BOUGAINVILLE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA: GENDER AND PARTICIPATION IN THE WAKE OF A PARTIALLY “GENDERED” PEACE AGREEMENT

SEPTEMBER 2018

NICOLE GEORGE
SCHOOL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary ........................................... 3

Introduction ...................................... 4

Women’s experiences of conflict ............... 4

Women as Agents of Peace ......................... 5

Factors enabling and constraining women’s participation in the post-conflict context ............ 6

Referendum and future developments .......... 10

Final comments and key findings ................. 11

Key References ................................... 11
SUMMARY

Even though they were mentioned specifically only once in the text of the Bougainville Peace Agreement forged in 2001, Bougainville’s women have achieved progress, albeit halting, in their demands for inclusion in the territory’s ongoing post-conflict transition processes. From the late 1980s through to the late 1990s, a secessionist war occurred in this island territory of Papua New Guinea (PNG), pitting a local resistance army against the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) which received cooperation from some local loyalist groups. In later years the lines of control within these groupings became fractured and the violence of the conflict became more sporadic, uncontrolled and opportunistic; conditions which women described as “life between two guns”. Through grass-roots peacebuilding activity and their participation in national and internationally brokered peace negotiations, Bougainville’s women played a major role in the country’s peace process; a role legitimated by their matrilineal authority and of which they are rightly proud. But today when this history is recalled, women reflect, somewhat ruefully that their influence as peacebuilders was not capitalised upon more successfully. The widespread and indiscriminate violence of the “crisis” years, as they are locally known, has certainly eased. Women’s leadership in the public service is occurring at unprecedented levels, and programs supporting women’s participation in community development, community government and community policing are helping women build leadership profiles. Women are also making noteworthy inroads into national politics, logging gains in electoral representation through the successful contestation of open seats, as occurred in 2015. But these gains are offset by the persistence of post-conflict gendered insecurities that limit women’s ability to participate on equal terms with men in post-conflict governance. These include rates of gendered violence that persist at extraordinarily high levels in Bougainvillean society, negative politicisation of efforts to promote women’s reproductive autonomy and an economic environment that tends to cloister women’s participation in areas such as market trading.

STRENGTH OF GENDER PROVISIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bougainville Peace Agreement 2001</th>
<th>0 None</th>
<th>1 Weakest</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 Strongest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Conflict Issues</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Against Women</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

CONSTRAINTS

1. High levels of gender violence perpetrated at all levels of society
2. Women’s marginal presence in economic development
3. Negative politicisation of efforts to promote women’s reproductive autonomy

ENABLERS

1. Women’s matrilineal customary standing
2. Women’s leadership of a local peace movement during the crisis years
3. Electoral provisions ensuring women’s representation in national and community government decision-making together with improved representation of women in leadership roles in state public service and security sector
INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, Bougainville, an island territory of Papua New Guinea (PNG), was plunged into a devastating secessionist war lasting almost 10 years. The conflict cost the lives of between 5 and 10 percent of the population, (an estimated 10,000 lives lost) and saw many more Bougainvilleans subject to trauma, injury and displacement. Bougainville’s women played an important role in bringing this conflict to a resolution. Their contributions to peacebuilding, both in localised contexts and within formal peace processes, are celebrated within the country and have been accorded respect across the Pacific Islands region. But in the longer term, women have faced difficulty in progressing the gender-just terms of the peace they worked so hard to build.

This becomes evident if consideration is given to the discriminatory continuities and ruptures evident in the way women have experienced the transition from conflict to peace. This perspective exposes, on the one hand, the continuity of gendered insecurity and violence that emerged so starkly in the conflict, and which remains all too prevalent in the post-conflict environment. On the other hand, this perspective also exposes how in peacetime, opportunities for women’s political participation, have not been fully realised in the way Bougainville’s women had hoped. Nonetheless women continue to advocate and insert themselves into political debate in the territory, calling attention to the forces that threaten security on the island, and building awareness of the need for peaceful negotiation of future challenges such as the 2018 referendum on Bougainville’s future political status.

