

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO BOUGAINVILLE'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

AUTHOR: DR RUTH SAOVANA-SPRIGGS

Dr Ruth Saovana-Spriggs is a linguist and socio-political scientist based in Bougainville after more than 20 years of working in the linguistics department as tutor, researcher, and lecturer at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (now the School of Culture, History and Language) at the Australian National University, and at the Kiel University's linguistics department in Germany. She currently leads a couple of projects. One is the establishment of the Bougainville People's Research Centre and the second project is a work in partnership with local researchers in expanding the work of the Bougainville National Heritage Foundation based in Arawa, Central Bougainville.

Introduction

Bougainville society is largely matrilineal and at its core are women and land. Men are also part of this inseparable connection, but land is owned and passed on from one generation to another through the female bloodline. There is a connection between women and land that is inseparable. However, this connection has suffered from much abuse, violation and destruction, and women's position in society has been weakened and marginalised since the period of colonisation. Unfortunately, the status-quo has been maintained by the present Government in Bougainville.

The paper briefly covers a number of areas with regards to women's participation in Bougainville's development. Firstly, a brief discussion of Bougainville's matrilineal system and women's place in Bougainville society. Secondly, the discussion deals with the role women played in the peace process in the 1990s and early 2000s. Thirdly, yet another

brief discussion on women's contribution in the post-civil war recovery processes. And finally, the paper proposes a possible future agenda for women's organisations.

Women's place in Bougainville society

Bougainville has both traditional and western government systems operating in parallel to each other. The most common traditional governing system is the matrilineal system which is practiced across Bougainville except in two language communities: the Buin language community in the south which has a patrilineal system, and the Bougainville-Polynesian outliers – the Mortlock and Tasman Islands – with a patriarchal system.

To illustrate power and authority women have and play in the matrilineal system, I'll give a couple of examples here – this is not an exhaustive list but describes some of the laws and regulations that underpin matriliney.

Local women conduct a traditional fan dance to celebrate the Arawa agreement, signed on 30 April 1998



Photo credit: Kristy Davies/Australian War Memorial

In the case of family breakdown or divorce, a man packs up and leaves his family empty handed. He does not take any share of the wealth he and his family had amassed over the years of their life together. He has no right to own a portion of land (being his wife's land) he may have previously worked on. Children remain members of the mother's female bloodline, not the father's female siblings' bloodline. A Bougainville woman is the treasurer and distributor of traditional wealth; she is the mother of everything that the sub-clan has – land, seas and rivers, ceremonial places; sub-clans' traditional arts and crafts including designs (hairdos, canoes and paddles, designs and colors), songs especially chants and dances, etc. On the man's side, a man plays a number of roles and responsibilities, not just as father and husband, indeed he plays those roles but in addition it is crucial that he learns the history of his wife's land. He is then added to the list of those who are the history keepers of the wife's land: plays the role of being the guard, protector and

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defender of the wife's land. At the same time, he exercises similar roles and responsibilities over his own land with his female siblings. In the matrilineal context, women and men are decision-makers on land matters, marriage and bride-price, the distribution of wealth, etc. However, women have a veto power and could easily veto sub-clan and family's final decisions. Male siblings also share this level of authority and power but their exercise of this is dependent on women's 'tok orait', permission in Tok Pisin.

This is the level of power and authority women have in the matrilineal system that saw ex-combatants respect women at a

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time when women conducted small-scale peace missions in their communities across Bougainville.

The establishment of a western system of government in Bougainville unfortunately set in an irreversible tide against the matrilineal system, weakening women's position of power and authority. The current Bougainville Mining Act for example, passed by the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) in March 2015, is a very clear example of the continuation of this process of disempowering women. However, it is not impossible to reverse the tide today.

Any woman in Bougainville reading this paper must understand that women in many countries have had to fight for their rights on many issues. Some such include the right to vote and participate in politics; equal opportunities for employment in the workplace: equal pay with their male counterparts: the right to have custody over children and to own properties, and so on and so forth. Bougainville women in the workplace now find themselves in the footsteps of western women's rights movements on similar issues and matters.

