

Being the President: Hilda Heine, Gender and Political Leadership in the Marshall Islands

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Abstract: The literature on gender and democratic politics in the Pacific Islands is dominated by a deficit model that seeks to explain the dearth of women candidates, of MPs and of women holding senior political positions. A small body of recent scholarship has focused on the experience of a select few women who have defied the odds to win high office. Specifically, this work has focused on the strategies that women leaders employ to win election in male dominated environments. This article extends these studies by focusing on how women govern and lead. Drawing on interviews with President Hilda Heine, the first and only woman elected head of state in a small Pacific Island country, her staff and network of supporters, we outline seven strategies for women politicians. Documenting these strategies serves three distinct purposes: 1) they add to our understanding of how Pacific women leaders undertake intentional action to shape male dominated environments; 2) they contain important primary source material that adds to the historical archive of this period in Marshallese politics; and 3) they inform efforts by reformers, including international donors, aiming to equip women leaders to serve in senior positions, both in Marshall Islands and the wider Pacific island region.

Keywords: gender, Hilda Heine, Marshall Islands, Pacific Islands, political leadership

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Introduction

The Pacific region has the lowest proportion of female members of parliament (MPs) in the world. Most Pacific Island countries have only one or two women MPs at the national level; some, such as the Federated States of Micronesia, have none at all. This absence has attracted scholarly attention over the last two decades (Baker, 2014; 2018; 2019; Fraenkel, 2006; Huffer, 2006; McLeod, 2015). Specifically, gender and politics scholars have sought to document the

barriers that prevent women running for and winning elections. Typically, explanations focus on structural factors, including the financial advantages essential for running a successful campaign, traditional customs and chiefly traditions that favour men, the patriarchal doctrine of local churches, and the highly personalised nature of small island politics which often renders political parties and programmatic policy agendas obsolete (Spark & Corbett, 2018; but see Rousseau 2012 for an alternative view). Cox (2009) and Wood (2019) have also noted the role of patronage politics in the region. This explanation has led to a deficit model which assumes that being a woman is always a disadvantage in electoral politics. In turn, the deficit model has mobilised campaigns to implement temporary special measures or parliamentary quotas for women candidates (Baker, 2019).

More recently, a subset of this literature, informed by critical actor theory (Childs & Krook, 2009), has sought to explain why some women politicians are able to defy these odds and get elected. Scholars in this area have also explored how women use their influence within the political system to represent other women, even when they are in a numerical minority. Similar work on the Pacific island region has focused on the background characteristics of successful women politicians – they tend to come from political families, have above average education, professional careers, and are unmarried or their spouse is from overseas – and the strategies they employ to develop the profile and reputation to win office (Corbett, 2015a; Corbett & Liki, 2015; Spark & Corbett, 2018; Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2018; 2019). While they may be ambivalent about being labelled ‘feminists’, they often take identifiable action to improve the position of women in their respective contexts (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2021). A key contribution of these studies is to question the blanket application of the deficit model by highlighting successful stories. In turn, these examples can help us understand how existing barriers can be overcome. This article extends this work by focusing on how the region’s first ever woman head of state, Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), governed and led. The significance of focusing on the ‘first’ woman to have achieved and performed this role in the RMI and the region is that her trajectory and experience can help us understand how more women can succeed in the future.

Seven strategies

To record these lessons, we draw on interviews with President Heine, her staff and her network of supporters. We outline seven strategies that have contributed to her success and are relevant to other women politicians:

1. Get the right staff
2. Use formal institutions and processes to disrupt the ‘boys club’
3. Cultivate a culture of mutual dependence among cabinet ministers
4. Find ways to turn gender into an advantage
5. Build an international network of women leaders
6. Keep family life simple
7. Never forget presence leaves a legacy

Not all seven strategies are exclusive to women politicians; but Heine shows how even a seemingly neutral imperative to ‘get the right staff’ can be transformed in gendered ways. Similarly, given the extent to which women across cultures assume the majority of domestic and caring labour, the need to ‘keep family life simple’ is likely to be of particular importance for women in public office. Documenting these strategies thus serves three distinct purposes:

1) it adds to our understanding of how Pacific women leaders undertake intentional action to work within and reshape male dominated environments; 2) it helps record important primary source material that adds to the historical archive of this period in Marshallese politics; and 3) it contributes to efforts by reformers, including international donors, seeking to support women already in senior positions, both in Marshall Islands and the wider region.

To substantiate these claims, the article is structured as follows: we provide a brief background on RMI and President Heine, then outline our methods and data. Most of the article is dedicated to outlining the key strategies provided by this unique example of a female head of state in the Pacific region. We conclude by considering the significance of this material for women leaders, donor agencies and reformers seeking to support them.

