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Ceridwen Spark, John Cox, Jack Corbett

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 33, Number 1, 2021, pp. 64-95 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2021.0003>

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*“Keeping an Eye Out for Women”:
Implicit Feminism, Political Leadership,
and Social Change in the Pacific Islands*

*Ceridwen Spark, John Cox,
and Jack Corbett*

In November 2011, Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa, one of Sāmoa’s longest-serving parliamentarians, was interviewed on Radio New Zealand. When Ian Johnstone, the host of the show, asked her, “What does it feel like to be a feminist in Samoa?” she said, “Well, you’re not a feminist in isolation, right. Whatever your beliefs are, the important things are how do you engage and interact. So, a really good Samoan Matai [chiefly titleholder] is probably one of the best feminists you’ll ever come across because he’s looking after his family and he’s making sure people reach their potential, people are engaged. When I see a really good Matai in action, and he utilizes all the human resources at his fingertips, which include the women, then you can say he’s a great feminist” (Johnstone 2011). Fiamē’s answer indicates that she sees feminism as being less about individual women and their actions than about how anyone, male or female, empowers and engages with others in the community.

When the interview continued, Johnstone suggested that, as the pro chancellor and chair of council of the University of the South Pacific, Fiamē was probably interested in establishing a course on women’s studies there. Again, Fiamē steered the interview in a different direction, shifting the focus from women to the possibility of cultivating a uniquely Pacific identity for the university, indicating that for her, this was perhaps a more important agenda. Specifically, referring to a conversation with Marjorie Crocombe, an author, academic, and the first Cook Islander to graduate from the University of the South Pacific with a PhD, Fiamē said that she and Crocombe had discussed how “in the early days . . . the university had

no Pacific spirit . . . [or] content.” She noted that it was still a challenge for the university “to try and build that” (Johnstone 2011).

Persisting, Johnstone tried one more time to draw out what might be seen as an explicitly “feminist” answer: “I can see that a School of Women’s Studies may be lifting higher on your priority list?” Fiamé responded, “It’s not just about women, it’s the whole gender thing and the utilization of the human resource. And if they’re not using it, we’re all the poorer for it” (Johnstone 2011). Again, she returned to the idea that development is about and for everyone regardless of gender.

This exchange, and Johnstone’s line of questioning in particular, is symptomatic of long-standing attempts to shoehorn feminism into debates about the Pacific existing between “two worlds,” the traditional and the modern. In this stereotype, the traditional world of chiefs and churches is patriarchal and the modern world of tertiary education and development, progressively feminist. Much ink has been spilled by scholars contesting these caricatures. Most pertinently, there has been a concerted attempt to illustrate that so-called traditional cultures are not always patriarchal (see Finau 2017; Renshaw 1986; SPC nd). For instance, encapsulating commonly expressed local perspectives, Penelope Schoeffel, Measina Meredith, and Ruta Fiti-Sinclair wrote: “When gender inequality issues are mentioned in Sāmoa it is often said there is no issue; the respect for sisters and the brother-sister covenant (*feagaiga*) as well as legendary aristocratic women from long ago provide evidence that women are respected” (2017, 10; see also Meleisea and others 2015). Similarly, Haunani-Kay Trask argued that “the best life Hawaiians ever enjoyed existed long ago, before the coming of white people to our land” (1993, 264), while Lisa Kahaleole Hall wrote that “at the time of European contact, Hawaiian women held significantly more power than their European counterparts” (2008, 277). Nor are these kinds of responses limited to the Pacific: Cree/Métis feminist scholar Kim Anderson observed, for example, that settler colonialism itself was patriarchal and forcibly displaced Indigenous ways of being in which women held more political power (2009, 119).

Such statements illustrate that, like their counterparts in other developing-country contexts and Indigenous women in colonized contexts, Pacific women maintain that it is more important to understand women’s oppression in relation to institutionalized racism and colonialism and the ways in which these intersect with gender than it is helpful to view it as being based solely or primarily on men’s oppression of women (see Abaijah 1991; Molisa 1985; Naupa 2017). This perspective is encapsulated

by Indigenous Australian academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who wrote that because “feminism is dominated and controlled by white women,” it tends overwhelmingly to exclude the struggles of Indigenous women, which are first and foremost created by their status as colonized peoples (2000, 69). It is also evident in the work of Hall, who suggested that given the denigration of cultures that was part and parcel of colonialism, “the project of decolonization is inherently multifaceted” (2008, 279). For these reasons, Trask argued, “struggle with our men occurs laterally, across and within our movement. It does not occur vertically between the white women’s movement and indigenous women on one side and white men and Hawaiian men on the other side” (1993, 264).

Fiame’s answers above, and her subtle but persistent derailing of Johnstone’s focus, echo the points made by Indigenous and Pacific women who have articulated the distinction between their agendas and those of white Western feminism (see Hall 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Trask 1993). For instance, in prioritizing the development of a “Pacific spirit” at the University of the South Pacific over and above the development of a women’s studies program, Fiame appears to have been elevating what Trask called “collective self-determination” (1993) rather than individual women’s rights. Her suggestion that male matai who include and work to develop the lives of everyone in their communities are “good feminists” is similarly inclusive, resonating with Trask’s argument that “Pacific Island women . . . want to achieve sovereignty through and with our own people, not separated from them as individuals or as splintered groups” (1993, 263). As Hall has argued, “many activist indigenous women” disavow feminism because they perceive it to be “a discourse of white Western women” and “inherently divisive to the strength of the ‘people’ or nation as a whole” (2009, 26). These arguments echo those made by contributors to the edited volume *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, who claimed that “third world women” may reject versions of Western feminism on the basis that they do not reflect the needs and priorities of women in developing contexts (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991). For these writers, Western feminism envisions women as individual rights-bearing subjects, thereby erasing older forms of women’s power that are grounded in collective identities and esteemed roles, such as motherhood and connection to land (Anderson 2009; Green 2007; Jolly 1996; Hall 2008, 277ff).