In the following sections I consider the roles assumed and played by women during the conflict and the ways in which women have been able to consolidate and progress those roles to participate in the political, institutional, social and economic realm, in the post conflict context.

WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT

The war that erupted in Bougainville at the end of the 1980s was triggered by short and long term grievances. Many Bougainvilleans have long held frustration over their territory’s incorporation, first into the colonial state of Papua and New Guinea administered by Australia, and after 1975, into the post-independence state of Papua New Guinea. In the late 1980s, secessionist unrest was brought to a head, triggered by resistance to the environmental and social costs of one of the world’s largest open-cut copper mines that was operating in central Bougainville’s Panguna region since the 1960s and was owned by Conzinc Rio Tinto Australia. Disputes between mine-owners and local land-owning groups over adequate compensation for land use, and environmental damage had been ongoing since the mine’s opening. These became more violent in the 1980s and saw some rebel groups engage in campaigns of sabotage against mine infrastructure.

The PNG national government, eager to protect the mine’s lucrative export revenue, deployed mainland police and military to quell unrest in 1989. This was a blunt and violent incursion that served only to increase the resolve and organisation of the local resistance and culminated in the formation of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army or BRA. But not all Bougainvilleans felt opposition to the mine or sided with the independence cause. The PNG Defence Forces (PNGDF) were joined by a local faction which became known as the Bougainville Resistance Force (BRF).

Despite the fact that women’s contributions to peacebuilding are commonly viewed as the most significant aspect of women’s involvement in conflict in Bougainville, women were also an important presence in the resistance movement, particularly in the early years. In large parts of the island, women’s authority is upheld through matrilineal customary structures. Land is considered to be ‘owned by women’ but a source of identity for all Bougainvilleans. Men are understood to have a ‘sacred duty’ to protect land on women’s behalf (Titus cited Savoana Sprigg, 2010: 210). Women therefore have the power to instruct men about when and how to protect their land and also to veto protective actions if they do not approve. Extending from these connections to land, women are understood to have the authority, to ‘make war’ and to ‘make peace’ as it is put in the local idiom (Personal communication ‘Therese’ Arawa, June 2014). Women may not be involved in violence directly, but in many parts of the country they are understood to have customary authority to direct men to fight and when to give that fight up.

This authority was certainly evident in the early years of the conflict around Panguna. Women, such as Perpetua Serero, cousin to rebel leader Frances Ono, played significant roles in the leadership of land-owner rebel
groups in areas close to the Panguna mine (Laslett 2012: 708). At the height of the conflict, there is evidence that women also worked with the BRA to lure PNG defence force troops into surprise attacks such as the one that occurred in Kangu Beach and accounted for the deaths of 12 PNGDF troops (Charlesworth 2008: 353). In other capacities, women were also involved in the supply and preparation of food for BRA forces and care for the wounded (UNIFEM 2004).

In a bid to weaken local support of this sort, the PNG government imposed a blockade on the islands in 1990 which lasted in some parts of the country for up to 7 years. This contributed to hardship and deprivation for everyday Bougainvillean and increased the conflict’s human cost dramatically due to shortages of food and medicines. Women were particularly affected by restrictions placed on civilian movement and the crumbling health infrastructure which prevented them accessing reproductive health care. Dramatic increases in maternal morbidity and infant mortality rates were recorded by local communities in the war years (Mirinka 1996).

As the conflict wore on, the lines separating secessionist and loyalist groupings on the island became fractured. In these conditions, the use of force became more sporadic, uncontrolled and opportunistic. Customary authority and the matrilineal structures that had ensured women a respected place within local communities gave way to the ‘law of the gun’ and violence was perpetrated amongst Bougainvillean ‘brother against brother’ as it is locally explained (anonymised source, June 2014). Many women were displaced during this period as they sought to escape the fighting with children and other dependents. A great number fled to the bush where they worked to establish food gardens and employed other ‘bush craft’ technologies to cope with scarcity. There was enormous resilience displayed in these settings, but the bush camp existence was highly precarious.

