

THEY COME CLEAN, THEY CONTRIBUTE, AND YET THEY DON'T GET IN

Insights from Women Candidates for 2022 National General Election in Papua New Guinea and Recommendations for Reforms

The equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy. For democratic governments to deliver to their constituents, they must be truly representative. Women's political participation drives tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace. As more women reach leadership within political parties, get elected to legislatures, and contribute their knowledge and perspective, these institutions tend to prioritise issues such as health care, education, and economic issues that impact the daily lives of citizens. Women must be, therefore, equal partners in the process of democratic development, to build a strong and vibrant society.

In PNG, individual, socio-cultural, and institutional factors continue to hinder women's political participation and their representation in legislative bodies. Cultural and institutional barriers reinforce each other and impact the extent to which women compete and are successful in the political arena. In the 2022 National General Elections, an uneven playing field—especially when it comes to campaign finance and election security—the traditional patriarchal gender stereotypes converged to prevent women from fulfilling their political rights in the democratic process. For women's meaningful political participation to increase, we must work at three levels—individual, socio-cultural, and institutional.

The remarkable achievement of two women—Hon. Kessy Sawang and Hon. Rufina Peter—being elected to the PNG National Parliament after an all-male term (2017 - 2022) demonstrates that despite tremendous barriers, there are some openings in the political environment that can be leveraged to consolidate women's representation in the country's political institutions. While around 100 election petitions are still waiting to be resolved in court and a few electorates are yet to see their representatives confirmed as members of parliament, the momentum for reflection is building.

Candidates, election observers, and other stakeholders are echoing each other's calls for a thorough review of the 2022 PNG National General Election and propose swift

and comprehensive reforms ahead of the country's next Local-Level Government (LGG) election slated for 2024 and national election scheduled to take place in 2027. The 2022 election saw a number of ongoing shortcomings continue, despite long-term advocacy for much needed reforms. A few new trends have also been noted—improvements, even if incremental, should be celebrated; concomitantly, some early warnings might indicate potential concerning issues in the future.

In an effort to add to the evidence base of a comprehensive review, and build a nuanced understanding of the success and shortcomings of the 2022 election, 17 women candidates¹ and 15 gender inclusion advocates convened in Port Moresby, on 3 and 4 November, to generously share their experiences, insights, and recommendations. The event built on the conclusions of a trauma-informed workshop for women candidates, conducted earlier this year, which aimed to strengthen the resilience of women in politics and elections against gendered violence. The project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was implemented with technical assistance from the National Democratic Institute (NDI). This paper is the culmination of this effort. These first-hand insights on barriers in the way of women's participation and strategies to overcome them will be shared with prospective candidates in the local and national elections. Furthermore, this paper formulates actionable recommendations to key election stakeholders.

This election was big money—more dark money than ever before...

Overall, women candidates noted a continuing trend of deterioration of the election environment, as the role of money and guns has increased, often creating a hostile environment for all involved in the election, including women candidates, scrutineers, and voters. The participants shared the criticism formulated by independent election observation missions who decried that poor management and limited technical capacity of the PNG Election Commission (PNG EC) led to ineffective and untimely implementation of electoral activities² and a spread of violence³ to regions that have traditionally been peaceful.

Participants also had the sense that there was a higher level of support for women candidates from political parties, but also a higher level of vote control by candidates

¹ From Eastern Highlands, Gulf, Madang Manus, Milne Bay, Morobe, National Capital District, Oro, and Sandaun electorates

² UPNG, The Openness and Transparency of Election Data in Papua New Guinea, Qualitative Assessment on the 2022 National General Election, 2022

³ Transparency International PNG, Summary Paper On The 2022 National General Election, 26 August 2022

and community leaders, and less public awareness and informed voting. A 'rush' by authorities to complete the process added to the poor quality of election delivery and to a feeling that the outcomes favoured certain candidates. Although women had different experiences, levels of success, and have come to politics in different ways, many experienced or witnessed some type of election-related violence.

