

Interview with Sandra Pierantozzi: Nipped at the Polls in Palau

By Bernie Pereira

Sandra Pierantozzi was the first woman to ever run for the number two job during the November 1992 national elections. She missed out by a narrow margin and in this interview, reflects on her pioneering political gamble.

Why did you run?

SP: I ran for the office of Vice-president because I thought that women should have active participation in policy-making. It was a very enriching experience which forced me to see how people live and what their basic needs are. Because I am a woman I was able to do door-to-door campaigning. Palauan men don't go out campaigning. They sit at home and send their wives to do it.

As a woman did you get a lot of support from other women?

SP: Unfortunately no. A big problem was jealousy. Somebody gave me a label for it - "professional jealousy", which came mainly from my peer group. I am a member of a women's club and one day my friend asked me why my women's club was not supporting me. To my face they had said they were supporting me but it turned out that they weren't at all. I really have no answer as to why or how to change this sort of thing except that I believe that the more we attend women's conferences, the more we understand the issues, the more we learn that as women we need to stand together to push each other up, not to pull each other down.

If your peers were not comfortable with a woman, then who was?

SP: In general I found that the older generation were happy to accept the idea of a woman in the job. Also, I had proven to them that I could do the job. In 1991 I became the first minister to balance Palau's budget and submit the presidential budget to the Senate on time. This good track record really helped.

Do you feel defeated?

SP: I don't consider it a defeat but a major milestone in the history of Pacific women. I am a trail-blazer for women and that is what the younger generation was so excited about, that if I could do it so could they.

Did the issue of you being a woman get raised a lot in the campaign?

SP: Unfortunately yes. In one of my campaign rounds, one of the questions asked was that if I was elected as Vice-president and something happened to the President, could I, as woman, handle it? I reminded them that in Palauan culture it is the women who bestow titles on the chiefs. If a chief doesn't behave, the woman can take his title away. So what's so odd about a woman as an elected leader? We just have to look back to our culture to see that the answers are there.

In the end it wasn't being a woman that lost the campaign for me. The real problem was that I announced my candidacy very late so I didn't have time to campaign. I won't make that mistake again. This time I ran on the campaign slogan "Why not?" Next time I'll be more positive and say "Of course."

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