

FEMINIST PEACE AND SECURITY IN PACIFIC ISLANDS

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Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Bilum bags being sewn by (L-R) Janeth Timothy, Elly Thomas and Erina Eric, during a visit by Oxfam to film skirts for the 2018 Comedy Gala. Patrick Moran/OxfamAUS

OVERVIEW

Pacific island nations are scattered across 30 million square kilometres of ocean – or one third of the earth’s surface – while their combined landmass is less than 2% of this total.¹ The remote and often archipelagic geography of Pacific nations presents unique challenges, particularly in the face of climate change and natural disasters.² However, like other regions in the world, the Pacific is also dealing with a difficult and diverse set of law enforcement, governance and security challenges.³ Successive regional security treaties adopted by Pacific Island Forum Leaders have reiterated the need for security and stability.⁴ Pacific leaders have also made several commitments to advancing gender equality.

Pacific feminist peacebuilding has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵ Since the nuclear free and independent Pacific campaign in the 1980s, women have led collaborative advocacy campaigns on peace and security, including responses to armed conflict, political crises and gun violence in Bougainville, Fiji, and Solomon Islands in the late 1980s to early 2000s, and pro-democracy riots in Tonga in 2006.⁶

Since the nuclear free and independent Pacific campaign in the 1980s, women have led collaborative advocacy campaigns on peace and security.

At the time of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in 1995, much focus was given to women's role in moving from armed conflict towards achieving peace and security.⁷ The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda has since expanded, particularly following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 which placed women's participation as central to conflict prevention and resolution efforts. Now, in 2020, is an opportune time to look back at the nature of women's activism in the Pacific:⁸ to acknowledge and delve deeper into what local women activists have continually said of the reality of being activists in a geographically diverse region, and the barriers to their ability to participate in political institutions and implement national and regional WPS mechanisms. Localising WPS commitments in the Pacific context has seen peace activists working with indigenous and faith leaders not only out of respect to traditional structures, but also out of necessity. In a region where poor transportation and communication infrastructure is a daily reality, local women actors are mobilising in innovative and creative ways, particularly in conflict prevention, recovery and humanitarian response efforts. Yet despite such demonstrated ability to participate in the peace and security field, regional mechanisms in the Pacific have not adapted to incorporate women's leadership and skills.⁹ An assessment of security sector governance policies and mechanisms shows there is a clear need to redefine processes of engagement that do not simply rely on inviting women 'to the table' but instead take bold steps at the regional and national levels to invest in peace and security.¹⁰

An assessment of security sector governance policies and mechanisms shows there is a clear need to redefine processes of engagement that do not simply rely on inviting women 'to the table' but instead take bold steps at the regional and national levels to invest in peace and security.

This paper uses a feminist analysis of regional WPS mechanisms to draw greater attention to Pacific feminist peacebuilders' efforts to localize regional peace and security policies across the region through gender-transformative peacebuilding practices.¹¹ The paper first looks at women's agency and capacity to participate and engage in political institutions across the Pacific.¹² It then shows how Pacific peacebuilding networks are working through traditional and customary systems, as well as engaging with faith leaders, to prevent the resurgence of armed conflict. The paper moves on to describe how women human rights defenders use peacebuilding approaches in addressing gun control issues and contributing towards ending the proliferation of small arms in the Pacific. Finally, the paper highlights how feminist approaches to addressing climate change and women's role in relief and recovery can bridge the existing gap in women's leadership roles within mechanisms focused on responding to climate change.

Overall, this paper argues that greater recognition and support is needed of the efforts and role of community-based women's movements. By looking at the rich and complex 'herstory' of women's activism in the Pacific can we find important clues to addressing the challenges women peace activists continue to face in localizing regional and national WPS mechanisms. Moving beyond simply commemorating the twentieth anniversary of UNSCR 1325, there is an opportunity for states and inter-governmental systems to consider a multi-actor consultative framework that enables women peacebuilders to participate in national and regional dialogues on the peace, development and humanitarian nexus, address the root causes of conflict, and bring about long-term conflict prevention and social transformation so that all women and girls can claim their right to peaceful societies.¹³

INTRODUCTION

‘As a woman human rights defender, I am trying to protect another woman. It is very challenging, it is very risky: it is costly too.’ Lilly Kolts Be’Soer, Papua New Guinea.

Lilly Kolts Be’Soer is a women’s rights defender and advocate for the political, economic and social empowerment of women in her native Papua New Guinea (PNG). She hails from Jiwaka Province in the highlands of PNG, and is the founder and director of Voice for Change, a provincial NGO based and working in Jiwaka. Voice for Change focuses on ending violence against women and girls, and building alliances with communities and the provincial government to advocate for safer communities and an end to all forms of violence. Be’Soer has assisted in facilitating mediation among the parties in tribal conflicts and wars. In January 2012, she coordinated a peace reconciliation process to resettle about 500 internally displaced families and helped set up a committee to address sorcery-related violence. Be’Soer is part of the regional network of women’s human rights defenders and the Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women. She is also a member of the UN Women Asia Pacific Civil Society Advisory Group; a member of the Jiwaka Provincial Committee on Budgeting and Planning; Chair of the Family Violence Support Group in South Whagi District of Jiwaka Province; and received the 2010 Pacific Human Rights Defenders Award.¹⁴

The personal is political for Be’Soer: ‘We experience all these inequalities [and] discrimination, and these experiences mean we have to make the change ourselves. We need to bring solidarity, build the network to collectively work together to make the change ourselves. We need to get into positions of decision making.’

