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SOLOMON ISLANDS: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

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SUMMARY

The Solomon Islands experience of peace agreement negotiations is not one that is generally celebrated by the country's women. The Townsville Peace Agreement which aimed to halt a civil conflict between warring militias representing different ethnic groups in the country was hastily negotiated in 2000, and in the absence of any civil society participation. It has often been described as “a militants’ charter” that ignored the devastating impacts of the violence women were exposed to during the conflict. It also ignored the important roles that women had progressed in conflict mediation and peacebuilding. As a result, the peace agreement included no gendered provisions and was soon to fail. By 2003, the security situation had deteriorated and the Pacific Island Forum responded to calls for assistance from the Solomon Islands Prime Minister. The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands ensued, an intervention that aimed to stabilise the country through programs designed to restore the legitimacy and capability of state governance and security institutions, and contain and apprehend militia operatives. This linking of statebuilding with peacebuilding has been a RAMSI hallmark and did little to accommodate women’s participation in conflict transition in early years. With time, the mission evolved in ways that allowed for the development of new national policy on gender and security, as well as opening up new opportunities for women’s participation both in public sector roles and as officers in state security agencies. But local women’s civil society groups point to gaps in this approach. They argue that the effort to equate peacebuilding with statebuilding has not created sufficient opportunities for women to lead peace and reconciliation efforts in their own right and in ways that match the expectations and needs of everyday communities. They are particularly unhappy that customary processes of atonement and reconciliation, crucial to healing the trauma and disharmony that continues to undermine peace within Solomon Islands communities, have been a neglected aspect of national peacebuilding efforts.

STRENGTH OF GENDER PROVISIONS

Solomon Islands - Townsville Peace Agreement 2000

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights	✓					
Development	✓					
Post-Conflict Issues	✓					
Violence Against Women	✓					
Participation	✓					
General	✓					



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

CONSTRAINTS

1. RAMSI emphasis placed on statebuilding as peacebuilding
2. Inadequate acknowledgment and support for women's civil society and customary peacebuilding work during and after the crisis
3. Lack of women's voice in formal parliamentary decision-making

ENABLERS

1. Increasing presence of women in public service and state security agencies
2. Formalisation of policies attentive to gender and women, peace and security
3. Active network of women within civil society and Churches who agitate for recognition of women customary status as peacebuilders and community leaders

Higher levels of violence in the public domain encouraged an increased rate of violence within familial and conjugal environments.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

The Solomon Islands is a culturally and geographically diverse archipelagic state comprised of 900 islands and atolls which are in the Western Pacific Region, extending southwards from Bougainville (PNG) towards the north of Vanuatu. Solomon Islands Pijin is considered the national language but the country's population of roughly 500,000 people speak a total of more than 80 native languages in addition to this.

Many have argued that this diversity presents a challenge for the consolidation of statehood in the post-colonial context. Can there be an 'imagined community' of the nation, they ask, in a context where the identification of 'common symbols, heroes, memories, and myths' that might reinforce a sense of 'harmony' and loyalty to the state are all but absent' (Kaubutalaka 2005: 300). Added to this, the state is often argued to be a distant presence for the many communities across the country, which exist in remote geographic locations.

It is frequently argued that in such contexts patriarchal systems of authority and decision-making are dominant, but this ignores the notable presence of matrilineal systems of land inheritance and decision-making that are found in some communities in the country, notably on the central island of Guadalcanal and in the northern regions of the neighbouring island of Malaita (Pollard 2000). Men tend to have greater access to economic earning opportunities across the country and this allows them to claim authority in the home and within the broader community. Even so, women also achieve status and respect through traditional roles as mothers, cultivators and within church and kin-based networks (Pollard 2000).

In the period between 1998 and 2003, a period known locally as 'the tensions', a violent conflict erupted in the Solomon Islands. The most serious outbreaks of violence occurred on the main island of Guadalcanal, home to the capital city of Honiara. At this time, indigenous Guale leaders began to voice resentment of migrant communities from the neighbouring Islands of Malaita that had settled

on Guadalcanal, purchasing land in some cases, establishing squatter settlements in others. This increased land acquisition provoked growing disgruntlement from local land owners who feared their own authority and identity were being eroded. The industriousness and commercial success of Malaitans who became increasingly dominant presence in business in and around Honiara also fuelled resentment (Liloqula 2000: 41).