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2022 ELECTION

Running as an independent candidate vs. receiving political party endorsement

In a departure from past elections, in 2022, an increased number of women, 65 in total, were endorsed by political parties. The increased openness of political parties to become more gender inclusive is a positive development that should be consolidated in future elections cycles to normalise women's presence in politics at all levels. There also seems to be a positive correlation between political party endorsement and performing well in the last election, as many of those candidates ended up in top 5-10 of the voters' preferences, but more analysis is needed to understand the interplay of all relevant factors leading to such results.

Some women candidates, however, had mixed experiences in their respective parties. Women candidates generally benefited from being associated with national political figures, as this helped increase their public profile and support. Nevertheless, some noted that joining a political party—as opposed to running as independents—has also led to shifting the perceptions, expectations, and behaviours of voters and political opponents alike. For instance, community members seemed to be more generous with their time and in-kind donations when women were politically independent, but, as soon as they appeared under a political party banner, there were increased expectations for payments or some sort of benefits, driven by a perception that, where there is a political party, there is big money involved.

Additionally, while some national campaigns provided much needed funding and in-kind support with printing campaign materials and organising rallies, other women candidates struggled with their parties' lack of commitment and timely support. Often, this hesitance translated into late endorsement; furthermore, in a few instances political parties decided to endorse male candidates—who were not even party members—against their own female members. Some parties, even if well intentioned, do not have a strong grassroots base and were not able to adequately support their candidates' ground game.

Furthermore, some women felt they were making great inroads in communities using low-key tactics such as door-to-door campaigning and implementing targeted projects, but once party endorsement was announced, political opponents united against them, perceiving women's support from powerful parties as a direct threat to their own chances to succeed. In reality,

material support from parties was limited and often provided late, and its real impact on the results obtained by each candidate is hard to assess. Finally, some women candidates thought that their own parties gave priority to male candidates, particularly incumbents. Consequently, some women candidates felt they were strung along and used to check a gender inclusion box.

Getting ready to run

Reflecting on their experiences, women candidates stressed the importance of making a decision about running early on, and then building a strong human, logistic, and financial resource base, regardless of running as independent or as a political party representative. There is growing awareness that money politics is a key factor in determining the success of a national election in PNG.

For women, financial self-reliance—in the absence of reliable political party support, strong links to the private sector, or access to the state resources that their male counterparts might draw on—is paramount to ensure appropriate and timely funding for campaign activities. Spending their own savings and borrowing money from family and friends was a key tactic used by women candidates in the last campaign. Some of those whose families were not particularly supportive of their decision to nominate for the election relied on fundraising events outside of their traditional social networks. As a result, they collected cash and in-kind goods, and at least one candidate received donations from Australia-based diaspora.

Have a financial plan—you can't move a car without fuel.

There is a growing understanding that winning as a first-time candidate is the exception, and a more predictable trajectory is progressively increasing one's public profile and voter support over multiple election cycles, which underscores the importance of thorough planning and strategic patience. The ability to plan from the election day backwards, to budget expenses and stay within a budget, to recruit a highly competent and motivated team, and to continuously refine the campaign message are key aspects in preparing for elections. In the 2022 election, social media played a significant role in building the candidates' public profile and communicating key messages. Learning how to use the online platforms effectively and how to protect one's accounts from cyberattacks and disinformation will become increasingly important in the next elections.

Women candidates had different experiences and levels of success, but most experienced directly or witnessed various types of violence due to their activism. While physical assault is less common, many politically active women are victims of character assassination and libellous accusations, which tend to be intensely personal and often sexual in nature. The ability to build resilience to deal with emotional stress and gendered, politically motivated violence is crucial for women's political endurance and strong mental health.

