

The Autonomous Region of Bougainville currently has the Pacific's only parliamentary reserved seats for women system. While the system guarantees a minimum level of representation for women in the Bougainville House of Representatives, concerns have been raised that the reserved seats act as a ceiling for women's representation and prevent women from successfully contesting other seats (CS/PIF 2005; Kelly 2010). This *In Brief* draws on fieldwork conducted in September 2013. I conducted qualitative interviews in Buka, Arawa and Port Moresby, including with the three current women members of the House of Representatives (MHRs), two of the three previous women MHRs, unsuccessful women candidates, the women representatives on the Bougainville Constitutional Commission, and representatives from church and women's groups.

Women's Political Representation and the Reserved Seat System

In 2004, the Constitution of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville was finalised. The constitution mandated that three seats in the House of Representatives be reserved for women, along with three for ex-combatants. There is one reserved seat for women for each of the three regions of Bougainville: North, Central and South. All eligible voters, male and female, can vote for the women's reserved seats. The constitution also mandates that one elected woman from either the reserved seats or an open seat be given a Cabinet position. The seats were viewed as an acknowledgement of the vital role that women played in ending the conflict in Bougainville. Women also pushed for the establishment of reserved seats because of the belief that without them, women would not be able to win any seats in the new Bougainville legislature.

The first election for the Autonomous Bougainville Government was held in 2005. There were 25 candidates for the women's reserved seats: six in North, eight in Central and eleven in South.

In the second election, in 2010, seventeen women candidates contested the reserved seats: seven in North, and five each in Central and South.

Women Candidates in Open Seats

No women candidates contested the 33 open seats in the 2005 election. In the 2010 election, five women contested open seats, and Magdalene Toroansi ran for president. All the women candidates contesting open seats lost in their constituencies; the most successful were Francesca Semoso, who placed second in the constituency of Tsitalato with 21 per cent of the vote, and Marcelline Kokiai, who placed third in the constituency of Eivo/Torau with 14 per cent of the vote (Kelly 2010).

There is a misconception in Bougainville that women are restricted to contesting only the reserved seats. It is unclear how widespread this is, but women's groups have actively worked to dispel the myth. This may have affected the low numbers of women contesting open seats. Another common factor is family pressure. Several women I spoke to who had contested reserved seats had close family members running in their local constituency seat, and they felt it would be disrespectful to compete with them.

Characteristics and Strategies of Women Candidates

Women who were elected in the reserved seats tended to have adult children, although some had younger families. Educational backgrounds were varied, from grade eight to tertiary educated. They tended to have had careers in the public service, and significant involvement in church, community and women's organisations.

While most successful MHRs in Bougainville run as independents, party connections — especially with the incoming president (Joseph Kabui in 2005 and John Momis in 2010) — were seen as advantages for women candidates.

Support from women's networks was also important, especially in the reserved seats as the larger constituency area makes campaigning more difficult. A significant factor in successful campaigns was access to resources, such as a candidate owning a personal computer to design and print campaign materials. Several current and former MHRs noted their considerable financial commitment to their campaigns, claiming spending of up to 50,000 kina.

Semoso, the most successful female candidate in the open seats in 2010, comes from a prominent political family and had a high profile herself as an incumbent MHR in a reserved seat from 2005 to 2010. Other candidates attributed at least part of their success to having a high profile in their communities, although one MHR claimed that her status as an outsider, due to not having been in Bougainville during the conflict, was advantageous. All the current and former MHRs interviewed had attended candidate training prior to their election campaigns. Various candidate training workshops have been run in Bougainville by both local groups, including the Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum and Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom, and international organisations.

Challenges

A considerable challenge for both candidates and MHRs is the size of the reserved seat electorates, which are significantly larger than the open electorates. To campaign effectively for a reserved seat requires time and significant financial resources. Once elected, regional MHRs are entitled to the same amount of discretionary funds as all other MHRs, despite their electorates being much larger. Regional MHRs often aren't considered to be as visible in their constituencies as other MHRs, because of a lack of time and funds constraining their travel.

MHR turnover was significant in the 2010 Bougainville general election. Only nine MHRs in

the 39-seat House of Representatives were returned in the 2010 election. The only woman MHR who re-contested a reserved seat in 2010, Laura Ampa in South Bougainville, was soundly defeated, placing last of the five candidates. Some women believe that members in reserved seats should serve only one term, then contest an open seat to allow new women to come through. At least one of the current MHRs, however, flagged her intention of recontesting the reserved seat in 2015.

The high turnover rate is related to another challenge, that of consistency of women's representation. Some women spoke of a long learning period when they entered the House of Representatives that they felt hampered their effectiveness as MHRs, as well as a lack of institutional capacity in Bougainville in terms of ministerial and parliamentary staff members. One potential method of increasing consistency would be to hold a 'mock parliament' for women. Many women felt a mock legislative session would be beneficial in both building the confidence of possible women candidates, and increasing women's knowledge of legislative processes.

Author Notes

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