Be’Soer has experienced the cost of armed conflict, including being displaced. She has faced threats while looking down the barrel of a gun. But she has also leveraged her traditional role, as the daughter of a chief, and her access to education, to persist in her work to bring an end to violence, including gun violence: ‘I was given the space to engage in conflict resolution and peace mediation. But what realized is that we are not addressing the issues of arms.’

Gun ownership is almost normalized and is a symbol of security: ‘We are talking about peace resolution, reconciliation, we are bringing people to peace, resettling them, organising compensation, but we are not talking about the arms [guns].’

At the local level she works with the provincial police commander to enhance gun control and the confiscation of illegal arms not only to enhance peacebuilding in local communities, but also to improve gender equality and women’s rights:

‘Women are threatened when they are looking for food, they cannot access healthcare or the market. It has taken us a long time, but we have been able to successfully resolve three cases [of such gender based violence].’

A feminist peace is inter-generational

‘We produce the next generation of our tribe and families’ says Be’Soer. ‘We are also working with the young women to try and make them realize the important role women play in our families and in our communities.’

A key message of the #IMatter campaign is exactly that – women are important. The campaign coordinated by Oxfam aims to build and strengthen an intersectional movement that works with women and girls in crisis and post crisis contexts, recognizing the universality of the struggle’s women experience.

But the challenge is that younger women need a lot of convincing if change is to happen: ‘The young women are holding guns and knives. They are the children we bore. We need a strategy to bring them in. Even with awareness programmes, women were threatened by their own children and young men. We have a difficult society. We need to consider a new strategy.’

A key message of the #IMatter campaign is exactly that – women are important.

Tackling power

It is important to understand the different structures that influence the status of women, from traditional leaders, the police and security forces, as well as local-level government. Engaging with the national government remains a challenge, not just because of the distance between Jiwaka and the national capital of Port Moresby: ‘We do not have a voice in there. It is male dominated.’

When power is determined by access to and ownership of natural resources, including land, men hold this power: ‘All the resources are owned by our families and our brothers.’

But Be’Soer believes this power can be transformed to bring about a voice for women in their families and communities, as well as at local and national government levels. Working in solidarity with campaigns such as #IMatter, she strives to bring women together to collectively enable access to power and decision making, to economic resources, and to be able to live in communities without the risk of violence: ‘We have to get ourselves into those positions. To take ourselves in and make decisions for women. We have to work together.’

PARTICIPATION

‘The situation of rural women also requires particular attention in the Pacific as they are especially vulnerable given their lack of access to basic services. We need to acknowledge women’s vulnerability, enhance their access to education, health, and economic opportunities, and realize their participation as decision makers in peacebuilding processes in post-conflict situations. In short, rural women must benefit from gender-equality initiatives and be specifically considered in all planning and budgeting processes.’ Lisa Horiwapu, Vois Blong Mere, Solomon Islands.¹⁵

The Pacific region has witnessed and continues to be affected by armed conflict, civil unrest, tribal fighting, and local-level conflicts over resources, increasing violent crime, and political crises.¹⁶ It is in this dynamic context that

Pacific women are ‘uniting in new and creative ways’ in a ‘gathering of force’ that can transform the fabric of Pacific societies.¹⁷ Since the nuclear free and independent Pacific campaign in the 1980s, women have led collaborative advocacy campaigns on peace and security, including responses to armed conflict, political crises and gun violence in Bougainville, Fiji, and Solomon Islands in the late 1980s to early 2000s, and pro-democracy riots in Tonga.¹⁸ Yet despite these efforts to engage in peace and security, women’s participation in formal conflict prevention, management and post-conflict recovery efforts remains a challenge. This is symptomatic of a broader problem in the region related to women’s absence from political decision making at all levels of society and continued high levels of sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁹



Noraida Abo, Peace advocate, who heads the women’s rights organization United Youth of the Philippines-Women (UnYPhil-Women) based in Cotabato, urges ‘Moro women to continue the struggle for genuine and lasting peace in the Bangsamoro homeland.’ Photo: Vina Salazar/Oxfam