In the late 1990s some political leaders encouraged a communalist politics which hardened Guale resentments further, notably in the impoverished Weather Coast region of Guadalcanal. This spurred the formation of a resistance militia known first as the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, and later as the Istabu Freedom Movement, which aimed to drive Malaitans off the island. A year-long campaign of violence and intimidation encouraged the mobilisation of a rival group, the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF), to defend Malaitan interests. The MEF operated with tacit approval and support, notably in the form of access to arms, from the state security sector and particularly the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, where Malaitans were a considerable majority of active personnel.

As the conflict continued, incidents of unrest and insecurity spread to other parts of the country and exacted a heavy toll on communities. It is estimated that between 100 and 400 people were killed in total, and in the first year alone, more than 55,000 people were displaced (Braithwaite 2013: 20, 24). Other more detailed reports of the aggressions suffered by Solomon Islanders in this period list 1,412 cases of torture, 212 abductions, 95 cases of illegal detention and 62 reported cases of sexual violence (although this last figure masks a much larger volume of cases that remain unreported (Jeffries 2017: 1: TRC Report 2012: 737–738)). Indirectly the conflict also exacted a toll on other more remote parts of the country, even those unaffected by violence, due to an erosion of state services. During the prolonged period of conflict, as the government weakened, and the economy began to shrink, those providing these services to communities often went for long periods without their wages and without access to materials to perform their functions effectively.

In places where violence was rife, the state was poorly positioned to repair damage sustained to public infrastructure such as schools, health or police posts, because of the fighting. State failure was predicted and seemed imminent when the police armoury in Honiara was raided by Malaitan militants and the country's Prime Minister and Governor General were placed under house arrest by rebel groups. These developments led to a rapid series of internationally sponsored peace negotiations occurring from mid to late 2000 and ultimately the formulation of the Townsville Peace Agreement.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PEACE PROCESS

There is a small amount of evidence suggesting that some women were actively involved in fuelling the conflict by exhorting their kin to become involved in revenge attacks and stealing weapons (Monson 2013), passing information to militant groups as spies and sometimes enacting their own forms of violence against other women they understood to be their adversaries (Fangalasuu et al. 2011: 35). Overall, however, these activities tend not to have been given a great deal of attention and are usually countered with the argument that women generally were considered to have more distant and neutral relationships with militia forces (Monson 2013).

Far more attention has been focussed on the heavy burdens that the conflict placed on the shoulders of many women in communities directly and more distantly impacted by violence. Women bore the burden of care for dependants when men in their families became involved in fighting, but also when they were killed or wounded. Women were exposed to sexual and physical assaults from combatants who perpetrated these acts to intimidate and shame adversaries. But this violence was also often opportunistic, which meant that in the prevailing environment of impunity, combatants also assaulted women from their own communities (Fanalasuu et al. 2011: 21). Higher levels of violence in the public domain encouraged an increased rate of violence within familial and conjugal environments, and home was no longer a site where women might expect to find respite from the insecurity that prevailed more generally in their communities. An environment of impunity was created by a breakdown in customary and religious systems of authority, which formerly upheld the sanctity of the family unit.

From the outset, women used customary idioms to try to appease militants by giving them strings of shell money as part of negotiations to release hostages (Monson 2013). In later years women worked through existing national organisations and formed new peace networks aiming to bridge the lines of conflict and mediate between militant groups to halt violence. Placing themselves between the bunkers separating militia forces, they shared food, sometimes wearing grass skirts; activities which aimed to remind combatants of their customary status as peacebuilders and nurturers.

Faith-based activities were also significant and women held prayer meetings to reinforce the idea that their peace work had a sacred dimension and demanded combatants' respect. Women in religious communities such as the Sisters of the Anglican Church of Melanesia were also involved in negotiations of this sort. For example with Brothers from the Church, they established a camp at Alligator Creek between the bunkers that separated the MEF and IFM militias as a presence for peace. There is

no doubt these peacebuilding activities reinforced highly feminised tropes of care, nurturing and duty, but their moral authority of these women was also enhanced by the fact their actions contrasted so starkly with the hyper-masculine aggression that was becoming increasingly normalised in conflict-affected parts of the country. This work played a critical role in building an acceptance of the need for dialogue amongst militia groups as the conflict wore on. But as noted earlier, women were a marginal presence when formal peace negotiations began in 2000 and, for a number of complex reasons, were excluded completely from the final round of peace talks that led to the establishment of the Townsville Peace Agreement towards the end of 2000.

