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## **Gender and governance**

### ◆ **Features**

*Gender and governance in international law; criminal law and gender in Pacific Island jurisdictions; gender and reform in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands; training women for elections in Vietnam; gender and economic governance; transformative politics in Asia-Pacific*

### ◆ **Gender and governance in Melanesia**

*Christian women's groups in Solomon Islands; Kastom in Vanuatu; literacy programmes for women in Vanuatu; Christianity and women in Bougainville*

### ◆ **Viewpoint**

*ICPD goals and thresholds in the Pacific; the Gender Empowerment Measure and West Java; gender and ethnicity in Nepal; gender equality in organisations*

### ◆ **From the field**

*Gender and livelihood in an upland community forestry project; working conditions of garment workers in Bangladesh*

### ◆ **ACFOA Briefing**

# Christianity and women in Bougainville

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## Background

During the past 200 years, Christianity has taken deep root in the lives of Pacific Islanders and it is now an inseparable part of people's existence. In Bougainville, Christianity has become a cultural way of life for the vast majority of people. The ten years of civil war/independence struggle between the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Security Forces/local militia and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) became a major turning-point to God for most Bougainvilleans. During the conflict, an estimated 18–20,000 lives were lost, both in direct military confrontations and through the lack of medical supplies after the PNG government withdrew all services from the island in 1990. The government later reestablished a system of military occupation in areas not dominated by the BRA. People were herded into refugee camps ('care centres'), where human rights abuses, intimidation, harassment, rape and killings were frequent, and where movement was strictly controlled, eventually by a pass system.

In the political vacuum of 1990–94, when there was virtually no civil government, the often traumatised people committed themselves strongly to their various churches. The churches have long offered succour and services, but they now by necessity became involved in public affairs, resulting in a general change of attitude and expectation about the respective roles of church and government. The churches played a pivotal role in providing services from their few stored resources, which soon ran out. The major issue was health. Services delivered with love and Christian fellowship became the most important aspect of people's social life. Many women launched a campaign to 'bring home our children from the jungle' – that is, the young men who took up arms with the BRA to fight for Bougainville's independence. This action by women was the birth of reconciliation and opened up other areas such as mediation and negotiation between the BRA, the people and the PNG Government. It was the beginning of the peace process, culminating in a ceasefire signed in April 1998 by all the warring factions.

Here are two women's stories of their experiences during the most violent period of the war. Both are church members, one a Methodist (United Church) and the other a Catholic. Both are heavily involved in community work to restore a degree of normality to the people's lives. Both testify to the help God gave them during the war in their efforts as women to bring peace to their communities. (I refer to the two women

by pseudonyms, since for security reasons they do not want to be identified.)

## 'Anna', a nursing sister-in-charge of a rural health centre

Anna had a Christian upbringing. Her father trained as a Methodist lay preacher and her mother was a nursing aide in the first Methodist hospital. They ran a Methodist boarding school in the 1960s and 1970s and Anna, like many children of her generation, received a modern education in mission schools. She trained at a Methodist nursing training college and then at a base hospital. She is a highly qualified nurse and midwife and does minor surgical operations. She is highly respected for her work and the love and care she brings to it. Most of her staff are local women trained at various nursing training colleges.

The health centre Anna runs was built in the 1960s by the New Zealand Methodist Mission. It has a maternity ward and an outpatients section, but no surgical ward or doctor – there has been no doctor since the New Zealand medical workers left the island after PNG independence in 1975. The centre caters for three major language communities and a population of 12–14,000.

From the beginning of the war, Anna made a conscious decision to attend to all wounded who came to the centre, not favouring one side over the other. She often performed minor operations to remove shotgun pellets or stitched up badly wounded soldiers, BRA men and civilians. For her neutral stance, Anna was misunderstood and she and her family were harassed and threatened. She was badly beaten up by members of the local BRA branch, resulting in a dislocated hip, a badly bruised face and lacerated hands. The BRA objected to her attending injured members of the PNG Security Forces and their local militia allies, whom they saw as the enemy, deserving to die. Anna's husband sparingly applied what modern medicine was left to the cuts on her body, and her family and church members prayed for her. Her recovery is testimony to God's sovereign power of healing and the power of faith and prayer.