Women were frequently exposed to the predatory violence of both rebel and loyalist troops, who were themselves living in increasingly desperate conditions. Local peace activist and nun, Sister Lorraine Garasu, described this situation for women as ‘life between two guns’ (Garasu 2002: 29). Violent sexualised attacks on women were frequent, employed to shame and humiliate enemy groups but also, in this context where women are considered custodians of the land, a powerful wounding to “the very roots” of communities (Zale 2004). In PNG government-controlled areas of the Island it is alleged that PNG Defence Force personnel also committed atrocities, both within the “care camps” that were administered to manage “the roots” of communities (Zale 2004). PNG Defence force personnel, and sometimes BRF members, displayed extreme suspicion of young Bougainvillean men, but also care camp residents generally. Incidents of extra-judicial violence and torture become common and also affected women. This violence, including rape, was never brought to the attention of higher PNGDF or BRA authorities and generally committed with impunity (Amnesty 1997: 27).

Local peace activist and nun, Sister Lorraine Garasu, described this situation for women as ‘life between two guns’

These attacks have left a legacy of changed gender relations in the post-war environment and normalized high levels of gender violence borne by women, while simultaneously eroding the customary protections that formerly provided women with security from this violence (Braithwaite 2006).

**WOMEN AS AGENTS OF PEACE**

Although the gendered costs of the conflict were extreme, women were active in the pursuit of peace, particularly as the conflict wore on into the 1990s. Women leaders in Bougainville today, are rightfully proud of their conflict mediation work and commonly repeat the refrain that they ‘brought peace to Bougainville’ (George 2016a). Recognition of this work has extended across the Pacific Islands region, internationally, and even as far as deliberations within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC 2003).

This work began modestly. As a first step towards bridging lines of political division, some women began to send baskets of scare goods to women in other parts of the territory. These ‘peace baskets’ were designed to build a bottom-up sense of solidarity amongst women and to show those in isolated areas that they were not forgotten (personal communication, ‘Angela’ peace leader, Buka June, 2014). Church networks were also significant in this regard and allowed women to connect with each other and organise events such as prayer vigils, and protest marches against violence in their communities (UNIFEM 2004; Hermkens 2011). As the impetus for peace increased, women’s initiatives became more brazen and involved direct interventions with combatants. Here they would insert themselves physically between warring groups, or wrap their arms around combatants in a bid to halt gun fights.

This work did not only occur within women’s local communities but became increasingly focussed on building a momentum for peace across the country. In defiance of PNGDF efforts to restrict movement, women began to organise national meetings to bring peace activists together. One of the most noteworthy of these events occurred in July 1996, when over 700 women gathered in Arawa. Reflecting on the utility of this event, one woman peace leader later explained; ‘when women met, they realised that
they may have had different political views’ but they were ‘not enemies’ (Personal communication ‘Angela’ June 2014, Buka).

In all of these efforts, from those occurring in grassroots context, to those occurring on the national stage, women drew on highly feminised tropes to legitimise their peacebuilding. They reminded their audience of their matrilineal status and the respect they deserved as maternal guardians of Bougainville’s future generations, as well as its ‘sacred’ land (see also Titus cited Savoanna Spriggs). References to Christian faith, particularly Marian traditions of Catholic belief also helped women to legitimate their peacebuilding work. Mary is the patron saint of the territory, and was invoked by women to provide a sacred dimension to their peacebuilding efforts. As Anna Karina Hermkens has shown, Mary’s attributes of virtue and peacefulness are entangled with customary representations of Bougainvillean motherhood. Women peacebuilders, therefore claimed that Mary, or ‘Mama Maria’ in the local idiom, gave them the strength to promote peace, would protect them as they stood between lines of fighting, and lent persuasive weight to appeals that combatants lay down their arms (Hermkens 2011).