With the rapid collapse of the Solomon Islands peace agreement and a deteriorating security situation prevailing, regional observers began to voice fears of a contagion of violence in the Western Pacific Island region, noting the patterns of conflict occurring in Solomon Islands, in the proximity of Bougainville, and the situation in Fiji which had recently also been a venue for ethnic tension and a civilian-led coup (Reilly 2000; 2003). Fears that the crisis was intensifying locally, but could escalate regionally, prompted the Australian Government, working in broad cooperation with the Pacific Islands Forum (member states also contributed to the mission) to lead and finance an international peacebuilding intervention in 2003 in response to ongoing calls from the government of the Solomon Islands for assistance.

Known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), the intervention began with a dramatic military operation at Henderson Field, the country's international airstrip with Australian Hercules enabling a police and military deployment in advance of civilian personnel entering the country to support the mission. The intervention placed a heavy emphasis on the restoration of law and order and state institutions across the country with a key focus on 'statebuilding, police-led peacekeeping and fiscal stabilisation' (Braithwaite 2013: 3). RAMSI's heavy policing and military presence, was welcomed by many Solomon Islanders, exhausted by the ongoing insecurity and uncertainty. The law and order, and police-led peacebuilding, emphasis of the mission was quickly made evident, with a key focus of activities aimed at locating, arresting and prosecuting perpetrators of violence in line with the provisions of the Solomon Islands penal code. In

This was a crude peacebuilding model that failed to take cues from local populations, particularly in regard to the value of customary peace and reconciliation processes.

Many women are moving into high level public service positions across the sector in the post-conflict context... in 1989 only two women were in senior management positions and held Bachelor's degrees. By 2009, this figure had risen to 144.

its first year alone 2,000 arrests were made and 3,730 weapons were seized or handed in, along with 300,000 rounds of ammunition. Significant new corrections facilities were built in Honiara and Auki to hold this large population of convicted detainees.

In later years it was this facet of the intervention that was most heavily criticised. The contention was this was a 'rule of law' approach 'according to World Bank templates' (Braithwaite 2013: 6). The argument was that this was a crude peacebuilding model that failed to take cues from local populations, particularly in regard to the value of customary peace and reconciliation processes, and the value these also hold for conflict transition in this particular socio-cultural context. As a result, the ability of women to contribute to the consolidation of order and peacebuilding in the ways they felt were appropriate - the ways that had done during the conflict - were greatly constrained.

In this highly securitised peacebuilding environment, the contributions of women and other civil society groups were quickly excluded from a memory of how peace was accomplished. The arrest of Harold Keke on day 20 of the mission was celebrated as a key RAMSI success, bringing an end to his reign of extreme violence in the Weather Coast region. This episode continues to be attributed to the skillful planning and negotiations of RAMSI's 'big three' Australian leaders Nick Warner (DFAT), Ben McDevitt (AFP) and Lt Col Frewin (ADF). But this view ignores the prior mediation, undertaken in particular by a group of local nuns, who had provided critical care to Harold Keke's wounded brother, and through him had helped convince Keke that he must 'lead his followers to peace' (Braithwaite et al. 2013: 32).

Sometimes the mission was deeply compromised by this blindness. For example, during the 2006 China Town riots in Honiara, Hilda Kari, former Solomon Islands parliamentarian and a respected elder, tried in vain to convince RAMSI security force personnel that if she could address the crowd she could quell the riot. On the grounds that her safety could not be guaranteed, her request was refused. This paternalistic response ignored the fact that as a former member of the National Peace Council, a civil society initiative that was also disbanded by RAMSI, Ms Kari had accumulated a great deal of negotiating skill and was well-used to evaluating and taking responsibility for her own safety in highly volatile situations.

In the wake of this event, RAMSI began to listen a little more closely to its critics and allowed a 'peacebuilding creep' to gradually complement its overriding statebuilding agenda (Braithwaite 2013: 162). The decision to support the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2009 has been identified as recognition of a more participatory, peace-oriented initiative to complement the other statebuilding directions of the conflict stabilisation mission. However research conducted by Louise Vella and Anna Karina Hermkens, as well as a locally authored report to the commission itself, offers a rather more critical portrait indicating that the TRC was not particularly well-g geared for women's participation, nor a venue that enhanced access to gendered-justice (Fagalasuu 2011). Notably, the final reports of the TRC were not tabled by the Solomon Islands government until November 2015, some three and a half years after they were received (in February 2012), and the recommendations within these report have not been given attention by successive governments (Jeffries 2017).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Almost all the women leaders interviewed during a first phase of field-based study in September 2017 lamented the low ratio of women in electoral politics. Many supported the need for a long mooted law on Temporary Special Measures creating some kind of reserved seat mechanism to enable women to become Members of Parliament.