While there has been a concerted effort to show that so-called traditional cultures are not always patriarchal, there has been a correspond-

ing attempt to highlight that so-called Western feminism is not always progressive. In many developing countries, including the Pacific Islands states we discuss here, feminism has had a mixed reception. It has been criticized as a Western cultural imposition, frequently by those seeking to maintain male privilege but also by women in the Global South, some of whom associate it with cultural imperialism and the “redemptive narrative” associated with liberal institutions (Banivanua-Mar 2007, 59; for a discussion of the historical relationship between Western feminism and imperialism, see Amos and Parmar 1984). Since the mid-1980s, the recognition that development is ultimately about power has meant that postcolonial and feminist theories have played a significant role in contemporary development studies (McEwan 2001), influencing the way it is theorized and practiced. Discussing the construction of so-called third world women as aid recipients, Chilla Bulbeck argued that these women have their own agendas, which “will not always be ‘feminist’ in Western terms” (2007, 60). She further suggested that feminists from the Global North “impose a Western feminist agenda on aid recipients in the global south, prioritizing projects and activities that are not always considered the most pressing by . . . women in the aid-receiving countries” (Bulbeck 2007, 64; see also Narayanaswamy 2016; Runyan 2018; Tiessen 2015). Ni-Vanuatu leader and poet Grace Molisa summed up this sentiment succinctly when she wrote: “If it is true that overseas bodies wish to assist in the development of women in Vanuatu then they must learn to listen a great deal more than they have ever pretended to do before” (1985, 217; see also Spark 2020).

Despite this important scholarly work among diverse feminists in the Global South, the binary distinction between Western (feminist) and non-Western (patriarchal) persists in popular and academic discussions in the region. Indeed, the low numbers of women elected to parliaments, as well as donor efforts to alter these trends, often serve to reinforce a perception that “real” Pacific feminists should look and sound like feminists in the Global North. As Cheryl McEwan noted, because knowledge, including feminist knowledge, “has been, and to a large extent still is, controlled and produced in the west,” women who adopt anything short of this risk being seen as undermining a progressive agenda (2001, 95).

In this article, we add to existing scholarship that seeks to deliberately muddy these waters. To do so, we focus specifically on the strategies employed by three of the most senior women in Pacific politics: Dr Hilda Heine, the most recent outgoing president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands; Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa, the deputy prime minister of Sāmoa; and

Dame Carol Kidu, the former opposition leader in Papua New Guinea. Arguing that these leaders articulate and practice a form of “implicit feminism” (Giffort 2011), we suggest that while they may eschew the label of “feminist,” they nevertheless promote gender equity, but in ways that seek to avoid the “artificial distinction between men and women” that they perceive to characterize white Western feminism and that they view to be unhelpful in their contexts (Hall 2008, 277).

Interestingly, their approach is often remarkably similar to that taken by other senior women politicians from elsewhere in the world—and this is a point on which our contribution to these debates turns. In Australia, recently retired Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Julie Bishop explicitly refused to identify as a feminist but has championed women’s rights within her own party, particularly in the face of recent bullying allegations. Other prominent women politicians such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel also reject the label “feminist” because of its association with transformative politics and hostility from right-wing male ideologues within their own parties. Even those who do appear to be more comfortable with the movement typically focus on promoting gender equality rather than feminism per se. For example, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern noted: “I’m a pragmatist . . . so when I talk about feminism I talk about equality” (The Spinoff 2018; see also Zucker 2004).

Given the similarities in how senior women leaders from around the world articulate their relationship to feminism, it is worth questioning the utility of the Western/non-Western binary for understanding contemporary gender relations in the Pacific. Importantly, what differentiates these leaders from the liberal articulation of feminism common to both local nongovernmental organizations and international donors is the inherent pragmatism of their message: their view of change is incremental or iterative. The women leaders we studied, particularly Fiamē Mata‘afa and President Heine, are grounded in their own cultural settings *and* prepared to use modern institutions and ideas, such as human rights, to create positive social change for women and men.

Here, we show that this pragmatism is born of long experience with, and exposure to, the intricacies of formal, institutionalized, and male-dominated policy-making processes. The key distinction then is not between “Western” and “non-Western” or “traditional” and “modern” but rather between those women who are seeking change from within established parliamentary systems and those who aim to push an agenda from the outside. The notion of implicit feminism reflects a practice of feminist

principles by women Pacific leaders in ways that are strategic for them but that nevertheless may depart from a more ideologically circumscribed agenda advanced by local activists, nongovernmental organizations, and donor agencies.

In this article, we begin with a brief outline of our methods and introduce in more detail the three women leaders whose perspectives we explore in the latter half of the article. We then discuss the relationship between donor aid and feminism as it pertains to women in politics in the Pacific region. This is followed by a discussion of the leaders’ strategies for success in a male-dominated environment, including allowing men to take the lead, maintaining a strategic distance from the gender agenda, and reframing issues as being about development for all rather than the promotion of gender equity. Next, we consider the ways in which women’s networks and friendships, particularly with other women, sustain these leading politicians. While these may not look exactly like the feminist movements that are typically identified as playing a crucial role in sustainable political and social change (see Batliwala 2012; Kabeer 2012), the relationships created within these networks offer Pacific women leaders important opportunities to share their experiences, build solidarity, and gain “courage and power in numbers” (O’Neil and Domingo 2016, 23; see also Kabeer 2011, 2012). Finally, we highlight the ways in which these three political leaders draw on international gender norms and relationships with donor agencies to shift the needle in debates within their national contexts (True 2019). We argue that the liberal rights-based stance of international donors and some local women’s groups provides a helpful foundation from which these politicians may shift the gender agenda while simultaneously distancing themselves from it.