Women’s participation in political fora has brought a level of dialogue that contribute to the culture of non-violence but are often unrecognized in formal post-conflict peace processes.²⁰ In Fiji, women’s NGOs collaborating with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs met with the Fiji government’s National Security and Defence Review Committee as part of its review process in 2003. The NGOs raised critical issues around the way in which the review process was being conducted, who was being consulted, and which issues were being identified

as security threats. Women provided recommendations on how international standards and norms, including UNSCR 1325, could be incorporated. As a result, two submissions were made to the Committee, including recommendations for the permanent appointment of the Minister of Women’s Affairs on the National Security Council, and representation of women on provincial and district-level security committees. The representation of the Minister for Women in the National Security Council was formally adopted in 2007.²¹

In Bougainville and Solomon Islands, women leaders from the Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency (LNWDA), mothers from the Bougainville Women’s Movement, and the Women’s Human Rights Defenders Network met and organized together, led mediation, walked into jungles, held negotiations across crocodile-infested rivers, brokered peace with armed combatants, and ultimately brought an end to the 10-year armed conflict and restored peace to the islands.²² It was these Pacific women leaders who informed the adoption of UNSCR 1325.

The adoption of the Regional Action Plan on Women Peace and Security by Pacific Island Leaders (2012-2015) was a legacy of women’s peace activism and focused on women’s contributions to peacebuilding and security sector reform.²³ Yet the action plan has been criticised for failing to demonstrate how Pacific island women can legitimately enter debate on regional security within the ‘architecture of entitlements’ that is deeply rooted in Pacific island politics.²⁴ Pacific island legislatures have some of the world’s lowest numbers of female elected representatives, at only 8.6% of all representatives as of January 2020.²⁵

Women’s media networks in the Pacific, like femLINKpacific, have tracked the continual under-representation of women in politics since the early 2000s, providing evidence of the consistent challenges faced by women entering the political arena. During the first Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) elections, five years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, there was a need for greater political education to ensure more women in parliament. According to Agnes Titus, who contested the women’s seat in the Northern Region:

‘I wish that women had understood that they could have contested the constituency seats because I feel that is where more women could have entered politics. But maybe they did not understand that fully. While I am happy that we have three guaranteed seats for women at [the] regional level I realize now that those [of us] organizations who advocate for the advancement of women, we still have a lot more work to do now to get the information out, get the women to understand that ‘yes’ you can contest the local constituency seat. They are not made for men only.’²⁶

To be successful, women candidates must fundraise to reach local communities on atolls or outlying islands hundreds of kilometres away.

Campaigning for political seats in Pacific parliaments is not easy.²⁷ In their campaigns for regional seats, women candidates in the ABG elections had to traverse wide rivers and terrible road conditions just on the mainland alone. To be successful, women candidates must fundraise to reach local communities on atolls or outlying islands hundreds of kilometres away. Very few can afford the airline service or long trips via outboard motorboats. Ruby Mirinka came second to the Central Regional candidate Magdalene Toroansi in the elections. Toroansi attributed her success to the areas she had visited personally while overcoming Bougainville’s poor and outdated transport system:

‘So, I learned a lesson that in the future I must have good plans, for networking and committees, coordination, assessing and reporting. Not having that made it hard to reach out.’

Pacific women like Ruby Mirinka and Agnes Titus still struggle to be heard at the negotiating table in leadership roles and are not given sufficient recognition and resources to do their work.²⁸ This is despite the Pacific Island Forum Leaders’ endorsement and adoption of the Gender Equality Declaration in 2012, Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012–2015) and, more recently, the endorsement of the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Human Rights (2018–2030) by the Pacific Ministers for Women in 2017. Their experiences highlight that it is essential to ensure women’s activism from the local to global levels is resourced, including improving women’s political agency to contribute to governance structures. There is also need to ensure that representation is more than just one woman. Mirinka was the sole female member of the Bougainville Referendum Commission. The referendum, which came 18 years after the 2001 peace agreement which ended the decade-long civil war was signed, remains subject to ratification by the national government. This will require Bougainville activists and women leaders to remain engaged in both provincial and national peacebuilding politics. According to long-time activist Helen Hakena, increasing women’s participation in Bougainville politics is the main goal following the autonomous PNG region’s resounding vote for independence.²⁹

There is also need to ensure that representation is more than just one woman.

This is the essence of UNSCR 1325. However, the Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325³⁰ identified that while resources have gone into formulating state-centric national action plans and increasing women in parliament and the military, women’s needs at the local level have largely gone unmet. A number of obstacles remain that limit the action plan’s effective implementation, preventing human security from being a reality for women of all diversities and their communities. They include:

- A focus on action planning rather than actual action and implementation;
- Endurance of a militarized concept of security;
- An emphasis on reaction rather than conflict prevention;
- A lack of resources to support women’s participation in enhancing prevention strategies or in advancing a human security agenda.³¹

At the regional level it is also worth considering how the Track II diplomacy facilitated by the Political Division of the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, between 2006–2011 resulted in collective action for the adoption of the Human Security and Conflict Prevention Frameworks as well as the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012–2015).³² Between 2006 and 2011, the Forum Secretariat responded to Pacific island countries’ request to broaden the concept of security in regional policy making, to include: the importance of women’s role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding; enhancing the oversight and accountability of security institutions; and recognizing that sexual and gender-based violence is a security threat in the region. The adoption of a human security framework was linked to research on the drivers of conflict, including migration from rural to urban areas and poorly planned urbanization, inter-group tensions, and the mobilization of grievances

and (mis)perceptions.³³ In December 2010, as part of the tenth anniversary commemorations of UNSCR 1325, a Pacific Regional Working Group on WPS was established with members from the Pacific Island Forum, Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP and UN agencies, and civil society. In June 2011, the Forum Regional Security Committee gave the group the task of developing a regional action plan on WPS. This was subsequently supported by Pacific Women’s Ministers in August 2011.

