**“Keeping an eye out for women”: Implicit Feminism, Political Leadership and Social Change in the Pacific Islands**

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**Introduction**

In November 2011, Fiame 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* 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). Fiame’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 others in their community.

When the interview continues Johnstone suggests that, as the Chair of the University of the South Pacific (USP), Fiame is probably interested in establishing a course on Women’s Studies at the university. Again, Fiame steers 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 is perhaps a more important agenda. Specifically, referring to a conversation with Marjorie Crocombe, an author, academic, and the first Cook Islander to graduate from USP with a PhD, Fiame says that she and Crocombe discussed that “in the early days … the university had no Pacific spirit ... [or] content.” She notes that it is still a challenge for USP “to try and build that” (Johnstone 2011).

Persisting, Johnstone tries 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?” Fiame responds: “[I]t’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 returns 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 for example, Finau 2017; Renshaw 1986; Secretariat of the Pacific Community n.d.). For instance, encapsulating commonly expressed local perspectives, Schoeffel, Measina, and Fiti-Sinclair (2017, 10) write: “When gender inequality issues are mentioned in Samoa 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” (see also Meleisea and others 2015). Similarly, Haunani Kay Trask (1993, 264) argues that “The best life Hawaiians ever enjoyed existed long ago, before the coming of white people to our land” while Kahaleole Hall writes: “[a]t 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: the Cree/ Metis feminist scholar, Kim Anderson, observes, for example, that settler colonialism itself was patriarchal and forcibly displaced indigenous ways of being where women held more political power (Anderson 2009, 119).

Such statements illustrate that, like their counterparts in other developing country contexts and indigenous women in colonized contexts, Pacific women have argued 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 for example Abaijah 1991; Molisa 1985; Naupa 2017). This perspective is encapsulated by indigenous Australian academic, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000, 69) who writes 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. It is also evident in the work of Lisa Kahaleole Hall who argues that the denigration of cultures that was part and parcel of colonialism means that “the project of decolonization is inherently multifaceted” (2008, 279). For these reasons, Trask argues: “[st]ruggle 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 for example Kahaleole Hall 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Trask 1993). For instance, prioritizing the development of a “Pacific spirit” at USP over and above the development of Women’s Studies, Fiame appears to be elevating what Trask (1993) calls “collective self-determination” rather than individual women’s rights. Her suggestion that male *matai* who include and work to develop the lives of all those in their communities are “good feminists” is similarly inclusive, suggesting the resonance of 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 Kahaleole Hall (2009, 26) has argued, “many activist indigenous women” disavow feminism because they perceive it to be “a discourse of white Western women” and as “inherently divisive to the strength of the “people” or nation as a whole” (2009, 26). These arguments echo those made by Mohanty and others who claim 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. For these writers, Western feminism envisions women as individual rights-bearing subjects, thereby erasing older forms of women’s power grounded in collective identities and esteemed roles, such as motherhood and connection to land (Anderson 2009; Green 2007; Jolly 1996; Kahaleole Hall 2008: 277ff. See also the discussion of the Marshall Islands women’s NGO WUTMI below).

While there has been a concerted effort to show that so called traditional cultures are not always patriarchal, there has been a corresponding 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” (Banivanua-Mar 2007, 59) associated with liberal institutions (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 “third world women” as aid recipients, Chilla Bulbeck (2007, 60) argues that they have their own agendas which “will not always be ‘feminist’ in Western terms”. She further suggests 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” (see also Narayanaswamy 2016; Runyan 2018; Tiessen 2015). The ni-Vanuatu leader and poet, Grace Molisa (1985, 217) 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” (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 levels of women elected to parliaments, and 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 (2001, 95) notes, 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.

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; Fiame 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 which seek to avoid the “artificial distinction between men and women” (Kahaleole Hall 2008, 277) that they perceive to characterize white Western feminism and which is seen to be unhelpful in their contexts.

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 upon which our contribution to these debates turns. In Australia, the 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 the 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 that do appear to be more comfortable with the movement typically focus on promoting gender equality, rather than feminism per se. New Zealand’s prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, notes for example: “I’m a pragmatist … so when I talk about feminism I talk about equality” (The Spinoff 2018; see also Zucker 2004).