INTRODUCING OUR METHODS AND THE THREE LEADERS

The research on which we draw here commenced in 2017 as part of a project about women leaders who had risen to the highest level of politics in the Pacific. In focusing on women who have succeeded in a region known for having one of the lowest levels of female political representation in the world (Fraenkel 2006; Huffer 2006; Baker 2014, 2018; McLeod 2015; Corbett and Liki 2015; Spark and Corbett 2018), we sought to determine whether there were identifiable patterns in their pathways in and through politics that might serve as strategies for other Pacific women seeking to enter formal politics. To gain insight into the women’s perspectives, we

conducted interviews with the three leaders, as well as with their colleagues and friends (unless otherwise stated, the quotations referred to here are from these interviews). In 2017, we conducted three in-depth interviews with Fiamé and one each with Dame Kidu and President Heine. We also interviewed people in the Marshall Islands and Sāmoa, as well as people in other contexts who know and have worked with Fiamé. In 2019, Spark conducted a further two interviews with Fiamé as part of a biographical project about her (see Spark and Corbett 2020), and Corbett interviewed Heine about her role as president. Given these additional interviews, in combination with Dame Kidu's departure from politics in 2012, the data is somewhat asymmetrical—there are more references here to Heine's and Fiamé's perspectives than to Dame Kidu's. We supplemented our more recent data with interviews Corbett conducted with Fiamé and Heine in 2011, as well as material from public sources such as the interview by Johnstone quoted above.

A detailed discussion of the women's biographies is beyond the scope of this article, but interested readers can learn more about them in other publications (see Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2018, 2019; Spark and Corbett 2020; Kidu 2002, 2015). Nevertheless, in order to gain further insight into the factors that have shaped the leaders' approaches to gender, we provide a brief account of their backgrounds and how they came to their positions.

As president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Heine was the first woman to head an independent Pacific Islands state, and between 2016 and 2019, she was one of only three women in the thirty-three-member Nitijela (Parliament). Heine became president in January 2016, supported by twenty-four senators, including two of her cousins. Her brother, the late Carl Heine, was a politician who served multiple terms in the Nitijela. Hilda Heine was the first Marshall Islander to be awarded a doctoral degree. She has had a distinguished career in education at senior levels in the Republic of the Marshall Islands and at the University of Hawai'i. After twelve years in Hawai'i, she returned to the Republic of the Marshall Islands to enter politics and served as minister of education from 2010 to 2015. The connection to Hawai'i and the continental United States is central to Marshallese politics, not only because of the large diasporic populations in those places and the remittances they provide but also because Marshall Islanders typically undertake their tertiary education overseas. Heine also cofounded Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), a vibrant and well-established women's nongovernmental organization that runs a range of programs designed "to advance the

causes and improve the lives of Marshallese women and their families” (WUTMI 2020).

Dame Carol Kidu was born in Australia and became a citizen of Papua New Guinea after marrying Buri Kidu, who later became the nation’s first Indigenous chief justice. Integrating into her husband’s Motu society, Kidu had four children and worked as a teacher while involving herself in local organizations, including the Business and Professional Women’s Club in Port Moresby, which she founded in the 1980s (Spark 2016). Three years after the premature death of her husband, Kidu sought permission from his family to run for Parliament. She determined that she would complete a maximum of three terms, a commitment she upheld when she retired from politics in 2012, having been a member of Parliament (MP) since 1997. During her second two terms, from 2002 to 2012, Kidu was the only female member of Parliament and served under Michael Somare as the minister for community development. When Peter O’Neill displaced the Somare government in January 2012, Kidu became the leader of the Opposition, making her the first woman to occupy this role in Papua New Guinea’s history.

In 2016, the Honorable Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa became the first woman to be appointed to the role of deputy prime minister of Sāmoa. She was elected along with three other women, as well as one woman who was appointed under the temporary special measures introduced to ensure that there will always be at least five women in Parliament. Fiamē’s credentials both within traditional Samoan society and as a parliamentarian are perhaps unmatched in this context. When she was in her twenties, as the daughter of the country’s first prime minister who was also a high chief, she earned the title Fiamē, one of the highest-ranking matai titles in Sāmoa. Leaving university in New Zealand to take up the responsibilities of the title in her district of Lotofaga, she entered politics in 1985 and has held various cabinet portfolios since then, including serving as education minister for fifteen years. In addition to her current role as deputy prime minister, Fiamē is the minister of natural resources and environment, a role she gained partly as a result of her outstanding reputation in the regional and international spheres. Like her mother before her, Fiamē maintains strong links with local women’s groups, including the Samoa National Council of Women (for further biography of Fiamē see Spark and Corbett 2020).

As can be seen from these brief descriptions, these three women are not representative of Pacific women as a whole. For a start, the three coun-

tries they come from have as many differences as similarities. Papua New Guinea has a population of over eight million and more than eight hundred languages, reflecting its incredible cultural diversity. In contrast, the Marshall Islands and Sāmoa have populations of approximately 55,000 and 200,000, respectively, and both are essentially culturally homogenous. Thus, while the countries share the deep historical experiences of German colonialism and missionization and participate in shared regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community, there is great variation between them. Nevertheless, all three women embody many of the characteristics common to Pacific politicians, whether male or female—including being educated to the tertiary level in overseas institutions (Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2018). As such, while not representative of Pacific women as a whole, gender aside, they are broadly typical of the political class. Moreover, as we outline later, all three share a common dilemma: how to articulate their relationship to feminism in male-dominated political environments (Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019). Despite the contextual diversity, it is this essentially similar experience that is our focus here.

DONORS, POLITICIANS, AND FEMINISM IN THE PACIFIC

Reflecting the critiques of development discourse above, the agenda of prioritizing support for increased women's political participation is sometimes seen by local women and men as divisive. Specifically, this emphasis on formal politics is critiqued for echoing the values and agendas of those providing aid rather than those of the Pacific women the funding is designed to support (for a discussion of these issues in Sāmoa, see Schoeffel and others 2017; Meleisea and others 2015). Indeed, debate about temporary special measures or reserved seats for women candidates has often created significant backlash and disharmony within Pacific societies (see Baker 2019).

Nevertheless, supporting women's political participation has been a priority within aid programs in the Pacific region in the last decade. In 2012, Australia's then prime minister, Julia Gillard, announced funding of A\$320 million (approximately US\$333.7 million) for Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, a program that continues to operate in various countries in the region. Within this program, promoting women's roles in "leadership and decision making" is the first of four intended outcomes (Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development 2017). Similarly,

the Australian Aid program’s gender equity strategy states that “enhancing women’s voice in decision-making, leadership and peace-building” is a priority (DFAT 2019). During the lead-up to elections in Papua New Guinea, Sāmoa, and the Marshall Islands, donors such as Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade worked with the United Nations Development Programme to deliver programs designed to encourage and support women candidates with their election campaigns (see Baker 2014, 2019; Meki 2015; Schoeffel and others 2017; Fiti-Sinclair and others 2017). Similarly, research on women’s leadership in the Pacific has also concentrated on the formal political realm, with a strong focus on the role of quotas and temporary special measures (Douglas 2002; Baker 2014, 2018; Corbett and Liki 2015; McLeod 2015).

