



# *Spotlight with NRI*

## **Development Issues, Policies, and Trends**

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### **Options for Increasing Women's Representation at the National and Local-level Governments: The Need for a Comprehensive Analysis**

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#### **Overview**

Politics in Papua New Guinea was electrified by the debates in the recent sitting of parliament on the nomination of three women to parliament. Whilst the vote failed in this sitting, the issue of increasing women's representation will continue to have national prominence.

An indepth analysis of the many policy options available – both to solve the current political impasse as well as deliver upon the ultimate objective of more women in parliament – is necessary.

This paper puts forward a range of possible options and briefly touches on implications for each alternative. It aims to stimulate discussion and generate stakeholder interest on the need for further research and policy analysis that will ultimately contribute to achieving political representation for the female populace who make up half of the population.

#### **Introduction**

Women have the right to make decisions on matters that affect their lives. Whatever the attitudes and policies of governments in PNG, the demand for women's empowerment, based on the demand for women's rights, is beyond doubt a great concern for the promotion of women's participation in decision-making and policy-making, and in legislature, stemming from the principle of women's

right to political equality, and is now woven into the fabric of PNG's democracy.

The United Nations and its allied agencies and regional organisations have been at the forefront of public advocacy for women's rights throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and now into the new millennium. At the transnational level, there are activist non-governmental human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, that have been tireless in their advocacy for human rights, and which have had significant implications for women's rights.

Alongside these forces has been the proliferation of UN conferences on issues such as children's and women's rights, which no doubt have had significant impacts on public policy and women's affirmative action in PNG. In the public domain, women have mounted a political challenge to male dominance in the national parliament. This was evident when some 101 women candidates contested various seats in the 2007 elections, with only the member for Moresby South Open Electorate succeeding.

In that election, male candidates were four times more likely to win seats than women. Whilst male candidates had a four percent chance of winning a seat (108 seats won by 2759 candidates), women candidates had a miniscule 1 percent chance (1 seat out of 101 candidates).

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## Women seeking public office

The recent move by the Somare government to invoke Section 102 of the Constitution, to have three women nominated by parliament as women's representatives, is indeed encouraging for democracy.

However, the Prime Minister's motion was not supported by some MPs due to procedural issues relating to the selection of the panel and in terms of legality, whether the necessary laws were in place. Concerns over the selected model of having candidates nominated rather than electing candidates as is the norm, was also a contributing factor. MPs were particularly critical of the amount of information that was available on the three nominees before they could vote on the motion. One option to solve the current political impasse would be to set up a select parliamentary committee to interview the three women on their qualifications, political allegiances, and political integrity.

While there were procedural issues in the selection of the panel, the move was generally welcomed by many, thus bringing this important debate to the fore of PNG politics. It shows that there is indeed the political will to see a fairer and more robust and inclusive democratic system. The net effect of the move would be the encouragement of democratic institutions in PNG to be more conducive for women's participation, especially in public office. Promoting the rights of women and opportunities for their participation in public office, and social and economic development, is no longer a women's issue alone. It is a national development issue. One way to do this is to amplify the voice of women in government and/or parliament.

## Options for increasing the number of women elected to parliament

There are a number of electoral options available to get more women into parliament and each has their pros and cons. All these options would require further analysis and widespread consultation on the most appropriate option for PNG. The Constitution could be amended to provide for two-member (one male, one female) provincial electorates. This could involve having separate lists for women and men, or it could retain one list of candidates and the best performing male and female candidate are elected. Using separate lists, the ballot paper for the provincial electorate could instruct voters to mark their

preferences for male candidates on the left-hand side column, and women candidates on the right-hand side column. Voters would be instructed to vote for one male and one female candidate.

In the case of a combined list, voters would vote as they do now and the female candidate with the most number of votes would be elected, regardless of where they polled in relation to men. Both options would ensure that women and men are formally elected through the electoral process. Women's participation goes beyond women's issues, and covers a wide range of public issues that affect the male population as well. The provincial electorate would not be physically divided into two – it would remain whole, but instead have two elected representatives – one being a woman. A number of options could be explored to determine who, if any, would assume the role of governor. For instance, the governorship could be conferred upon whoever has the highest number of provincial votes, unless he or she becomes a national minister, in which case, the one with the lesser of votes would become governor.

Alternatively, an amendment or addition to the section of the Constitution may be considered with the aim of creating reserved seats for women. For example, one possible option would be the election of three or four women to represent the four regions of PNG. This means that voters would elect provincial, open, and regional members. The electoral boundaries in PNG have not been revised for some time. This remains a complex issue, as many revisions made by the Boundaries Commission in the past have failed due to political reasons. Increasing women's representation could also be linked to a revision of the boundaries of all the electorates in the country so that they give a better reflection of the population demographics.

