and it is that culture that is patriarchal in its deepest foundations, and if we further, accept that the political culture of the Anglophone Caribbean is the also deeply patriarchal ‘winner take all’ Westminster model in which power resides – and is clutched – in the hands of the few – men – then we could possibly fail to appreciate that, by as hard as they might, the women of the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region have a very tough ‘row to hoe’, as the enslavement era saying goes saying.

These formidable obstacles each one, ingrained, socialised, inculturated, re-enforced by community, religious and political leadership. They will not be easily shifted or circumvented, but they must be, and as long and difficult as might be the road to women’s political – and other – equality with men, the women of the region are continuing to push up against the structures and impediments they find in their political pathways and slowly, ever so slowly, making inroads.

In the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region, the work of advancing women’s political participation is being carried out by indigenous entities and institutions specifically political and not, and the result is that there is now distinctly noticeable, a sense of empowerment on the part of Caribbean women that is deepening, strengthening and not, and the result is that is growing and fissuring and in time, these will fully open. The light will eventually flood through. At this point in the region’s history, at which political independence and national autonomy have no longer the urgency of the earlier era, there remains this major hurdle of women’s equality and full, unimpeded political participation to be leapt, and as national independence and autonomy have no longer the urgency of the earlier era, there remains this major hurdle of women’s equality and full, unimpeded political participation to be leapt, and as national independence and autonomy have no longer the urgency of the earlier era, there remains this major hurdle of women’s equality and full, unimpeded political participation to be leapt, and as national independence and autonomy have no longer the urgency of the earlier era, there remains this major hurdle of women’s equality and full, unimpeded political participation to be leapt.

Nonetheless, “affirms Bolles, “women’s political groups use interpersonal networks and other strategies to circumnavigate the Westminster model, out manoeuvre the status quo … and continue to do the extraordinary to get things accomplished on behalf of women, children and in society.”

However much Caribbean women might circumnavigate and manoeuvre and rack up wins against the ‘system’ it remains true that here, as elsewhere, political women encounter difficulties and challenges at every turn. Whether campaigning or governing, they are held to a much higher standard and much more strictly enforced set of rules than are their male counterparts. In too many instances, women continue to encounter violently sexist responses to their involvement and to experience gender-specific harassment and violence for daring to enter the political arena. Caribbean women politicians, too, find that they must often work twice as hard as their male colleagues and be ten times as good if they are to enjoy any real longevity.

That is a part of the regrettable reality that informed my premise for The Handbook for Political Women: My personal experience and those of the women whose lives I researched into made it impossible for me to ignore that: Under the subheading, The Importance of Being Good, I advise political women, whichever their country of service that, and in what ways, we must be deliberate and intentional about being better and doing better than has been done so far … Our participation must be top-notch … We must change the way political business is done, and not be changed by how it currently is being done. We must be good … We must be good in every sense of the word … We must each leave legacy that is unassailable.

Caribbean women might engage in a matter-of-fact manner in global movements such as #MeToo and the Women’s March, but the shift is beginning to make itself felt.

As women in individual territories select and engage in global influences and as their communities are urged forward by them, their progress is inspiration for their sisters in neighbouring territories and all are nudged forward – brothers not excepted. This, however, does not cancel out the territorial insularity that is a major factor in a general lack of communication across many Caribbean territories and that continues to be a major impediment for the Women’s Movement.

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formal restrictions to women’s participation in national parliamentary institutions in the Pacific today. And it is not for lack of capability—traditionally, women in many Pacific societies occupied high positions and leadership roles in society. However, due to social, cultural and economic barriers that have existed historically and are still ongoing, there is a noticeable imbalance in the representation of women in the Parliaments of the Pacific Region. Our region also faces unique and immediate challenges, including climate change, ocean acidification and rising sea levels, extreme weather, and energy and food security issues, which can sometimes seem to eclipse conversations about gender sensitive Parliaments and political participation. The reality is nevertheless that we need women at the decision-making table, championing the needs of women and girls, in the context of global sustainable development and well-being for all.