In contrast to the donor focus on representative politics, scholars working on gender in the Pacific note that women are present and active outside of formal institutions. Isadora Quay, for example, argued that “leadership in Pacific women’s lives does not fit nicely into one category” (2012, 36), and Schoeffel and coauthors noted that were Sāmoa “to be judged on the extent of its gender equity based on gender indicators for education and employment it would compare favourably with many ‘developed’ countries” (2017, 6). Thus, while political leadership in the Pacific is typically in the hands of men, women’s participation in decision making and leadership varies widely across the nongovernmental, civil society space. Participation in movements, networks, and coalitions provides women with opportunities to influence the delivery of services and lobby governments to pay attention to issues of concern to them (McLeod 2015). Civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions in the Pacific have given women an opportunity to “challenge the status quo” in ways that are subtler than more overt, formal political processes (Dickson-Waiko 2003; McLeod 2015). Alongside these civil society spaces, church groups have long provided forums where women can gather for support, to fundraise, and to lead community activities and training (see Douglas 2003; Pollard 2003; McLeod 2015). These diverse forms and experiences of leadership highlight the need to go beyond merely providing support for women’s formal political participation. Some recent shifts in language and focus suggest that donors are beginning to take a more inclusive approach to women’s leadership in the region.

Nevertheless, as Bulbeck noted, there continue to be “unintended consequences of Western feminist development agendas” (2007, 60). As we argue here, this includes a tendency within donor and development agen-

cies, as well as among local activists and nongovernmental organizations, to misrecognize the Pacific as lacking feminism. Moreover, programs built on this premise promote an emphasis on women politicians who embody the opposite—namely, Pacific women politicians who have not only been elected but who can be presented as feminist role models within the media and communications produced by donor organizations and associated think tanks.

The problem for women politicians of the Pacific, as elsewhere, is that polarizing constructions of them as feminists (or not) may not only misrepresent them and undermine their own (sometimes “implicitly feminist”) political agendas but also damage their chances of reelection in contexts in which there is a high turnover of all politicians, both men and women (Baker 2018). Put simply, in the Pacific, as elsewhere, women who advocate too loudly for causes typically seen as feminist are at risk of being marginalized. Thus, senior women leaders are required to balance domestic political priorities with the priorities of the development community, in which prominent women leaders are expected to be feminist success stories. As these tensions play out, women leaders must navigate their stance on gender issues with caution and strategy.

This is not to say that there are no Pacific women who advocate and espouse explicit feminism. For example, Roshika Deo ran an overtly feminist and rights-based campaign in the 2014 elections in Fiji. Deo achieved a high personal vote but, running as an independent, failed to win a seat (Liki and Slatter 2015; Tarai and others 2015; Vakaoti 2017). Martha Macintyre, observing the spread of international human rights discourse among a new generation of women, including Deo, wrote: “There are two significant changes in the ways that women now voice their views when compared with conversations a decade ago. First, many are extraordinarily confident. Second, they regularly appeal to the notion of human rights” (2017, 12). Magazines such as *Stella* in Papua New Guinea (Spark 2014) and the edited collection *My Walk to Equality* (Bell 2017) provide evidence that Pacific women are embodying and exploring these progressive positions and views. But they rarely get elected to Parliament, let alone occupy high political office.

Without in any way discounting these more explicitly feminist articulations of gender now evident in the Pacific, it is important to note that the three leaders, like the majority of their political counterparts in the Global North, are generally less inclined to couch their discussions of gender and other forms of equity in the language of human rights or feminism. As

we suggested earlier, their approach is likely to have less to do with their personal beliefs about the value of promoting gender equity than with the pragmatism necessitated by their insider status as elected politicians, a situation that we argue is common among women politicians the world over. An examination of the positions embodied by female politicians in most contexts shows that female candidates and elected politicians who seek longevity are required to make pragmatic decisions about how they represent themselves with regard to feminist politics. And, as we contend here, some do so partly because they believe they can advance the cause of gender equity better by staying in power.

With these caveats about pragmatism in mind, the reflections of the three women leaders we discuss in this article certainly suggest that familial values, including the provision of education for girls, have shaped in each a commitment to advancing opportunities for girls and women. For instance, Heine attributes her own education to her upbringing, particularly her father's subscriptions to American magazines such as *Time* and *National Geographic*. The Heine family are known as having a strong commitment to education and public life. This is often linked to their missionary ancestor the Reverend Carl Russell Heine (1870–1943), one of many foreigners and their descendants who were embraced into Marshallese life in the nineteenth century (LaBriola 2019). Similarly, Fiamé says that her mother and her maternal grandparents “grasped the power of the pen” and that it was her mother, herself a parliamentarian and a very important influence in her life, who was determined to ensure that Fiamé could attend school in New Zealand, just as she herself had done. Kidu was a teacher and writer of school textbooks who saw firsthand the need to actively promote the education of Papua New Guinea's girls and women (Spark 2016).

These instances make clear that all three politicians have inherited a commitment to the importance of empowerment through education, something each has emphasized differently in her political life. While the empowerment of women through education no longer seems radical in many parts of the Pacific, it is nevertheless a powerful driver of change (O'Neil and Domingo 2016, 11). It is also the case that education underpins the electoral success of all three leaders, who now support other women as mentors and facilitators and fulfill an important symbolic role in demonstrating the capabilities of women and legitimizing women's leadership (O'Neil and Domingo 2016, 28). Heine's, Fiamé's, and Kidu's respective achievements in the field of education and as role models for

other women ensure that they will not be dismissed as having failed to live up to the feminist cause. Rather, in their roles as elected representatives, these women are contributing to change in their societies—change that in turn makes possible the articulation and practice of some of the more overt feminism emerging in the region. But their purpose is not the promotion of explicitly feminist goals as these might be construed in “white stream” feminism (Trask 1993) but rather something that we might call inclusive development—inclusive of not only girls and women but also boys and men who may themselves be marginalized from opportunities as a result of intersecting disadvantages, some of which are directly attributable to colonialism. As Hall wrote, “The reverberations of the past coexist with a thoroughly colonized present” (2009, 16). For these reasons—and as one of Fiamē’s friends, a self-declared feminist, said when discussing Fiamē’s contribution to gender equity in Sāmoa and the region—it is important to “look at what she has done!” as well as what she says (or does not say). We take her injunction as a guide in our discussion of the three women’s gender strategies in the remainder of the article.