This commitment to collaboration and inclusivity is also clearly stated in the Pacific Islands Forum’s Principles of Security Sector Governance, which emphasizes its mechanisms should be ‘inclusive through gender equality, participation of youth, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, and consideration of traditional culture and governance structures’.³⁴ This reflected the recognition that civil society, including women’s rights organizations, must be empowered to proactively engage with military and state officials to open a pathway to free elections and a return to democratic rule in post-conflict settings.³⁵ However, since the institutional reform within the Pacific Islands Forum, civil society no longer has a clear channel to engage with Forum Regional Security Officials. This further marginalizes women.

Despite these gaps in resourcing and implementing regional mechanisms on women’s participation in security sector reform, women’s organizations continue to transform and localize UNSCR 1325 into practical strategies, drawing on documented qualitative and quantitative evidence and the lived experiences of women leaders.

Since the institutional reform within the Pacific Islands Forum, civil society no longer has a clear channel to engage with Forum Regional Security Officials. This further marginalizes women.



East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea: Molie Pasalau (C), a cluster leader and a member of her local WASH committee, participates in a WASH meeting in East Sepik Province. Photo: Patrick Moran/OxfamAUS

Women's participation in political processes provides the key to building and sustaining peace. Security sector governance policies need to redefine processes of engagement that do not simply rely on inviting women 'to the table' but instead take bold steps at the regional and national levels to invest in peace, such as creating a new inclusive space that integrates faith and indigenous practice into local, national and regional development processes and frameworks.³⁶ Additionally, inter-group conflict, while having many triggers and underlying causes, is intimately connected with inequitable gender relations, structures and agency. The ability to bring about change and see peace normalized not only requires women agency but some shift in the 'male-dominated structures which often inhibit their collective action'.³⁷ Further, women's potential for collective solidarity to redress men's power must confront the divisions 'created by kinship, generation, language, religion, ethnicity and class'.³⁸

Peacebuilding in the Pacific region requires balancing traditional and customary practice with modern governance, including accountability to the culture of human rights, by engaging with indigenous leaders and church leaders as well as creating a sustainable space for peace education, peacebuilding dialogue and mediation that challenge and transform patriarchal practices to enable women and youth of all diversities to access decision-making spaces. It should be noted that throughout the Pacific there is a strong tradition of Christian leaders speaking out against violence and well as providing contextual theological guidance, such as to support government directives and medical advice on Covid-19. Furthermore, theological engagement and resourcing is being used to address more taboo impacts, such as the exclusion and stigmatization of vulnerable groups and family violence, which has increased globally during the pandemic restrictions.³⁹

Pacific members of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) have identified the need for distinct strategies to enhance engagement with men and boys as allies and counter deeply entrenched stereotypes of men solely as perpetrators of violence. There is a need to raise awareness that only by working with both men and women can we contribute to women's meaningful participation in prevention and protection from all forms of violence, and their subsequent access to justice resources. These processes require addressing notions of masculinity and tradition that perpetuate harmful gender norms acting as barriers to achieving our collective goal. Therefore, by mainstreaming gender into conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes, GPPAC aims to eliminate the root causes which allow unequal power relations to persist and instead provide transformative solutions. As introduced in GPPAC's gender policy document, GPPAC Pacific members aim to adopt a gender transformative approach to change the attitudes, behaviours, and norms that lie at the very core of unequal power relations and gender inequality.

Dedicated resources must be allocated to national and local women's rights actors, to strengthen agency, amplify voice, and build on collaborative opportunities (including women-led coalitions and feminist practices) to enable a shift from funding crisis-reaction measures to gender-responsive peacebuilding and preventative action. This can enable women's leadership across the peace cycle, from immediate response and assessment through to recovery measures. There must also be sustained resourcing of inclusive and innovative peacebuilding practice and leadership, including wider civil society and social movements such as traditional systems and faith communities.⁴⁰

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PREVENTING THE RESURGENCE OF ARMED CONFLICT

‘If post-conflict reconstruction is carried out without looking for the root causes of conflict, recovery will only be superficial. Reconciliation is important to heal spiritual and psychological wounds, prevent hatred, distrust, and warmongering, and to encourage forgiveness and unity.’ Josephine Tankunai Sirivi, Bougainville.

