

The role of women in promoting peace and reconciliation

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From the early days of the Bougainville crisis, women's groups played important roles in initiatives to end the violence and promote a sustainable solution to the conflict. Women of all political, religious and regional groupings mobilised and spoke out for peace. We prayed, marched and negotiated for peace and reconciliation.

Women in Bougainvillean societies

In traditional Bougainvillean society, women have an important place in the family, and a vital role in the life of the clan. Most language and cultural groups in Bougainville are matrilineal. This means that it is the woman's line that determines kinship and the inheritance and use of land rights. There is a saying in Bougainville that 'women are mothers of the land'. With this go other key responsibilities such as keeping the family wealth and recording family history. From time to time, in consultation with her uncle or elder brother, a woman is also responsible for arranging marriages, organising the special feasts and cultural activities within the clan and participating in important negotiations around land rights and birthrights. However it has not been usual for women to exercise political power in the public arena, although their views are conveyed through a spokesperson in the family or clan.

Prior to the war, there were two main women's organisations on Bougainville. One was the Churches' Women's Organisation, which was established in the mid-1960s and had developed successful programmes for women to be self-reliant at the village level. The other was the North Solomons Provincial Council of Women which was instituted in the late 1970s and in the 1980s was in the process of establishing a system of networks between different women's organisations when its progress was disrupted by the outbreak of violence.



The impact of conflict on women

All Bougainvillean women were affected by the war, but their experience differed in some respects depending on whether they were in government-controlled or BRA-controlled areas.

For those of us in government-controlled areas, it was 'life between two guns'. Women experienced harassment by both the BRA and the PNGDF forces. Our lives were constrained by rules and regulations such as the curfew from dawn to dusk. Freedom of movement and communication were restricted whenever there was a military operation, affecting the supply of medicines, basic store goods and the provision of education. Restrictions on movement meant that women often had to wait a few days before they could go to their gardens to collect food.

Women in the BRA-controlled areas bore the brunt of the war as they suffered sustained attacks by PNGDF and Resistance forces. Eight years of blockade deprived them of access to shelter, food, clothing, health and educational services. Families who had fled into the hills had to establish new food gardens and while waiting for their crops to ripen, the women would return to their old gardens to harvest food. This was a long and dangerous journey and caused many health problems. Women behind the blockade struggled to care for their children without medicines, immunisations and adequate food supplies. Many babies died from preventable childhood diseases. Those in the mountains suffered from lack of warm clothing. Women and girls in both areas were at risk of rape by soldiers from all factions.

Military operations in all areas prevented travel and contact between groups living in different places. The 'divide and rule' tactics of the PNGDF were successful in creating and maintaining divisions between Bougainvilleans, with the consequence that peace groups were initially forced to operate in isolation from each other, within their own communities.

Women as peacemakers

Women's groups played a major role in working for peace and reconciliation at local and national levels. Individual women used their high status in the family to negotiate peace in their communities and managed to use their influence as go-betweens with the warring factions to maintain constructive dialogue. Mothers went into the bush to attempt to bring their sons home. In south and southwest Bougainville, women went into the jungle to negotiate with the local BRA.

Groups such as the Catholic Women's Association and the Bougainville Community Integrated Development Agency (BOCIDA) run by Ruby Miringka, were the mainstay of humanitarian networks that provided food, clothing and medicines to those in government and BRA-controlled areas. At the time, movement restrictions meant that these clandestine networks were the only source of emergency assistance. As restrictions eased, these groups became the backbone of development and peacebuilding activities.

Women's groups and individual woman leaders emerged as an important influence in the political arena. Their activities included prayer meetings, reconciliation ceremonies, peace marches and petitions. They also

played an important role in awakening the international community to the suffering of the Bougainville people. Their contacts with women from Australia and New Zealand were influential in bringing in support and assistance from abroad.

Early peace initiatives

It was their domestic influence on the BRA and Resistance forces that enabled Bougainvillean women to have a significant impact in the early stages of the war. Events in September 1990 on the island of Buka led to the first public display of women's courage. Various women's groups, including the women of Buka Island, protested against a BRA blockade that was preventing PNGDF soldiers from distributing emergency medical supplies. The women, led by Anastasia La Pointe, planned a march that they were then forced to abandon by a BRA roadblock. Nonetheless La Pointe had the opportunity of confronting BRA commanders with the feelings of the women. She said, 'I spoke out and told them that it was a women's initiative. If we had involved men there would have been trouble.'

The following month, the women of Selau, in north Bougainville, planned another peace march to petition the PNGDF and BRA to put down arms and begin peaceful negotiations. After this the women again organised an all-night peace vigil to protest silently against the violence. About 5,000 people, including children and even members of the BRA, attended the vigil.

These peace efforts led by local women, culminated in August 1991 in the declaration of a 'Peace Area' by the Selau people. The community took steps to disarm the local BRA and agreed not to have Resistance Forces in the area. It was our responsibility to create an environment where we could dream about a peaceful solution to the conflict. It was not 100 percent safe but we planned to trust each other again.

Other events included a peace march in December 1993 by the women in Buka to petition the leaders of all parties to carry out peaceful negotiations. In August 1994, the women of Siwai, south Bougainville, organised a peace march to petition the BRA to stop the war and to allow people out of their bush camps.

Women's organisations gather momentum

In October 1994 the national government called a peace conference in the capital Arawa. Though the BRA and BIG leadership boycotted this event, it proved significant for women's groups, who had the opportunity to meet and air their views. Shortly after this, Catholic women

organised the Bougainville Reunion in Buka. More than 2,000 women from all over Bougainville attended the conference, marking a new period of confidence for Bougainville women.