Of the twelve Pacific Parliaments who are members of the CPA and CPAW, eleven have elected women Members of Parliament. Some of these countries have legislated seats reserved for women in an attempt to rectify the gender disparity. For example, in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville there are three constituencies reserved for women only. These seats are seen as an acknowledgement of the vital role that women played in ending the civil conflict in 1998. The seats were strongly advocated for by women, who believed without them, women would be unable to win when competing against men. In the most recent election for the Bougainville House of Representatives, four of the 39 representatives elected were women. Three of the four women were elected from the constituencies reserved for women, while the fourth stood in an open seat. This was the first time in Bougainville’s history where a woman has been successful in winning an open seat and in the same year, a woman was elected Deputy Speaker. Women now make up 10% of the total number of candidates in Bougainville and we only hope to see this proportion increase in the future.

Another jurisdiction in which legislation has helped increase the representation of women in politics is Samoa. In 2011, Samoa’s Constitution was amended to guarantee that at least 10% of the seats in Parliament would be held by women. In the 2015 election, 24 of the 164 candidates were women, a considerable increase from the five women that stood in the previous election. The results saw three female MPs were re-elected and a fourth woman candidate also won a seat. These four constituency MPs were joined by one additional woman Member to fulfil the constitutional requirement for there to be a minimum of five women in the Samoan Legislative Assembly. Legislation introducing specific measures reserving seats in Parliament for women candidates has also been considered by Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

There is robust debate around the issue of reserved seats in the Pacific Region. Reserved seats are seen by some as a way to help women overcome the cultural barriers they face when attempting to be elected to Parliament. However, others raise concerns that women will find themselves restricted to reserve seats only, or that the women elected to these seats may be regarded as ‘second rate’ MPs. While there is support from Pacific women MPs for reserved seats, there is also opposition and a belief that they are unnecessary as greater participation by women in Parliament will not be achieved without clear strategies or priorities or without coordinated action across the Pacific Region. Strong networks such as this are critical to the success of increasing women’s participation. These networks are a fundamental way to help women overcome barriers. Gender stereotypes and a perception that politics is ‘men’s work’ has negatively affected women’s representation in the region. Not only in terms of encouraging aspiring women candidates but also in voter attitudes towards women leaders. Women play an important and vital role in Pacific culture, their traditional roles in political decision-making is often behind the scenes, which is not acknowledged enough to garner the support needed for a successful election.

Despite a myriad of well-intentioned initiatives, sadly, commitments to gender in the region have been slow and often women still lack the resources to enter politics in the region. Many women who want to enter politics find that the political, cultural and social environment can be unfriendly or even hostile towards them. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, it has emerged that an astonishing number of women Parliamentarians have experienced harassment and violence. This affects women standing for Parliament, as much as women in Parliament. A recent report on the experience of women who stood for the 2017 Papua New Guinea election, found in addition to lack of funds for campaigning, women reported receiving threats of physical violence and destruction of property.

There are encouraging examples of Parliaments, governments, civil society organisations, communities and other partners coming together to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women and girls. For example, the Tuvalu Parliament recently implemented a National Gender Policy which set out a strategic plan of action which focused on institutional strengthening and capacity building, women’s economic empowerment, women in decision-making positions and ending violence against women.

Looking forward As a Tongan Newlander I’m encouraged by a Tongan Hymn, “He ‘ake ha tuluta, ‘aonga kihe ha, ka tanake ‘e tuluta ‘e fonu e ipu na, ‘o inu e ilevela.” What is the use of a single droplet of water? When collected, it will quench a world of inclusiveness or not? Faka ‘apalapa atu.

References:
1 Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu (Vanuatu).
2 Dr Kerry Baker (2017), Experiences of Female Candidates in the 2017 Papua New Guinea General Election, p.5.