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To make a difference: Realities of women's participation in Papua New Guinea politics

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Introduction

Why is women's participation so important? . . . There can be no true democracy, no true people's participation in governance and development without the equal participation of women and men in all spheres of life and at all levels of decision-making (Karl 1995:1).

Women's involvement in a sphere of life can bring new perspectives and priorities into decision-making processes and make a difference. Persistent gender inequality in the national political arena does not reflect well on a state that claims to be democratic. As long as women are denied access to the corridors of power, the quality of leadership that is essential for effective and meaningful democracy, as well as for national welfare, is being stifled.

The two crucial components of a democratic system are a democratic state and a democratic civil society. The prevailing conditions in Papua New Guinea (PNG) do not allow such a system. The state is weak and the society is characterised by a great deal of turbulence. Without economic and social rights, political rights continue to be denied to a great majority in civil society. Women are by far the majority of those denied their political rights. This presents a fundamental challenge for PNG in the next decade or more.

Within this context, women are bargaining and negotiating access to power at the centre, with the hope of bringing about improvements in the lives of their families and society as a whole. In PNG, this is happening on two frontiers, both within the state and outside it.

This article looks at women's attempts to enter national decisionmaking forums mainly through electoral contest, legislative reforms to increase women's participation in decision making, and collective action by women. Despite women's persistent losses in successive PNG national elections since 1977, their struggle is relentless and their spirit has not been stifled. Ever-increasing numbers continue to negotiate access to decision-making structures. The impact of women's struggle to gain access to the corridors of power is also evident in the recent legislative reforms.

Women's participation in electoral politics

Three women candidates contested the first PNG House of Assembly election in 1964. Elsewhere it has been reported that no women contested the 1964 and 1968 elections (Brouwer et al 1998, AusAID/Government of PNG 2000, Kamau 1997). My own research (Sepoe 1996) revealed otherwise.

Table 1 Women in national elections, 1964–1997

General elections	Number of women candidates	Number of women elected
1964	3	0

1968	1	0
1972	4	1
1977	10	3
1982	17	1
1987	18	0
1992	16	0
1997	55	2

Source: adapted from Sepoe 1996

The first PNG national woman ever to contest an election was Ana Frank from Pari village, while the other two were expatriates: Mrs Mckeller, who was married to a district officer in Madang and who contested the Madang Open seat, and Mrs Ascroft-Smith, who was married to a public servant in Port Moresby and who stood for the central special electorate. The second House of Assembly election in 1968 drew only one woman candidate, Mrs J Wilkinson, married to an Australian planter-trader, who contested the Esa'ala Open seat in Milne Bay. All women were unsuccessful.

At self-government in 1972, four women candidates, all nationals, stood. Only one, Josephine Abaijah (now Dame), succeeded at the polls.

The national election of 1977 was the first for a newly independent nation and, in the euphoria, women who contested that election saw their challenge as paving the way for others. A total of ten women contested the 1977 election, which was, and remains, the most successful attempt at winning seats by women in PNG. Three women candidates, Nahau Rooney, Waliyato Clowes and Josephine Abaijah, triumphed in this election. Their victory, however, did not ensure the success of those who were to follow.

In the 1982 national election, 14 women, plus Clowes, Rooney and Abaijah, contested. Only one, Rooney, was elected, but only after a successful Court of Disputed Returns hearing. In the 1987 and 1992 national elections, 18 and 16 women respectively contested, however, none were elected to parliament.

Throughout 1996 and 1997, 'getting women into parliament' became the main theme in the activities undertaken by women activists. In workshops attended by provincial and community leaders of women's organisations throughout PNG, Women in Politics (WIP) and the National Council of Women (NCW) took up the challenge of training potential candidates about aspects of the political system, and in capacity building for leadership at the national level and in local-level governments (LLGs). A total of 55 women contested the 1997 election and only two, Lady Carol Kidu and Dame Josephine Abaijah, were elected.

The political culture of PNG has not readily absorbed the notion of liberalisation (Anere 2000) and it does not understand that women continue to be casualties of this system (Sepoe 1996 and 2000). In contemporary PNG, women's status has diminished. Yet, in the past, PNG culture had a different attitude towards women. They were recognised as playing a crucial and complementary role in economic production and resource management (Brouwer et al 1998, Sepoe 2000). However, 'because women played a less public persona it was concluded that women had relatively little influence in family or community decisionmaking' (Brouwer et al 1998:3).