However, Bougainville women do have an advantage based on matrilineal laws and regulations. How to promote and make their traditional positions of power relevant in the western government system is a challenge they must genuinely deal with. Government policies on how to develop natural resources deals with the very heart of the matrilineal system. In this context, women should not be marginalised but actively exerting their influence and promote their participation in government affairs and decision-making processes.

Women's contribution in bringing the war to an end: grassroots peace missions

Grassroots women's peace missions mushroomed across Bougainville in the early 1990s and continued up until 2001. In the mid-1990s, these small-scale peace missions led to the establishment of a number of Bougainville-wide women's organisations including the Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum led by Sr. Lorraine Garasu; the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom under Josephine Kauona's leadership; and the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency with Helen Hakena (a contributor to this report) being the first president. Women's organisations within the churches were also active and remain so to this day.

Drawing on their matrilineal power and authority, women also successfully carved out their own space in high-level peace negotiations and meetings that were held in Bougainville, PNG, Australia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the late 1990s (see box 1 for an excerpt of the 'Women's Lincoln Statement').

Women's contribution in the recovery process: 2005 to 2018

Women leaders of the 1990s have moved on since the inauguration of the ABG in 2005. What took place was something akin to the changing of the 'old guard.' Women leaders from the 1990s – who worked tirelessly together – have moved on to establish other Bougainville-wide projects and programs. I will briefly describe two examples (Sr. Lorraine Garasu and Sr. Ruby Miringka)-

Sr. Lorraine Garasu was instrumental in bringing women and their leaders together, forming

Box 1: the 'Women's Lincoln Statement'

Here is an excerpt, the 'Women's Lincoln Statement' read by one of the women leaders at the Lincoln Peace Talks in 1998 in New Zealand. Once again demonstrating women's level of influence, contributing at meetings and negotiations in relation to Bougainville's political status, cessation of the civil war and achieving peace.

To survive, we looked within our culture, our traditional society and ourselves. In almost all areas of Bougainville, women traditionally own the land. The land is sacred and protected by men on behalf of the women. The men as guardians share leadership with women, taking the responsibility in open debate to protect women from potential conflict; however, women have the power to veto decisions, and therefore are involved in the final consultative process.

The destruction of this balance of power as held in Bougainville in traditional times occurred through Westernisation in the colonial period. It is a tragic fact that the ignorance of external powers exercised in Bougainville by default weakened the traditional balance that kept a peaceful and harmonious society. In the recent absence of formal Western political structures, our people in social crisis have turned to traditional decision-making methods in which women have been restored to their rightful place in leadership.

Women have built bridges between their families, clans and displaced fellow Bougainvillians by working for mutual survival, whether it be in the bush, in care centres or wherever they have hosted strangers in their own communities.

[In] our society, although men and women have distinctive roles, they are complementary. We, women are co-partners with our men and as such we are not daunted by the enormous tasks that lie before us to bring about a new Bougainville. In holding to the peace message that has spread in Bougainville from Burnham, we, the Women's Delegation at Lincoln University Leaders' Meeting, affirm with all our sisters and fellow Bougainvillians our determination to make this peace process work until we reach our common goal of freedom.¹

1. Ruth Saovana-Spriggs, *Gender and Peace: Bougainville Women, Matriliney and the Peace Process*, PhD Thesis (Australian National University: Canberra, 2007).

the Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum in the early 1990s. Much of her time and energy was spent on counseling women who had been suffering from traumatic war experiences: the loss of lives including husbands, experiences of widowhood in time of war, rape, mental and emotional issues, etc. Guided by the issues and problems she was dealing with in the early 2000s, and with the support of other Sisters from the Congregation of Sisters of Nazareth, Sr. Lorraine set up the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation at Chabai at

the northern tip of Bougainville. Currently the Centre works across all regions of Bougainville and provides safe houses services in four locations (Chabai, Buka, Arawa and Buin), as well as engages with their network of Women Human Rights Defenders and male advocates. Women and children, who suffer from domestic violence and abuse, family breakdown, rape and teenage pregnancy and other related socio-economic issues are able to seek counseling and support from the Centre. Sr. Lorraine has worked tirelessly since before



Photo credit: Elena Leddra/IWDA

the crisis. She is one of Bougainville's true treasures.

