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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF WOMEN CANDIDATES IN THE NATIONAL GENERAL ELECTIONS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Key Points

- In PNG, men seemed to make decisions in the public space, a situation that stems from a combination of influences: colonisation, missionisation and socio-cultural beliefs and practices.
- The trend of women candidates winning parliamentary seats in the National General Elections (NGE) has not exceeded three in Papua New Guinea (PNG), it demonstrates that it is difficult for women to contest national elections as candidates and more difficult for women to win.
- Mission institutions introduced and spread the image of the good housewife with sewing and cooking lessons. During colonial rule, majority of the women missed out on the nation-building process.
- There is a possibility that women of today's generation to change the trend of winning more than three seats in the parliament.
- Women of today's generation can have influence, and it starts with finding the right political party, changing their mindset from the mission's mindset, and emulating those that have won seats in the past elections.

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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF WOMEN CANDIDATES IN THE NATIONAL GENERAL ELECTIONS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By Joseph Kaile

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), men seemed to make decisions in the public space, a situation that stems from a combination of influences such as colonisation, missionisation and socio-cultural beliefs and practices (Meki, 2021). The society that we live in today is male dominated and it is evident in the National Parliament. There were several women elected to the parliament, but the numbers have not increased beyond three since 1975.

According to Dickson-Waiko (2013), most women were excluded from the nation-building process because of Christian missions in PNG. Mission institutions introduced and spread the image of the good, domesticated housewife with sewing and cooking lessons under the colonial rule (1884–1975), thus, the majority of the women missed out on the nation-building process. Papua New Guinea (PNG) has a political history of very low representation of women in parliament, which demonstrates that it is difficult for women to contest national elections as candidates and more difficult for women to win (Fairio, 2019).

This paper highlights mission influences on women in PNG and the challenges women candidates faced during National General Elections. The article highlights the lessons from the 2022 National Election, lessons from PNG neighbours and recommendations for potential female candidates in the future national elections. It concludes with a reflection of the main points of the article.

Trends of women candidates in National General Election in PNG

Since the National General Election in 1972, only a few women candidates were able to win the seats they contested in. The trend of number of women candidates winning seats at any of the National General Elections has not gone beyond three, which was in the 2012 to 2017 Parliament. Table 1 shows trend of women candidates who have won parliamentary seats since 1972.

Table 1. Trends of Elected Women Candidates in PNG since 1972

Name	Party	Electorate	Year
1. Dame Josephine Abaijah	Papua Party	Central and NCD	1972-1977-1982 and 1997-2000
2. Waliyato Clowes	Independent - Papuan Alliance	Middle Fly open	1977-1982
3. Nahau Rooney	Pangu Pati	Manus Open	1977-1987
4. Dame Carol Kidu	Melanesian Alliance Party	Moresby South	1997-2012
5. Julie Soso	Triumph Heritage Empowerment	Eastern Highlands	2012-2017
6. Delilah Gore	People's National Congress	Sohe Open	2012-2017
7. Loujayah Tony	Triumph Heritage Empowerment	Lae open	2012-2017
8. Rufina Peter	People's National Congress	Central	2022
9. Kessy Sawang	People First Party	Rai Coast	2022
10. Francesca Semoso	Pangu Pati	North Bougainville	2023

The 2022 National General Election in PNG

From July 2 to August 13, 2022, Papua New Guineans voted 118 Members of Parliament (MPs) to serve in the National Parliament for a five-year term. Of the 118 MPs, 96 of them represented the districts, 20 of them represented the provinces, one for the National Capital District, and one for the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. The 118 members of the National Parliament were elected from single-member constituencies through the Limited Preferential Voting system. In the 2022 National General Election results, of the 118 elected, 115 were men and only three were women.

The 22 reserved seats

The democracy of PNG is still male dominated despite few women elected leaders in the parliament. The campaign led by a former female member for Moresby South has drawn the line of needing to have reserved seats for female leaders. The idea is working for the Autonomous Region of Bougainville that has reserved seats for female to contest. However, according to a report by Kuku (2022), *Why reserve seats?* in *The National*, Prime Minister James Marape said that “the government will not consider the reserved seats for PNG parliament as he believes that women have been inclusively involved in the National General Elections with their husband or at their respective communities”. The government is looking towards creating an improved electoral process to allow females to compete in the coming National General Elections in PNG.