The similarities in how senior women leaders from around the world articulate their relationship to feminism means it is worth questioning the utility of the “Western/ non-Western” binary for understanding contemporary gender relations in the Pacific. The key difference between these leaders and the liberal articulation of feminism common to both local NGOs and international donors is the inherent pragmatism of their message; their view of change is incremental or iterative. The women leaders we studied, particularly Fiame Mata’afa and President Heine are both 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 policymaking processes. The key distinction then is not between “West” and “non-West”, “traditional” or “modern”, but rather between those women who are seeking change from within established parliamentary systems and those who seek 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 which nevertheless may depart from a more ideologically circumscribed agenda advanced by local activists, NGOs and donor agencies.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide 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 paper. 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 for example; 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 internal women’s groups provide a helpful base 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 had success 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 consider whether there were patterns we could identify in their pathways in and through politics which 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, this included three in-depth interviews with Fiame, and one each with Dame Kidu and President Heine. We also interviewed people in the Marshall Islands, Sāmoa or other contexts but who know and have worked with Fiame. Since 2017, the first author has conducted a further two interviews with Fiame as part of a biographical project about her (in 2019; see Spark and Corbett 2020) and the third author a further interview with Heine about her role as President. These additional interviews, in combination with Dame Kidu’s departure from politics in 2012 mean that the data is somewhat asymmetric - there are more references here to Heine and Fiame’s perspectives than to those of Dame Kidu. We triangulated the data with information, including interviews conducted by the third author with Fiame and Heine in 2011 and material from public sources, including for example the interview by Johnstone to which we have already referred.

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 for e.g. Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2018, 2019; Spark and Corbett 2020; Kidu, 2002; 2015). Nevertheless, in order to gain further insight into the factors that shape the leaders’ approach 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 (RMI), Dr Hilda Heine was the first woman to head an independent Pacific Islands state. She was one of only three women in the 33-member Nitijela (parliament) between 2016 and 2019. Heine became President in January 2016 supported by 24 senators, including two of her cousins. Her brother, the late Carl Heine, was a politician who served multiple terms in the Nitijela. Heine was the first Marshallese to be awarded a doctoral degree. She has had a distinguished career in education at senior levels in the RMI and, for twelve years, at the University of Hawai’i, before returning to RMI to enter politics, serving as Minister of Education from 2010-2015. The Hawaii and US connection is central to Marshallese politics, both because of the large diaspora population and the remittances it provides, but also because Marshallese typically undertake their tertiary education overseas. Heine was a co-founder of Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), a vibrant and well-established women’s NGO that runs a range of programs designed “to advance the causes and improve the lives of Marshallese women and their families” (WUTMI n.d.).

Dame Carol Kidu is Australian-born and became a Papua New Guinean after marrying Buri Kidu who later was the first indigenous Chief Justice. Integrating into her husband’s Motu society, she 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 the 2002-2012 periods, Kidu was the only female MP and served under Somare as the Minister for Community Development. When Peter O’Neill displaced the Somare government in January 2012, Dame Carol became the leader of the Opposition, making her the first woman to occupy this role in PNG’s history.

In 2016, the Honorable Fiame Naomi Mata’afa became the first woman to be appointed to the role of Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) of Sāmoa. She was elected along with three other women and one who got in under the temporary special measures introduced to ensure there will always be at least five women in Parliament. Fiame’s credentials both within traditional Samoan society as well as a parliamentarian are perhaps unmatched in this context. As the daughter of the country’s first Prime Minister who was also a high chief, in her twenties she earned the title Fiame, 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 DPM, Fiame 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, Fiame maintains strong links with local women’s groups including the Samoa National Council of Women (for further biography of Fiame 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 countries they come from have as many differences as similarities. Papua New Guinea’s population is over eight million and has more than 800 languages reflecting its incredible cultural diversity, the population of the Marshall Islands is approximately 55,000 and Sāmoa 200,000 and both are essentially culturally homogenous. Thus, while the countries share the deeper historical experiences of German colonialism and Christian missions, 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 tertiary level in overseas institutions (Spark and others 2018). As such, while not representative of Pacific women as a whole, gender aside, they are broadly typically of the political class. Moreover, as we will outline, all three share a common dilemma (Spark and others 2019): how to articulate their relationship to “feminism" in male dominated political environments. 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 to the value of AUD $320,000 million for Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, a program that continues to run across 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](https://pacificwomen.org/about-us/our-approach) Women Shaping Pacific Development n.d.). 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 n.d.). During the lead up to elections in PNG, Sāmoa and the Marshall Islands, donors such as Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) worked with United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 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 formal institutions. Isadora Quay (2012, 36), for example, argues that “Leadership in Pacific women’s lives does not fit nicely into one category,” and Schoeffel and others (2017, 6) note 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”. 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 non-governmental, 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, conduct fundraising, and 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 (2007, 60) notes, there continue to be “unintended consequences of Western feminist development agendas.” As we argue here, this includes a tendency within donor and development agencies, as well as among local activists and NGOs, to misrecognize the Pacific as “lacking” feminism. Moreover, programs built on this premise promote an emphasis on women politicians that 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 re-election in contexts in which there is a high turnover of all politicians, whether male or female (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, such as Deo, writes: “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 PNG (Spark 2014), *My Walk to Equality*, the edited collection by Rashmii Amoah Bell (2017), and discussions on the podcast “Who Asked Her?” provide ample 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 discussion of gender and other forms of equity in the language of human rights or feminism. As we have suggested above, 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 argue here, some do so partly because they perceive 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 paper 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 Rev. 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, Fiame says that her mother and her maternal grandparents “grasped the power of the pen” and that it was Fiame’s mother, herself a parliamentarian and a very important influence in her life, who was determined to ensure that Fiame could attend school in New Zealand, just as she herself had done. Dame Carol Kidu was a teacher and writer of school textbooks who saw firsthand the need to actively promote the education of PNG’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 differently emphasized in their political lives. 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’Neill 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 legitimating women’s leadership (O’Neill and Domingo 2016, 28). Heine, Fiame and Kidu’s respective achievements in the field of education and as role models for other women ensure that they not be dismissed as having “failed” to live up to the feminist cause. Rather, in their role as elected representatives these women are contributing to change in their societies, change which 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 girls and women, but also of 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 Kahaleole Hall writes: “[t]he reverberations of the past coexist with a thoroughly colonized present” (2009, 16). For these reasons and as one of Fiame’s friends, a self-declared feminist, said when discussing Fiame’s contribution to gender equity in Sāmoa and the region, it is important to “[l]ook at what she has DONE!”, as well as what she says (or doesn’t). We take her injunction as a guide in our discussion of the gender strategies of all three women in the remainder of the article.

