



Women's Inclusion in the Post-Referendum Consultation Process between Papua New Guinea and Bougainville

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In late 2019, in a non-binding referendum, 97.7 per cent of Bougainvilleans voted for independence from Papua New Guinea (PNG). This In Brief presents the key findings of a qualitative assessment conducted in 2021 of women's participation in post-referendum consultations, inclusive of intergovernmental consultations between the national government of PNG and the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), as well as Joint Supervisory Body (JSB) consultations (NDI 2021).¹ The study captured views about women's participation in the ongoing process, and despite mixed views on the gendered nature of consultation priorities there was consensus about the value of having women at the negotiation table. Participants stressed the importance of inclusivity – listening to people's wishes – in reaching an outcome from the consultations.

Despite widespread consensus that women should be equally represented in peace negotiations during conflicts and in subsequent peacebuilding efforts, women tend to remain marginal from such processes (Bouta et al. 2005). In Bougainville, women played an integral role in the peace process at the grassroots level during the conflict. However, despite their contributions, women were largely marginalised during the peace negotiations (Garasu 2002; Saovana-Spriggs 2003).

Currently, the PNG and Bougainville governments are conducting consultations on a political settlement for Bougainville, which is due no later than 2027. The consultation process is the last stage of the process mandated in the Bougainville Peace Agreement.² The general principles of intergovernmental consultations between PNG and the ABG are enshrined in part XIV of the PNG constitution, the Bougainville constitution and the Bougainville Peace Agreement. However, these documents do not include specific provision for the inclusion of women and other groups in the JSB and on the agenda of the joint consultation process.

Our research included speaking to 44 focus group discussants and key informant interviews. This was followed by a validation workshop involving 24 participants, comprising former and current members of parliament (MPs), members in the consultation teams and other officials, women civil society leaders,

ex-combatants and academics. Two focus groups were conducted in Port Moresby, the PNG capital, and two in Buka, in Bougainville. The focus groups were also gender segregated.

Key findings

Our research shows that the delegation attending the intergovernmental and JSB talks – one representing the PNG government and the other representing the ABG – is composed of five members, all male. It is understood that a number of officials from PNG and Bougainville, as well as foreign diplomats, attend the JSB meetings in an 'observer' role, but it is unclear whether there are any guidelines or criteria for attendance, and how many of them are women. The four Bougainville women MPs participate as 'observers' at the JSB meetings. As the JSB is a political body, and PNG does not have women MPs, there are no women represented on the PNG side (NDI 2021:17).

While participants were well aware of the ABG's pursuit for full independence, our research revealed a significant knowledge gap between Bougainville and Port Moresby participants about the consultation process, and in particular about the role of the various bodies and their operations. Participants in Bougainville professed familiarity with the consultation structures overall and saw the consultation process as a work in progress, but there was limited awareness about the mechanics of the consultation, beyond those directly involved in the consultation structures. Participants in Port Moresby had very little awareness of the process.

Bougainville participants in our study praised the ABG's efforts to design an inclusive intraregional process in its Bougainville-specific consultation structures. In 2019, the Bougainville government established the Bougainville Leaders Consultation Forum, composed of all members of the Bougainville House of Representatives (BHOR) and members of civil society, women, youths and other recognised leaders. In November 2020, the BHOR adopted the Independence Ready Mission resolution, which included the establishment of committees, including women leaders, in all constituencies so that citizens could be involved

in nation-building. Those who do not directly participate in the PNG–Bougainville consultations use these forums to express their views. However, participants who are not part of the Bougainville delegation to the PNG–Bougainville consultations said the views raised at the various Bougainville forums are not always presented at the intergovernmental consultations.

In contrast, Port Moresby participants lamented that the national government has not created similar grassroots consultation tracks and, therefore, they view the PNG position representing predominantly the views of government officials and MPs.

Though participants hold mixed views on the gendered nature of consultation priorities, there was consensus, in principle, about the value of having women at the negotiation table to ensure fair representation and better outcomes. Some women participants said they would also feel encouraged if a moderator and government officials explicitly acknowledged the importance of having women in the talks, which would bolster women's confidence to speak up.

During interviews and focus group discussions, participants indicated how they thought including more women can lead to improved outcomes and public outreach, and reduce the risk of renewed conflict. They also demanded the inclusion of more women's voices in the consultation process to increase its legitimacy and buy-in. Participants saw a need to build women's capacity to effectively fulfil high-level representation and consultation roles and called on development partners to cascade capacity building, such as negotiation skills and policymaking at the community level, to avoid further exclusion.

There were some shared concerns about a lack of opportunities for women to develop their civic participation skills and practise leadership. Participants talked about a need to strengthen information exchanges between women's groups and official delegations to encourage the consultation parties to raise gender issues and protect women's rights, and create more avenues for advocacy outside the PNG parliament, which has no women members at the moment.

The international community remains an important pillar for the inclusion of women and marginalised groups in the post-referendum consultation process. Women participants in particular suggested continuing to build on inclusion successes in Bougainville by further supporting the elected members of Bougainville's parliament in a push to open the national parliament to more women MPs. However, at the same time, participants across genders and localities requested respect for the Melanesian culture, a long-term engagement, inclusive programming for women and strategic patience from development partners.

Finally, participants thought that inclusion should be at the heart of the consultations. As a woman leader in Bougainville stated:

The best possible decision outcome must be one that is achieved because of inclusive decision making. There must be inclusion, and the decisions

must promote the wishes of the people. They must promote the decision that people of PNG and people of Bougainville must be happy with. Even if it's a good decision, but the people do not understand it, that will be a risk for the sustainability of the outcomes that the both governments will come up with. It's more than making a good decision, it must be an inclusive decision.

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Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Most of the negotiations are done at the intergovernmental consultations, while the JSB approves the resolutions proposed at intergovernmental level, as well as acting as a dispute resolution body. The JSB was initially set up to track and review the implementation of the three main pillars of the Bougainville Peace Agreement, namely, weapons disposal, autonomy and referendum. After the referendum in 2019 it was retained to act at the highest level of decision-making for the post-referendum consultations.
2. According to the Arawa JSB resolution in February 2021, both governments agreed that the intergovernmental body would meet at least three times a year, tentatively in January, June and December. These meetings will immediately be followed by JSB meetings. Though the meeting dates varied due to COVID-19 and political instability in PNG, three consultations were held in 2021.

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