Building on their work as ‘bottom-up’ peacebuilders, women were involved in many, although not all, of the formal national peace negotiations that occurred during the conflict as well as internationally supported ones such as those occurring in Burnham and Lincoln in New Zealand in the late 1990s. The final Comprehensive Peace Agreement was established in 2001 and saw Bougainville declared an autonomous territory of PNG. It should be noted however that parts of the country remain ‘no-go’ zones under the control of rebel leaders who refused to recognise the peace agreement and later, the authority of the autonomous government. These include areas in southern Bougainville under control of a local dissident Damien Koike, and the breakaway Meekamui-controlled territories in the central highlands area which has a distant but negotiated and less hostile relationship with the ABG.

In the final years of the conflict, women activists asserted that male political leaders had ‘rediscovered the value of women sharing in the decision-making process’ and that this attitude would be ‘liberating’ for all women in Bougainville (Titus cited Savoanna Spriggs 2010, 211). Transitional governments took various forms and women were given representation in these administrations. Three women also sat on the 24-member Constitutional Commission that deliberated on the future structures of institutional governance for the autonomous territory between 2002 and 2004.

**FACTORS ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE POST-CONFLICT CONTEXT**

**INSTITUTIONS: WOMEN IN ELECTORAL POLITICS**

Bougainville’s constitution states the importance of recognising “clan structure and customary leadership” opening the way for institutionalisation of the matrilineal authority of Bougainville’s women (ABG, 2004; Subsections 13(1) and (2); see also Dinnen & Peake 2013; 575, Wallis 2012). This stipulation led women to anticipate that they would be granted 12 reserved seats in the newly formed 39 seat parliament, to ensure there was female representation in each of Bougainville’s 12 districts. Yet, when the final constitutional design was agreed, the extent of women’s parliamentary representation was whittled down to only 3 reserved seats, along with 3 reserved seats for ex-combatants. Interviews with women leaders indicate that these limited concessions remain a source of grievance for many across the country.

Women are able to also contest open seats but in the three elections that have been held in the territory since 2005 only one woman has achieved this goal (Josephine Getsi in 2015). The general hesitancy towards women’s candidates in Pacific politics is well documented (Baker 2015). In Bougainville it may also be compounded by the gendered experience of the conflict where the emphasis upon women’s conflict prevention roles, in contradiction to their roles as ‘war-makers,’ has been invoked by some male political leaders to cast doubt on women’s ‘entitlement’ to assume roles in institutional decision-making (UNIFEM 2004: 20). This link between combat and political acumen and expertise has proved a difficult one to break in Bougainville, notwithstanding the fact that women also lived, first hand with the impacts of combat, were “warriors for peace” as some local explain it, and had their lives changes, many times irrevocably, because of the conflict experience.
Recent developments at the level of local government suggest there is some interest in reversing this pattern. In June 2016, new ABG legislation was enacted to reform community level government structures, overturning the Council of Elders structure that was established under Bougainville’s first constitution but afforded women only a marginal level of representation (around 15 per cent) (PSRP and CR, 2017: 12). The new Community Government legislation establishes 47 urban and rural governments comprised of between 3 and 15 Wards. Each ward elects a male and a female representative. The community government act stipulates that the role of Chair and vice chair within the community government must alternate between male and female ward representatives. That is to say, if a man holds the office of community government chair, the vice-chair must be a woman and in any subsequent term, the role of the chair must be held by a woman and the position of a vice-chair must go to a man (ABG 2016a: 10).

The first community government elections were held in April 2017. Further observation over time will be critical to understanding how far these provisions enhance women’s capacities to contribute to decision-making at this level.

**INSTITUTIONS: WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE**

Bougainvillean women’s increased access to tertiary education is providing new opportunities for them to build careers in the public service has ensured that women have greater participation in decision-making through this avenue. Presently women hold 42% of the ABG public administration positions, and 3 women are currently employed as Department Secretaries across the 18 government departments. Interviews conducted with high-ranking women public servants revealed strong commitments to the idea that a public service career allows women to “do something” for the country”. Nonetheless, women’s ability to push for gendered change from within the public service can also be limited by discriminatory practices outside the workplace. There was strong evidence from interviews conducted in Bougainville, that women public service employees can face serious challenges in navigating gendered familial responsibilities in order to build careers within this sector. Cases of female employees within the public service being exposed to serious violence from spouses were discussed at various points during interviews. In interviews with staff members at the family violence support service located in the Buka hospital it was also explained that women employed within the state administration as teachers or nurses regularly faced pressure and threats of violence from their spouses if they did not hand over their bank cards giving husbands control of their cash earnings.