The nature and source of political capital—*hanmak*, *lewamak*, and *belmak*⁴

Election campaigns—like most family, social, and community events—are deeply rooted in the Melanesian culture, which values personal relations, systems of reciprocity, and complex rituals of giving and receiving. In general, the value of women’s contribution to communities is enormous. Additionally, traditional gender roles and a culture of giving precedence to elders as a way to honour and respect add a degree of complexity and nuance to women candidates’ interactions with their electorates. Often, demonstrating cultural awareness and aligning the roles of the campaign team with local cultural norms and expectations helps build buy-in and long-term support. For instance, a plea for support may have more chances to be well received when it comes from the clan chief, rather than the woman candidate herself, even if she is from a chieftain family.

As long as [clan leaders] are alive, they hold the power. The power is only transferred to you after they pass on. So, there is a role for everyone on your team to play, including your 70-year-old father who is a clan chief, your brothers, everyone.

There is also a gendered approach to doing groundwork ⁵in an electorate. While men are expected to contribute to ‘hard’ infrastructure projects, due to the nature of their professions, traditional gender roles, and social networks, women often conduct more ‘soft’ infrastructure work, such as awareness and education on health and gender-based violence issues, and women economic empowerment. By connecting on a more personal level with the community, women can win the hearts of voters, especially other women. Despite leaving *hanmak*, *lewamak*, and *belmak*—engaging with the community, providing basic services, facilitating development programs, handing out funeral or church contributions, and organising feasts—the vast majority of women candidates did not get elected. Many citizens, including women, continue to associate politics with men and view political leadership as a masculine trait. In fact, there’s a perception that women outside the informal economic sector tend to vote for male

⁴ In Tok Pisin, *Hanmak* means leaving your ‘hand mark’, or making an impact on a community by providing a service, implementing a project, or supporting a cause. *Lewamak*, or ‘heart mark’, refers to making an emotional impact, by showing care and empathy. This is where women candidates feel they could have an advantage comparing with men, as they are better positioned socially and culturally to play caregiver roles. *Belmak* refers to the local customs of showing generosity by providing food and drinks before asking for a favour, such as voting.

⁵ Meki, Theresa, Lusim Hanmak: [Why Women Candidates in Papua New Guinea Need to Start Early](#), Australian National University, Department of Pacific Affairs, 2020

candidates in the detriment of other women. Other factors, such as family dynamics, but especially vote buying, have influenced voter behaviour; in some instances, relatives confessed the reason for changing their mind, saying, “sorry, I took the 50 Kina [provided by another candidate]”. The psycho-social and economic impacts of the election can last long after the polls close, as some women continue to struggle with savings and income loss or residual family and community resentment.

The PNG electoral system—an uneven playing field

Cultural barriers that hinder women’s political participation are compounded by an electoral system that enables pervasive vote bribery, politically-sponsored violence, and impunity for negligence and fraud in the delivery of the election. The lack of proper preparations ahead of the elections, delayed and dysfunctional polling, and irregularities during counting led some women candidates to question the real intentions of the election stakeholders involved in the process. A host of issues affected women disproportionately, compared to their male counterparts, in particular incumbent candidates.

It’s not the people, I’ve been with the people. It’s the system that’s problematic.

Opacity of campaign finance and a lack of independent election monitoring of campaign spending make it difficult to assess the scale and depth of these issues but, overall, there is a sense that the role of money politics was exacerbated in the 2022 PNG NGE, putting those with less access to funding at a significant disadvantage. Such ongoing transactional approaches hinder voter education efforts that strain to foster a culture of sound citizen participation in the democratic process. Additionally, as mentioned above, there was a high level of frustration about how the election was delivered.