The Pacific region has witnessed varying levels of instability, from armed conflict, civil unrest, tribal fighting and local-level conflicts over resources, to increasing violent crime and political crises. Peace is still fragile in numerous Melanesian countries, including Solomon Islands, and among the tribes in the highlands of PNG as well as Bougainville. While globally, feminist peace politics and women activists have been advocating for a more comprehensive vision of security – or human security – for well over a hundred years,⁴¹ the increased militarization of Pacific states perpetuates a narrow understanding of national security and is a growing threat to peace and security in the region.⁴²

In these fragile contexts, women have been security providers rather than victims.⁴³ During the Bougainville crises in the late 1980s to early 2000s, using their traditional role as peacemakers women like Helen Hakena, then coordinator of the Catholic Women in Buka, organized an Air Niugini plane to fly to Buka to take a group of women to attend the Catholic Women’s Federation Conference in Port Moresby. This was at a time when no planes were flying to the province. On 8 September 1994, Hakena boarded the plane with 105 other women, including Monica Samu, Sister Lorraine Garasu, Celine Kiroha and other executive members of the Catholic women’s network. As a result, a delegation of women were present at the conference and also sought an audience with the PNG Prime Minister, to petition him on the need to maintain a PNG Defence Force presence on the island, as even though this was a form of occupation, at the same time it was also providing protection for many of the citizens.

In these fragile contexts, women have been security providers rather than victims.

As Rhonda Siro, an independent candidate for the women’s seat in the Northern Bougainville Region ABG elections in 2005, explained, ‘We have those [traditional] lines, the clans behind us and when we talk, we’ve got power to talk and whatever we say, the boys, the husbands they do whatever we say. So, to bring peace and reconciliation back the woman has to stand and talk. And that’s when those big reconciliations have taken place, because of us the women.’ Agnes Titus agreed: ‘... here in Bougainville, you tie the land to the woman and many times conflicts arise over land, but who is the land, it is the woman who is part of the land.’ While Bougainville is an example of how matrilineal societies can provide more opportunities for women to have a voice, this is in stark contrast to the predominantly patriarchal social constructs in other parts of PNG.⁴⁴

More recently, GPPAC Pacific members use ‘multidimensional definitions of security’ to prevent the resurgence of armed conflict. They do this by working through traditional and customary systems and engaging with faith leaders. Network members also use peacebuilding tools including cross-gender dialogue to enhance engagement with men and boys as allies, and to counter deeply entrenched stereotypes of men as solely perpetrators of violence. In Fiji, where cultural militarism is still evident in contemporary society, organizations like Transcend Oceania advocate for gender, masculinity and non-violence through engaging men and boys as partners in the prevention of violence

against women.⁴⁵ By employing cross-gender dialogue, men are trained on peace education and understanding conflicts, power and violence ‘to work hand-in-hand with men to prevent violence against women and girls’, according to Adivasu Levu, Executive Director of Transcend Oceania.⁴⁶

The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) focuses on three core pillars of work: self-determination in West Papua, New Caledonia and Solomon Islands, ecumenism, and stewardship. Through its national council of churches, PCC works with indigenous and faith leaders to confront real, growing and interconnected issues affecting indigenous communities, including environmental degradation, weak political governance systems and high levels of social injustice. Its Reweaving the Ecological Mat project will engage multiple stakeholders from churches, civil society, academia, communities and governments to address the ecological crisis from a theological, biblical and indigenous perspective, and will lay the foundation for an ecological framework for development that will complement existing regional development frameworks.

East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea: Mollie Pasalau (C), a cluster leader and a member of her local WASH committee, participates in a WASH meeting in East Sepik Province. Photo: OxfamAUS



Women have also been vital in sustaining peace efforts in Bougainville. Following the conflict, women leaders like Agnes Titus and Sister Lorraine Garasu created the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation (NCfR), which in turn established four safe houses and two men's hubs that provide trauma healing and mediation support to heal the psychological wounds. NCfR also established a network of women's human rights defenders, male advocates, and a school-based peer education programme dealing with out-of-school youth. In October 2018, NCfR hosted a week-long forum in local villages, catalysed by the network. These women's human rights defenders were able to invite and initiate face-to-face dialogue with key ministerial representatives, including the President and Vice-President of the Autonomous Government of Bougainville.

In December 2010, a long-anticipated, but non-binding referendum in the autonomous PNG region saw a resounding 97.7% vote for independence. Helen Hakena, of the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency, revealed that as part of the campaign for women's rights in Bougainville, priorities following the referendum include economic security for women, and increasing safety and security from gender-based violence.⁴⁷

In order to make progress in these areas, women needed to be included in political decision making in Bougainville, Hakena outlined. The 2020 Autonomous Bougainville Government elections provided an opportunity to achieve this: 'Women should be participating fully in the political processes that are happening now. So, our priority at this time is to field more women, to put more women in the constituencies available here and not to race for the three regional seats. So that is the priority for us.'⁴⁸

In order to make progress in these areas, women needed to be included in political decision making.