WORKING IN A MALE-DOMINATED ENVIRONMENT

Pacific Island parliaments are largely male-dominated environments, reflecting their colonial institutional lineages, which are in some cases overlaid on gendered hierarchies that predate colonialism (George 2015; Jolly and Macintyre 1989; Macintyre 2019). While it is common for scholars to note the absence of Pacific women in formal politics—and indeed donors base their interventions on these numbers—here we do not seek to explain the deep histories of why this may be the case. Rather, our interest is in how some exceptional women have negotiated their way into positions of power in a field that, worldwide, rarely welcomes women. As discussed earlier, the product of these deep historical trends is that the three leaders face a common dilemma: whether to adopt an implicit or explicit feminist politics. What is interesting is that the three most successful women politicians in the region have each favored a more implicit approach, articulating common strategies they employ to navigate male-dominated environments: allowing men to take the lead, maintaining a strategic distance from the label “feminist” and from gender politics more broadly, and reframing issues as being about inclusion and development for everyone. These strategies are exemplified by Fiamē, who observed the relationship between women politicians and feminism in the following

terms: “I do know, with the more experienced women politicians that I’ve come across, they know how to play the game. I don’t think there are too many women politicians who are necessarily entrenched in gender feminist stuff. Very few.”

For Fiamē, women with an explicitly feminist agenda are unlikely to be politically successful. According to her, this was because the art of knowing “how to play the game” involves allowing men to take the lead and have ownership of new initiatives, particularly those relating to gender issues, such as implementing reserved seats (Baker 2014, 2018). Fiamē herself supported these reforms but allowed the prime minister to take the lead and much of the credit. She believes that allowing men to be associated with and even champion “women’s issues” (such as the gender quota reforms) has had the strategic effects of broadening support and avoiding the risk that such reforms would be misrepresented and dismissed as a preoccupation peculiar to her and the few other women in Parliament. Similar approaches have been observed elsewhere, such as in Rwanda and Uruguay, where, as Sonia Palmieri documented, women leaders reframed new laws addressing domestic violence and abortion reform in ways that ensured the support of male parliamentarians (2013, 74).

Fiamē’s observation echoes the findings of Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook, who argued that “critical actors” may intervene to support the interests of women, regardless of whether they themselves are women or whether there is a “critical mass” of women in politics in a particular country (2009). While some in the Samoan women’s movement expressed a hope that Fiamē would be more vocal in her support for gender equity goals, her strategy was seen as effective by others in Sāmoa, including a Samoan woman active in the women’s movement, who said, “I consider myself a feminist, but there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to advocate for transformation, and the longer I’ve lived here, the longer I appreciate it. If you’re going to take people along, Western approaches to feminism just do not work. They just don’t.”

Fiamē’s considered approach was also recognized by local men, one of whom noted that in Sāmoa, “you wouldn’t get up and make a song and dance about [getting women into Parliament]. You have to be subtle. You have to let the issue evolve.” Thus, Fiamē includes women in her political agenda but always frames this in terms of national development for all: “I have to be honest and say there are very few situations where it’s been really gender-specific, but it’s been about development for everyone. Most of the time I will talk to my male colleagues and just thrash out issues. It

didn't worry me one bit if they were the ones that took it up. I wasn't necessarily interested in sort of projecting about what I thought. It was more about getting something through."

Fiaame has always had an expansive view of her role as a politician, refusing to be constrained by her gender even as she recognizes that other women in Sāmoa are not in the same position. As one woman we spoke with commented, "I think she's very aware of getting up and doing a Joan of Arc thing, saying that all women should try for [politics]. No, she's not doing that because she would come in for a lot of criticism because people would say, 'Well, it's all right for you, you're single. You don't have to worry about a [husband and children].'"

Thus, while Fiaame "looks out for," inspires, and supports other women in politics, she has sometimes distanced herself from causes strongly associated with gender or regarded as "women's affairs." Her comment that her emphasis was on getting things through rather than projecting her own opinions reflects her commitment to achieving realistic political goals that benefit both women and men over symbolic statements about her own political ideology. Fiaame's strategy of investing her political capital in national issues that are not necessarily associated with women is not unusual for women politicians. As Jack Corbett and Asenati Liki noted, "Flagging broader issues while simultaneously downplaying the influence of their gender is a common strategy adopted by women leaders the world over" (2015, 339; see also Ribberink 2010).

Given the broad networks of relationships in which Pacific women are embedded, the agency of individual women is often seen as most effective when they work cooperatively with men. Family connections, including the support of senior male relatives, are crucial to political success for both men and women (Corbett 2015a). For women politicians to prioritize a personal feminist identity over their other social relationships is understood by many as a risk to maintaining support among men and more conservative women. As Yvonne Underhill-Sem and coauthors explained, "In the Pacific, where gender relations sit at the intersections of other forms of relations considered by Pacific Islanders to be equally, if not more, important—for example, familial, generational, sociocultural, religious, and political relations—meddling with one of these at the expense of the others is likely to produce resistance and noncooperation" (2016, 26).

However, this is not an argument for an unchangeable traditionalist status quo. Put more positively, successful social change relies on building coalitions that include relevant, influential partners who may have differ-

ent interests and ideologies but share the same goals (Hudson and others 2018). For Pacific women leaders, this means working to gain the support of men, as none of these individuals operate in contexts with a critical mass of women in politics (Childs and Krook 2009). As Tam O’Neil and Pilar Domingo argued in their review of women’s voice and agency, “Women’s political influence therefore also depends on their ability to make strategic alliances with the men who are often the leaders and gatekeepers and/or among themselves in order to achieve progress” (2016, 11). In the small-scale societies of the Pacific where “everybody knows everybody” (Corbett 2015b), informal women’s networks also allow women access to a range of male decision makers through their wives, relatives, and other connections (a form of “bridging” social capital [Hwang and Wu 2019]). President Heine, for example, was supported in the Nitijela by several male cousins and had a close relationship with the late Tony deBrum, an internationally respected Marshallese politician and diplomat who strongly supported gender equality reforms.

