

Women's leadership and foreign aid in PNG

by Mary Fairio

3 October 2024



Mama Bank officer registering women in the Markham Bridge Community, 2022

Photo Credit: Eddison Silas

Women's leadership in PNG is often described as tough, difficult or challenging. The contributing factors range from political and economic to social and cultural. For example, the PNG National Research Institute [Gender Program Report 2020](#) showed that women political candidates faced gendered challenges, such as stereotypical attitudes that women are not capable, and therefore lack support during campaigns. Consequently, the number of women candidates every election year since independence (1975) has not exceeded 5% of the total number of candidates, and the number of women elected each time has not exceeded three out of the 118 parliamentarians.

Over the years, international development agencies have continued to play a big role in supporting women's leadership in PNG. Aid support includes financial and technical support. For example, the United Nations Development Programme [facilitates mock parliaments](#) for women candidates, and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [supports capacity building](#) for women candidates in partnership with the [PNG Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission](#).

However, aid can also have negative effects. Universal frameworks are often applied that do not consider the various differences in cultural context, according to [Sally Engle Merry](#). And [Teresia Teaiwa has cautioned us](#) to rethink the position of the Pacific in a global context, particularly with respect to knowledge practices, and how foreign aid is framed in a Western context while "indigenous ways of knowing and being" (p. 75) are excluded. Indigenous approaches, such as local women's strategies of providing support to each other, are often not recognised by international aid organisations. So how can aid agencies work more effectively with women's organisations to improve women's leadership in PNG?

The findings of a 15-month ethnographic study undertaken from November 2021 to February 2023 showed that women's groups organise themselves through the community approach of *wok bung wantaim* (a Tok Pisin phrase that means working together). According to a woman leader from Lae town, when asked how women

organise themselves, “over the past 20 years, I work together with the women’s network to help other women” (interview, August 2022). Women leaders work with women’s networks for many years, with 10 to 20 years representing the typical timeframe required to build long-term relationships.

The long-term relationships and networks built by women leaders involve women conducting various activities such as the establishment of craft markets, because the leaders care and provide support for other women. A woman leader at a craft market said, “I am happy to see women get together, and women are happy to get together and do activities” (interview, June 2022). *Wok bung wantaim* is practiced among the women’s groups and is about working together as partners in a horizontal relationship where all parties have respect for each other.

Wok bung wantaim is a relationship built through *givim bel*. *Givim bel* means to give and not expect anything in return, such as when giving money for transport and providing shelter for a gender-based violence survivor. *Givim bel* is care based on reciprocity, where women support each other — and the leader when she needs help. For example, an aid agency might ask a woman leader to organise women to attend a one-day workshop at a hotel in town. If the leader agrees, she then asks the women in her network to attend and contribute to the one-day workshop.

The social values of *wok bung wantaim* and *givim bel* are based on strengthening relationships and not on realising monetary value. These social values are practiced among the local women and in their relationships with aid agencies because the women want to help other women in their network and the wider community.

As for the women in the peri-urban Markham Bridge community in Morobe province, despite their having no connection with the provincial women’s associations and aid agencies, five women’s associations were registered with the Investment Promotion Authority (IPA) in 2022, comprising a total of 120 women. Furthermore, women leaders worked with community leaders and some men in the community to open bank accounts with the Mama Bank for their associations and individual members, some of whom were opening bank accounts for the first time. This was possible through the practice of *wok bung wantaim* and *givim bel*.

On 10 December 2022, the Huon Gulf District Office supported the Markham Bridge community by launching the five women’s associations. In the words of the district officer, “we are very happy that you have established your associations, and you will be the model for other women in the Huon Gulf District to also establish their associations; because we will only work with groups and not individuals.” The women’s groups have established a relationship with the district office through *wok bung wantaim* and *givim bel* to help themselves and their communities.

Consequently, there is more trust in women's leadership within the community.

Unfortunately, the labour that women leaders put into building women's networks is not well understood by aid agencies because these social values are built over time and manifested when one needs help ([West and Aini](#)). As expressed by one participant at a Civil Society Organisation forum on gender equality in Lae town in December 2021, "there must be recognition". This is an important statement that summarises the labour, passion, commitment and care of the women, and the long-term relationships fostered among them. The women organise themselves, at times on an empty stomach, often sharing the little money they have for transport costs to make sure a sister gets home safely.

Further, aid agencies' relationships with women's associations are often based on power dynamics described by West and Aini as patron-client relationships. For example, an aid agency only calls a woman leader when they want to conduct a workshop; they run a one-day workshop in a hotel and leave the next day. They have ticked their boxes! There is no long-term relationship between the women and the aid agency. This is because aid agencies do not understand the social values of *wok bung wantaim* and *givim bel* that are practiced by local women's networks.

Re-colonisation in any form is not a solution. It is important to include local knowledge and local people from the beginning of any aid program to make a practical impact. The local women leaders are catalysts for social change who must be involved in aid efforts from the beginning. They must be represented and their voices kept alive. When this happens, this allows both aid agencies and local groups to address larger issues such as gender inequality and the impacts of colonialism, and to cultivate a deeper understanding of women's leadership that goes beyond tokenism.

This research was presented at the 2024 PNG Update. Presentations and recordings of keynote sessions from the Update [are now available](#).

Author/s:

Mary Fairio

Mary Fairio is currently a PhD candidate in the Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. She is on a study break from her position at the PNG National Research Institute.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/womens-leadership-and-foreign-aid-in-png-20241003/>