**Activities of the ARoB Department of Community Development and Women’s Affairs (DCDWA)**

Notwithstanding the tensions surrounding women’s employment in public administration, impressive gains have been made by the ABG’s Department of Community Development and Women’s Affairs (DCDWA) in the area of gender policy in recent years. These range from cooperative activities with civil society groups such as financial support provided to the Bougainville Women’s Federation to establish as national peak body of women’s groups, to policy initiatives and government development programs. Since 2011, the DCDWA has collaborated on a USD 2.4 million World Bank-funded project titled Inclusive Development in Post-conflict Bougainvill that has enabled women to develop women’s skills in all the facets of community development from project design, implementation to financial acquittal. Recent evaluations indicate the project has provided women opportunities to develop leadership skills in the community as well as a personal sense of empowerment (George, 2018).

Most significantly, the DCDWA released its long awaited policy on Gender Equality, Peace and Security in 2016 responding to the United Nations Women Peace and Security policy framework (ABG 2016c). The policy document provides a detailed analysis of where and how gendered disadvantage impacts on women’s access to decision-making spheres, economic participation, education and health and welfare services. It is followed by a matrix of action points designed to meet these challenges with a key focus on gender mainstreaming within government institutions. The Office of Gender Equality (newly formed since 2016) is nominated as providing oversight and technical assistance for specific aspects of the plan. These are all promising developments, but there is little evidence to date, that the plan has attracted adequate resourcing for its implementation. The policy’s substantive content would be greatly assisted if there were some concrete material or financial resources committed either by the AGB or external development partners to progress implementation, as well as clearer articulations of specific goals and outcomes that can be identified as measures of the policy’s success.

**INSTITUTIONS: WOMEN AND STATE SECURITY AGENCIES**

As noted earlier as part of peacebuilding on Bougainville there has been a clear commitment to building a hybrid model of regulatory authority drawing together state and customary systems of conflict mediation and justice. This was given particular emphasis in the area of policing, given the PNG state police force’s indiscriminate use of force against suspected local rebels in the crisis period (Dinnen and Peake 2013). This has led to the establishment of a new Bougainville Police Service (BPS), currently numbering roughly 200 officers, albeit with many former Royal PNG Constabulary personnel retained. This force is a largely urban-focused one with its policing activities predominantly focussed in Bougainville’s urban centres of Buka, Arawa and Buin (Dinnen and Peake 2013, 575–6).

A force of community auxiliary police officers or CAPs as they are locally known also operates as a subsidiary arm of the police service with roughly 350 personnel deployed in
196 rural locations (Dinnen and Peak 2013, 575). There is a strongly held view that this force, although also thinly spread, plays a more trusted law enforcement role in the eyes of the community than the regular police force. In part, this is because CAP’s are expected to carry out their duties in ways that align more closely with other sources of village authority, chiefly, customary and religious. This capacity to operate within “local leadership and governance structures, including dispute resolution practices” has been contrasted positively with more critical assessments of the regular BPS who often criticised by Bougainvillean as having less accountability and legitimacy or dismissed as agents of “white man’s law” (Dinnen and Peak 2013, 576-7, 578).

Within both arms of Bougainville’s police force there has been a concerted effort to lift the representation of women. Within the BPS, the aim is for women to make up 25% of the regular force and 50% within the CAP program. At present female CAPS number 66 of the 350 officers appointed and only two women hold the CAP equivalent of sergeant ranking.