**Working in a Male-Dominated Environment**

Pacific Islands parliaments are largely male-dominated environments, reflecting their colonial institutional lineages, which are in some cases overlaid on gendered hierarches 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 makes women welcome. As above, the product of these deep historical trends is that each of 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 navigating male dominated environments: allowing men to take the lead; maintaining a strategic distance from the label “feminist” and gender politics more broadly; and reframing issues as being about inclusion and “development for everyone”. These strategies are exemplified by Fiame 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 Fiame, 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). Fiame 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 the cases from Rwanda and Uruguay documented by Palmieri (2013, 74, where women leaders reframed new laws addressing domestic violence and abortion reform in ways that ensured the support of male parliamentarians.

Fiame’s observation echoes the findings of Childs and Krook (2009) who argue that “critical actors” may intervene to support the interests of women, regardless of whether they themselves are women or whether there are a “critical mass” of women in politics in a particular country. While some in the Samoan women’s movement expressed a hope that Fiame 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.”

Fiame’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, Fiame includes women but always frames this in terms of national development for everyone:

I have to be honest and say there are very few situations where it’s [my political agenda] 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.

Fiame 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 Fiame “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, “I wasn’t necessarily interested in projecting about what I thought. It was more about getting something through” reflects her commitment to achieving realistic political goals that benefit both women and men over symbolic statements about her own political ideology. Fiame’s strategy of investing her political capital in national issues not associated with women is not unusual for women politicians. As Jack Corbett and Asenati Liki (2015, 339) note, “Flagging broader issues while simultaneously downplaying the influence of their gender is a common strategy adopted by women leaders the world over” (see also Ribberink 2010).

The broad networks of relationships in which Pacific women are embedded have often meant that the agency of individual women is seen as most effective when working 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 their support among men and more conservative women:

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 non-cooperation (Underhill-Sem and others 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 different 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 context where there are a “critical mass” of women in politics (Childs and Krook 2009). As O’Neill and Domingo (2016, 11) argue 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...” 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 (parliament) 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 Fiame 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 if certain policies were 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 comments “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 above in the Pacific, maintaining a focus on inclusive development is crucial. Nevertheless, as is evident in Kidu’s concerted effort to implement reserved seats for women in PNG’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 confidantes 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 “side-lining” that are typical of women’s experiences of public life. Corbett and Liki (2015) document the loneliness of Pacific women in politics and their experiences of corrosive male gossip, bullying, and other sexist exclusionary behavior. 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 Carol Kidu did not have this support from other women in parliament during two of her three terms and comments 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 was typically one or two, including Fiame). Speaking with this small but impressive cohort they describe their support of one another, with Honourable Gatoloaifaana Amataga Alesana Gidlow, for example, saying that it has always been good to have Fiame 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), says that Fiame not only gave her invaluable advice regarding her campaign strategy, but observed that Fiame herself is responding positively to having more women around her in parliament: “Personally [since we got the numbers] I find that Fiame 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 Fiame I usually observe from outside before I enter, 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 Fiame for a long time but noticed a change in her in the lead up to and after the 2016 election when Fiame was appointed deputy prime minister. She attributed this to what she saw as Fiame’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 in to 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.”