Like Fiamé and Heine, Dame Kidu talked about taking her initiatives a certain distance and then handing these over when she knew they needed “big man” backing. Indicating that she did this with numerous policies she worked on, Kidu said she did so because she knew this would be more effective than having certain policies associated with her. This strategy and Kidu’s consistent self-representation as “not a feminist” indicate the importance of women politicians creating strategic distance from the label “feminist,” if not the gender agenda in Pacific politics.

This can be a fine line. As Kidu commented, “I was looking at the gender issues . . . although I’d never see myself as a ‘feminist.’” Such declarations may be frustrating for donors wishing to see such an agenda promoted in the region, but, as noted earlier, in the Pacific, maintaining a focus on inclusive development is crucial. Nevertheless, as evident in Kidu’s concerted effort to implement reserved seats for women in Papua New Guinea’s national Parliament, not identifying as a feminist does not preclude a commitment to women’s inclusion at all levels of the political system.

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL AND WOMEN’S NETWORKS

While all politicians have their confidants and mentors, for women, the friendship of other women is important for working within a male-dominated field such as parliamentary politics (Childs 2014; Devere and

Curtin 2009). Only other women in similar positions can empathize with the personal impacts of men's petty harassment, belittling behavior, and exclusion or sidelining that are typical of women's experiences of public life. Corbett and Liki have documented the loneliness of Pacific women in politics and their experiences of corrosive male gossip, bullying, and other sexist exclusionary behavior (2015). Women often draw together in these hostile circumstances, and "the bonds formed between women friends can become a form of collective action that can produce political change" (Devere and Smith 2010, 352; see also Hwang and Wu 2019 on "bonding" social capital). Unfortunately, as the only woman elected, Dame Kidu did not have this support from other women in Parliament during two of her three terms, and she commented that during her first term when Dame Josephine Abaijah was still in, various efforts to connect with her were fruitless.

Since the 2016 election in Sāmoa, there have been five women in Parliament (where previously there had been typically one or two, including Fiamē). When we spoke with members of this small but impressive cohort, they described their support for one another, with Honourable Gatoloaifaana Amataga Alesana-Gidlow, for example, saying that it has always been good to have Fiamē there in Parliament because "it is easier to relate to another woman than to the men." Another, Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau, who was elected after a very focused campaign in 2016 (Baker 2018), said that Fiamē not only gave her invaluable advice regarding her campaign strategy but also appears to be responding positively herself to having more women around her in Parliament: "Personally [since we got the numbers] I find that Fiamē is really stepping up. . . . When she was the only one, or maybe only two of them, well she was always there making her point but when there's a group of us, I find that she is really, really, it's a great difference I see now. From the Fiamē I usually observe[d] from outside before I enter[ed], she has really stepped up."

This sentiment was echoed by a woman active in the Samoan women's movement, who said that she has known Fiamē for a long time but noticed a change in her in the lead-up to and following the 2016 election in which Fiamē was appointed deputy prime minister. She attributed this to what she saw as Fiamē's increasing awareness that she was supported by other women and to her beginning to trust that "there were actually women in this country who were actively working towards getting her to be deputy prime minister . . . and maybe pushing for her eventually to be the prime minister. . . . We carried out a lot of affirmative action and activities to

support women . . . who wanted to get into Parliament . . . so maybe those kinds of activities made her see that, yes, . . . there are a lot of women in the country that will support it.”

In contrast, when women do not experience female solidarity, the matter of loneliness in politics can be exacerbated, as they typically perceive a need to maintain clear boundaries between themselves and their male colleagues, something that is perhaps particularly important in the small, conservative societies of the Pacific. Discussing her reputation among male politicians for being standoffish, Fiamé said, “I have to be so careful around males and how I relate to them, because with my women colleagues it’s very easy to be a lot more intimate, do girl talk, but with guys, not really, so it gave me pause in terms of, you know, how does that impact on my working relationship with them?”

While there are signs that things have been different in the 2016–2021 Samoan Parliament, the loneliness that Fiamé admits to experiencing in politics has historically been offset by her friendships and connections with the women’s networks outside of Parliament. She actively maintains her roles in women’s groups and organizations, including her role as the long-serving president of the Samoan National Council of Women and as the leader of the Women in Advocacy Network (WinLA). Discussing the personal significance of these roles, Fiamé commented, “I’ll tell you, with my strong link with women’s groups, and when I go to women’s meetings, . . . I get this energy from them. And that’s a part of the reason why I still keep up those networks. Because they sustain me. And because, also, when you’re in that grouping, you can actually just focus on women, whereas in politics you’re just focusing on everything and keeping an eye out for women.”

The knowledge, political savvy, and moral support that these networks provide enable women politicians to respond to the draining emotional work that they undertake in ways that are not expected of—or simply not taken up by—men (Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2018). Kidu has reflected on the emotional labor that women politicians are often expected to perform with their constituents: “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 . . . facing the problems that people face, and the fact that you feel powerless to help them, but you know they desperately need help.”

Like Fiamé, Kidu has rich networks of trusted women friends, many

of which have coalesced around and been developed through particular causes or organizations, including, for example, the Business and Professional Women's Club Port Moresby, which hosts a long-running scholarship program for girls (Spark 2016). Such groups attract a cohort of elite women who, according to political scientist Orovu Sepoe, play a "vanguard role" in creating political space for women (2000, 195). Similarly, Kidu has worked with other Papua New Guinean women in Port Moresby to establish the Women in Leadership (in the public service) initiative (see Spark 2016).