The result of the non-binding referendum and the vote for independence now need to be negotiated between leaders from Bougainville and PNG, with the final say resting with lawmakers in the PNG Parliament. Agnes Titus stated that, while the process of becoming a separate nation could take years to achieve, a key message is the need to sustain and uphold the peace.⁴⁹

Since the end of the 10-year armed conflict, more 30 years ago, women who walked into the jungles and brokered peace with armed combatants, in whose names peace was brokered, weapons collected, and political agreements adopted, have been sustaining peace, providing recommendations for a sustainable approach to development: a shift from gender-based violence to gender justice. While the Autonomous Bougainville Government has adopted a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the process of political transition, including political negotiations, needs to be more accountable to the WPS agenda, including ensuring the protection of women's rights. This requires investment in a gender-inclusive engagement roadmap on Bougainville's political transition that is accountable to women's participation, protection and human security.

Ultimately, prevention requires both a short-term approach which includes monitoring women's participation and gender-based violence as part of early warning measures, as well as longer-term structural approaches to address the root causes of conflict, including inequality, and address new sources of conflict, including the impacts of climate change and natural resources.⁵⁰ The efforts by Pacific peacebuilding networks aim to build alliances with traditional and faith leaders to achieve a collective goal, and demonstrate how local actors can mainstream women's rights into conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes.

Prevention requires a new multi-actor consultative framework for regional peace and security that supports community representatives who can localize and operationalize women’s participation in peacebuilding and prevention including: implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty’s provision on gender-based violence; prioritizing the consultation and participation of women in the implementation, monitoring and accountability of the SDGs; adopting gender-responsive budgeting practices as a strategy to address, highlight and mitigate militarized state budgets and their destabilizing impact on international peace and security and women’s rights; including women’s participation and gender-responsive indicators in all early-warning processes, conflict prevention and early-response efforts; working in partnership with affected women and girls when designing, implementing and monitoring climate change and natural resource-related strategies; and providing financial, technical and political support, to strengthen the capacity of women’s civil society to organize and play a greater role in national and community-led violence prevention, dispute resolution and mediation initiatives, and wider preventive diplomacy work.⁵¹

PROTECTION OF WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

‘Us women we don’t need to be taught to protect anyone. It’s instinct – we are born with it. So, we take into consideration everyone, not just our family but also our community and society as a whole.’ Vanessa Heleta, Talitha Project, Tonga.

According to Nario-Galace,⁵² the proliferation of weapons is often overlooked as an enabling and sustaining factor in armed violence and conflict. Weapons play a central role in putting women’s security at risk in particular, and in tearing down peace and promoting insecurity in general.

The UN Secretary General’s 2019 report on Women, Peace and Security, is a key reminder that despite the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and of 10 security council resolutions dedicated to the WPS agenda, there are record levels of political violence targeting women human rights defenders and peacebuilders.⁵³

The Pacific is not immune to these issues. In the recent past, the region has witnessed and continues to be affected by armed conflict.⁵⁴ The Pacific region also has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world – twice the global average, with an estimated two in every three Pacific women impacted by gender-based violence.⁵⁵

In PNG, previous traditional sanctions under which fighting men should not have sex before battle, as well as other sexual prohibitions, may have prevented the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war. These prohibitions are apparently declining, with reportedly more incidents of women and girls being deliberately targeted.⁵⁶ In addition, mercenaries are allowed sexual access to girls and women since their presence is seen as necessary for protection or to win the conflict; however, research has shown mercenaries may have multiple partners, increasing the likelihood of sexually transmitted infections.⁵⁷

The Pacific region also has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world.

Pacific women are 'waging peace' to allow effective responses to the complex and multifaceted threats and challenges to human security, which require partnerships that support local women's considerable initiative and capacity. Women are not just passive victims of violence and inequality, but also provide security during conflict.⁵⁸

In PNG, where the most consequential impacts of ethnic conflict are felt at the local level, women are instrumental in providing security to affected communities.⁵⁹ Women and girls displaced by conflict and living on other people's lands are at risk of being sexually abused. Displaced wives may not have their husbands or sons to help protect them or their daughters, and as refugees they have a low status.

Agnes Titus, Program Coordinator for the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation, shared: 'Addressing gender-based violence ... contributes to achieving personal peace. Once personal peace is there, we can find family peace, community peace, and the overall regional peace.'

Lilly Kolts Be'Soer has brought attention to the situation in her province through networks such as the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), and the Centre for Arms Violence Reduction, engaging in arms control and gender issues including gender-mainstreaming policies, programmes, and actions against small arms trafficking and misuse.

Be'Soer is mindful that improving accountability to women's rights and WPS commitments requires her relying on the police, while monitoring conflict situations and identifying entry points for mediating and resolution: 'We always bring this to the attention of the police. There are always the police, the peace mediation team involved. I personally cannot do it because it is risky.'