First, poor preparation, un-transparent hiring practices, and inconsistent application of the law fuelled some complaints about a low level of competence of polling officials and dysfunctional election administration procedures. These comments were similar to the findings of independent election observation missions. For instance, in some provinces, the ward roll was used instead of the common roll for the whole electorate, and only voters registered in that particular ward were allowed to vote,⁶ while in other provinces voters were able to use their National ID⁷ cards to vote. Additionally, some voters were not able to find their names on the roll. In particular in those provinces where polling was limited to one day, there was a sense of rushed outcomes. Adding to a sense of systemic political bias was the decision to call winners for some electorates while voting in other electorates was still underway. Delays in publishing

⁶ Manus Electorate. This issue was also noted in the Bougainville Women’s Federation [2022 Election Observation Report](#)

⁷ Milne Bay Electorate

the polling schedule made it difficult for campaign teams to deploy scrutineers effectively. In some instances, candidate poll watchers also faced restricted access and intimidation at polling places and counting centres. It was also noted that some scrutineers were either not well trained or abused their roles by assisting illiterate voters to cast their ballot or trying to influence the election outcomes in other ways.

Not one CCTV worked... the screen was there [in the counting centre], but it didn't work.

There was also a sense that candidates and political parties' actions during the campaign went unchecked and led to misleading or defrauding voters. In addition to unrealistic promises of large development projects with funding from well-known international organisations, candidates also promised money and other benefits, such as Green Cards, and even a pyramid game scheme seems to have been organised. The state authorities should have established fact-checking mechanisms and should have enforced the law for the protection of the most vulnerable voters.

In some provinces, a centralised and prolonged counting meant that women candidates who campaigned on a shoestring ran out of funding in the middle of the process and had to borrow more money for scrutineers' transportation and allowances; others simply had to end the counting observation early due to a lack of funds. Not being able to monitor the process in its entirety led to suspicion that the outcome of the election was manipulated. The 'eleventh hour' or the 'devil's night' are references to potential machinations after polling places close and sensitive material is prepared for counting.

Women's accounts include stories of improper storage of ballot boxes, without police supervision, and cases of tampering with the boxes by replacing or even burning them. Some believe that ballot stacking was made possible by an oversupply of ballot papers to some electorates. Often, women thought they had popular support, but lost the race due to irregularities during vote counting. A positive outcome however, was that opposing candidates joined forces and shared evidence and raised their collective voice demanding accountability.

Election security and violence against women in elections

The scale and quality of the security apparatus deployed during the PNG election varied greatly among provinces. In some electorates, insufficient and ineffective law enforcement personnel during the campaign, polling, and vote counting had a direct impact on the outcome of the election. Lacking security at polling places allowed crowd crushes, intimidation of voters, and ultimately tampering with sensitive election material. The inaction of security forces when these incidents happened, especially when the burning of ballot boxes took place

in Markham—makes some candidates wonder about potential political bias and hidden agenda of security forces.

The transportation of ballot boxes was at times chaotic, especially the escorting of ballots from rural areas, with police cars racing through populated areas with little regard to the safety of pedestrians or the scrutineers who followed the convoy in their own vehicles. At times, there was brutality toward scrutineers at counting centres, with one account of security forces beating the scrutineers with belts for trying to record the proceedings. Women candidates felt there was more action that the security personnel could have taken in real time to prevent or mitigate violence or other irregularities, such as the ballot box burning incident in Markham and Kabwum, Morobe Province. Despite women's pleas for action, officers were often dismissive and did not take them seriously. The go-to response was "go submit a petition" although clearly that is a way to deal with a situation only after the fact. Furthermore, women felt that forceful action by the security personnel was often misplaced, including the brutality against scrutineers and the display of semi-automatic machines at counting centres. This contributed to an atmosphere of intimidation and some women were concerned for their personal safety.

There was chaos at polling booths. We had to pull three older people out of the line because they were getting crushed.

Reflecting on their experience, women candidates noted that while there was a palpable sense of insecurity across the board in some constituencies, women might have been more vulnerable to violence and threats of violence. Some women experienced, firsthand, or witnessed acts of violence against women engaged in political activities. A few noted that their teams were physically assaulted—in particular during vote counting, when tension between scrutineers and counting officials ran high, but also between candidates themselves, due to suspicions of vote rigging.