The women's population, vis-à-vis the men's, is an important consideration to bear in mind when thinking about how many women have been elected in PNG's political history. The women's populations in these provinces are not very different from the men's populations. However, there is a lack of direct political participation by women. The implication is that there is political inequality between men and women. Men dominate the national, provincial, and local levels of government and decision making. Women are not directly represented (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Women's Population in Provincial Electorates with 60 000 or More Eligible Voters**

Provincial/Regional Electorate	Women's Population	Men's Population
East New Britain Provincial	104 429	115 704
West New Britain Provincial	85 493	99 015
Milne Bay Provincial	100 744	109 668
NCD Regional	115 185	138 974
East Sepik Provincial	171 169	172 012
Madang Provincial	174 784	190 322

**Source:** National Statistical Office 2000

**Note:** Women's populations in Morobe and the five Highlands provincial electorates are in this category.

## Local-level governments

At the local level, relevant sections of the Organic Law on National and Local-level Government Elections (OLNLLGE) could be amended to provide for two reserved seats for each local-level government (LLG) – a model similar to the one used for the Motu Koitabu Assembly under its own Act. Local-level governments (both urban and rural) would have their electorates divided into east and west, or north and south, which would constitute reserved seats only for women candidates. These seats are different from the ward seats. The boundaries for north-south or east-west need to be clearly defined, as would the roles and responsibilities of the women councillors.

The amendment would mean that for each rural LLG, there would be two elected women councillors, instead of one appointed woman which is the current practice. For each urban LLG, there would be two elected women councillors instead of one appointed woman, which is the current practice. The elected women councillors are guaranteed by law.

Following the 2008 LLG elections, there are now more elected women councillors holding ward seats, and some holding seats as LLG presidents, across the country, than there are women in parliament.

For the LLG elections, the names of male candidates, whether the ballot papers are for the presidential or ward seats, would appear on the left, while the names of the women candidates would appear on the right. Alternatively, there could be separate ballot papers for women candidates contesting the provincial seats, and separate ballot papers for women candidates contesting LLG north-south or east-west seats. Under these arrangements, counting would be less confusing.

## Political parties should do more for women

While the executive arm of government, the opposition, and parliament are making efforts to promote women's participation in parliament, political parties do not appear to be conducive for women's entry into public office. In the 2007 General Elections, only two political parties recorded 15 percent of their respective total candidate endorsement as being comprised of women candidates. They were the People's Action Party (6/40) and Melanesian Alliance Party (4/26), both of which had prominent women in their party structures – Janet Sape and Dame Carol Kidu.

Each of the other major parties recorded less than 10 percent of their total endorsements as being comprised of women candidates (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Endorsement of Candidates by Major Parties in 2007 Elections**

Political Party	Number of Women Candidates endorsed	%
National Alliance	2 out of 91	2.2
PNG Party	1 out of 66	1.5
Pangu Pati	2 out of 83	2.4
People's Democratic Movement	1 out of 55	1.8
People's Progress Party	2 out of 74	2.7
New Generation Party	3 out of 90	3.3
United Party	1 out of 49	2.0

The average endorsement of women candidates by major parties, at 2.27 percent, does not make the political parties as institutions that are conducive for women's entry into parliament. This is contrary to the spirit of the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) wherein political parties are recognised as institutions that seek to promote values of good governance, let alone national unity.

Is promoting women's empowerment not a value of good governance? Is promoting women's participation in public office not an essential part of national unity and social cohesion? Is OLIPPAC lacking in enforcement such that there is a weak link between political parties and women candidacy?

Political parties do have a responsibility towards strengthening democracy in PNG, among other means, through the facilitation of women's entry into parliament through the electoral process. OLIPPAC sees political parties as institutions that can promote good governance and citizen participation.

The common knowledge that it is popular candidates who win seats for parties cannot be used to excuse the parties from their lack of endorsement of women candidates. After all, women's participation in public office is a nonsectarian public issue. Governance cannot be defined from a predominantly male standpoint, as this has the potential to undermine the government's chief purpose of promoting the common good.

### **Voluntary quotas for political parties**

Political parties can set themselves voluntary quotas through their party constitutions. This will guarantee the nomination of a certain number of women candidates in elections. However, there are no sanctions to enforce the quotas, as the voluntary party quotas are not legally binding. Nonetheless, party quotas can be used strategically during the nomination process. In the lists of party candidates, the names of women candidates should appear between the top to the middle of the lists in order to give them better recognition by the voters. Parties can also campaign strategically for their women candidates in terms of the exchange of preferences with like-minded candidates, under the Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) system.

### **Why women's participation is important**

Women's participation in public office is in the national interest of PNG. It encourages inclusive democracy or, put differently, the development of the political system. International experience shows that countries are better able to achieve progress when legal, institutional, and societal barriers are removed to allow for women's participation in national development. Women have a positive role to play in the development of PNG.

### **Conclusion**

In PNG, women have equal rights as stated under Section 50 of the Constitution. As such, certain legislations can be amended to guarantee equal opportunity to women citizens at the national, provincial, and local levels. Women-in-governance includes the advancement of

women's participation in elective as well as non-elective public office, among other aspects of governance. In terms of their participation in elective public office, this process can be advanced at the national and local levels of government through appropriate constitutional, legislative, internal party, provincial and or LLG electorate changes.

Under such changes, women would be able to occupy offices in national and local-level governments, with the majority at the local level. (This figure does not include women who are appointed to provincial assemblies under current laws.)

A roughly 20 percent increase in women's representation should be a target at the national level, while at the local level, an estimated 200 percent participation (628/313 LLGs x 100). When combined, this amounts to about 218 percent women's participation in elective public office across the country. The 20 percent participation in the national parliament is a bold step towards compliance with the Beijing International Conference on Women's Platform for Action which has set the target of 30 percent.

When PNG is seen with other comparable developing countries, the number of women holding elective public office at the national and local levels would be quite an achievement both for the country and democracy, a sign of a truly inclusive, equitable, and robust democratic culture.

### **About the Author**

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