Gender issues in electoral politics

There are many hindrances to women's effective participation in electoral politics. Some of these problems have persisted since the first parliamentary election. Others have

emerged under the changing economic and political circumstances of the late 1990s and the new millennium. Any meaningful attempt to understand gender issues must be cognizant of regional variations or differences, as well as account for common experiences. For instance, women in the Highlands of PNG encounter more violence during elections than women in coastal areas, the islands and the New Guinea mainland. In terms of commonalities, nationwide women experience immense constraints on the resources they need to run election campaigns.

Changes are required in several areas so that women can be actively and meaningfully involved in the electoral process. A survey (AusAID and Government of PNG 2000) conducted in 1999 identified these priorities for change:

- review current legislation, especially regarding Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government (OLPLLG) nominated members;
- change the voting system to preferential;
- improve common roll and polling practices;
- make Electoral Commission staff more gender inclusive;
- provide support for women candidates; and
- provide voter education.

In addition, the most fundamental issue is that of culture and perceptions about women's access to power. Women's struggle for power is often perceived to be on equal terms to that of men. However, women's struggle for power is not geared towards obtaining possessive or extractive power, but rather 'power to empower'. This type of power is inextricably linked to female gender roles in society. Therefore, the decisions that they would make in the public sphere will very much reflect the type and quality of decisions that are made within the context of families and households. This is the difference that women in PNG are striving to make in the formal and institutional spheres of politics.

With the poor conduct of the elections, the increasing incidence of electoral violence and general insecurity; the prevalence of corruption; the loss of confidence in elected members of parliament; the continuing deterioration of basic infrastructure; the continuing economic crisis and increasing poverty, the role of women in PNG has largely been to 'subsidise' a weak state unable to provide for its citizens. This vital role remains invisible to those in control of resources.

The behaviour of PNG voters resembles that of marketplace activity: selling votes and buying favours from intending candidates or political parties. As long as this behaviour continues, the state will operate as the marketplace. Vested interests will conspire to get the best deal out of this political market activity. Consequently women's vital role and their voices continue to be submerged in the competition for power.

Legislative reforms

Two crucial laws, the *Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government* (OLPLLG) and the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* (OLIPPAC or Integrity Law), are intended to include women in decision making, however, there is a problem with implementation. Poor implementation is partly rooted in the varied cultures of PNG (Okole and Kavanamur 2002) and the pre-eminence of communal-primordial sentiments over legal-liberal requirements.

Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government: The OLPLLG is an initiative of the government, under pressure from women's organisations, that will encourage more women to participate in decision making in provincial and local-level governments.

By law, there should be 566 nominated women in all 296 LLGs nationwide, two in each rural LLG and one in each urban LLG. In all 19 provincial assemblies (Bougainville and the national capital district are exempted), there should be one appointed woman. It is not known how many women are in LLGs at present, but it is a well-established fact that LLGs have failed to implement the provision on nominated women.

Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates: The enactment of the OLIPPAC in 2002 was a direct response to the problems of political instability, frequent votes of no confidence, party fragility and party hopping in PNG politics. Having a weak party system that consists of loose alliances of individuals has had a tremendous impact on the life of parliament and the life span of successive governments.

The prime objective of this legislation was to bring about political stability and discipline within parties, to build a strong party system with clear and coherent political manifestos on which voters can base their decisions. Continuity in governance of the party in power would also ensure continuity in policy making and implementation. The OLIPPAC is a major legislative instrument with which the government of PNG has demonstrated affirmative action in relation to increasing women's participation in national level decision-making forums.

Table 2 Party allegiances of women candidates

General elections	Number of women candidates	Party affiliation	Independent
1977	10	1	9
1982	17	0	17
1987	18	7	11
1992	16	0	16
1997	55	12	43
2002	60	40	20

Source: adapted from Sepoe 1996 and Anere 2000

This law requires a member appointed by the NCW to serve on the central fund board of management, and this provision has been fulfilled. A more substantive provision encourages parties to endorse more women by giving a 75 per cent refund of electoral expenses to any party that endorses a woman candidate in a national election if the candidate receives at least 10 per cent of the votes in her electorate.