There were instances of intimidation as well as online and offline hate speech, character assassination, and libellous accusations. Unsurprisingly, in places where gender-based violence is pervasive, the perpetrators of violence against women in elections include women, as well as men. There was also a sense that more women than men engaged in online trolling and badmouthing other women. Sadly, one 22-year old female scrutineer was shot dead when police opened fire at a crowd at a polling station in the National Capital District, where people rushed to vote after polling had been delayed a few times.⁸ The results of the investigation are still forthcoming.

In the absence of gender-disaggregated official data on security incidents,⁹ it is difficult to assess the scale and ways in which men, women, and children have been affected differently,

⁸ AlJazeera, [Papua New Guinea police accused of killing woman at polls](#), 15 July 2022

⁹ UPNG, [The Openness and Transparency of Election Data in Papua New Guinea, Qualitative Assessment on the 2022 National General Election](#), 2022

but it is estimated that ongoing conflict in the country and election-related violence have displaced more than 15,000 people; ¹⁰many children remain out of school, and the incidence of rape and other types of gender-based violence is significant. There is growing awareness of acts of violence and harassment against women in politics, recognising the convergence of violence and women's public participation and how violence against women impacts the democratic process.

While political violence can be experienced by both men and women, violence against women in politics targets women because of their gender, can be gendered in its form, and its impact is to discourage all women from any political activity. This phenomenon impacts the full range of women engaged in political action or activity, such as running as candidates for elected office, participating in political parties, working as election officials, voting, being a civil society activist on political issues, or attending campaign events.

Online platforms can be important in helping women overcome barriers to becoming politically active, but they are also a forum for disinformation, hate speech, abuse and harassment. Online violence can be anonymous, borderless, sustained, and permanent. Violence and abuse create a hostile online environment by shaming, intimidating, or degrading women, for the purpose of silencing them or pushing them out of the political arena. The perception of impunity emboldens perpetrators and raises women's sense of insecurity and violation. Ultimately, online and offline violence against women in politics has a chilling effect on the ambitions of young women and new entrants to politics, is an expected price they pay to engage in politics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the event, the women candidates reiterated their commitment to addressing the numerous barriers that continue to impede fair political representation in PNG. By formulating the recommendations listed below, these women candidates add their voice to the calls for a thorough review of the 2022 election made by independent election observers and other election candidates. They also demand the implementation of comprehensive reforms to create an environment in which men and women can compete more equitably in the country's next election and represent their constituencies at all levels of government.

The Special Parliamentary Committee on the 2022 General Election¹¹

¹⁰ IOM, Papua New Guinea: Conflict and election-related violence trigger wave of displacement, 2022

¹¹ See the Annex for more information on this committee

The Committee should conduct a comprehensive and inclusive review of the 2022 election. Women candidates for open and regional seats (at least two running for each seat category) should be invited by the committee to testify on their experiences in the last general election.

- As part of this review, the Committee should investigate the role and decision-making processes of the election commission regarding using the ward voter rolls instead of constituency level rolls, and as well as the impact of early declaration of the election result in some electorates and the prolonged vote counting in others.
The Committee should collect evidence on all security incidents, including the burning of ballot boxes in Kabwum and Markham.
- The Committee should conduct a review of the budget and spending of the PNG EC for the 2022 election and formulate recommendations for an adequate annual budget for all pre-election processes, including to carry out public awareness initiatives.
- An independent audit of the quality of the common roll, as well as an audit of the PNG EC internal processes and organisational structure should also be conducted.
- The Committee should also investigate the abuse of state resources during election campaigns. In particular, the government should cease the Provincial Services Improvement Program (PSIP) and District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) funding due to persistent use as campaign funding by sitting members of parliament.

The committee should spearhead much awaited legal reforms to improve the electoral process. First, the Committee should advocate for the revised Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) to be passed in the parliament. Additionally, the Committee should review the Organic Law on National and Local-level Government Elections and recommend improvements. The Committee should give consideration to the proposal to increase the number of election commissioners from one to three or four to improve competency and transparency of decision making at the highest level of the election management body. More incentive should also be provided to women to compete in elections for candidates who qualify in top 10--not only those who obtain 10% of the votes--to receive a refund of K10,000.