Despite the many electoral candidate support programs for women funded by international aid and development actors (for example, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, UN Women) the goal of women's political representation remains an elusive one. Since Independence only four women have ever sat in the parliament. Hilda Kari, the country's first woman MP was elected in 1989 and went on to win three successive terms. She re-contested an election in 2010 unsuccessfully. This experience caused Kari to reflect on the changed nature of electoral politics as she observed it during her last campaign. She argued that the money politics environment and large scale vote buying made it impossible for women to compete.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Research undertaken by local women also indicated other challenges. This work has shown that male voters turn away from women candidates because they fear that women MPs will have authority over them. This suggests a misunderstanding of the ways in which authority and the relationship between voters and MPs operates. This work has also shown that even from the Church pulpit, voters are being directed how to vote, and often in ways that encourage a turn away from women candidates. Within the current parliament there is one elected women, Frida Tuki, who also has ministerial responsibility for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs. In mid-2017, there was a very public dispute between the Minister and her high profile Permanent Secretary (PS) Ethel Sigimanu, a long time gender advocate, who ultimately has left the women's ministry to become PS in the Ministry of Justice. This exposes the challenges faced by women in politics and the need for careful navigation of the assumption that all women MPs are interested in gender issues or understand the goals of gender policy in the same way.

If electoral participation remains elusive, the success of women bureaucrats working within the public service is a more hopeful story. Many women are moving into high level positions across the public service in the post-conflict context. An increasing number of women gaining tertiary degrees accounts for this trend, and stints of overseas education to gain advanced degrees greatly assists women's public service careers. While men still outnumber women by a rate of 3 to 1 in mid to senior level public service roles, statistics from a 2009 study of public service participation shows where and how things are changing. In 1989 only two women were in senior management positions and held Bachelor's degrees. By 2009, this figure had risen to 144 (cited Liki Chan 2010). Hilda Kari, herself a public servant, before her parliamentary career, reflected on the entrenched discrimination in this sector and the difficulties she faced in trying to advance her career as a women in offices dominated by men, something she found to be much worse in the public service than any of her experiences of discrimination within the Parliament.

To counter these kinds of trends, RAMSI established a 'women in government' program in 2009 aiming to institutionalise new policies to assist the career advancement of women. A 2010 study suggested that few women in mid-level management positions had, in this admittedly early phase, experienced any exposure to the program (Liki-Chan 2010: 14). Access to education, as well as improved workplace gender policies, seem to be a contributing factor that are enabling women's advancement in the public sector (Pollard 2000). Recent advancements for women in this sector are undoubtedly also aided by the fact that RAMSI placed a heavy emphasis upon public service institution-building as part of its conflict stabilisation approach.

The National Gender Equality and Women's Development Policy for 2016-2020 – established by the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs – names its second policy goal as improving the economic status of women. A range of reports have highlighted the ongoing constraints on women's paid labour force participation. The 2009 census figures show 64 per cent of women identify as being part of the labour force, but only 26 per cent of women are paid for the work they do (ADB 2014: 43). The need for women to find lucrative earning capacities outside the bureaucratic realm was a theme that featured in many of my interviews. These testimonies illustrated the slim earning opportunities available to women generally in the country, but also reinforced the importance that women place on their ability to put food on the table and provide for their dependants, activities from which they derive a sense of self-worth and gendered security (Kozcerbski 2007).

The National Gender Equality Policy notes that where women may lack the skills or education that enable them to become engaged in professional, paid employment, market trading becomes a key site for their economic participation. Notably during 'the tensions,' markets were often places where women came together across the lines of conflict to trade food with each other and swap information and stories. But market trading is not wholly empowering for women in Solomon Islands either, as research by Alice Pollard has shown. Like women market traders across the Pacific, women traders in Solomon Islands are known to suffer discrimination and insecurity in these settings, and often struggle to make any reasonable earnings from the long days they spend at market sites.

A UN-funded 'markets for change' program has been running in a range of Pacific Island countries since 2011 and is also operating in the Solomon Islands. This program has sought to improve market infrastructure and provide women market traders with stronger support networks. In Honiara, the program has led to formation of a market vendors association which is currently headed by Maureen Sariki, who argued that it was a positive development. Prior to the creation of this association, Sariki argued, the Honiara City Council treated the market vendors as useless 'pumpkin heads,' the lowest people in the society. She also alleged that Council representatives abused their office to collect fees from traders. Sariki was therefore positive about the changes that followed in the wake of the new market vendors association. Through this venue, traders managed to get a police post established at the market which had improved

In 2017, the Solomon Islands Government became the first in the Pacific Islands region to develop a National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security.

security. They had also raised money to pay for improved cleaning of the market each day. She had established a chair-hiring system so that women paid \$5 a day to the association to build up its funds. Sariki also noted that she now participated in Honiara City Council meetings: 'They are better understanding that we are driving the economic development of the country.'

