



GENDER ALERT ON COVID-19 IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA



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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

UN Women issues this alert to highlight the gender-specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on women's lives. This alert outlines the value and importance of women's participation and leadership in humanitarian and political action. It focuses on why women's leadership and meaningful participation is a right, and can lead to more sustainable responses to crisis.

Inequality between women and men hinders women's ability to influence and participate in crisis planning and response. With this in mind, this alert concludes with a set of recommendations for consideration by key national and international stakeholders in Papua New Guinea to ensure women's needs are effectively addressed in the COVID-19 response. UN Women PNG is committed to advancing the rights and meeting the needs of women and girls, including in the COVID-19 response.

CONTEXT

COVID-19 comes at a time when gender inequality, widespread gender-based violence, and weak rule of law and service delivery are negatively impacting Papua New Guinea's economic and social development. Despite the presence of capable women leaders and activists able to contribute to PNG's development, peacebuilding and COVID-19 response efforts, women remain under-represented in political, health, humanitarian and economic decision-making forums.

Papua New Guinea is one of the least urbanised countries in the world, with approximately 85 percent of the population living in rural areas with very limited infrastructure.¹ As a result, service delivery is a considerable challenge in many remote areas. The country has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.740, ranking it 161 out of 162 countries in 2018, and 155 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index. Overall, women spend less time in school, experience

¹ United Nations (2017). Papua New Guinea United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2018-2022.

high rates of maternal mortality and adolescent births, have limited access to law and justice services and participate at a lower rate in the formal labour force than men.² While difficult to capture a comprehensive picture of violence against women and girls across the country, regional findings suggest it is pervasive.³

STATUS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women in Papua New Guinea have made gains in advancing their participation in political and public life, for example through the establishment of the Office for the Development of Women and the passage of the Bougainville Women's Federation Bill in June 2020⁴, as well as established grassroots networks of women human rights defenders in some regions across the country. In the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB), representatives from women's groups played an essential role in the negotiations that resulted in the Bougainville Peace Agreement and disseminating information about the process across their networks and within their communities. The Bougainville Peace Agreement is also one of a very small number of peace agreements globally that has a woman signatory.⁵

However, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in decision-making and leadership positions. Since gaining independence in 1975, only seven women have been elected to the national parliament and only three women have been in parliament at any given time.⁶ In Papua New Guinea's 2017 parliamentary elections not a single woman was elected, leaving the country tied for last place (alongside Vanuatu and Micronesia) in an international ranking of 193 countries by the Inter-

Parliamentary Union measuring the number of women in parliament.⁷ However, at the subnational level, the Bougainville House of Representatives has three reserved seats for women and the 2015 Autonomous Bougainville Government election saw the first woman candidate win in an open seat.

The challenges facing women's equal and meaningful political participation and leadership in Papua New Guinea are due to a variety of systemic, structural, and cultural factors. At the national level, few women contest elections, and those that do, tend to lack the support and resources required. During elections, 'money politics', the practice of vote buying and 'community voting' impact women's ability to freely exercise their right to vote and participate in the electoral process.⁸ Gender stereotypes also contribute to the stigmatization of women who are perceived as less educated, in particular single mothers, and are therefore discouraged from exercising their right to vote.⁹

For the few women who do hold leadership positions, their capacity to exercise this leadership is strongly influenced by gendered and political dynamics of the institutions in which they are operating.

² UNDP (2018). Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update. Accessed on 15 July 2020.

³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Addendum: Mission to Papua New Guinea, 18 March 2013, A/HRC/23/49/Add.2.; UN Women (2014). Scoping Study: Ensuring safe public transport with and for women and girls in Port Moresby; Ganster-Breidler, M. (2010). Gender-based violence and the impact on women's health and wellbeing in Papua New Guinea, Contemporary PNG Studies, Vol 13.; Jewkes, R., Fulu, E., Roselli, T. and Garcia-Moreno, C. (2013). Prevalence of and factors associated with non-partner rape perpetration: Findings from the UN Multicountry Cross-sectional Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. The Lancet Global Health, 1(4), 208-218.

⁴ The Bougainville Women's Federation Bill was passed by the Bougainville House of Representatives on 11 June 2020 following wide consultations. The Bill establishes the Bougainville Women's Federation as the peak non-governmental organisation responsible for representing the interests of women from across the region.

⁵ Globally, women constitute 4 percent of signatories to existing peace agreements. (UN Women (2012). Women's participation in peace negotiations: Connections between presence and influence.)

⁶ Papua New Guinea is a parliamentary democracy with a national parliament comprised of 111 seats. Currently, there are no special measures, temporary or otherwise, in place to support women's electoral representation in the National Parliament.