The extent to which mission influence women status in PNG

Dickson-Waiko (2013) argued that the inclusion of women in politics within the nation of PNG was problematic, partly because women had rarely experienced mainstream colonial rule – an experience that provided a basis for participation in the post-colonial state. Christian church missionaries also contributed to this erosion of women’s cultural status by encouraging Pacific women to emulate European conjugal norms which privileged women’s domesticity (Huffer, 2006; 33). The Christian mission’s idea of women being domesticated housewives is still eminent in the local communities of PNG. It was evident in the PNGNRI 2022 National General Election observation report that women’s roles and duties were doubled and tripled during the General Election period. Many women were cooking and making coffee until daybreak, others provided financial assistance for building campaign houses and raising pigs for the campaign feasts (Sanida and Goro, 2023).

Challenges women face in contesting National General Election

Fairio (2014) stated that society influenced on the gender of the leader elected and the majority of the PNG society and its people tend to follow such practice. The obvious reason that some women often feel reluctant to contest in the National General Election is that societies believe women must submit entirely to their husbands, to their husband’s clan and its customary ways.

According to Koitaka (2019), Auali left indelible footprints, *The National* newspaper, kiaps appointed males to lead instead of women and that gave prominence to male leaders which the society saw and adopted as a normal way of life.

Keimelo (2019), identified potential strategy for addressing electoral irregularities in Papua New Guinea. The article found out that electoral irregularities, specifically common

roll update and vote buying which are the most common irregularities in PNG.

Report edited by Sanida and Goro (2023) highlighted that the vehicles used during campaign by candidates were driven around with full load of supporters to show their numbers and most clan coordinators were appointed from each clan to make a list of the eligible voters.

The summary of challenges that women face in the National Election of Papua New Guinea includes:

- The marital duties for women contesting election,
- The males are seen as leaders of the community and the country,
- Election is a very expensive exercise,
- Election-related violence,
- Election-related bribery,
- Vote rigging in the national election,
- Stealing of ballot papers, and
- Manipulation of counting at counting centers that disadvantage women candidates in PNG.

Election opportunity for women in PNG

Despite the setback of not reaching the goal of having reserved seats in the parliament for women to have a fair representation in the parliament, there is a gradual shift in the mindset of the people. The political parties in PNG have realised the importance of having women in their parties as shown in the recent endorsement of the women candidates by political parties.

According to Loop News (2023), Post-election women’s forum, in the 2022 National General Election, 159 women candidates nominated, 64 (40.3%) were endorsed by political parties. The data can be compared to the previous election year, it can be concluded that this is a promising trend evident for women in which saw a significant increase in the number of women candidates endorsed by political parties.

Lessons from PNG’s neighbours

According to Huffer (2006), New Zealand was the first state to recognise women’s right to vote in 1893 but women did not win the right to stand for electoral representation until 1919, and it was not until 1933 that the first woman entered New Zealand’s national parliament. By the 1980s, however, women began to make their political mark to the extent that New Zealanders elected their first woman Prime Minister, Helen Clark, in 1994. It was not until 2010 that Australia was able to boast a female Australian Prime Minister. Every system takes time to mature, and this system can be a potential aid for the women in PNG in the future.

Recommendations

The well-performing candidates in the 2017 National General Elections started preparations for their candidacy at the beginning of 2014, around 18 months prior to the election. Preparations at an early stage involved consultations with the community to canvass support and early fundraising.

Other notably points discussed was for female candidates to know their constituency well and plan accordingly of how they will campaign. The 2022 election victory of Hon. Kessy Sawang for Rai Coast Open and Hon. Rufina Peter for Central Province, and Hon. Francesca Semoso for North Bougainville Open in a by-election in 2023 can be used as case study and motivation for other women in PNG to emulate.

For women candidates to be successful in breaking the barrier of representing their electorate and province, the following recommendation should be considered:

- Women have to break away from the belief and mindset that men are the decision makers.
- Reserved seats for women are not going to be given but the electoral process will be improved for female candidate to compete, and hence, aspiring women candidate must prepare early.
- Planning and fundraising are vital for election success and women must strive to always contest under a political party.
- The Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission has done well in advocating for political parties to endorse women and provide necessary support to women candidate to contest election and its revised Organic Law on Integrity on Political Party and Candidates (OLIPAC) has to be supported.

Conclusion

The challenge for potential female candidates to be successful in the future National General Elections is to learn from the present strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the General Elections. Activities surrounding the elections are an expensive exercise, and it needs time and resources. Early planning, fundraising and preparation is vital as this can be a small step, but it is the step in the right direction for potential women candidates in PNG.

There is a possibility that women of today's generation can change the trend of winning more than three seats in the parliament and it all starts with changing their mindset from the mission's mindset, finding the right political party, and emulating those that have won in the past National General Elections. The lessons from Bougainville and other countries

can be used as a motivation for women who are losing faith in themselves and women who have lost in election but are willing to try again in 2027.

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