Time for women to represent the Pacific

Seseki shrugged her shoulders and gestured hopelessly. "Women can't win elections here... we don't have any pigs to slaughter". With those words she made clear why this week's announcement of the appointment of Australia's first global ambassador for women and girls is so timely and so necessary.

The women of the Pacific region are among the most discriminated against in the world. These women, our near neighbours, suffer shockingly high domestic violence and maternal death rates, do most of the work for a fraction of the male wage and have virtually no representation in public office.

Just under 3 per cent of all elected leaders in the Pacific are women—the lowest percentage in the world. The region is now far worse on women's parliamentary equality than the Gulf states. In fact, five of the nine countries that have no female parliamentarians are in the Pacific.

Even Ban Ki-moon during his recent visit to Australia for the Pacific Islands Forum became disturbed by the issue of women's representation. In my brief conversation with him he acknowledged that the situation in Papua New Guinea in particular, disturbed him.

My conversation with Seseki took place in Port Moresby last month. The centre for democratic institutions at the Australian National University is running programs in the Pacific to help women candidates stand for parliament. In PNG, the only woman MP Dame Carol Kidu is retiring and the bleak prospect of PNG becoming the sixth country in the region to have no women in their parliament is very real. (Tonga would then be the seventh, if not for an unelected woman appointed by the King.)

The problem for women seeking public office is complex. Certainly there is straight out discrimination and the refusal of men to vote for a good woman candidate is documented, but the endemic corruption is also a factor. Women with little access to wealth (or pigs) are in no position to offer the traditional feast that a successful candidate is expected to provide. We cannot propose solutions that border on corruption, but what is the answer?

The women I have worked with in Bougainville, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have pushed for change. One woman I spoke with recently said: "They are, in the end, taking our land, our money and our children. Women are affected the most... They are affected at home, at church, in the work place. Women are the backbone of the community."

The women of the Pacific are ready to stand up and be counted. It is time for us to help them get there.
The problem for women seeking public office is complex. Delivered to women is the most effective mode of delivery, as the Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, wrote at smh.com.au on Tuesday.

The new ambassador Penny Williams is a senior diplomat, who is a former high commissioner to Malaysia and is expected to hit the ground running with meetings on women's development scheduled over the next week in San Francisco and New York, and then a visit to the Pacific.

The government has already announced that “an immediate practical priority will be working with the US and our Pacific partners on domestic violence in the region.” Let’s hope this is the case. With 60 per cent of the Pacific countries having no domestic violence legislation and two in three women having reported physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their spouse or partner, such support is long overdue.

Then the next step is to get some women elected to the parliament of Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, Micronesia and the Solomons.

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The Greek failure is unfolding. Western Europe has created a structural tension between the wishes of its various national peoples, expressed through their parliaments and central banks, and the dictates of a transnational bureaucracy, the European Union.

The most dangerous fault line is the conduct of the European Central Bank, which cannot set the fiscal policies of EU members but is acting as if it can. It has been buying zombie bonds issued by Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, the derisively called PIGS economies. The markets see this as folly because the debt mountain of the pigs is much greater than the resources of the European Central Bank.

The euro zone is fractured between the profligate Mediterranean PIGS and the prudent northern bloc led by Germany and the Netherlands, which in recent days have indicated they have reached the limit of their willingness to bail out Greece.

The bond market has worked out this policy schism. The sharemarket has worked it out. The markets have stopped believing in the credibility of European political solutions.

The result is a run on the banks most vulnerable to PIGS debt. Greek debt is becoming untouchable, with the yield on two-year debt now an extraordinary 47 per cent.

Ever since the high point for modern Greece, the 2004 Olympics in Athens, it has become increasingly clear that the country was living on borrowed time and borrowed money, a state of collective delusion. Even Greece’s two biggest Olympic stars, two medal-winning sprinters, turned out to be drug cheats. They even staged a fake accident to avoid a doping test.

The whole country is heading into a crash now and it is not fake.

Almost every element of society shares in this inglorious achievement. Successive governments piled up debt to pay for social services and pensions. The public service was bloated and its unions demanded early retirement and generous pensions. Public debt has blown out to about 150 per cent of gross domestic product. The courts have a backlog of 300,000 tax cases. The tax-collection system is riddled with a culture of bribery. The banks have been reckless. The business community is immersed in tax avoidance. A large anarchist subculture wants to cripple capitalism. And the rich are the biggest tax cheats of all.

The black economy in Greece, where tax is avoided altogether, is estimated at 27.5 per cent of GDP about double the scale of the black economy in Australia, and does not include the underground economy of crime.

As for the larger failure in which