Recent research into community perceptions of this policing structure has found that women in CAP jurisdictions are more likely to use that channel to pursue grievances than traditional chiefly ones and generally feel an increased sense of safety than women in jurisdictions without a CAP (Cooper, 2017). New Zealand police assisting with programs of policing reform were less optimistic on this matter, and pointed out that women police officers can face the same barriers that everyday Bougainvillean women confront in managing or reporting experiences of violence in the family or community. To illustrate this idea, one NZ police officer explained that in an 8 month period of deployment in Bougainville they had encountered 5 cases where women in the regular force had been subjected to serious incidents of violence perpetrated by their husbands, and these officers had been discouraged in pressing charges by more senior male officers.

**GENDER AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

As noted above, the Bougainville Women’s Federation was established with government support in 2012, as a new peak body, representing women’s groups across Bougainville. It has a strong relationship with government and acts in an advisory capacity on a range of DCDWA projects. AGB funding flowed generously from the ABG to the BWF in the early years of the organisation but has shrunk dramatically from 150,000 Kina per year in 2012 to only 5000 Kina per year today, according to BWF representatives. This reduced funding has impacted on organisation’s profile. Today, few of the BWF’s executive receive payment for the work they do, and many of the operating costs of the organisation are covered by current members from their own limited purses (personal communication, BWF executive February 2018). While the BWF has been grateful to receive external funding, some members are wary about how this impacts on their ability to define organisational priorities and equated receipt of this money with a loss of autonomy and a reduced ability to reflect the voices of local member organisations. A resumption of ABG funding to the BWF was, in this context, argued to be crucial for ensuring that the organisation could maintain its advocacy profile and work more effectively to ensure the ABG was hearing the voices of everyday communities.

Women working directly from within the Church in Bougainville, as clergy, have long played a significant support role in the community in Bougainville, and continue this work today. Most notable are the regional centres that provide support to women exposed to violence in the home and family that are operated by the Sisters of Nazareth. Led by well-known local leader Sister Lorraine Garasu, the Sisters of Nazareth are also engaged in peacebuilding programs that work with young men to build positive forms of masculine behaviour and to encourage the rehabilitation of ex-combatants and ex-prisoners.

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Violence against women poses a serious threat to the security of women at all levels of society in post-conflict Bougainville, with 75% of women reporting exposure to violence in their lifetimes (Jewkes et al. 2014). In diverse interview contexts, the subject of gendered violence was raised, indicating the cross-cutting nature and depth of this challenge for Bougainvillean women from all walks of life. The fact that such high levels of sexual and gender-based violence were perpetrated in an environment of impunity during the conflict seems to have contributed to a diminishment of women’s authority in the post-conflict context and increased women’s vulnerability to this violence more permanently (Braithwaite 2006). The conflict experience also seems to have made it less likely that women are able to mobilise customary idioms of maternal authority to access meaningful forms of justice (Eves 2016; George 2016a).

Presently, regulation of violence against women on Bougainville, in so far as that might involve state authorities, (and often it does not) occurs in accordance with the PNG parliament’s national family protection law which came into effect in 2013. As earlier sections of this analysis have shown, policing authority is being rebuilt after the conflict along with new community policing structures that draw on the input of customary leaders and elders. But this hybridised model of policing is thinly stretched on the Island, and CAPs are only present in 193 of Bougainville’s 2000 villages. This means that a majority of gender violence incidents,
Women who do seek assistance from outside authorities can access family violence support units established around the country. These include a state run unit established at the Buka hospital where women can access protection orders as well as counselling and other forms of health and legal support. Safe houses are also run by the Sisters of Nazareth for women exposed to violence in Chabbaı̇, Arawa and Buın. These facilities are all important but promote a strict “no drop” policy. If women wish to access safe house protection, but are not willing to report their experiences to police they are “asked to leave” the facility (personal communication Sister Garasu, February 2012). This may be a deterrent for some women who seek support or protection in the short term but are concerned about the long-term consequences of turning male family members over to state authorities.

**ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION**

**Women and mining**

Amongst most Bougainvilleans there is a strong frustration about the lack of economic development and opportunity in the wake of the conflict. Any discussions on this theme quickly turn to the question of mining. Consequently some women leaders have the strong view that renewed mining investment would be beneficial in creating new employment opportunities for both women and men. This sentiment is not universally held however and many women also fear that renewed mining ventures will be damaging due to their environmental costs, and of course the risk that new tensions will be triggered. The assertion that mining will create more local employment opportunities also overlooks how contemporary mining ventures tend to operate in the broader Melanesian region and the mining industry’s shift towards the employment of “fly-in, fly-out” contract workers.