Finally, the committee should give consideration to a number of public policy changes. The Committee should advocate for adequate funding for the National ID department to complete its work and use that database for a biometric voting system and bring the national ID up to speed in those provinces where it is lagging behind.

The Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission (IPPC)

The IPPC should be given more powers to hold political parties and candidates accountable. In particular, it should make the code of conduct enforceable as a way to address vote buying, defamation, and other illegitimate practices during the election.

- The Commission should conduct an audit to ensure that political parties have real membership and presence on the ground.
- The Commission should also create a hotline where citizens can check if a party is real or not to avoid scams and fraud.

The PNG Election Commission

- PNG EC should require candidates to nominate early, so that it can conduct appropriate background screenings.
- PNG EC should ensure that no dual citizens run for any election in PNG.
- PNG EC should provide a report on the progress of the update of the common role.
- PNG EC should consider adopting electronic voting and or counting.
- PNG EC should ensure that the selection criteria and the names of the returning officers, assistant returning officers, and all other election officials are gazetted at least six months before the election.

International Development Partners

- Development partners should continue to monitor the election petitions that are currently underway and document the resolutions, for the purpose of understanding how women might have been affected disproportionately by election irregularities.
- Development partners should conduct on-going monitoring of actions on all recommendations in this election cycle.
- They could also support more research to better understand voter behaviour and attitudes regarding women candidates, including the role of *hanmak*, *lewamak*, and *belmak*.
- Development partners should support networks of solidarity and initiatives that advocate to women to vote for other women.
- Organisations such as IFES should provide election security advisors to each of the 22 provincial election committees ahead of the next LLG elections.
- Development partners—including UN agencies, NDI, DFAT and MFAT-supported programs—should join forces to provide support ahead of time for the LLG elections.
- More regional-level workshops to get women involved at all levels of government, from ward counsellors to LLG members and presidents, should be conducted. Women leaders—including those who attended the NDI workshops funded by USAID and those included in the Vote Women for Change program, supported by DFAT—have established a public profile and gained hands-on experience in the past elections. They are able and willing to serve as a first cohort of trainers and mentors to cascade knowledge to subnational level and get more women involved in politics.

- Support for programs that strengthen women resilience against online and off-line violence against women in politics, such as NDI's, should be continued.
- International development partners should also continue to give grants to women economic empowerment programs in different districts around the country, to support building their financial independence which is a prerequisite for successfully running in the next elections.

ANNEX

Special Parliamentary Committee on the 2022 General Election—Establishment and Appointment of Members¹²

Motion (by Mr Rainbo Paita) agreed to - That:

- (1) Parliament Establishes a Special Parliamentary on the 2022 National General Elections.
- (2) The Committee shall consist of eight to nine members appointed by Parliament at the quorum of the Committee shall be.
- (3) And the members of the committee shall be: Mr Allan Bird (Chairman), Sir Puka Temu (Deputy Chairman), (Mr Robert Naguri, Mr Jacob Maki, Mr Charlie Benjamin, Mr Saki Soloma, Mr Steven Pim, Mr Elias Kapavore and Mr Keith Iduhu.
- (4) The Committee shall inquire into and report on the conduct of the 2022 National General Election to its specific considerations to; (a) The powers, functions, and responsibilities of the Electoral Commission relating matters, (b) The process involved in the conduct of the General Elections with the focus on updating the Common Roll, campaigning, voting, counting, declarations, Disputed Returns process and related matters, (c) Expenditures of electoral funds and relate matters, (d) The security provided by the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, Papua New Guinea Defence Force, Papua New Guinea Correctional Service and related matters.
- (5) The Committee also inquire into and report on any election related matters where the Committee considers appropriate.
- (6) The Committee shall have powers to send to persons' papers and records and to meet from place to place to act.

¹² [Draft Hansard](#), 2 September 2022