

# Deputy Speaker of the House: “Women leaders vital for Bougainville”

Autonomous Region Of Bougainville Papua New Guinea Regional  
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August 30, 2016



In April 2016, Hon Francesca Rhianna Semoso participated in the Pacific Women Parliamentary Partnerships Forum (PWPP) for the first time with MPs from around the region. Photo: Shazia Usman, Pacific Women Support Unit. Hon Francesca Rhianna Semoso, the Deputy Speaker of the Bougainville House of Representatives, is an advocate for women in leadership. As one of the only four women Members of Parliament (MPs) in a 40 member Parliament\* she is an ardent supporter of Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) to increase the number of women in the region’s highest decision making body because she believes the “women of Bougainville are natural leaders – in the home, in putting food on the table and in national decision making.”

Hon Semoso was elected into Parliament in 2005 and holds the North Bougainville Women Constituency seat. She also serves as the Deputy Chairperson on the Standing Order Committee and is a member of the Parliament Business Committee. Prior to joining politics, she worked with the National Broadcasting Commission for 10 years and later joined private radio station UMI FM in Papua New Guinea (PNG), as their team leader.

She held that position for four years before moving back to Bougainville with her family in 2003 to be part of the region's peace process. Her vast knowledge on public affairs and policy, and passion for social justice, combined with strong public speaking skills, was one of the many reasons that led to her joining the Bougainville Constitutional Commission at the invitation of the Governor at the time (now President). In her time with the Commission, Hon Semoso was instrumental in lobbying for the inclusion of the TSM provision in the Constitution.

“There are three reserved seats in the Bougainville Constitution and I was one of the members that fought hard for it to be there. We had initially wanted ten seats but we found it challenging to get that through. Even in the thirty member Commission, we only had three women including myself, so we fought for those reserve seats and I had to stand up and tell them – they are not there for keeps, its temporary and it's a launching pad for women politicians who face challenges that men don't often face when they enter politics,” she said.

Later, the very seats she had lobbied so hard to be reserved for women candidates who would otherwise face challenges in getting elected such as herself, supported Hon Semoso and two other women MPs to be elected into Parliament in 2005. With around 50,000 voters supporting her candidacy, Hon Semoso knows that she has the trust of her constituency in representing them and stressed the importance of voting the “right kind of people” into the reserved seats.

“I am an example of a person that has made the reserved seats work, so it's important to elect into these reserved seats, people that will do the work. If you elect someone that just sits there for the next five years and doesn't say anything

then the reserve seat doesn't work. So it's not just about getting into Parliament, it's about doing the work once you're there. But what we were really waiting to happen was for a woman candidate to be elected through an open seat and that happened in the last election with Josephine [Hon Josephine Getsi, Minister for Community Development] and we are really happy about that.”

In April of this year, Hon Semoso participated in the Pacific Women in Parliamentary Partnerships Forum (PWPP), for the first time with her colleagues. Supported by Pacific Women, the fourth PWPP Forum held in Samoa, explored women's economic empowerment in the Pacific. It brought together 60 parliamentarians from 21 parliaments in the Pacific including: Autonomous Region of Bougainville (Papua New Guinea); Australia; Cook Islands; Federated States of Micronesia; Fiji; Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Nauru; New South Wales; New Zealand; Niue; Northern Territory; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Queensland; Samoa; the Solomon Islands; South Australia; Tokelau; Tonga; and Victoria. There were also observers from Vanuatu. While the majority of delegates were Pacific women parliamentarians, eight male MPs also attended the Forum (read the Forum's Outcome Statement [here](#)).

“It's really important for every woman to be economically independent and have access to formal and informal markets. Women are good managers. It's mainly the women right now in Bougainville that are responsible for putting food on the table. Seven days a week, they are going to the market. They are proactive about how they can earn a bit of cash for school fees, for health care, for fees in the village. We, collectively as governments, as women parliamentarians with women's organisations can make this happen. We can make sure that every family has clean water to drink and the basics for healthy living. I hope to go back from the Forum and work with my colleagues in seeing how we can make policies that will make informal and formal markets more accessible to women.”

Hon Semoso also works with key women's organisations such as the Pacific Women supported Bougainville Women's Federation in addressing violence against women and other issues affecting women in the region.

“As a survivor of violence who took her kids and left her violent partner, I work with organisations like the Bougainville Women's Federation to encourage women and the society not to accept and take part in violence against women. I am very public about my experience. What better person to use as an example than yourself? It's about leadership. Using your own example to make a change in other people's lives. I don't use other people's stories, I use my own. I am out there, in the front and I tell people: I am where I am today because of the decision I made to leave a violent relationship. I am walking the talk and I am happy to work with the Federation, as their member for North Bougainville.”

\*Inclusive of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the House.