The young BRA men eventually recognised the stupidity of their behaviour. A year or so later they persuaded their chiefs, parents and relatives to organise a big reconciliation ceremony with Anna and her family, involving several villages and

including both Christian and traditional forms of reconciliation. The BRA men sought forgiveness from Anna and her family and kin, who joined in prayers for reconciliation. A huge amount of traditional currency and other gifts was given to Anna and her family as compensation, followed by a feast and much handshaking.

## **Anna's story**

It was the most difficult time of my career as a health worker in a rural community. The health centre where I have worked for over 15 years had very little medicine. Every form of communication and transportation was cut off when the PNG Government imposed a complete blockade on Bougainville in 1990. I had heard that the International Red Cross had been supplying some medicine, mainly antimalarial drugs, to the nearest health centre, a Catholic clinic. For love of the people, I risked my life, generally walking alone to this clinic to collect whatever medicine they could spare. On rare occasions, two or three men dared to accompany me. My husband comes from Buka island and it was doubly risky for him to move about because the Buka leaders and chiefs had invited the PNG Security Forces to return. In the eyes of the BRA, this invitation was a betrayal of the BRA cause – independence for Bougainville.

I made a conscious decision to attend to everyone who needed medical attention: Papua New Guinean and Bougainvillean civilians, Papua New Guinean soldiers and local militia men, and BRA men. It was my duty to save lives, which meant making no distinctions between race or ethnic groups, religion, soldiers or civilians. My commitment and my duty is first to God and to his people. Members of the BRA rejected my neutral stand and commitment. In their minds, I should only attend to them and other Bougainvilleans, and not the Papua New Guinean soldiers. At times, when BRA members learned of the little supply of medicine in the centre, two or three would come and seize it at gunpoint.

The PNG Security Forces also meted out their share of harassment, intimidation and threats to me, my family and my nurses. The Security Forces inherited the only vehicle the health centre had at gunpoint and it was never returned. Soldiers came drunk and armed to the health centre, often in the middle of the night, and shouted at nurses to attend to them, or used the only maternity ward as a toilet.

What was most difficult was maintaining a balanced attitude towards these warring factions. When I was so badly beaten, I decided not to work again, but after a while I saw the need of the people. It was my love for them, and their love for me and my family that kept me going. Besides this, God was my support. Nowadays, my family and I are constantly flooded with gifts, even from people we do not know. It is a great blessing and we thank God for that.

## **'Maria', a trained horticulturalist**

Educated and trained through the Catholic mission, Maria taught at a Catholic agricultural centre in Bougainville before the civil war. When the war began, she and her husband moved to their village in the northeast. As church leaders they took up

the task of mediating between members of the BRA and civilians, and negotiating with the BRA to lay down their arms and 'come home' to their families in their communities. They did this in a very quiet and unassuming fashion. Maria also formed a Catholic Women's Group in her community. Apart from social service activities, the group also engaged in negotiations with northern BRA members to abandon fighting and 'come home'.

## **Maria's story**

The most important thing for me and my women was to establish and nurture trust and honesty in the BRA, so that trust and honesty would flow between us. One little move outside the rules of the game could mean the end of our efforts, a futile and devastating outcome for me, the women and my family.

We tracked through mountains and valleys, crossing rivers week after week, month after month. This was the most trying time for us. But we had to show the BRA that we were serious. If we gave up after a few tries, they would have lost trust in us. We had nothing material to offer them and modern medicine was a thing of the past. But like them, we looked to tradition. We learned local traditional medicine from our old people. We saw the jungle with a different eye. It became our source of medical and food supplies. Plants, leaves, roots, fruits, the bark of trees as well as marine life became useful as medicines.