WOMEN'S SOCIAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

During interviews a number of interlocutors spoke about the importance of policing and legislative reform, in the shape a new Family Protection Act in 2014 which was passed into law to confront the extreme levels of violence against women that were documented in a national study on the incidence rates of family violence in 2009. This study showed that nearly two out of three ever-partnered women (aged 15-49) had experienced physical and/or sexual violence inflicted by their partner - with sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) more common than physical violence. It is also reportedly more common for women to experience severe, rather than moderate, forms of violence. Such severe violence includes assaults with the use of weapons, as well as extreme physical force (SPC 2009: 3). Reforms are therefore much needed.

The new legal code in this area promises a much stronger police response to women's complaints of violence: a new safety notice regime providing women with protection from perpetrators of violence and stiffer sentencing for those convicted of violence. Additionally, in 2016, the Ministry for Women, Children, Youth and Family Affairs established a four year national action plan on violence against women which aims to support and further intensify the law and order response on this issue. Coordinating activity with the public health sector now ensures that medical officers who suspect their patients have been subject to familial or conjugal violence are instructed on how to make referrals to stat authorities. This plan has also led to the establishment of the Seif Ples Gender-based Violence Crisis and Referral Centre at Rove Police Station (Honiara) which, in addition

to a policing response, also offers medical aid and short-term crisis accommodation (MWYCFA Solomon Islands Government 2016: 24).

State responsiveness on this issue is more visible in the vicinity of Honiara than in remote areas. But even in this central jurisdiction a great many questions remained about the capacity and institutional will of state police to enact these reforms. Since the formalisation of the family safety law only 18 people had been convicted of family violence offences and only one person has received a custodial sentence. This suggests the promise of state reform on GBV in Solomon Islands, is far from fully realised yet, a situation that in fact is replicated in many other Pacific Island jurisdictions and indicative of capacity limitations and long-standing norms that continue to see police treat this issue as unimportant, even in the wake of reform (George 2017; Bull, George, Curth-Bibb 2017).

In 2017 the Solomon Islands Government became the first in the Pacific Islands region to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women Peace and Security (WPS). This is a significant undertaking and the culmination of activity that commenced in the wake of the submissions made by women's groups to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which wound down its operations in 2012. The NAP that has been formalised, went through an initial drafting process, a period of reformulation and the development of a new plan. The first plan involved a great deal of civil society negotiation and placed a heavy focus on 'women's human security issues' such as economic well-being and the importance of bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding that incorporate the voices and needs of women (Teakini personal communication September 2017). The final shape of this draft was felt to be too broad, however, and a second round of consultations were undertaken involving the input of consultants from the Philippines.

The NAP that was established in 2017 sets out ambitious goals under the pillar areas of Participation, Protection, Prevention and, Recovery and Reconciliation. Throughout the document there is a strong focus on gender equality and human rights with many references made to goals ensuring that harmful customary practices that are detrimental to women are challenged (2017: 27). But this tends to undermine the extent to which women have frequently mobilised customary and religious idioms in empowering ways to legitimise their role in peacebuilding and to enhance their authority with parties involved in conflict. While the language of the NAP as it is formulated presently resonates strongly with the key priorities that are commonly said to define Women Peace and Security (WPS) policy frameworks globally, there are questions about the extent to which these reference points offer utility for activists, policymakers and peace practitioners in the local everyday context. As

Louise Vella has noted in relation to the ways human rights language often confused the TRC process in Solomon Islands, it is important to ask where and how this language provides a 'meaningful, effective, safe and honest means in which' women might 'represent themselves' (Vella 163).

Questions might also be posed about the broader recognition given to this NAP, or its impact within the Solomon Islands government and regionally. In August 2017, and as the RAMSI operation was officially brought to a close, a new security treaty was established between Australia and Solomon Islands and jointly launched by both the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Manaseh Sogavare and the Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull (ABC Online 14 August 2017). Notably, neither leader made mention of the NAP nor of the ways in which WPS principles had influenced the design or would influence the implementation of the treaty into the future.

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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.

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