Background

The RMI is a small island state of 55,000 people, with an additional 45,000 living abroad in Hawai'i, the mainland United States (US) or other US territories such as Guam. Until 1986, the Marshall Islands was part of the United States-administered Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. As an independent state in free association with the US, RMI has greater autonomy than other overseas territories like Guam or Puerto Rico. But the US connection still dominates Marshallese politics due to ongoing federal funding ('the Compact') and revenue from a US missile base on Kwajalein Atoll (Kupferman, 2016).

The Marshallese legislature is unicameral, with 33 seats in the Nitijela (Parliament). The President of RMI is both head of government and the head of state, an arrangement that is not uncommon in the Pacific (Fraenkel, 2010). There are no formal political parties in the Marshall Islands, and candidates contest elections as independents. One consequence of the absence of formal parties is that aspiring presidents have to cobble together a coalition of largely independent MPs. These coalitions have tended to be temporary and fractious, with votes of no-confidence in the government common (Fraenkel, 2002; Kupferman, 2016). Dr Heine won the presidency on the back of a successful vote of no confidence and survived a vote against her in the final year of her tenure.

Dr Heine entered the Nitijela in 2011 and became Minister of Education. In January 2016, she was elected president, making her the first woman to head an independent Pacific Island state. Heine was one of only three women out of 33 senators in the Nitijela after the 2015 election (Labriola, 2017, p. 113). Initially, Casten Nemra was elected President by a margin of one vote. However, a vote of no confidence saw him removed from office two weeks later. Heine recalls:

I was given the Minister of Education portfolio by President Nemra but I declined due to concerns related to actions of the newly elected President, including brazen disregard for members of the coalition who voted for him. These discouraged me from joining his Cabinet. It was obvious that prominent traditional leaders in the coalition were going to make decisions for him. I warned him of such actions but he did not heed my warning nor took me seriously (personal correspondence, April 2020).

Heine mobilised her family and other personal connections to successfully form a new coalition in the Nitijela, with her as President. In small countries such as the Marshall Islands where 'everybody knows everybody' (Corbett, 2015b), these personal relationships have more

political purchase than party loyalties. However, they are also subject to electoral vicissitudes. At the most recent 2019 election Heine regained her seat as a representative of Aur Atoll but a number of members of her coalition were not returned to the Nitijela. As a result, David Kabua was elected president in January 2020.

Becoming president is the most recent in a long career of ‘firsts’ for Heine. She is also the first Marshallese to be awarded a doctorate in education (Ed.D.). President Heine had many of the characteristics common to successful women politicians in the Pacific (Corbett, 2015a; Corbett & Liki, 2015): she had a distinguished career in education at senior levels in the Marshall Islands, including as a classroom teacher, as President of the College of the Marshall Islands, and as Secretary for Education. She also worked for 12 years in Hawai’i at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL), a non-governmental organisation that focuses on educational projects. Heine’s family have been active in public life since the 1950s, providing a classic “political apprenticeship” (O’Neill & Domingo, 2016, p. 22) in public affairs. Her cousin Dwight Heine was the first Marshallese to become a District Commissioner within the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which administered Micronesia after the Second World War. He was among the first to raise concerns about the health impacts of nuclear testing on RMI citizens. Hilda’s Heine’s brother, the late Carl Heine, served multiple terms in the Nitijela, including as Leader of the Opposition.

Method and Data

This paper builds on our recent articles that document how three of the region’s most successful women politicians – Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands; Fiame Naomi Mata’afa, Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa; and Dame Carol Kidu, former Opposition Leader of Papua New Guinea – managed to sustain long and high-profile parliamentary careers (Spark et al., 2018). Adapting Bourdieu, our argument is that the success of these women stems from their ability to translate social capital into political capital (Spark et al., 2019). We argued that this insight gained via the unique vantage point of high-profile cases could shed light on both their own personal success as politicians and as advocates for other women and point the way for others with similar characteristics, opportunities and ambitions (Spark et al., 2021).

When we conducted our initial research, Hilda Heine had just become President of RMI and the first ever woman to become head of state of a Pacific country. The focus of that research was, therefore, on winning elections and *becoming* a president. For this article, we conducted additional interviews some years later to better understand what it was like to *be* the president, and in particular what strategies this unique vantage point offers scholars interested in gender and political leadership, and future women heads of state, both in the region and beyond.

The empirical material we draw on is qualitative and insider-oriented. The core of our analysis focuses on three interviews with Heine: in 2011, before she became a politician; in 2017 during her second year in office; and in September 2019 in the lead up to the November election. We triangulated this material with 10 semi-structured interviews with other political actors in the RMI, many of whom were supporters or allies of Heine, and public documents, including speeches and newspaper commentary. Given the focus of this piece on being the president, we have here drawn primarily on more recent material.

