

# Why are there are no women in Papua New Guinea's parliament?

Papua New Guinea

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Papua New Guinea has a history of extremely low rates of women in parliament. Only seven women have ever been elected in over 40 years and no women were elected to the 111 seat parliament in 2017. To try to find out what is stopping women from winning elections, Kerry Baker spoke with a group of unsuccessful candidates and examined the impact of the introduction of the limited preferential voting system on them.

Dr Baker is a research fellow in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. In September 2017, she spent time with 26 women from all four of Papua New Guinea's regions who had contested the 2017 national election.

In general, women contesting Papua New Guinea elections have fewer financial resources than men running for election. The candidates identified this as a challenge, because well-resourced campaigns are often the most successful. The candidates noted that, to counter this disadvantage, women candidates in separate seats – and even sometimes in the same seat – would often work together. They would share transport and coordinate events as well as arrange preference-swapping deals and provide moral support to each other. Candidates suggested nurturing these networks, using them for mentoring and to support women who want to enter local level politics.

It was expected that the shift from first-past-the-post to preferential voting in 2007 would increase the electoral chances of women candidates. It was thought that women would have better chances in the electoral contest through the collection of preferences, as opposed to the winner-takes-all result from a first-past-the-post system.

Dr Baker proposes that the shift to limited preferential voting does not seem to have helped women's electoral chances at all beyond a few isolated cases in 2012. Rather, she argues that an unintended consequence of limited preferential voting has led to further disadvantage for women candidates.

Specifically, limited preferential voting has resulted in an increasing prevalence of money politics (including vote buying and gifting). These practices disproportionately impact on women candidates, who do not generally have access to the financial resources to participate in that type of political behaviour. Candidates speaking with Dr Baker highlighted that the practice of money politics and the bribing of election officials was detrimental to the chances of women candidates. The participants felt it was vital to deal with these issues of money politics, along with electoral fraud and failures in electoral administration before women's political representation would increase.

Dr Baker also heard from candidates that it was important to start election campaigning early. While campaigning is not allowed outside the official period, the participants stressed the importance of being well-known by visiting the electorate throughout the electoral cycle. Making their intentions to run early would also allow more time to raise funds and may discourage male relatives from deciding to run, which could possibly split the vote.

Dr Baker asserts that changing the formal rules of the election process, such as through a change to the mode of elections, is only one element required for a change in women's political representation:

'Institutional reforms are layered onto existing rules and norms, related to political culture and electoral behaviour, that are firmly established and unyielding; these existing institutions can hinder or even subvert the goals of reform. In Papua New Guinea, this broad political context includes the widespread acceptance of money politics as part of the political system, and a patriarchal political culture that works against women. Thus, the limitations of any electoral system reform in producing significant gains for women are clear.'

Dr Baker's paper on the experiences of women candidates can be downloaded here:

<https://pacificwomen.org/research/experiences-female-candidates-2017-papua-new-guinea-general-election/>

Her paper on the impact of the introduction of the limited preferential voting system can be found here:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/app5.235>