When they do not experience female solidarity, the matter of loneliness in politics can be exacerbated because women typically perceive a need to maintain clear boundaries between themselves and their male colleagues, something which is perhaps particularly important in the small, conservative societies of the Pacific. Discussing her reputation among male politicians for being “stand-offish,” Fiame 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 things have been different in the most recent Samoan Parliament, the loneliness that Fiame admits to experiencing in politics has historically been offset by her friendships and connections with the women’s networks outside parliament. She actively maintains her role in women’s groups and organizations, including 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, Fiame comments: “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 are important for being able to respond to the draining emotional work that women politicians undertake in ways that men are not expected to (Spark and others 2018) or simply do not take up. 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 Fiame, Kidu has rich networks of trusted women friends, many of whom have coalesced around and been developed through particular causes or organizations, including for example, the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Port Moresby, which hosts a long-running scholarships program for girls (Spark 2016). Groups like BPW attract a cohort of elite women, who, according to political scientist Orovu Sepoe, play a “vanguard role” in creating political space for women (Sepoe 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 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 the NGO WUTMI explained the support that she feels from the personal engagement of several great Marshallese women leaders:

It is great having Hilda [President Hilda Heine], Marie [Maddison, 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 co-founder 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 women to graduate with a degree and the first woman to serve in the Congress of Micronesia, the predecessor to the Marshall Islands parliament or Nitijela] is also always correcting me.

Such friendships provide an example of the kind of collective action envisaged by Devere and Smith (2010). For decades, these women have come together with like-minded friends in private and through the membership of 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 between this cohort of women have also built a vibrant women’s movement, particularly in founding the NGO, Women United Together Marshall Islands (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 and others 2018). Despite these shortcomings, sometimes such events provide opportunities to build networks among women. In 2011, in advance of the Marshall Islands national election, UNDP ran training for women interested in entering politics. This included staging a “mock parliament”, where program participants were brought into the Nitijela (parliament), 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 was threatening to men. Male senators complained that they would have to replace all the chairs in the Nitijela as 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 the parliament (although see Macintyre 2011). For the women, this reaction was seen as infantile and unbecoming of the nation’s supposed leaders. The backlash immediately became a source of ridicule and so delegitimated the men’s standing while legitimating the women’s aspirations. Women find the story amusing years later. As they look back, the mock parliament was a watershed moment where women (collectively and as individuals) saw themselves as credible political actors.

Few women have since been elected to the Nitijela but President Heine and other women view 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 have 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 Marshallese tradition that is respectful of women. This has included ongoing conversations with older Marshallese, particularly leroij (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 (Stege and others 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 Kwajelein, the Nitijela proposed restrictions on women holding the title *alap*. However, WUTMI successfully campaigned using the argument that women had always been eligible to be *alaps* (Stege and others 2008, 19). According to the senior woman quoted above, 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. … 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 above to “the brother’s heart being with the wife” is a nod to the popular proverb of women as “the basket facing in (to the clan)” and men as “the basket facing away (from the clan)” (e.g. Stege and others 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 and 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, 47-8).

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, describes decades of collaboration among educated Marshallese women that date 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 timeframes 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 Fiame see violence as “cultural”, but rather 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 “shifting the needle” on gender issues 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 Fiame’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 approaching 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. Female politicians—whether in the Pacific, other developing contexts or 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 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, whether or not these successful politicians identify publicly as feminists, they are certainly contributing to feminist practice in a range of ways that include informal institutions such as friendship groups as well as more traditional civil society actors such as women’s rights NGOs. We have referred to the way they do so as “implicit” feminism to reflect this. Indeed, these senior women politicians often gain considerable political mileage from distancing themselves both from those who defend conservative, patriarchal institutions and outspokenly feminist NGOs 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 feminist according to a “Western/non-Western” binary but 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” (La Liberte and others 2017), we would argue that our use of “implicit feminism” is best understood “not as a fear of controversy but rather as a strategic choice for engaging controversy”. 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 NGOs and international donors while at the same time “shifting the needle” in support of gender equity. What our approach does provide is a way of thinking about gender politics in the contemporary Pacific outside the outdated categories of “traditional” and “modern”, “western” and “non-western”. It also allows that there are many ways of practicing transformative politics, including the pragmatic path chosen by these women leaders, and that each has their 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. She writes about “the East” and we have discussed the Pacific Islands, but in her inspiring and poetic work, she captures the ideas we have tried to explore herein:

[I]t 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).

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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 showing how senior women politicians practice a form of “quiet” or “implicit” feminism. Drawing on in-depth interviews with three senior politicians, Dr Hilda Heine, Deputy Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata’afa, and Dame Carol Kidu, together with other observers and supporters of their careers, we show how these women position themselves as pragmatists—neither as 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 their articulation of and relationship to feminism is remarkably similar to other senior women politicians from elsewhere in the world who eschew the label but pursue substantive representation. In making this claim we seek to reframe understandings of Pacific feminism away from the ‘Western/non-Western’ binary and instead refocus it on a distinction between women seeking 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