Our account is unashamedly one-sided: we aim to understand how Heine saw her role and the strategies she employed rather than attempting to undertake a holistic assessment of her tenure as president. We include extensive quotations from our interviews to capture her voice. This methodological choice echoes a longstanding position in feminist research in the humanities and social sciences where giving priority and credence to women's voices is a strategy as well as a political commitment (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). This approach is based on two assumptions: first, that women's voices have been and continue to be marginalised in relation to men's; and secondly, that women's lived experiences represent 'legitimate sources of knowledge' (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). It is also the case that, attending to what women politicians have to say will produce new and different findings in this field. As such, while we allude to criticisms of her where relevant, we are chiefly interested in reflections and lessons learned. Thus, unlike other such assessments of political leaders in small states (e.g. Baldacchino, 2012), we make no claim to tell the 'whole' story or even determine whether Heine made a substantive difference in the lives of Marshallese and particularly Marshallese women. Rather, we focus on *her* reflections, on *her* tenure and the specific insights and implications of this unique experience for ongoing debates and policy discussions about increasing the political representation of women in the Pacific.

Being the President: Key strategies

1. Get the right staff

Women executives tend to be held to a higher standard than men and thus can be disproportionately punished for perceived underperformance (Carlin, Carreras & Love, 2019; Reyes-Housholder, 2019). As the first woman President, Heine felt this added pressure to perform. However, the sudden nature of her ascent to the presidency meant that she had little time to prepare for the role or to plan the transition. On reflection, she believes that this was a disadvantage as she didn't have the right staff in place to support her as president.

[I]f I have another term, I will carefully look at that and making sure that the right people with the right skill sets and dispositions are there and that they have the necessary training and support. Ideally, one should be making decisions in a place where there is opportunity to get feedback on plans, policies and so on. It's always good to have people with the right skill sets and relevant experience to bounce off ideas ... for me, that's the most important lesson learnt this time (interview with Heine, September 2019).

This aspiration is nonetheless tempered by the reality of governing a small state where family connections are paramount and human resource constraints, acute:

Due to smallness of the community and family connections, it's very hard to come in and do a cleaning [out] of the office. It's almost impossible to do because everyone is related to everyone else and so getting people off and bringing in a new crew is very difficult. So we pretty much continued with the staff that we inherited...we should have carefully assessed and then recruit[ed] people that have all the necessary skill sets ... I don't think we have the right mix of skill sets. I think that one of the important [changes I made was to] bring on a [new] highly qualified chief secretary ... That helped and I could see the difference in how policies were implemented and speed in which they carried out (interview with Heine, September 2019).

Heine makes a similar point about her relationship with her constituency. A perpetual challenge for politicians in archipelagic small states is that most of the day-to-day work occurs in the capital and, because transport links are infrequent, it is hard to maintain regular contact with constituents. These challenges are common to all MPs but are particularly acute for the president who also spends a lot of time overseas, chiefly because Marshall Islands has a significant presence in global climate negotiations.

Given this, Heine regrets not having appointed someone in her office who was specifically responsible for her constituency:

It would have been good to have someone assigned to assist with constituency matters; being new to the role that's not something I considered my right to do. In hindsight, I should have (interview with Heine, September 2019).

Instead, she relies on family support and the fact that she was upfront with her constituency about having national and international commitments. The assumption is that for the people of her small island constituency – less than 500 votes were cast in Aur in the 2019 general election – having her as president is an honour and this would help her re-election:

That is added benefit for them. There is honour and prestige in having their representative chosen to serve as president of RMI. I try not to do more for them than I am doing for other people; however, I cannot help but give special consideration to their specific needs when I travel and go around the world and talk to people. I think they know that (interview with Heine, September 2019).

Heine's constituency returned her to the Nitijela as their MP at the November 2019 election, indicating that she got the balance between national and local issues. But, the more general point is that, even though decisions about staffing and constituency relations are important for all MPs, Heine believes role expectations are nevertheless gendered and this informed how she operated once in office.

2. Use formal institutions and processes to disrupt the 'boys club'

The gendered, informal and personalised nature of politics in the Pacific Islands means that key decisions are often made on the sidelines of formal processes, in the lounges over lunch, or in the bar, and subsequently rubber stamped by institutions (Corbett 2015a, p. 90). This can place women politicians at a significant disadvantage as they are often excluded from informal gatherings of the 'boys club' (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2021). Heine sought to mitigate this tendency by ensuring that all government decisions are channelled through formal cabinet meetings:

For me, the most important principle that I try to get across to cabinet members is that important decisions have to be made in cabinet rather than by individual ministers making decisions on the sidelines ... Issues have to come to the Cabinet for discussion before decisions are made. And, once a Cabinet decision is made, it is all of our responsibility to go out and implement as needed. When issues arise later on, necessary changes are made in Cabinet, not by individual Cabinet members. But let's not just [have] one person decide "oh, I'd rather do it this way so let's do it this way" without coming back to the cabinet (interview with Heine, September 2019).

