

Lusim Hanmak: Why Women Candidates in Papua New Guinea Need to Start Early

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As of October 2020, the next national elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are due in less than two years. Among Papua New Guineans, it is common practice for intending candidates to do their groundwork, known locally as ‘doing awareness’ or *lusim hanmak*,¹ months before the official election period. *Hanmak*, in the context of electoral campaigning, refers to community development projects or meeting traditional obligations in one’s society. Voters use it as part of their process of determining if a candidate is serious or has credibility.

Many political aspirants are already organising and trying to gain visibility. But why is it so necessary for intending candidates, particularly women candidates, to start preparing so early? We can learn from the successful wins of the 2012 elections by Delillah Gore (Sohe Open), Loujaya Kouza (Lae Open) and Julie Soso (Eastern Highlands Provincial) that creating *hanmak* by starting early and persisting are part of the key to success.

In PNG, women candidates continue to struggle to be elected. In the 2017 national elections, while a record of 179 women contested,² they still only represented 5.4 per cent of the total 3340 candidate nominations (Haley and Zubrinich 2018). None were given a mandate and only a handful finished in the top five. Most societies in PNG are patriarchal, money politics greatly influences the electoral environment and there are no legislated temporary special measures to aid women in their quest for political office.

*Yu gat hanmak?*³

A study conducted by PNG’s National Research Institute in Huon Gulf and Lae Districts (Morobe Province) after the 2017 national elections highlighted that *hanmak* is considered the most important factor in voting for a candidate (Fairio 2019). But for women candidates, this informal institution in PNG’s electoral politics poses a double obstacle. The first obstacle relates to the gender challenge of executing *hanmak*. Research has shown that there is voter prejudice driven by the patriarchal culture and the archetypal political candidate in PNG; there is a perception that male politicians are better able to deliver services if elected (Wood 2014).

Given that women candidates have generally limited access to resources and finances, the expectation of *hanmak* represents an additional obstacle for women because of the time it takes to raise the funds required to implement these kinds of projects. Male candidates or politicians can ‘employ financial capital to build a reputation as somebody who contributes to community life’, but women need to undertake more long-term meaningful contributions to ‘offset the relative resource disparity between themselves and other candidates’ (Spark et al. 2019:11). According to Fairio, ‘female candidates must prepare 5 to 10 years before election to implement *hanmak*, fundraise and build their support base’ (2019).

Lessons from 2012: start early, try again, persist

If *hanmak* is critical to electoral success in PNG, then women candidates need to negotiate their own ways of demonstrating it to the electorate. Here, we can learn from the experiences of the three successful women candidates in 2012: all three women started their political endeavours early. Former Eastern Highlands governor Julie Soso was a regular contestant. She began contesting in 1997 and did not give up until her victory in 2012 (see [Meki 2019](#) for details of Soso’s campaign). Each election was an opportunity to develop her strategy and identify ways to improve her game — and in the process she became a serious contender. Similarly, Loujaya Kouza was also not a first-time winner. Kouza first contested the Lae Open constituency in the 2007 national elections where she finished fifth of 25 candidates. Then, in 2008, she ran for a seat in the local level government council with 38 male candidates and finished third. In each of her campaigns, she explored new ways of making connections with her constituents. Finally, at the polls in 2012 in a field of 31 candidates, Kouza received 1859 first preference votes, 7.3 per cent of the (24,769) total allowable ballots, and won with 7364 accumulative votes.⁴

Unlike Kouza and Soso, Gore was a first-time candidate in 2012. However, she first considered contesting in 2002 but decided to postpone and focus on her groundwork. As an Oro resident and working as a public servant in the district’s treasury

office, she was relatively popular among her kin and church community, although she needed to become more visible to be considered a credible candidate. Thus began her decade of groundwork through strategic spending and contributing whenever the need arose. 'I did a lot of public relations. And when my election posters went up, people said "I know this woman ... when we needed a dinghy, she got us a dinghy"' (Chandler 2013). Donating a dinghy to a coastal community demonstrates addressing communal needs rather than simply responding to the obligations of her relatives and friends, as is common in PNG. In this way Gore was creating *hanmak* in the wider community. When her posters went up on display boards along with many other candidates for the 2012 Sohe Open seat, not only did people in her constituency recognise her but they also had a level of affinity with her. At the polls, Gore won with 6105 votes and a 900-vote gap between her and her nearest rival.

Women candidates negotiating their own *hanmak*

Many commentators have portrayed PNG's political culture as steeped in clientelism. Policy and party affiliation have little weight in voter calculations because money politics is pervasive and voters decide based on personalities. In this space, voters have been groomed to require *hanmak* and candidates use *hanmak* as a way of creating debt with voters to be reciprocated at the polls. For intending candidates, both male and female, they are competing against incumbents who are already involved in institutionalised money politics (Clark and Walton 2017), so they essentially have five years to build *hanmak* — the term of the incumbent.

Why is it so necessary for intending women candidates to start early and create *hanmak*? They need to because creating *hanmak* and establishing favourable visibility can help with '[overcoming stereotypes](#) relating to women's place in public life'. But also because come election time, it is possible they will be '[priced out of the game](#)'. Creating meaningful *hanmak* now can potentially act as a shield against the next wave of money politics that will soon descend upon PNG voters for the national elections in 2022.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. 'To leave *hanmak*'. In Tok Pisin, the term *hanmak* means to leave a mark or the mark of one's hand such as a signature or autograph. Allegorically, it refers to things that your hand made, for example planting a tree (garden), building a house

or giving money to a cause.

2. The PNG Electoral Commission's official record states 167 women candidates. However after DPA's examination, there were in fact 179 women candidates (Haley and Zubrinich 2018).
3. In English: 'Do you have anything to show?'
4. Figures taken from the [PNG elections database](#).

References

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