



# Violence Against Women in the Autonomous

## Region of Bougainville – Assessment Summary

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### Background

Bougainvillean women's participation in politics is heavily influenced by the lasting impacts of the Bougainville conflict, which upended the traditional social order and is thought to have contributed to high rates of domestic violence and breakdown in survivor support networks. However, the instrumental role of women in peacebuilding during the conflict resulted in post-conflict provisions granting women three reserved seats in the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) Parliament. Today, women's political participation is shaped by conflict between women leadership roles provided for in the law and social norms around women's traditional caretaking roles.

Gender relations in Bougainville in the public and private spheres are complex. The new gender parity requirement at the Community Government level and the election of Josephine Getsi in 2015, the first woman to win an unreserved seat in the ABG Parliament, has increased women's political representation. However, high rates of domestic violence reinforce the lower status of women in the home and community. Violence against women in elections (VAWE) in Bougainville primarily manifests in two ways: socio-psychological, in the form of gossip, harassment and threats and physical, often through domestic violence stemming from conflict over the election and other political pressures. Female voters experience pressure from family and clan leadership about whom

to vote for and may face physical violence if they do not toe the line. Female candidates must contend with deeply entrenched attitudes about women's roles in politics, cultural perceptions denigrating women's leadership abilities, intense scrutiny and gossip about their personal lives and a lack of access to adequate financial backing. Like their male counterparts, female election workers face physical violence and verbal harassment from disgruntled candidates and supporters.

Responses to VAWE in Bougainville have been limited to date – due in part to a severe lack of concrete data and have primarily centered on CSO-led candidate and awareness trainings and traditional support to survivors of non-electoral domestic violence. There is ample opportunity to improve the engagement of government ministries and create better coordination with existing support networks for survivors of domestic violence to help mitigate the prevalence of VAWE.

### Recommendations

To properly address VAWE, electoral stakeholders must come together to improve enforcement of current laws, raise awareness and take concrete steps to make elections safer for women. IFES recommends the following actions:

1. Increase enforcement of the current laws, including those prohibiting domestic violence, bribery, undue influence and candidate defamation.
2. Enhance voter information campaigns regarding resources available to voters to report electoral violations and educate voters on reporting mechanisms in the event that they experience

electoral violence or election-related domestic violence.

3. Make the recruitment process for election officials more inclusive, and actively seek to recruit and promote women, young people and persons with disabilities.
4. Expand voter education and awareness campaigns to focus on what makes a good candidate or elected leader and educate voters on women's role in the peace process.
5. Mandate that political parties provide the same degree of funding and training support to female and male candidates, including women who are contesting open seats.
6. Identify key allies who can be trained to act as catalysts for change to reduce the factors that lead to VAWE through legal reform, awareness and education campaigns, and programming.
7. Provide female candidates and elected officials with adequate training and resources.
8. Conduct voter education and awareness campaigns surrounding the referendum targeted at women and educate women on what the referendum options will mean for them.
9. Improve enforcement of the secrecy of the ballot and train officials to provide assistance to illiterate voters.
10. Conduct voter and candidate awareness on the impact of shaming and verbal abuse on female candidates and the resources to combat it.

## VAWE Assessment Findings

	Windows of Vulnerability	Windows of Opportunity and Responses
<b>Status of Women</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Historically, traditional matriarchal land rights afforded women power in decision-making, but the disruption of this system, possibly by colonialism and Christian patriarchy, contributed to the erosion of women’s authority today.</li> <li>High rates of domestic violence, linked to lasting impact from the conflict, include psychological factors like substance abuse, emotional abuse and neglect in childhood.</li> <li>Domestic violence is often unreported or handled informally rather than through the formal legal system, making prevalence challenging to determine and limiting survivors’ access to resources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Criminalization of family violence has been enforceable since 2017. CSOs and churches have been key providers of resources as ABG support remains limited.</li> <li>There have been changing attitudes towards women in some leadership roles, including in churches where women are now permitted in some leadership positions.</li> <li>Interviewees noted a relaxing of strict gender roles in political, religious and community spaces with increased awareness and education.</li> <li>Women played a key role in negotiating the peace process and have taken on key roles in providing services, conducting advocacy work, and taking on leadership roles in their communities in the post-conflict period.</li> </ul>
<b>Access to the Electoral</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confusion over women’s eligibility for unreserved seats, financial barriers of campaigns, and the perception that women are unable to win elections remain key challenges for female candidates.</li> <li>The underlying belief that women are unable to be strong leaders and negotiators hinders women’s ability to take on strong roles in the referendum negotiation and in government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Former candidates have noted improvement in attitudes toward female candidates.</li> <li>Reserved seats for women have been established at the ABG level and the first woman was elected to a non-reserved seat in 2017. In 2018 the law changed to mandate gender parity in local government.</li> <li>There is a good gender balance between women and men as polling officials and women actively serve and participate as scrutineers.</li> </ul>
<b>VAWE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family and clan voting is enforced through threats or acts of domestic violence and stems in part from lack of secrecy of the ballot for women.</li> <li>Female candidates face gossip, harassment and threats including intense scrutiny of family life.</li> <li>Female election workers report verbal violence and harassment by supporters and scrutineers including the use of gendered language. Physical threats brought to the attention of IFES reportedly were quickly addressed by police.</li> <li>There is a lack of awareness among voters and candidates to report VAWE and access support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Passage and enforcement of the Family Protection Act can assist in preventing domestic violence surrounding elections.</li> <li>Bougainville has notably lowered rates of overt physical VAWE and higher participation of women as electoral officials and scrutineers.</li> </ul>

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