⁷ International Parliamentary Union (2019). Women in national parliaments. Accessed 14 July 2020.

⁸ Haley, N. and Zubrinich, K. (2015). Assessing the Shift to Limited Preferential Voting in Papua New Guinea: Money Politics. SSGM In Brief 2015/30. Canberra: ANU.; Haley, N and Zubrinich, K. (2018). 2017 Papua New Guinea General Elections, Election Observation Report. Canberra: ANU.

⁹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2019). Violence against women in elections in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville: An IFES assessment.

WHY A GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACH TO COVID-19 MATTERS

EMERGING GENDERED IMPACTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought pre-existing gender inequalities to the fore, clearly demonstrating how these inequalities are exacerbated in times of crisis.

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women's social, political and economic wellbeing across the globe has been well-documented. Women's unpaid care and domestic workload has increased with school closures and the need to care for sick relatives, funding for sexual and reproductive health services has been diverted, gender-based violence has increased exponentially and women's economic security has worsened considerably.¹⁰ As a consequence, the social, political and economic gains made by women across the globe are at risk.

On 24 March 2020, the Government of Papua New Guinea declared a National State of Emergency (SOE) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which officially ended on 16 June 2020.¹¹ Under the SOE, containment measures resulted in the temporary closure of markets, a key source of income for many women across the country, intermittent suspension of public transport and the diversion of staff away from Family Support Centres¹² towards COVID-19 efforts. An assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on market vendors, conducted by UN Women PNG in May and June 2020 highlighted an income loss of up to three quarters for women vendors in district markets as a consequence of 'lockdown' measures.¹⁴

Recent findings from the PNG gender-based violence sub-cluster on the State Of Emergency in Papua New Guinea revealed a 31 percent overall decrease in the number of clients accessing GBV services as compared to the 2020 period preceding the SOE.¹⁵ According to the report,

economic stress was a primary cause of violence during the State of Emergency period. Transport limitations, increased caregiving and domestic responsibilities, and a lack of information on COVID-19 were also among a few of the recorded barriers preventing survivors from accessing vital services.

Given the emerging gendered impacts of COVID-19 on women in Papua New Guinea, it is essential that women are meaningfully engaged in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. This should include their equal participation and leadership in decision-making, as well as playing a key role in the design and implementation of the COVID-19 response.

By ensuring women are able to effectively and meaningfully participate in this process, it is more likely that their needs will be represented and addressed. In this way, COVID-19 represents an opportunity to centre the voices and experiences of women, thereby promoting and supporting inclusive decision-making and showcasing women's capacity as leaders.

THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

The evidence base demonstrating the positive impact of women's political leadership suggests that women are more likely to address issues that directly impact the broader community, including employment, infrastructure, education, family policy, and social insurance.¹⁶ Research conducted by the National Democratic Institute over the past 35 years has found that female political leaders appear to prioritise policies and legislation that promote equality and inclusion, focus on quality of life and contribute to better health and education outcomes.¹⁷ Additionally, women are more likely than their male counterparts to work across party lines and respond to the concerns of their constituents.¹⁸

¹⁰ UN Women and United Nations Secretariat (2020). UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women.

¹¹ Before ending the SOE, legislation was drafted and passed to codify national management of pandemics, which includes many of the restrictions that were imposed under the SOE.

¹² Family Support Centres provide critical clinical and psychosocial support services to survivors of family and sexual violence.

¹³ PNG GBV sub-cluster, UNFPA (June 2020). The State of Gender-Based Violence during the COVID-19 Crisis and State of Emergency. Papua New Guinea.

¹⁴ Out of a total of 191 survey respondents, 64.9 percent identified food shortages as the main problem they faced as a result of 'lockdown' measures. (UN Women PNG Country Office (May 2020). COVID-19 Market Assessment. Unpublished report.)

¹⁵ PNG GBV sub-cluster, UNFPA (June 2020). The State of Gender-Based Violence during the COVID-19 Crisis and State of Emergency. Papua New Guinea.

¹⁶ Chattopadhyay, R. and Duflo, E. (2004). Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India. *Econometrica* 72(5), 1409–1443; Bratton, K. A. and Ray, L. P. (2002) Descriptive Representation: Policy Outcomes and Municipal Day-Care Coverage in Norway. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(2), 428–437.

¹⁷ Pepera, S. (February 28, 2018). Why women in politics? Accessed 13 July 2020.

¹⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2008). Equality in Politics: A Survey of Men and Women in Parliaments.