Personal friendships and women's groups of this kind create spaces that allow women's leadership to be nurtured outside of the direct purview of male influence. This resets women's expectations of themselves, as their capabilities become more visible to each other and are therefore more highly valued. In the Marshall Islands, women's friendships provide the opportunity for more experienced women to mentor and inspire younger women. One staff member from WUTMI described the support she feels from the personal engagement of several great Marshallese women leaders: "It is great having Hilda [President Hilda Heine], Marie [Marie Madison, another senior woman with a distinguished record of leadership within the Marshallese civil service], and Daisy [Senator Daisy Alik-Momotaro, another current woman parliamentarian and a past cofounder and director of WUTMI] there to back me up. . . . They are the smartest people of their generation. They have cultural knowledge, and they are very well-rounded. Carmen Bigler [the first Marshallese woman to graduate with a degree and the first woman to serve in the Congress of Micronesia, the predecessor of the Nitijela] is also always correcting me."

Such friendships provide an example of the kind of collective action envisaged by Heather Devere and Graham Smith (2010). For decades, these women have come together with like-minded friends in private and through their membership on boards and campaign committees. Together they have planned campaigns, strategized about reforms, reframed debates, shared information, laughed at ridiculous behavior by men, and become trusted confidants for each other, providing important moral support that has enabled them to be effective leaders in public life. Over time, their behind-the-scenes work has created space for new generations of women to develop professional careers and other leadership roles, including senior public service positions. The personal connections shared among this cohort of women have also resulted in a vibrant women's movement, as exemplified by the founding of WUTMI.

At other times, these networks come together in formal settings, such as donor-driven programs that aim to increase the number of women in Parliament. These programs are frequently criticized for being culturally insensitive, for importing campaigning models from industrialized countries with strong party systems, and for simply turning up too late to make a difference (Zeitlin 2014, 159; see also Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2018). Despite these shortcomings, sometimes such events provide opportunities to build networks among women. In 2011, in advance of the Marshall Islands national election, the United Nations Development Programme ran a training program for women interested in entering politics. This included staging a mock Parliament, in which program participants were brought into the Nitijela, introduced to parliamentary rules, and given the opportunity to make speeches. This process allowed women to collectively reimagine themselves as rightfully belonging in that space and to meet with other women who were serious about being political actors.

However, what women experienced as an energizing affirmation, men saw as threatening. Male senators complained that they would have to replace all of the chairs in the Nitijela because they could not sit where a woman had sat. Some Pacific societies, including the Marshall Islands, do have traditional taboos of this kind, but they are not generally applied in “modern” settings such as offices, taxis, or parliaments (although see Macintyre 2011). The women saw this reaction as infantile and unbecoming of the nation’s supposed leaders. The backlash immediately became a source of ridicule and delegitimized the men’s standing while legitimizing the women’s aspirations. Years later, women find the story amusing. As they look back, they view the mock Parliament as a watershed moment when women (collectively and as individuals) saw themselves as credible political actors.

While few women have since been elected to the Nitijela, Heine and other women regard the event as a catalyst for an increase in women candidates, particularly in local government. Moreover, the influence of these women in politics, particularly in Heine’s case, goes beyond their small numbers to make them “critical actors”: “legislators who initiate policy proposals on their own and/or embolden others to take steps to promote policies for women, regardless of the numbers of female representatives” (Childs and Krook 2009, 138).

Women’s organizations play an important role in framing issues (O’Neill and Domingo 2016, 24). WUTMI, for example, has been very careful to build its platform for women’s rights on a foundation of Mar-

shallese tradition that is respectful of women. This has included ongoing conversations with older Marshall Islanders, particularly *leroj* (female chiefs), in an effort to recover and revitalize cultural traditions that speak of women's authority and dignity. Matrilineal land tenure, for example, is sometimes claimed as evidence of women's traditionally high status in Marshallese society, but this respected status does not immediately translate into political power, particularly in contemporary systems that are influenced by patriarchal norms from Christianity and colonial powers (Huffer 2008, 13). As one senior woman leader put it, "We are matrilineal. So even though the land passes through the woman, through the mother, society always looks to the man as the one who will take the leadership role because they were the ones who go out and do the hard work, war, and so on. This is when we started to support the women in their role as head of the clan. Because traditionally they would delegate that authority to the younger brother to be the *alap*, the head of the clan."

Tradition is always subject to contestation and WUTMI has become involved in arguments about what titles women may hold. In 2005, following a land dispute on Kwajalein, the Nitijela proposed restrictions on women holding the title of *alap*. However, WUTMI successfully campaigned using the argument that women had always been eligible to be *alap* (Huffer 2008, 19). According to the senior woman just quoted, WUTMI, led by Carmen Bigler at that time, marshalled traditional leaders and showed deep knowledge of local traditions:

There was a resolution of the Nitijela that would disallow women to have that title, *alap*, because they said that's a male title. So WUTMI worked very hard with the traditional leaders, women traditional leaders, to make sure that that resolution would not move forward, and it did not.

Because, you know, in some domains they said only men can, but from our experience in Majuro, for example, women have always been the *alap*, the head of the clan. Even though they had a younger brother, they never gave it to their younger brother because their younger brother's heart was with the wife and everything went to the wife and he did not care about the clan and the members of the clan. So the older aunts and the older sisters knew this, so they never delegated that role. That's what WUTMI really helped to ensure—that women can hold that title.

WUTMI has been strategic in taking Marshallese proverbs and using them to reframe debates about women's rights. The reference to the brother's heart being with the wife is a nod to the popular proverb that describes women as "the basket facing in (to the clan)" and men as "the

basket facing away (from the clan)” (see Huffer 2008, 12), a characterization echoed in Sāmoa, where women are associated with the “back of the house” and men, the front (see Meleisea and others 2015; Schoeffel and others 2017). Women are seen as having the long-term interests of the clan at heart, unlike men, who leave and join other clans. Sometimes traditional norms around motherhood and child-rearing are reclaimed and used to women’s advantage (O’Neill and Domingo 2016, 24; Anderson 2009).

