

Commentaries on the public discourse on the 22 Reserved Seats for Women by:

UN Resident Coordinator, Mr. David McLachlan - Karr

19th January 2011, Port Moresby: The public discourse in recent months on women's participation in public policy-making in the PNG context has been diverse and challenging in terms of the different perceptions about the 22 Reserved Seats Bill. Critics have said that the proposed Bill will challenge the status quo and be disruptive to the age old tradition that women's position in society is one of subserviency and being a dutiful partner to that of men. Whilst this may be the norm of many societies, the fact of the matter is that globalization is at our doorstep and many countries have adopted similar legislation to correct the imbalance in female representation of their respective parliaments: Rwanda, Uganda, Bangladesh, Egypt with India passing its first reading - to cite a few - and in our region, the Autonomous Bougainville Government.



Mr. David McLachlan – Karr, UN Resident Coordinator

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PNG is no exception to the global scenario where gender inequalities fuel the gender divide especially in light of the HIV epidemic coupled with high prevalence rates of gender-based violence and sexual abuse of the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The challenge for PNG in the 21st century is to reverse these trends and allow for the voices of the marginalized to be heard, especially those who are well-versed with their issues to have them articulated for purposes of public policy and law-making. The global evidence suggests that in countries where women are well represented in government, parliaments

place greater emphasis on social issues and spend more on essential services like health and education. It is also axiomatic that where women do not have a voice in the running of government, those societies generally suffer from a lack of policy focus directed at improving the quality of life of all citizens.

In this context, the Development Partners view the discourse with interest acknowledging the vibrancy in the discussions ranging from political, social and economic reasons why women should, or should not be given special consideration. On the other hand, it has been argued that men would be discriminated against if women were given this opportunity and allow for a free and fair election for everyone to contest.

The statistics of past elections indicate that women make up a mere 5% of the total candidate population in any one election and women have less than 2.2% success rate as a candidate. Over the past decade, women's representation has been limited to 0.9% of parliamentary seats. This record speaks volumes about society's attitudes that women should not be given any public leadership positions. Data also shows that women have contested seats with support from their families and communities, but cultural, systemic and financial obstacles prevent women from actively participating in Parliament through the normal process of election.

The latest debate on whether women have a right to stand for public office becomes a contentious issue bordering on infringements of their status quo in society and whether these should be disturbed by raising the profile of women at a higher level of exposure. It is now a question of whether the current electoral system under the limited preferential system can boost numbers for successful women candidates, or the successful passage of the Women's Bill will render an assurance of equity and social justice for the people and women in general.

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