Women in Politics has called for a quota system in OLIPPAC: it wants 30 per cent of candidates endorsed by political parties in national elections to be women (WIP 2000). This amendment met with stiff opposition and the minister responsible at the time did not appear to be aware of women's concerns.²

Impact of OLIPPAC: preliminary observations: To appreciate the impact of OLIPPAC, it is worth looking at the party allegiances of women candidates in the past national elections in PNG.

Most political analysts agree that parties have existed as nothing more than parliamentary factions, primarily operating as vehicles for formation of government in parliament and professing no commitment to gender equality. Yet the 2002 election has seen more women candidates endorsed by parties. In that election, political parties responded quite positively by endorsing far more women candidates than ever before. Out of the total of 60 women candidates, 40 women were endorsed by political parties (see Table 2).

It could be argued that female candidates were endorsed by political parties as a source of funding from the public purse. However, this argument falls short of findings from past elections that political parties endorse the candidates that are most likely to win (King 1989). Accordingly, women who have been endorsed in this election are probably the most promising candidates from the perspective of political parties. It can be deduced from this reasoning that political parties have responded to the call of women for increased participation through OLIPPAC.

In previous elections, most women contested as independent candidates, but this election was different. There is some indication of a slow and gradual shifting of boundaries in PNG politics that allows for women's participation in the formal decision-making forums. However, party structures are still male dominated. Only a handful of executive officers of registered parties are women. However, the importance of the positions they hold indicates the significance of their role, as can be seen from Table 3.

Table 3 Women executives in political parties

Name	Position	Political party
Susan Haro	Treasurer	PNG Labour Party
Mary Karo	President	People's National Congress Party
Nerri Sumati	Treasurer	People's Democratic Party
Kila Rumery	Treasurer	People's Action Party
Nolin Pivini	President and	Papua New Guinea First Party
Jeanette Kuman	Public Officer	People's Welfare Party
Jenny Artango	Secretary	Pan Melanesian Congress Party
Dorothy Tekwei	Treasurer	Melanesian Alliance Party

Source: National Gazette 2002

Women's organisations and civil society

Women worldwide participate in politics mostly in the context of collective action (Karl 1995). This is very much the case in PNG (Sepoe 2000). The nature of women's political activities can be either 'oppositional' (against the system) or 'supportive' (for the system) (Waylen 1996). Women in PNG engage in both, but much more in political activities that support the system, such as:

- the voter education undertaken by the NCW and affiliated groups in 2002;
- the WIP regional workshops for potential candidates in national and LLG elections in 2002; and
- an alliance between Transparency International and the community coalition against corruption in 2002.

Various activities of key women's organisations have attempted to build and strengthen the capacity of women and empower them, to increase their participation in the formal political arena and to provide effective leadership. These include:

- a consultative workshop, PNG Women in Decision Making in 2001;
- Good Governance and Effective Leadership, a training workshop for women members of LLGs in 1999; and
- a workshop on political awareness of the OLPLLG in 1999.

In the 2002 election, WIP and the NCW emphasised LLG leadership by encouraging more women to contest local elections. The underlying premise of women's participation in politics is making a difference. The quality of their leadership, in contrast to the predominant male style of leadership in PNG, reflects respect for state authority and a commitment to non-violence, holding community and family welfare above personal interests, efficient management and use of scarce resources, recognition of the democratic principles of people's participation and empowerment, and equitable and sustainable development.

Conclusion: to make a difference

Increasing numbers of women candidates have pursued their collective desire to make a difference in PNG politics, and women are slowly entering the mainstream political arena. In essence, women's participation has attempted to connect their private sphere of decision making with the public sphere.

Patterns of political behaviour displayed by women are a reflection of their role in society as carers and nurturers of human lives, more than anything else. These are qualities that women feel are needed in the public decision-making arena. Women's desire is to make a difference on the basis of their gender roles; it is their concern for human lives, more than power for its own sake, that increasingly brings women into the institutional sphere of politics.

A concerted effort from women, the government and donor agencies is required to sustain and expand the level of political consciousness among grassroots women. To help curb the increasing abuse of public power and resources for personal gain and to satisfy the parochial interests of wantoks (relatives) or friends, and to ensure responsible leadership for the common good, more effort is needed to reach out to the vast majority of women and the general populace to facilitate a certain level of mass political consciousness.

It is clear that women's participation is essential for building a sustainable and democratic society and government. Women are half of every community, therefore they are half of the solution to problems encountered in society and in governance. Women believe they can make a difference to their lives, the lives of their families and the nation if they are supported in their efforts.

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