In the Marshall Islands context, there is evidence that cultural traditions that have affinities with feminist principles are being reaffirmed in ways that have shifted social norms and created space for law reform and women’s leadership without attracting the backlash that has been experienced elsewhere. In the conflict over the *alap* title, for example, WUTMI was able to position itself as the defender of tradition and therefore occupy an essentially conservative position (Rudiak-Gould 2013, 47–48). These strategic reframings are the work of decades of deep thinking, collaboration, discussion, and influence (and should not be confused with the cosmetic communications strategies of public relations campaigns). Heine, for example, described decades of collaboration among educated Marshallese women, dating back to her own return from US college education in the 1970s:

When I came back, I started working as a classroom teacher, and there was a group of women; these were just recently graduated from college. There were a number of us, and we started to get together and form a group very early on. And that group . . . was the predecessor to WUTMI; it was another group, Jined Ilo Kobo [“our mother forever,” an ancient Marshallese saying (Tobin 2002, 143)]. And we were all active in civic discussions. We were interested in looking at the issues and social change and what is happening to our communities and what can we do as women, and that started to raise my consciousness about issues and how individuals can help with issues.

These long-term processes of social change, movement building, and strategic reframing operate well beyond the kinds of formal institutional time frames that aid agencies are able to conceptualize within their own (typically three-to-five-year) program logics. Nevertheless, it is possible for aid agencies to assist women’s organizations in ways that support long-term social change, particularly if they maintain that support over time. Heine believes the consistent support of donor partners—including Australia—for work on domestic violence was an important enabling

contribution to the process of change. But neither she nor Fiamé see violence as cultural; rather, they see it as something evident in all societies and across strata within them. Their approaches reveal the importance of international gender norms and relationships with donors in gradually shifting understandings of gender in the Pacific, while also reflecting an implicit refusal to reiterate gender divisions in the same ways as “white stream” feminism.

CONCLUSION

In our introduction, we discussed Fiamé’s radio interview to make the point that progressive outsiders and donors look for and identify feminism as it is defined in the Global North. Suggesting that this reflects a deficit approach in which local women’s ways of addressing gender are seen as falling short of feminism, we situated our discussion through reference to arguments made by women in the Global South about their relation to this version of feminism. We further suggested that taking a dogmatic or imperialist approach to what counts as feminism takes insufficient account of the complex terrain that elected women have to navigate politically. Women politicians—whether in the Pacific, in other developing contexts, or in the Global North—must work within the system, making strategic decisions about how best to represent themselves and build support for particular issues. In any context, identifying explicitly as a “feminist” is a minor consideration when doing so may undermine relationships, divert attention from more strategic framings of issues, risk marginalizing women further, or produce backlash.

Through our discussion of three senior women leaders, we have clearly shown that while Pacific women in politics may not necessarily govern with an explicit or publicly articulated feminist ideology, they do engage in feminist practice. Specifically, we identified strategies that they have articulated, both explicitly and implicitly, for working with men and building up networks of support that have the effect of advancing both women’s issues and the careers of the women advocating for them. Thus, we argue that regardless of whether they publicly identify as feminists, these successful politicians are certainly contributing to feminist practice in a range of ways, including through informal institutions such as friendship groups and more traditional civil society actors such as women’s rights nongovernmental organizations. We have referred to the way they do so as “implicit feminism” to reflect this. Indeed, these senior women politi-

cians often gain considerable political mileage from distancing themselves both from those who defend conservative, patriarchal institutions and from outspokenly feminist nongovernmental organizations and donors. In this sense, they are similar to most senior women politicians around the world. Consequently, the key distinction is not whether these women are feminists according to a Western/non-Western binary but rather that they are advocating for change from within established institutions rather than from the outside.

Those who would criticize our use of the label “implicit” to describe the leaders’ feminist strategies might say that by attempting to justify incremental change we are excusing or defending conservative institutions. This is not our intention. Rather, like scholars who have written about “stealth feminism,” we suggest that our use of “implicit feminism” is best understood “not as a fear of controversy but rather as a strategic choice for engaging controversy” (Laliberté and others 2017). The stance of these three leaders does not delegitimize a more radical approach. Indeed, we have explicitly stated that they often gain considerable political capital from defining themselves against nongovernmental organizations and international donors while at the same time shifting attitudes toward support of gender equity. Our approach provides a way of thinking about gender politics in the contemporary Pacific outside of the outdated categories of “traditional” and “modern,” “Western” and “non-Western.” It also acknowledges that there are many ways of practicing transformative politics, including the pragmatic path chosen by these women leaders, and that each has its merits. By paying attention to the variety of Pacific feminisms, including the internal diversity of experiences and beliefs about how changes to gender relations should occur, we hope we have elucidated the value of honoring the voices of the Pacific women who practice politics.

We finish with a quotation from the work of Sara Ahmed. While she was writing about “the East,” not the Pacific Islands, her inspiring and poetic work captures the ideas we have explored in this article: “It might be assumed that feminism travels from West to East. It might be assumed that feminism is what the West gives to the East. That assumption is a traveling assumption, one that tells a feminist story in a certain way, a story that is much repeated; a history of how feminism acquired utility as an imperial gift. That is not my story. We need to tell other feminist stories” (Ahmed 2017, 4).

* * *

WE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE *the three leaders who gave their time and spoke with us for this research. It would not have been possible without them. We also thank the Developmental Leadership Program and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for funding that enabled the research.*

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Abstract

Much popular and academic analysis of Pacific politics, especially on issues of gender, juxtaposes foreign “Western” norms and institutions with “traditional” beliefs and customs. Despite considerable scholarship debunking these caricatures, they persist and indeed have (re)gained salience in debates about the absence of women in parliamentary politics. In this article, we critique this framing by describing how senior women politicians practice a form of “quiet” or “implicit” feminism. Drawing on in-depth interviews with three senior politicians, Dr Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands, Deputy Prime Minister Fiaame Naomi Mata’afa of Sāmoa, and Dame Carol Kidu of Papua New Guinea, as well as with other observers and supporters of their careers, we illustrate how these women position themselves as pragmatists—as neither the champions of liberal feminist principles that some local activists and international donors would like nor as conservative as most of their male colleagues. We further show that both their articulation of and their relationship to feminism are remarkably similar to those of other senior women politicians from elsewhere in the world who eschew the label but pursue substantive representation. In making this claim, we aim to reframe understandings of Pacific feminism by shifting the focus away from the Western/non-Western binary and instead toward a distinction between women who seek change from within established parliamentary systems and those who seek to push an agenda from the outside.

KEYWORDS: representation, feminism, leadership, gender quotas, Pacific Islands, life history