This approach has the advantage of ensuring a degree of collective responsibility that is often missing from cabinet government in states that do not have a strong tradition of party politics. The government's *Agenda 2020* was key to this attempt to unite cabinet behind a single policy platform, as one senior official relates:

She already set the bar pretty high by setting up this ambitious agenda to tackle all these challenges. So I think that right there, right off the bat, it set her apart as being a bit more proactive and articulate in terms of what she wants to get done (interview with senior official, August 2019).

Critics have argued that *Agenda 2020* was too wide-ranging with too many priorities. Whether true or not, from a gender perspective, it ensured that Heine remained central to key decisions due to her position as the head of cabinet:

I have to [keep] bringing them back by saying “no, this is the decision we made”. We have to come back to cabinet if we want to change it, we change it as a group and then we go back and do it. But don't make a decision by yourself. (interview with Heine, September 2019)

Heine also worked hard in office to lead the cabinet away from ad hoc decision-making to a greater reliance on research and evidence:

We want to convince our leaders that we need to make decisions by using good data evidence. We don't just go and hop on a tangent over here because there is social pressure for us to do certain things. It's more of the data and what the evidence is telling us before we move forward (interview with Heine, April 2017).

The result of these strategies was a formal process that ensured all voices were heard in Cabinet, followed by consensus in public that reinforced Heine's authority as president. Heine's use of formal processes to disrupt the 'boys club' has parallels in other countries (e.g. Annesley, Beckwith & Franceschet, 2019; Piscopo, 2016). But this strategy also reflects the imperatives of being a senior woman in the highly personalised context of small state politics.

3. Cultivate a culture of mutual dependence among cabinet ministers

Being chair of cabinet is not an easy task for any head of government; but it is a particularly challenging role in Pacific island states without a strong tradition of political parties. In RMI, politicians run as independent candidates. Thus, maintaining the support of MPs, and especially ministers, is critical to the survival of the government. In this sense, presidents govern at the pleasure of the Nitijela who have the power to appoint and dismiss. The result is that Heine took office after the former president lost a vote of no-confidence and in the final year of her first term she narrowly defeated a vote of no-confidence in her government brought forward because of disagreement over a proposal to turn Rongelap Atoll into a 'special administrative region' (Smith, 2018). More generally, women politicians tend to have a smaller margin for error than men (Thomas, 2018). Thus, it is important to manage the aspirations and ambitions of supporters within the parliament:

Well, it's not easy. I know that I'm sitting there because they put me there... I am indebted to them; at the same time, my name goes with decisions and the legacy of my administration are mine to bear. I have to keep that in mind (interview with Heine, September 2019)

To be a successful leader in such circumstances, Heine argues, it is important to remind members of your coalition that they also depend on you:

The way the coalition was organised was they couldn't have taken over control of the government if I and members of my group did not join the coalition. So, they knew that they couldn't be ministers if I didn't come on the scene; we mutually supported and depended on each other. So I think we all realise that ... the coalition is held on by our needing each other and that we need to support each other. (interview with Heine, September 2019)

These messages are especially important when allegations of misconduct arise:

[T]his is something that's at the back of my mind every time I made a decision. It was important to me that when somebody is not doing what he or she is supposed to be doing and was lacking integrity ... I draw the line. It wasn't easy. It was very difficult to let go of the ministers that I ended up letting go. But, I think it was important to let the rest of the cabinet know that ... integrity is really important ... I agonised over ... these incidents. It took me up to six months of mulling over and collecting information/documents to back up allegations, reviewing and looking at these - you know, back and forth and back and forth. I listened to people; I also looked at what's happening and I [took] – you know, over – up to six months before I made that final decision. (interview with Heine, September 2019)

What makes the Heine case especially challenging is that she had several close relatives in the Nitijela, including two in cabinet. This led to accusations that she displayed favouritism. She counters this charge by saying each Cabinet member sits on the Cabinet as a representative of his/her constituency. She prioritised geographic representation in her selection of Cabinet members and while this advantaged some of her relatives, others were denied a cabinet post. She further comments that:

There will always be people who are not only dissatisfied but they look at opportunities to criticize; and in any government there are opportunities there to bring forth a vote of no confidence against the government and that was very difficult. I hope that I won't have to go through it again (interview with Heine, September 2019).

These dynamics are not unique to women but, as outlined below, there is often an implicit expectation that they should govern to a higher ethical standard than men. Indeed, this expectation can be implicitly and even explicitly reinforced within donor narratives arguing for the importance of women's representation. This is a double-edged sword, one also compounded by the inherent difficulties of running an executive government in small states and the amount of work required to maintain fractured coalitions. Over time, observers argue that Heine got better at this side of the job:

The soft skills [being approachable, personable, etc.] have been there [from the beginning] but over the four years, she's also started to really develop a tougher side where she's spoken out much more verbally and directly on poor governance, bad public service, a lot of the issues that we see. She has become really a better, more rounded leader over time. But it's taken a couple of years of being in the position for this to really develop (interview with senior official, August 2019).