Women's human rights defenders are putting their lives on the line daily to prevent violence as well as mediate in community-level conflicts. Pacific governments must therefore create and enforce normative and legislative frameworks, including in local governance and traditional mechanisms, to grant the safety and security of women's human rights defenders, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Additionally, all national peace and security strategies must protect women's human rights defenders and women's organizations by ensuring the safety and protection of diverse peacebuilders in public and online spaces, as well as enhancing the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence by strengthening legal frameworks as well as prevention measures particularly in crisis situations.⁶⁰

On 2 April 2013, UN member states passed the Arms Trade Treaty. By the end of 2013, the US and more than 100 other states had signed this global treaty; of these, nine states had also ratified the instrument. However, in the Pacific island region, the PNG government is yet to ratify the treaty.⁶¹

But the priorities of the treaty are being localized by women's human rights defenders and for Voice for Change it is critical to track and influence the implementation of the Jiwaka Provincial Gender Based Violence and Strategy, which is based on the national government strategy. According to Be'Soer:

Women's human rights defenders are putting their lives on the line daily to prevent violence as well as mediate in community-level conflicts.

‘I am working on a baseline survey across the whole of Jiwaka to show the presence of SALW in our community. We will document case studies and show what is happening when these get into the hands of young men and how they terrorise women and children. The report will inform our advocacy strategy.’

RELIEF AND RECOVERY

According to Adivasu Levu, the Executive Director of Transcend Oceania, the Pacific regional secretariat of GPPAC, a founding network of the Shifting the Power Coalition (StP Coalition): ‘One thing to take into account is that – we are currently at a phase of global transitional change because of COVID-19. There are probably going to be some major changes as we’re currently experiencing. We might return to normal and it may be a new normal. The question is, ‘How can we ensure that women are part of the decision making of policies that depict the new (normal), and ensure inclusivity in the changes?’ These are just my thoughts and may we pay close attentions to all discussions and meetings.’

Levu provides important guidance to the Secretariat and Programmes team of the StP Coalition. She reminds us that the Covid-19 pandemic adds another layer of challenges to the persistent inequalities that women in the Pacific continue to struggle against – where women in communities and villages are still waiting for government gender equality commitments to transform their lives with inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and agricultural programmes.

The Pacific island region is recognized as one of the most vulnerable to the consequences of the ongoing global climate crisis, including environmental disasters, intense variations in temperatures, and extreme storms. Successive Pacific Island Forum and Pacific Small Island Developing States country statements during open debates on UNSCR 1325 provided early warnings of the reality of climate change at the global level.

In addition, Pacific peacebuilding networks such as GPPAC Pacific advocated for the peace, human security, development and humanitarian nexus in the 2015 Global Study on UNSCR 1325, ensuring two significant words were included in UN Security Council Resolution 2242 which seeks to fast-track UNSCR 1325 implementation: ‘climate change’. This resolution reminds UN member states of their responsibility to bring about a gender-inclusive shift from reaction to prevention, within the climate change agenda.

The Regional Action Plan on WPS (2012-2015) demonstrated how UNSCR 1325 could be used to protect women’s human rights and provide women and girls with access to health, psychosocial and legal protection in times of humanitarian emergency. It had the foresight to recommend that humanitarian action must take into account pre-existing gender inequalities and discrimination faced by women, and ensure that these are not further magnified or exploited during humanitarian crises. However, George⁶² is critical of the plan’s ‘relative silence on the growing regional challenge of gender and environmental insecurity’. This reflects the broader trend across the Pacific region of women’s low levels of representation in decision making, and cultural norms that exclude women from public life. Indeed, despite increased attention to and investment in women’s leadership in decision making across the region, women are still notably absent from visible leadership roles in mechanisms

The question is, ‘How can we ensure that women are part of the decision making of policies that depict the new (normal), and ensure inclusivity in the changes?’

focused on responding to climate change and resulting disasters. Growing climate crisis insecurities at the local and national levels have seen current political strategies allude to military responses and the ‘securitization’ of the climate crisis. This is indicative of True and Hewitt’s⁶³ assessment of relief and recovery being the most ‘under-developed, under-researched and misinterpreted of the four WPS pillars’, further stating that ‘advocates and scholars often refer to prevention, protection and participation, leaving off R&R’.

When approaching the difficult issue of how best to respond to the climate crisis, ecologically just approaches to locally driven solutions must align and be accountable to the gender equality, just peace and human security agendas. The issue of environmental security calls for a gendered analysis.⁶⁴ Without women’s adequate representation in discussions around relief and recovery, the default approach can be – and often is – techno-centric and ignores the realities for women, which include the changing burden of unpaid work, increased prevalence of gender-based violence, further loss of their reproductive health rights, food insecurity, and the institutionalized marginalization of women’s voices and leadership. Diverse women’s needs are marginalized through one-size-fits-all gender approaches that presume all women have the same experiences in disasters. Additionally, for young women and girls to be able to be actively engaged in determining prevention and recovery measures, requires a social, political and economic infrastructure that not only supports their access to education, but also ensures these are safe spaces. It also requires greater accountability by governments to prevent gender inequalities and multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including harmful traditional practices.