Often our efforts were misunderstood, raising suspicion on both sides – civilians and the BRA. We saw the need to explain our efforts to the people but time was always an important factor. So we often had to leave suspicions hanging and just pray that no major or minor conflict would arise. But, gradually, as my Catholic Women's Group and the northern BRA members felt more secure and confident, there was a little opening in the path of negotiation and mediation. Sometimes, a small matter would take over two months to resolve, but we did it wholeheartedly.

The BRA trusted us, the women, but not so much the men. There were complicated dynamics during this 'building trust' process. The young BRA men know we women are important not only as landowners but also as procreators and peace makers. It finally dawned on them that the women are picking up the bits and pieces from what they, the men, have destroyed. The women saw the young men as their children, children of Bougainville whom they must protect and bring back home. These young men are the defenders of our land from external destructive forces. They do not deserve to be killed for defending their land and people, but they do need to learn to live a normal life.

## **Reflections**

My particular concern is that women should participate in the future governing of Bougainville. Women's efforts to create an environment of reconciliation must not be lost to the men, who have a tendency for power play. It is the women who have been picking up the pieces left by men's actions. Women from all levels, but especially simple, ordinary village women, showed strength and bravery in venturing into the jungles and the

mountains in search of their children, the young BRA men, and bringing them home. The coming home occurred in waves, one by one, in twos or in groups, sometimes after weeks, months or years of women's persistent efforts. It was a great joy to the women when the young men came home.

Women in Bougainville are 'jacks of all trades'. Mothers and mothers-to-be are nurturers of life, leaders, health workers, teachers, fisherwomen, gardeners, cooks, fuel collectors, home carers, and accountants in the customary and modern economies. It is highly desirable that they extend these skills in order to take a proper share in governing the island. The war has given them fresh, vital strength and command of these customary roles and their roles as landowners in Bougainville's matrilineal societies. The authority that women exercise over land is hugely misunderstood by well-meaning outsiders who have come in droves to assist in restoring the society, the infrastructure and the people's sense of security.

The ten-year conflict has caused people to reflect on their relationship to and complete dependence on the land and the environment at a time when modern infrastructure, goods and services failed to sustain them. Lost customary practices were revived and became both useful and necessary, such as building bush material houses and carving traditional canoes and paddles for fishing and transportation, when modern forms of travel had been destroyed. Traditional knowledge of healing and the use of traditional medicine became very important and effective.

However, these strategies for coping with the crisis did not just mean a return to tradition, to the past. New forms of relationships were revived, strengthened and extended. For example, a person from the south stranded in the north needed only to announce his or her clan, and he or she would immediately be taken in as a clan and family member by the same clan in the north. Such new relationships, extending kinship and friendship, were emerging before the crisis, with marriages between men and women from different parts of the island. However, they gained strength and new meaning during the years of conflict. The younger generations growing up in

urban areas, with Tok Pisin and English as the only languages of communication, are now learning and using their local languages, to their parents' great pleasure. It is a time when the land, the jungle, the sea, the marine life, the customs, all have revitalised meanings for the people, who before the crisis were very much drawn to Western ideas and influence. One can say that the years of fighting have given the people a more deeply meaningful relationship to their environment and indigenous identity.

## Conclusion

Women are as interested in control over their land and resources as are men in contemporary Bougainville. The women's initiative in planting/birthing the peace process should mark a new era in the process of government. Their efforts in this arena have raised a new and strong awareness of the need to involve them in matters concerning the exploitation of natural resources by external companies. This is really about women regaining and exercising their traditional authority, not only in the communities and over land, but also in governing modern Bougainville. They are looking for ways to combine traditional and modern authority in order to find their place in a world organised and managed by men. In other words, women desire to achieve a balance in the political economy of a new Bougainville.

Christianity is fundamental in people's lives. Their faith in God gave them the strength to carry out daring tasks, and their Christian love and commitment for each other gave them strength to rebuild and make sense of their individual lives. It is faith in God through Christian activities and networks that brought change and hope to broken lives. No one who lived through the conflict in Bougainville will not have testimony to share on how God saw them through the difficult times, or on the miracles which occurred, of healing, welfare and bonding with friends and enemies. The experiences of 'Anna' and 'Maria' tell in microcosm the story of the Bougainville people.