This more direct approach also extended into the international realm and climate advocacy in particular.

4. Find ways to turn gender into an advantage

The deficit approach to questions about gender and political leadership assumes that being a woman is always a disadvantage. However, as the scholarship on politics and gender has long highlighted, in some circumstances and times, there are advantages to being a woman leader and astute politicians can exploit these to their benefit. Heine argues that in some respects her appointment as president can be attributed to her gender:

Well, I have to say that I think I got elected to this position in a way because I'm a woman, a neutral candidate and when many men were vying for the office, I was [seen as] a safer, less controversial candidate (at the time)... there were a lot of different feelings about potential male candidates ... Because men tend to argue with each other; but it's different when a woman candidate is in the mix ... At the time, the opposition party we joined had few traditional leaders and more younger senators who were more open to having a woman run for the office of the president. It wouldn't have happened otherwise (interview with Heine, September 2019).

This echoes Beckwith's (2015) findings that women often ascend to senior roles when there is too much division among the male contenders.

As president, Heine reflected on the importance of her reputation as a strong, scandal-free Minister of Education for her legitimacy as the nation's first woman leader. As noted above, women politicians in the Pacific, as elsewhere (Barnes & Beaulieu 2014; Funk, Hinojosa & Piscopo, 2019), are often perceived as being above the corruption that entraps men. But the conventions of public discourse in the RMI also suggests that male politicians feel they should be careful about their choice of words when they criticise her or other women politicians:

You know, I think I know this one thing being a woman leader, at least in our culture, it's very difficult for men to criticise women because women are considered their mothers, whether or not they are really the mother. But they will be auntie [or other close relatives]: so it's that kind of in the Marshallese culture, there is that kind of respect in the culture. So, for men to really openly criticise women publicly, especially personal criticism, - you know women in general they can talk but personal attack, I think the culture I think helps women in that sense. I think most men know that if they go out there

and have an outright personal attack on a woman, everybody is going to get down on them and say look at that. That's so un-Marshallese (interview with Heine, April 2017).

Demonstrating a helpful intersection between gendered and cultured ideals, Heine's gender also led to her being given the title of 'mother of the nation'. Analogous designations are also common in Latin America where the societal framing of women as 'caretakers' has been transposed into the political sphere (Franceschet, Piscopo & Thomas, 2016; Jalalzai & Dos Santos, 2015). Heine reflects on being somewhat uncomfortable with this label:

That designation comes from being the first woman president of the nation. But I'm not sure what a mother of a nation is - you know, what is that all about? ... [Laughs] I mean, I know that Amata Kabua had been the father of the nation because he was the president when the country was going through its own formative and growing pains and becoming independent. So, that makes him father of the nation. But: mother of the nation? I came in like 40 years later so I'm not too sure about the connotation and what it means except to say that it is associated with the Marshallese saying "Jined ilo Kobo" [also the name of a women's organisation Heine founded: see below] meaning women are mothers to all and for all times. I often wondered if the reference when made, in my case, was more a figure of speech or colloquial Marshallese rather than what we like to think (interview with Heine, September 2019).

Others argue that the term is overwhelmingly positive and reflects Heine's popularity:

Her nickname over the last few years is the 'mother of the nation'. Sort of a unique description in her title that she's earned. Even in the parliament, the speaker will say "the mother of the nation is here and let's give her time to speak". So, I think again, the motherly figure has helped her gain some social capital and political capital. So, I think that's put her in a good spot in terms of being not only re-elected to her constituency but having a pretty good shot of going onto a second term. That's all about the fact that she's a mother and a grandmother.

She made a speech where she [talked about being] a perennial mother. Even after your kids have grown up and have moved out and everything, you're still going to be playing that role of a caretaker, to look after the interest of others and care for others and pay attention to the details of your children, even after they've long left the home. Anyway, it was a really well put, well-constructed concept of the perennial mother (interview with a senior official, August 2019).

In this view, being the 'mother of the nation' denotes positive leadership traits like duty, responsibility, service, and inclusion. Heine and other women advocates have been able to reframe Marshallese cultural traditions that reference gender equity and the dignity of women in ways that support a progressive agenda. (Rudiak-Gould, 2013, pp. 47-48; Spark et al., 2019, 2020; Stege, Maetala, Naupa & Simo, 2008).