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has continued after the closure of industrial mining at the troubled Panguna site, and is an enterprise where women’s labour is strongly in evidence. Generally, this is lucrative work but due to its informal nature, it is difficult to ascertain the scale of this industry (O’Faircheallaigh, Regan and Kenema, 2017). Where ASM involves whole families, gendered hierarchies may prevent women from accessing earnings. This is because strong familial gendered norms tend to uphold the male control over the distribution of cash earnings within households (Koczerbski 2007, 1175, 1182).

**Small-scale enterprise**

The weapons disposal plan outlined in the 2001 BPA established a grant scheme to assist ex-combatants’ development of small-scale enterprises and encourage weapons hand-over but did nothing to enhance the economic standing of women affected by the conflict (UNIFEM, 2004). The distribution of benefits from the program went overwhelmingly to men, with women only submitting 9% of the total applications for assistance and no single woman being a beneficiary of the process (although some did receive benefits as part of group applications) (UNIFEM 20014: 26). In addition the scheme was subjected to widespread rorting and corruption which prevented many deserving recipients, women and men, from accessing the money they believed they were due. The poor administration of the scheme has meant it has done little to alleviate the post-crisis economic vulnerability of the population generally, and provided no support to women.

Women’s business involvement is, most frequently, as market traders. Unlike the experience of women in Solomon Islands however, Bougainville’s women have not yet been encouraged to organise traders associations. In addition to their presence in the central city markets, many women run small road-side market stalls of a more informal variety selling cooked food and produce from their food gardens. The seasonal nature of this sort of economic activity means that women vendors are often competing to sell the same fruits and vegetables to their customers. The potential for growers and sellers to value-add to their produce, through home-based or cooperative forms of food processing and storage could be expanded in Bougainville, in ways that enable women to differentiate the goods they sell from each other and build greater income.

**SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

**Women’s authority over land**

As noted earlier, in most (although not all) kinship groupings, women’s authority is underpinned by their customary standing as those who inherit land and whose judgements about how land is used must be respected. Women’s customary authority and status as land owners is often held up as a signifier both of Bougainvilleans’ cultural distinctiveness and of women’s power, even while these things are more contested in practice. For example, the failure of mining companies to negotiate with women land owners in initial efforts to establish the Panguna mine in the 1960s is often cited as an indicator of the disdainful attitudes
that Australian business interests and colonial authorities had for Bougainville’s matrilineal traditions, a portent for the resentment the mine generated in later years. But in the post conflict context, as population pressures increase and awareness of land as a source of cash income grows women have seen their ability to influence decisions over land use diminish. This is particularly so when land is used for cash-crop cultivation such as cocoa production. There is a strong push to revitalise the cocoa industry on Bougainville as an alternative source of income to mining (World Bank 2016b). But efforts to improve women’s high-level participation in an industry that has long been described by local women as “man’s world” have, to date, not been aided by the fact that in custom, it is women, not men, that make decisions about land use (George 2016b).

**Reproductive autonomy**

The strong emphasis placed upon maternal authority in Bougainville has also made discussions about women’s reproductive health challenging and seen state and non-state actors intervene in an attempt to police women’s reproductive autonomy. In 2015, Richard Eves reported on the activities of a Bougainvillean nationalist group calling itself “The Hardliners” that had begun to wage a campaign against women’s access to contraception. This campaign included intimidation of organisations such as Marie Stopes. The Hardliners justified their actions, contending that any defence of women’s reproductive rights threatened to reduce the size of the country’s population, weakening Bougainvillean’s claims to the land while also encouraging promiscuity amongst young women (Eves 2015). Courts in Bougainville, have also convicted and jailed young women for the crime of “killing an unborn child” when they have attempted to terminate pregnancies (Chandler 2015).