At the community level, given their frontline roles as caregivers and health workers, women are uniquely positioned to participate in health surveillance, early detection and prevention.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Research shows that engaging women in prevention and crisis response leads to more effective humanitarian outcomes and reduced gender inequalities.¹⁹ An analysis of COVID-19 data from 35 countries revealed that those with women in leadership positions recorded six times fewer confirmed COVID-19 deaths than countries with governments led by men.²⁰ Female-led governments also appeared to be more effective and rapid in flattening the curve, and prioritised long-term social wellbeing over short-term economic costs. Moreover, GDP growth forecasts for 2020 indicate that female-led governments will experience a lower decline (less than 5.5 percent) than male-led governments (over 7 percent).²¹

In Papua New Guinea, despite the lack of women in political leadership positions, the National Operations Centre for COVID-19 (NOC-19) responsible for overseeing the COVID-19 response demonstrated some promising practices.

Whilst in operation and at its peak, the NOC-19 was comprised of approximately 35 to 45 percent women with some holding more senior roles. Women's groups and networks have also played a role in mobilising to ensure COVID-19 information reaches their communities. For example, the elected women leaders in the Motu Koita Assembly have taken an active role in conducting COVID-19 awareness via radio and in their communities.²²

In Bougainville, the Ministerial Taskforce on COVID-19 and the Parliamentary Committee on the State of Emergency, each had a single woman Member from the Bougainville House of Representatives. However, due to the issuance of writs and the 2020 Autonomous Bougainville Government elections, and the extension of the State of Emergency until 14 August, a caretaker Government has since been installed. This means that there are currently no women represented in the COVID-19 government response mechanisms.

However, the gender-specific policy implications of COVID-19 will be represented by a Gender Team, and gender focal points on the 10 additional thematic teams, to the Joint Agency Task Force. Each thematic team reports to the Controller of the State of Emergency. The Gender Team and focal points were established as a result of a Call for Action developed by the Bougainville Women, Peace and Security Working Group (WPS WG) with technical support from UN Women.

The promising practices on women's participation in the COVID-19 response demonstrated by the Government of Papua New Guinea and the Autonomous Bougainville Government represent a valuable opportunity to continue to empower women as leaders and decision-makers.

Local women's organisations and networks across Papua New Guinea are critical to an effective crisis response. Their ability to operate under incredibly challenging conditions with limited resources, recognition and support only serves to highlight their local leadership and intimate knowledge of the needs of their communities. Supporting women's networks and women leaders to conduct advocacy, carry out essential work and scale up their activities is necessary to ensure the COVID-19 response is inclusive and mindful of local realities for women, and their families, across PNG.

¹⁹ UN Women (2015). The Effect of Gender Equality Programming on Humanitarian Outcomes.

²⁰ Open Democracy (26 May 2020). Women in power: countries with female leaders suffer six times fewer COVID deaths and will recover sooner from recession. Accessed 14 July 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Motu Koita people are the Indigenous Peoples of the land referred to as the National Capital District. Until 2007, their political governance structure was the Motu Koita Council established under a sub-section of the National Capital District Commission Act. The Motu Koita Assembly was formally established through an Act of National Parliament in 2007 to provide for a semi-autonomous government for the Motu Koita people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to ensure the COVID-19 response addresses the needs of women and girls in Papua New Guinea:

1. Promote women's full and meaningful participation in leadership and decision-making related to the COVID-19 response and recovery, including taking steps to ensure gender balance and engagement of gender experts and women's interest organizations in any relevant task forces, parliamentary committees, disaster management teams, and any other relevant local and national government bodies/institutions.
2. Channel a broad spectrum of women's voices into COVID-19 response discussions and decision-making by creating pathways for women's organisations and networks, women's rights activists, civil society organisations, national gender mechanisms and academia to provide input and gender expertise. This can be done in a variety of ways including through dedicated forums and consultations, the creation of gender subcommittees to relevant governance bodies, and the inclusion of civil society women representatives in COVID-19 response discussions.
3. Involve women leaders from civil society, government and academia in the design of any emergency legislation, economic relief packages and budgets, and the delivery of the COVID-19 response.
4. Ensure emergency legislation, budgets and relief packages are evidence-based and developed using gender-disaggregated data and gender analysis that clearly identifies the gendered impacts of COVID-19.
5. Encourage the media, civil society and government to showcase the voices and contributions of women leaders and women's organisations to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
6. Monitor and evaluate the ongoing gendered implications of existing emergency legislation, budgets and relief packages, and take the necessary steps to respond to any gendered gaps identified.
7. Work closely with Local Level Governments, District Development Authorities and Provincial Assemblies to ensure information on COVID-19, including the gender-specific impacts of the crisis, is readily available and accessible to women leaders to support their full participation in COVID-19 response efforts at the local level. For example, through targeted awareness raising campaigns and outreach on COVID-19 with local level women leaders.