5. Build an international network of women leaders

One of the themes running through our previous work on senior women leaders in the Pacific was the extent to which they are enmeshed in and draw strength from networks of other senior women (see Spark et al., 2018; 2019; 2021). This strategy has affinities with those designed to disrupt the ‘boys club’ discussed above, but with an added international dimension that reflects the small size of civil society in Pacific states. It is also especially important for understanding Heine’s tenure given that as a senior educator and civil servant she put a lot of work into supporting the development of the women’s movement, together with other senior women. This network building continued during her time as President, taking on a regional rather than national flavour. Heine explains her rationale:

I realised that being the only woman in these all men-fora, especially ones for Pacific leaders, which are often all men, is not easy. Not only that but I think issues that are important to women are not necessarily at the forefront and so I think it's important for women leaders to have a network of support from other Pacific women. That's why we organised that Pacific Women Leaders Coalition.

While the Pacific leaders have made declarations on gender related issues, aspired to decrease discrimination against women, and worked to give equal status to women, I also noticed that in any of the discussions that we had and in the meetings that we had, gender discussion never really came out. So, as leaders, how do we make sure that this gender declaration takes on meaning and is carried out when implementation is not tracked and no one reports back or discusses how these gender declarations are carried out at national level? ... to say this is what’s happening as a Pacific region; this is where we are with this issue; perhaps that is not how things are done:

So, I felt alone; the need to have some kind of a network, to support other women leaders, on a regional level, is not there. I have a network in the Marshall Islands; but a network from the region that provides perspective from different countries on some of these mutually important gender issues is needed (interview with Heine, September 2019).

The cornerstone of this effort was the 2017 Micronesian Women’s Conference that focused on building relationships:

We brought all the women [leaders from Micronesia] and the idea is to create a coalition that women leaders can bounce off ideas and from which they can get feedback right away – especially on issues that are gender related – so that at that [conference, we heard] the different voices of women from different countries and the perspectives of women leaders around the Pacific region (interview with Heine, September 2019).

This reliance on women for support and advice was a hallmark of Heine’s gender advocacy. She was part of a cohort of women who had access to US college education and went on to have influential careers at senior levels in the Marshallese public service. Early on, these women also founded the first non-church women’s organisation, *Jined ilo Kobo* (women are the mothers of the child) and have supported successor NGOs such as Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI). These civil society organisations have run various programs for women’s empowerment and created fora in which feminist principles have been

indigenised and rearticulated in Marshallese idiom, including the repurposing of traditional proverbs that speak of the dignity of women (Spark et al., 2018, 2019, 2021).

This had been a patient approach to making change. In the quotation below, Heine reflects on the origins of a new law addressing domestic violence and child protection (known in Majuro as “the WUTMI law”) as a seventeen-year history:

Well, there’s been a lot of work on gender for quite a number of years. I think the women’s groups (WUTMI) started to work on violence against women as early as 2000. We had a plan that started the process and studying it and looking into and talking about it; and from that, all these awareness [efforts] are beginning to bear fruit. People are more accepting and talking openly about that subject; are more understanding of the issue around violence against women. And a big part of it was the women’s groups just coming together and, you know, they’ve been on this for almost seventeen years now, we’ve been talking about violence against women and so I’m glad that things (legislations, etc) are coming together (interview with Heine, April 2017).

The long-term work in building, legitimating and embedding an activist women’s movement in the Marshall Islands had created a strong network of women leaders who have been able to connect regionally within Micronesia and the Pacific and in global fora. As one senior public servant observed, these international networks have been invaluable in the fight for action on climate change:

Her being a female president has generated a lot of international interest which I think she’s really leveraged well. Because she’s now got this very strong network of women leaders that she regularly convenes ... I think she’s used that to her advantage to push for issues like gender equality and also using that network for climate advocacy, to highlight the challenge of Marshall Islands in terms of climate change. So I give her a lot of credit for bridging that advantage that she had as a woman to then strengthen this network and use the network of other women and leaders to get messages across (interview with senior official, August 2019).

She also argues that it extends to cabinet level decision-making:

There is one other woman in the Cabinet [Senator Amenta Matthew] and she and I help each other when it comes to gender issues and gender discussion. That helped a little bit because we are there and - yeah, so far, all the gender-related legislation and issues that we’ve brought on board were given the support they needed (interview with Heine, September 2019).

6. Keep family life simple

The ‘family’ question is always contentious for women leaders: men are rarely asked whether or how they will balance family and political duties (Thomas & Bittner, 2017). Like many women politicians, Heine’s children are now adults. But she was nevertheless keen to emphasise that keeping family life as normal as possible is the only way to survive in the hustle and bustle of public office. Indeed, she is insistent that she didn’t want being the president to

change her, including refusing to move house. She concedes she has not always been as successful as she would have liked in pursuit of this goal:

My husband and I made sure that nothing changed in our family life after I assumed the presidency. But it was not always easy; some changes were inevitable. For example, maintaining our privacy; I have bodyguards going around with me almost all the time except when I say I don't want anybody coming. So: like today, I went on a picnic without any police officers tagging along. It's those kinds of things that are forced on you; they came with the position. So I guess one learned to live with those things and accepted as necessary. I guess, changes to my routine were also inevitable.