The issue of environmental security calls for a gendered analysis.

Lessons learned from humanitarian responses to Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015 and Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016 reveal how the large influx of international and regional humanitarian actors duplicated relief and recovery efforts on the ground and even silenced the longer term development agenda within the response and recovery interventions, due in large part to little complementarity between the humanitarian response and longer-term development outcomes.⁶⁵ These outside actors often arrive with little understanding and knowledge of local contexts and can prove detrimental to local humanitarian efforts, even de-legitimising the agency, expertise and experience of local women leaders and first responders during crises. As Mary Jack, a woman leader from Vanuatu and Provincial Coordinator of ActionAid Vanuatu recalled: ‘I still remember standing after two weeks when the flights were allowed to go back to Tanna. I stood there looking at all the humanitarian agencies coming in and going out. There was no space for women.’⁶⁶

Recognising that ‘coalitions are more likely to challenge gender norms directly or indirectly and promote transformational change’, in 2016 the GPPAC Pacific network contributed to the establishment of the StP Coalition, forged by 13 diverse Pacific women and women’s organizations from Fiji, PNG (including Bougainville), Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Australia, and the Pacific Disability Forum. As a unique, women-led mechanism, the feminist coalition draws on its members’ capacity and collectively aims to enhance the capability for organizations to engage nationally and regionally in the humanitarian sector and climate change movement from a women’s rights and feminist approach. As noted by Lanieta Tuimabu, representative of the Fiji Disabled People’s Federation which is a member of the coalition, ‘Women’s rights simply mean to me: my right as a woman with a disability in accessing information,

communication, and accessibility to facilities, services ... I think gone are the days that we work in silo. Once we are working together, our issue becomes stronger.'

Since the formation of the StP Coalition, Pacific Forum Leaders have adopted the Boe Declaration (2018), which broadened the definition of security to include human security, humanitarian assistance, environmental security, and regional cooperation. The declaration reflects successive Pacific Forum statements during previous open debates on UNSCR 1325 that amplified the need to address the growing climate crisis. This expanded notion of peace and security is a welcome development, and an opportunity to enhance a peace, development and humanitarian nexus approach for the Boe Declaration Action Plan in line with the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012-2015). At the national level it means women peacebuilders can bring their specific knowledge and expertise on security provision and diverse women's needs. This is not about 'taking the power but balancing it', as Mary Jack put it, and giving rise to the democratization of security sector governance. Local women actors can also ensure that oversight is comprehensive and responsive to communities by supporting the development of conflict prevention measures, such as early warning and early response systems, within a human security and development framework.

At the national level it means women peacebuilders can bring their specific knowledge and expertise on security provision and diverse women's needs.

In 2019, StP Coalition messages reached the UN Climate Change Summit as well as a panel convened by the Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund coinciding with the nineteenth anniversary of the adoption of UNSCR 1325. Together the messages have been clear on participation, prevention and financing:

- Strengthen the capacity and accountability of the humanitarian sector to ensure the protection of women's rights in times of crisis in a meaningful way: with women's rights organizations involved as key stakeholders.
- The prevention of all forms of violence, and ensuring the protection of women's rights should be central to any humanitarian planning response. It must be integrated into early warning, response, recovery and resilience building.
- Ensure equitable allocation of resources towards the strengthening of women's networks and coalitions that support women leaders to take up leadership and coordination roles alongside other national actors in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

Through the StP Coalition, network members are building on each other's areas of expertise, including the adaptation of the inter-operable Women's Weather Watch information-communication system, as well as the application of peace education and dialogue to address the persistent underrepresentation of women in local government and governance structures and their lack of responsiveness to women's security needs.⁶⁷

Such feminist approaches to addressing climate change provide opportunities for greater levels of participation and agency of women and girls in renegotiating peaceful societies not just in humanitarian crises, but as part of longer-term development strategies.⁶⁸

The adoption of the Boe Declaration by Pacific Forum Leaders expands the concept of security with an increasing emphasis on human security, including humanitarian assistance and environmental and resource security. The realization of this agreement at national and local levels must put greater emphasis on the development and adoption of gender-inclusive early warning mechanisms and conflict prevention strategies by ensuring all planning and implementation measures meet the specific and diverse needs of women and girls, as well as ensure women's capacities to act as agents in relief and recovery are reinforced in humanitarian crises and conflict and post-conflict situations. The implementation of the Boe Declaration Action Plan requires a new multi-actor consultative framework for regional peace and security that structurally includes and supports civil society representatives who can prioritize, localize and operationalize women, youth and civil society peacebuilding, prevention and participation frameworks as equal partners.⁶⁹

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