

## **Gillard has chance to champion rights of women in PNG**

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Julia Gillard's first visit to Papua New Guinea as Prime Minister starting today is loaded with symbolism. Following on from the April visit of Australia's first female Governor-General, the Prime Minister can demonstrate to Papua New Guineans that women can effectively and confidently occupy the highest offices in the land.

This is the first visit by an Australian prime minister to our nearest neighbour since Kevin Rudd in early 2008. PNG has experienced rapid change in the five-year interregnum, and Gillard's visit is important also because it will recognise the nation as an increasingly significant economic partner rather than as Australia's second-biggest aid client.

Like Australia, PNG has been in the grip of a resources boom, driven in part by rising demand from Asia and super-charged by the \$19 billion Exxon Mobil LNG investment. Average annual GDP growth from 2008 to 2011 was an impressive 7.3 per cent.

Then prime minister Sir Michael Somare departed due to illness in 2011 and was replaced by the much younger and highly regarded Peter O'Neill.

Elections last year confirmed a generational shift in political leadership. O'Neill is determined to improve PNG's poor education and health services and crumbling infrastructure and to tackle the country's endemic corruption.

He has declared 2013 the year of implementation to realise his ambitions for the country.

Members of an emerging middle class, thought to number 150,000-200,000 in a country of seven million people, are starting to assert themselves and are demanding better government. Young Papua New Guineans are networking on social media platforms enabled by better mobile phone connectivity and have bright ideas for transforming their country.

But an unwelcome change has been an increase in violence against women.

The challenges faced by women in our nearest neighbour are unfathomable to the vast majority of Australians. They face severe obstacles in the way of achieving equal opportunities to men and in accessing health and education services and even personal safety and basic survival.

Two-thirds of women in PNG are exposed consistently to domestic violence. Medecins Sans Frontieres has estimated that 70 per cent of women will be raped or physically assaulted in their lifetime.

Fortunately, Gillard herself is keenly aware of the problem, informing high school students on ABC TV's Q&A program audience on Monday of the appalling levels of violence experienced by women in PNG. The Prime Minister announced last year a new Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development aid strategy to support women's rights in the region.

A record three women were elected to PNG's parliament in 2012. Loujaya Toni, Minister for Community Development, Delilah Gore and Julie Soso, also the Governor of Eastern Highlands Province, are under pressure to meet the impossibly high expectations of several generations of women as well as delivering on the demands of their electorates.

The Australia-PNG relationship is multi-faceted. The \$493m aid program was for many years the main focus of the relationship, but relations have broadened to focus more on the economic and trade relationship.

Australian investment in PNG is almost on a par with our investment in China, at more than \$16bn. Bilateral trade is worth almost \$6bn.

An economic and co-operation treaty has been finalised. Australia has been assisting PNG with the establishment of a sovereign wealth fund.

Business to business links have also deepened.

In managing this broad agenda, Gillard's most important responsibility should be to PNG's women.

She can not only set a visible example of a strong female leader but can also speak out in support of PNG's women to a wide audience of men who will listen to her because she is the Australian Prime Minister.

This is not an issue that Gillard should take up only in private meetings. Women in PNG need Australian support and Gillard can be a very effective advocate for them.

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This article first appeared on the institute's Interpreter blog.