I stopped going shopping locally. My husband and my son ended up doing the family shopping. It's - I don't know, it's just easier. I just don't like to attract attention and when you go into a store with the policeman following you, obviously people will stare - oh, okay. [Laughs] So it's not any personal change. It's more... a lifestyle change; because of the office more than anything else (interview with Heine, September 2019).

But, putting these forced changes to one side, Heine was adamant that not getting seduced by the trappings of office is the only way to survive her term with a sense of personal integrity intact:

So I guess there are lots of perks that come with the office and I consciously made sure that I don't get used to those perks because I know that it's a - there is a limit - time limit to the position and you don't want to get comfortable with certain ways of living and doing things knowing that changes are temporary and are coming. So I - yeah, I guess I have thought about that and we made - both my husband and I have made a decision that we weren't going to make too many changes to our lifestyle and the way we do things. So we pretty much keep our lives simple as it was before I assumed the position (interview with Heine, 2019).

Heine has been consistent in refusing to use her position for personal gain and has used this as an opportunity to set a different example of how political leaders should act:

I mean an example is people are saying how come you are not buying a government vehicle and I'm saying I think we need to lead by example. That's not the most important thing about being in this office is having a nice car. I have my private vehicle and it's still working in good condition, so why not continue to use it because I've seen how government can spend a lot of money on vehicles because it's a symbol— it's a status symbol for many people and they want to buy the most expensive car. I'm saying no, you don't need to do that. The perfect way to get the message out is to do it by example and that's exactly what I'm doing (interview with Heine, 2017).

7. Never forget: presence leaves a legacy

A key debate about gender and political leadership is the extent to which descriptive representation – the presence of women – translates into substantive representation: policies that benefit women (Baker, 2018). Heine sought to implement the latter but reflected that her symbolic presence as a woman president was most likely to have the longest legacy (Alexander, 2012; Jalalzai, 2015):

Well, I think being a woman president is a legacy in itself because it is a testament to girls and women here that anything is possible. Throughout my career, that has been one of the important principles for me - to do things as a way to show others, that it can be done, to be a role model. I remember when I first contemplated going to get my doctorate degree in education and someone was asking me – “why am I doing this?” The first - the most important thing I thought about then was that I needed to show that it can be done - that Marshallese and especially women can do it ... if I can attend an outer island where schools lacked everything – quality teachers, school supplies and books, often missing school many days in a school year – and yet, I was able to go on and complete my doctorate in education, and later, became a woman president. It can happen to anybody ... This is a great opportunity to continue to be a role model for Marshallese women (interview with Heine, September 2019).

Certainly, while opponents sought to portray her gender as a negative in the most recent election, all the women we interviewed within government and the NGO sector regard Heine as an inspiration for Marshallese women. As one department head in the public service commented:

She has all the qualities that I see in a Marshallese woman. She’s very steady, as in, she can be stern. She’s very motherly. When you see her with her family, she’s extremely like a mother figure. She’s educated. In fact, the first Marshallese woman with an Ed.D. I have plans to be the second (interview, April 2017).

Heine’s high achievements as an educationalist and politician are matched by her personal connections in mentoring and supporting so many women, old and young. One of the frustrations of holding public office, and the limited time and resources a president has, is that Heine feels she had not been able to do as much mentoring of other women as she would like. She reflects:

Unfortunately, I think four years is too short. I didn’t have enough time... if I had more time I would dedicate more time and resources to mentor more people, especially more women. Being there and talking to the women in many respects – you know, in different forums and in different ways – that in itself has been kind of mentoring; I saw a lot of the women and through this period, young, very capable women coming out and being very confident in their own skin. That’s very comforting because we have a lot of very smart, hardworking women in the country and they should be given more opportunity to shine (interview with Heine, September 2019).

Substantive policy changes for women include the setting up of a small business loans program for women entrepreneurs and a Miss Marshall Islands pageant. The latter was controversial but Heine backed it from the beginning, as one official reflects:

You know, you would think okay, that's sort of a waste of time but it was really all about getting young women to become leaders. It was far less about beauty and really about her developing future female leaders ... in the end, everyone was very proud of it. A lot of these contestants were really articulate and were able to learn about and talk to the issues. So that's another thing that she can take some credit for. You think the government shouldn't support that kind of thing, it's really not a priority. But, in the end, everyone really enjoyed it and thought it was worth doing (interview with senior official, August 2019).

This reflection supports claims that beauty pageants may (surprisingly) provide a political platform for women, despite their association with objectification in most instances (Hinojose & Carle, 2016).

