



IFES Support to Women's Inclusion in Papua New Guinea and Bougainville

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of four countries globally with no women represented in its national legislature. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) works with partners in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville to promote women's inclusion and participation throughout the electoral cycle. IFES collaborates directly with the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission (PNGEC) and the Office of the Bougainville Electoral Commissioner (OBEC) and other other key partners to consider gender in all electoral operations, provide targeted advising and mentoring of female staff, and lead skills-building workshops to electoral stakeholders including elected officials, electoral professionals, and civil society organizations. These strategies are grounded in IFES' gender-in-elections assessments and preliminary findings from two upcoming assessments of the impact of violence on women's experiences in elections in PNG, as well as broader research, to inform and develop strategies and recommendations.

Key Successes

Since 2015, IFES has provided support on gender equality and women's empowerment to the PNGEC, OBEC and other partners, which has resulted in the following achievements:

- Ahead of the 2017 national elections, the PNGEC electoral commissioner developed and announced a new policy to provide separate lines at polling stations for men and women to support women's free participation, which has been discussed as a standard to be met nationwide in the upcoming local government elections;
- The PNGEC elevated the importance of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) within their strategic planning for the first time ever, designating it as one of their eight long-term strategy areas, and subsequently developed and adopted a five-year plan to mainstream gender in operations and election planning. This exercise demonstrates a shift in thinking about gender in elections and underscores its importance in PNG and to the PNGEC;
- Newly-elected women community government chairs and deputy chairs from all three regions of Bougainville – many of whom had never held a government or formal leadership position – developed basic public speaking, financial management, and networking skills through two She Leads women's leadership trainings, which ensure this recently created role effectively provides representation for Bougainvillean women;
- The OBEC drafted new gender-focused strategies and approaches for incorporation into future election operational plans, putting into practice skills and knowledge gained from gender sensitization training; and
- Women in the PNGEC's staff have demonstrated stronger engagement and leadership as seen by their increased confidence speaking up in meetings, chairing and presenting at large workshops, and taking on formal leadership roles in provincial offices, when comparing 2018 to 2016.

IFES supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral systems and builds local capacity to promote sustainable democracy.



Identifying Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

IFES is exploring how gender-based and domestic violence are manifest throughout the electoral process – be it physical, verbal or online – and their impact on women's participation as candidates, political supporters, voters, and election officials. Initial findings from IFES' forthcoming Violence Against Women in Elections assessments identify that much of the physical election violence directly impacting women occurs in the private sphere, following the pattern established by the country's already extremely high rate of domestic violence. Women's lack of agency in decision-making is reinforced through threats or acts of violence within the family and village that are broadly used to influence women's votes, as women fear the consequences of voting other than how they are instructed. In the public sphere, female candidates and their families are frequently subject to verbal violence, including threats, gossip and harassment, though non-gender-based physical violence also features dominantly in PNG electoral events. This violence is used to enforce traditional gender roles, which many – both men and women – are uncomfortable breaking and which would preclude women in public leadership positions.

“What will you do in [government]? You don't have a husband.

-Question posed to a female candidate in Bougainville during her campaign

Fostering Women's Leadership Through Training and Mentorship

To build women's leadership skills and confidence, IFES supports women election administrators in the PNGEC and OBEC as well as elected women in Bougainville with targeted trainings and one-on-one mentorship. Thirty-five female community government chairs and deputy chairs from across Bougainville attended IFES' She Leads women's leadership trainings, aiming to improve their ability to represent their constituents through improved skills in public speaking and financial management, as well as learning how to identify and foster male allies to support their effective leadership. To encourage further learning and confidence, participants developed concrete plans to accomplish targeted goals or actions within their constituencies, including identifying allies and partners and mobilizing community support. IFES has found a similar appetite for training and mentorship among female staff within the PNGEC. Since these efforts began in 2015, there has been a notable increase in interest in women's leadership within the commission, among both men and women, and women are participating more in decision-making, leading key presentations, and taking on visible leadership roles. In preparation for the upcoming local government elections, the PNGEC is working toward gender parity among election workers, building upon the IFES-supported efforts to recruit women for such roles for the 2017 national elections.

Mainstreaming Gender in Election Preparations

Reflecting a willingness to address barriers against women's participation in elections, both electoral commission partners have begun taking gender and inclusion into account during election preparation. The PNGEC has been keen to institutionalize this, as highlighted with GESI as a strategic pillar in their 2018-22 Corporate Plan and a five-year plan to mainstream GESI in PNGEC operations, recruitment, training, and civic and voter education programs. OBEC recently participated in a workshop to determine means to mainstreaming gender in electoral operations plans, following an IFES-organized presentation for stakeholders, including OBEC, DPAI, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, candidates and officials, to share insights and recommendations from an IFES gender assessment. OBEC and other Bougainville referendum stakeholders are currently working with IFES to examine and revise their gender policies to better support women's inclusion.

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