**REFERENDUM AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

In 2018, Bougainville will hold a referendum for independence. A great many aid and development programs are currently occurring inside the country aiming to promote referendum awareness amongst voters but also to build support for the idea that the polling must be conducted in an orderly way and avoid harming the peace that is fragile in many parts of the country still. There is a strong vein of support for independence generally amongst local people. The idea that Bougainville’s “sacrifices” have been too great for this vote not to result in Independence, is a critical refrain repeated by many local people. “If not independence, we will have lost 20,000 of our people for nothing”, they argue.

General discussions with women on this theme revealed a desire for, and optimism about, independence. But these views were also tempered with critical reflections about the future security and economic viability of a Bougainvillean state. Nonetheless, the tendency for critics to suggest that Bougainville’s limited economic development made sovereignty unthinkable is also firmly rejected by some women leaders. One, in particular, argued that PNG and Australia have a clear responsibility to support the economic viability of an independent Bougainville because both states derived enormous wealth from their involvement with the territory and were enmeshed in the conflict that killed many of the territory’s people.

**FINAL COMMENTS AND KEY FINDINGS**

As the prospect of an independent Bougainville draws closer, women’s leadership in decision-making, conflict-mediation and development will remain critical. It is certainly true that women’s participation within formal institutions of political life, and their access to opportunities for employment or income generation is at levels lower than they would like. Yet positive developments are emerging. Advances are especially evident in initiatives such as the rising number of women heads of public service departments, new legislation guaranteeing women’s representation in local level government, and new government policies on gender equality, peace and security. The newly created office of gender equality situated within the Presidential Department of the ABG is significant and indicates high level support for all efforts to enhance women’s standing. Material support from external aid providers, or the ABG itself, will largely determine the effectiveness of this institution in the years to come.

Their customary status as guardians of the land, and mothers to Bougainville’s future generations, continues to provide women with the cultural resources and the motivation to insert themselves centrally into areas of political and economic decision-making in their country even if this authority is also subject to some contestation and challenge in everyday contexts. It is vitally important that these aspirations be recognised and supported locally, regionally and internationally, but in ways that do not suffocate the important achievements that women have already progressed.
Perhaps the most serious impediment to women’s participation in conflict transition remains the fundamental challenge of family violence perpetrated against women. This was a recurrent theme that figured in almost every interview conducted for this research, indicating its cross-cutting capacity to impact on all the domains of women’s lives as well as the general insistence of this phenomenon at all levels of society. Rigid gender norms that legitimate appropriate forms of conduct for women, and masculine authority to control women when their conduct is considered dissident, remain strongly in evidence in the post-conflict context and seem to powerfully undermine other societal and customary values upholding women’s own entitlement to authority and respect. Policing authority is thinly stretched and tends not to focus serious attention upon this issue, even when BPS members themselves are exposed to this violence. More public debate on the costs of violence, its detrimental impacts upon the society and, in particular, its undermining of a matrilineal value system that Bougainvillean women claim to be distinctive, and a foundation of their claims to nationhood may be critical to ensuring women’s equality and safe participation in the territory’s next-phase of transition, and as it contemplates a future, wholly sovereign, political status.

REFERENCES


ABG (Autonomous Government of Bougainville), 2016b. Policy for Women’s Empowerment, Gender Equality, Peace and Security. Department of Community Development and Women’s Affairs, Buka, August.


Department of Veterans Affairs, (Autonomous Region of Bougainville) and AusAID Democratic Governance Project, Bougainville Peacebuilding Project Report, (Buka: DVA and AusAID) 3 October, 2010.


This situational analysis supports the Australian Research Council Linkage Project “Towards Inclusive Peace: Mapping Gender Provisions in Peace Agreements, 2000-2016” (LP1048808). The project is hosted by Monash GPS and partnered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.

Monash Gender, Peace & Security is a group of policy and community engaged scholars whose research is focused in the field of gender, peace and security. We seek to use our research to inform scholarly debate, policy development and implementation, public understanding about the gendered politics of armed conflict and the search for peace.