



Violence Against Women in Papua New Guinea

Assessment Summary

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Background

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has among the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world and an estimated 66 percent of women are survivors of domestic violence, which was only criminalized in 2017 with the implementation of the Family Protection Act in 2017. Perpetuated in part by cultural norms that marginalize women in the public sphere, women are largely limited in their ability to take active roles in decision-making and politics in their communities. Violence against women in elections (VAWE) in PNG is expressed through acute physical and verbal violence and rooted in deep structural inequality and gendered violence. It is based in cultural norms and strict gender roles that condone, tolerate and are enforced through gendered violence against women. This context – coupled with a broader culture of violence, intense tribal politics and gaps in the legal framework and enforcement to protect women – creates an environment hostile to women's free and fair participation in electoral and political processes.

VAWE occurs throughout PNG with regional variation. In the Highlands, VAWE occurs in both the public and private spheres with female voters facing direct threats of violence at the polls and threats and acts of domestic violence, which are used to reinforce family voting. Female candidates face intense gossip, scrutiny into their personal lives and sexual histories

and direct threats to themselves and their families. Electoral officials and observers report witnessing violence at the polls, family voting, intimidation of female voters and frequent harassment. In the coastal regions, VAWE is subtler and occurs more often as verbal and domestic violence than public physical violence. Female candidates from these regions who were interviewed for this assessment noted that they received support from their families, though some faced resistance from their communities. Interviewees nationally noted, however, less resistance to female candidates locally than nationally. Once elected, former female parliamentarians reported immense scrutiny, with their gender viewed as a handicap by their constituents. Some reported sexual harassment by fellow members of Parliament and not receiving recognition for their work, hurting their chances for reelection.

Responses to VAWE in PNG have been limited or absent to date, exacerbated by a lack of enforcement of the current laws and policies. This can be partially credited to a lack of resources and understanding of the scope of the issue. Recent awareness regarding the lack of women elected to Parliament in 2017 has resulted in a resurgence of proposals addressing women's political representation, though further support beyond the political realm is needed.

Recommendations

To properly address VAWE, government, civil society, political parties and police must come together to improve enforcement of current laws, raise awareness and take concrete steps to make elections in PNG safer for women.

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems recommends the following actions:

1. Improve enforcement of existing laws through advocacy and education on laws and reporting mechanisms.
2. Enhance gender-sensitive electoral security to all voters.
3. Strengthen civic and voter education curricula nationwide so that electors understand their rights and responsibilities as voters.
4. Establish separate polling booths for women at all polling locations and increase security at the polls to mitigate possible intimidation of female voters.
5. Identify key male allies who can be trained to act as catalysts for change to reduce the factors that lead to VAWE through legal reform, awareness and education campaigns, and programming.
6. Support advocacy and development efforts for enforceable temporary special measures at the national level.
7. Collaboration between electoral stakeholders to development enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with temporary special measures and support effective implementation.
8. Provide training to aspiring female candidates and assist them to engage men and build coalitions.
9. Implement programs to reduce hate speech and online VAWE.

VAWE Assessment Findings

	Windows of Vulnerability	Windows of Opportunity and Responses
Status of Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women are largely relegated to the informal sector and expected to be subservient to their husbands. Their status is thought to be partially rooted in Christianity and a deeply patriarchal society. Payment of bride price and prevalence of polygamy are used to reinforce women's low status. The handling of family violence cases by police and the courts is under scrutiny and there is inadequate support for survivors. Domestic violence is often unreported or handled informally, making prevalence challenging to determine and limiting survivors' access to resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil society organizations and churches have and continue to provide resources to survivors of family violence when and where the government is unable to do so. In some cases, there have been changing attitudes toward women in leadership positions, including in churches where women are now permitted in some leadership positions. Some regions have more equal gender dynamics and have made strides toward acceptance of women in leadership positions.
Access to the Electoral Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reserved seats for women have been established at the local level, though compliance is low. Women are underrepresented as scrutineers and polling officials, with interviewees citing security concerns. Lack of support, including financial, from political parties places female candidates on an unequal playing field. The cultural status of women is a barrier for female candidates. Family voting is enforced through lack of secrecy of the ballot. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proportion of female candidates at the national level is low but growing, and women contest more frequently at the local level. Former candidates have noted attitudes toward female candidates have improved. Reserved seats for women at the national level and legislated candidate quotas have been proposed. The PNG Electoral Commission permanent staff has greater equality than among polling officials.
VAWE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women are often unable to vote without interference, particularly in the Highlands, and are more likely to be assisted than men by partners or family members. Female candidates face verbal violence, harassment, threats and online violence. Female scrutineers and electoral workers are in some areas threatened. Reportedly, sex workers in "campaign houses" sometimes as young as 13, used by campaigns to garner support. Alcohol may contribute to greater domestic violence during campaign periods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Passage and enforcement of the Family Violence Act can help address election-related domestic violence. Bougainville has notably lower rates of overt physical VAW and high participation of women as electoral officials and scrutineers. Separate polling lines were enacted at some polling stations in 2017. However their efficacy is debated in areas where election violence does not appear to be gendered.

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