. Baker, "Explaining the Outcome"; McLeod, *Women's Leadership in the Pacific*; True et al., *Women's Political Participation in Asia*; Zeitlin, "Women in Parliaments."
18. George, "Women in Politics."
19. See Biersack et al., *Gender Violence and Human Rights*; Kabutaulaka, "Re-Presenting Melanesia"; Macintyre, "Gender Violence in Melanesia."
20. See Corbett and Liki, "Intersecting Identities, Divergent Views."
21. See Corbett, *Being Political*.
22. See Durose et al., "Acceptable Difference."

23. Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."
24. See for example, Moore, "Capital."
25. Huppatz and Goodwin, "Masculinised Jobs," 294.
26. Bourdieu, Wacquant and Farage, "Rethinking the State," 8.
27. Chappell and Waylen, "Gender and the Hidden Life of Institutions," 601.
28. See Leonard, *African Successes*; Corbett, *Being Political*.
29. Andrews, "Explaining Positive Deviance"; Peiffer and Armytage, *Searching for Success*.
30. Leonard, *African Successes*; Leonard, "'Pockets' of Effective Agencies."
31. Corbett and Veenendaal, *Democracy in Small States*.
32. Hanlon, "You Did What."
33. Corbett, *Being Political*.
34. Alexander-Floyd, "(Inter)Disciplinary Trouble"; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection"; Davidson-Schmich, "Gender, Intersectionality, and the Executive Branch."
35. O'Neil and Domingo, *Women and Power*, 22.
36. Goetz and Jenkins, "Feminist Activism and the Politics of Reform," 722.
37. Ibid., 716.
38. Women United Together Marshall Islands, website homepage.
39. Adams, "Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf"; O'Neil and Domingo, *Women and Power*.
40. Cox, *Fast Money Schemes*; Jakimow and Harahap, "Gaji Sejuta"; McKinnon, *Development Professionals in Northern Thailand*.
41. Htun and Weldon, "Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change."
42. Chappell and Waylen, "Gender and the Hidden Life of Institutions," 603.
43. Reay, "Gendering Bourdieu's Concepts," 57.
44. Ibid.
45. Corbett and Liki, "Intersecting Identities, Divergent Views."
46. Reay, "Gendering Bourdieu's Concepts," 57.
47. Spark and Lee, "Successful Women's Coalitions."
48. Reay, "Gendering Bourdieu's Concepts," 57.
49. Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen*; Cox, "Israeli Technicians."
50. Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*.
51. See Kidu, "Reflections on a Remarkable Journey."
52. Kane and Patapan, *The Democratic Leader*, 5.
53. Bourdieu cited in Reay, "Gendering Bourdieu's Concepts," 57.
54. Nowotny, "Women in Public Life in Austria."
55. Spark, Cox and Corbett, "Being the First."
56. Sales, "Julia Gillard Gives First Speech."
57. George, "Women in Politics," 85.
58. Childs and Lovenduski, "Political Representation," 503.

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