In 1995, women from the BRA and government-controlled areas sent separate delegations to the Fourth Global Conference on Women in Beijing. Bougainvillean delegates realised that women from different parts of the world shared their experience of war. On their return from Beijing, women from northern Bougainville conducted a silent march in protest against the war, in defiance of the State of Emergency.

The Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum (BICWF) was established in 1995 because a united women's voice from all church groups was needed to help bring about peace. It included a wide range of women, many of whom were not usually politically active. Later in 1995, the BICWF began to organise for a Women's Peace Forum which was subsequently held in Arawa in August 1996. About 700 women met to discuss how they could move towards a united front and find lasting solutions to the Bougainville Crisis. Women from the three main-line churches and from across the island participated at the Forum. At the workshops they freely voiced their fears about the conflict. They formed strong working groups from all the districts of the island and put in place some concrete plans on how they would work towards a lasting solution to the conflict. Another positive spin-off from this Forum was a meeting between the organisers and a BRA group in the area, which was chaired by the women.

October 1996 brought Bougainville women from both sides of the blockade together. At the 'Bougainville Women Speak Out' Forum in Sydney, I met many women, including Ruby Miringka (founder of Bougainville Community Integrated Development Assistance) and Daphne Zale (who represented Bougainville women at the Beijing Conference). It was the first time that the three of us had met during the eight years of war, and for the first two days there was much uncertainty between us. We soon realised, however, that we were all working for the one cause – peace. The Forum provided us with an opportunity to discuss strategies for working together even though once back in Bougainville we would be living far apart. We produced a position paper that became our stepping-stone for further peace talks. While in Australia we also met with senators and had a session at the PNG High Commission in Canberra.

Women's role in negotiations

Despite having important roles and responsibilities in Bougainvillean culture, women have struggled to participate directly in the formal political peace process, which has been dominated by men. However, our

different forms of support for a negotiated solution to the conflict, often expressed from the sidelines at official meetings or through discreet lobbying of the different parties, have maintained vital pressure on the men to continue to search for peace.

During the Sandline affair, a delegation of three women travelled to Port Moresby, where we met up with other Bougainvillean women. Together we produced a written petition that was presented to the Prime Minister's First Secretary, urging the government not to involve Sandline and to instead seek a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

An official delegation of leaders of women's organisations played an important role at the Burnham talks in New Zealand in July 1997. This was because Daphne Zale, Marilyn Havini and I, who had all attended the 'Bougainville Women Speak Out' Forum in Sydney, Australia were able to speak with a united voice about our quest for peace. About 50 Bougainvillean women also attended meetings in Lincoln, New Zealand that led to the signing of the *Lincoln Agreement* in January 1998. Women drew up an adjoining statement on peace, which was presented by Agnes Titus of the BTG at the signing ceremony and which called for greater inclusion in the peace process: 'We, the women, hold custodial rights of our land by clan inheritance. We insist that women leaders must be party to all stages of the political process in determining the future of Bougainville.' One observer said, 'the women showed tremendous strength and unity. They spearheaded the union of Bougainvilleans during all exclusive Bougainvillean sessions.'

Back in Bougainville, women's groups combined outspoken criticism of the violence with quiet initiatives behind the scenes. In July 1998, the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom (BWPF), an organisation representing women from BRA and BIG, released a statement condemning the presence and conduct of the PNGDF in their areas. They demanded a complete withdrawal of the army from their areas as well as autonomy for the Bougainville Reconciliation Government.

Other groups continued to play an active role in local peace initiatives and negotiations. For example, Helen Hakena from the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (LNWDA) accompanied the Prime Minister's wife, Rarura Skate, to meet women leaders in central Bougainville. The BICWF negotiated with the BRA to care properly and provide for John Momis, then the regional member for Bougainville in the PNG Parliament, who was being held hostage by the BRA in Tiniputz.

Women's participation in post-conflict Bougainville

With moves towards the signing of the final agreement gathering momentum, a number of us from women's organisations organised a Bougainville Women's Summit in August 2001 funded by the New Zealand Government. The Summit aimed to consolidate and expand existing networks between women's organisations, create an opportunity for women to inform themselves of the content of the *Peace Agreement*, and to explore ways in which women could contribute to the socio-economic and political development of the new Bougainville. A blueprint was produced outlining the vision and some guidelines for the Bougainville Government's responsibilities for women's affairs. As a result of these discussions, it was agreed that there was a need to establish a women's body under the Bougainville Autonomous Government.

In her address at the signing of the *Bougainville Peace Agreement*, Ruby Miringka outlined the aspirations of the women to participate fully in political life. She devoted much of her speech to the need for peacebuilding and development in post-conflict Bougainville. A range of NGOs, led mainly by women, are now in the process of restructuring to meet new needs. For example BOCIDA, which was the lead agency delivering humanitarian assistance during the war, is now focusing its work on critical literacy, reproductive health and education. Others, like the LNWD, offer a range of services for women and youth such as counselling and a programme to combat violence against women. Another example is the BICWF, which has shifted the focus of its work to critical literacy, small business training and capacity building for women and local women's organisations.

The question of women's participation in structures of the new government remains open. Women continue to be under-represented in the new political organs. When the Bougainville People's Congress was appointed, only six out of a total of 106 were women. During a debate it was decided that the time was 'not yet right' for stronger female representation. This has become a pattern in later political developments. The Bougainville Interim Provincial Government comprises four women members. The 52-strong Bougainvillean delegation at the September 2001 talks on autonomy, referendum and arms disposal included only two women.

For some, the absence of women's voices is a great loss and they fear that reversing this may be a long-term process. According to Ruby Miringka: "For women to be effective political leaders in shaping and developing the future Bougainville, political education for women is of great importance. Also girls must be given opportunities in formal education. Women need to be educated on the rights of women!"