In addition, Heine argues that one of the unintended consequences of having more women in politics is that because they face additional scrutiny this implicitly raises the bar for all candidates, regardless of gender:

I know that there were a lot of expectations and people expected me to fail because I'm a woman - that's number one. So, I needed to disprove that ... we [women] can do this job just as well ...

Men get away with a lot of things ... I was looking at the newspaper the other day and there is an [election] ad for a man and he used a swear word ... If I were to put that, I would be immediately criticised ... Until that changes I think it's important for us women to acknowledge that and not to just say it shouldn't work for us because that's the way things are. Maybe in the future it will change and that's why we're talking about all the gender roles, gender issues and all of that. But, in the meantime, we need to acknowledge that it's there and that in order to get ahead and be able to overcome a lot of the challenges we need to work hard. [Laughs] We need to get ourselves out there and we need to make sure we have that integrity ...

The more we set our expectations higher, raise the bar for politicians, maybe; they will be able to do better. I remember a time in this country when politicians got away with so much. Right now, they cannot get away with that as much... Expectations and accountability for politicians have increased for the better of the country and the people (interview with Heine, September 2019)

The evidence that setting a standard matters is the increase in the number of female candidates running for the 2019 election. While only two won (Heine and Kitlang Kabua), their presence creates a subtle shift in attitudes that others observe:

I think that the last four years opened some eyes. You know, there are some men in the Marshall Islands who thought that it was not possible; it was not even allowed, for a woman to be president. That's how bad it was amongst some men. They were just

thinking it can only be a man that's president, right? So she's done a lot just being there as female head of government, head of state for the last four years in terms of changing mindsets. Without even having to try. Just the fact that she was there as our female president made a lot of changes in terms of the perception and perspectives (interview with senior official, August 2019).

Conclusion

Being a president is a unique position; very few politicians let alone people will ever occupy the role. This exclusivity is why memoirs of presidents are so popular; we want to know what it is like to be at the apex of government, to feel the weight of key decisions, to hold the fate of a country in one's hands. No Marshallese politician has ever written a memoir. When Heine comes to the end of her political career, perhaps she will be the first to do so, thus embodying another premier moment. In lieu of a full life history, we have taken an intermediary step of seeking Heine insights about what it is like to be the first woman head of state in the Pacific region. We have not aimed to provide an impartial account, weighing conflicting evidence of her tenure, even though we have acknowledged criticisms that others make of her. Rather, we have asked her to reflect on what she learnt doing the job. Our claim is that these insights have significance, for scholars working on gender and political leadership in the Pacific, for historians of Marshallese politics, and for donors seeking to increase the number of women holding high office in the Marshall Islands and elsewhere. We conclude by considering what each audience might gain from our 'insider' account.

For scholars of gender and political leadership in the Pacific Islands, Heine's reflections add to the growing body of scholarship that acknowledges the presence of women leaders in politics—rather than focusing exclusively on their absence—and treats them as intentional agents pursuing change in male-dominated environments. This sense of intentionality is apparent throughout our account of Heine. But, we also highlight constraints: limited time, limited resources, limited allies, and, at least initially, limited experience. These constraints are not unique to women politicians or the Pacific region. Rather, they intersect with gender and context in important ways that tend to go unacknowledged in the existing literature which focuses on structural barriers, be they economic, cultural or religious, that exist outside parliament. We thus add to this literature but draw attention to barriers that are only apparent to 'insiders'.

For historians and other observers and commentators on Marshallese politics, we provide hitherto unpublished reflections of a sitting president about the challenges of governing a small island state. Specifically, we highlight how archipelagic geography, traditional norms and customs, and human resource constraints shape the processes and practices of contemporary institutions like cabinet and the Nitijela. We also document the thinking behind some of the key decisions made by the RMI's first woman president. Given the dearth of memoirs by Marshallese politicians, these insights contribute to a gap.

For donors and other would be reformers, our account builds on our contribution to scholarly debates about the importance of an 'insider' perspective to explain some of the challenges women face in the formal political sphere. So much attention focuses on getting women elected—and as Heine reflects, descriptive representation has an important impact—but the next step is maximising the impact of those who have obtained senior positions and so may be considered 'critical actors' (Childs & Krook, 2009). Heine's advice thus has enormous

practical value for this latter, select group as it both asks them to consider how they will navigate male dominated environments, and provides some tips and tricks that may aide them along the way. We summarised these as seven key strategies, not all of which are unique to women – male politicians also consider staff, family and legacy, for example – but each can be transformed in gendered ways. The strategies are also not a formula for success. Rather, they serve as lessons learned from somebody who has done the job. They provide a place to start for leaders and their supporters thinking through the issues. Each will have to be adapted to specific circumstances and personalities. However, we anticipate that the underlying messages will resonate across contexts to women leaders in the Pacific and beyond.

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