Sr. Ruby Miringka (the then sister in charge of Nursing Training at the former Arawa Nursing College of the 1980s) was an important leader in the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom, at the same time, the Coordinator of the Bougainville Community-Based Integrated Humanitarian Program (BOCBIHP), which was based in the capital of the Solomon Islands, Honiara. She and her family, together with more than 2,000 Bougainvillean refugees, fled to the Solomon Islands during the conflict. The organisation supported refugees living in Honiara and people living up in the mountains of Central Bougainville, who suffered most severely as a result of the embargo the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government imposed on the people in the 1990s. BOCBIHP provided a wide range of support including transporting very sick people, pregnant mothers/women experiencing difficulties in childbirth, basic medicines, secondhand clothes,

etc. In the late 2000s Sr Ruby founded the Bougainville Healthy Community Programme, a not-for-profit community program, which is very much a carry-over from BOCBIHP and is a success story region-wide.²

Post-civil war (2000 to 2018) women in politics

Bougainville women are fortunate to have three reserved seats in the Bougainville Parliament (compared to none in PNG). In the 2005 general election, three women were elected in accordance with the rules established in Bougainville's constitution.

As of the last general election (April 2015), Bougainville now has four women parliamentarians. The fourth woman contested the last general election as an independent candidate. She won! That was a landmark victory for all women, showing a growing confidence in their ability to participate in politics and

leadership at that level.

At the community level change is also on the horizon with the passing in 2016 of the Bougainville Community Government Act. This Act establishes urban and rural 'Community Governments' comprised of individual wards. Each ward must elect one male and one female representative, and the leadership roles for each Community Government must rotate between men and women. This system – if properly implemented – offers women leadership opportunities and experience at the local level that may well translate to future leadership opportunities at the national level.

While there are clearly some success stories, there are, on the other hand, opportunities for women to improve their participation in governance. There is plenty of room for women to raise their standard, build confidence and promote their ability to participate in the political arena, Government bureaucracy and in many other areas in the formal and private sectors.

The final section of the discussion here is an outline of a few issues that are of critical importance to Bougainville's future – that might form a possible future agenda for women's organisations in Bougainville.

A possible future agenda for women's organisations

Participation and leadership at government level decision-making processes

There is I believe an opportunity for women to establish communications with Bougainville's four female parliamentarians, so that they gain some understanding on how the government functions with regards to decision-making on policies and laws. Gaining such insight would strengthen their confidence and enable them to increase their participation in

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decision-making processes, potentially as members of a future Bougainville Government.

Increasing women's participation in government decision-making processes would also require women to skillfully integrate matrilineal authority and leadership skills and use them to navigate their way through the patriarchal western government system in order for them to effectively participate in all affairs at all levels of government.

Independence referendum

The tentative date for holding the referendum on Bougainville's future political status is currently scheduled for June 2019 – just 16 months away from the time of writing this paper. Efforts by the ABG to explain the concept and complexities involved in the referendum has been so far very minimal indeed. This lack of information could propel women's groups (the Bougainville Women's Federation and its district branches maybe) to launch their own education awareness programs on the issue in their respective communities.

Resistance to mining and the Bougainville Mining Act

Kate Lappin and Helen Hakena, in their contribution to this report, describe how the Panguna mine had an irreparable, devastating impact on women. My concern is that, this too may become the dilemma women in the Tinputz and Wakunai districts could face – becoming their worst nightmare – once the Perth-based mining company Kalia Holdings



Photo credit: Christina Hill

Limited begins exploration, with the prospect of mining down the track.

As the Cathal Doyle contribution to this report and previous analysis by Jubilee Australia³ have demonstrated, the Bougainville Mining Act will not protect landowner rights (and certainly not landowner rights to free, prior and informed consent) and in some instances criminalises dissent to mining projects. The Bougainville Mining Act contains offences and subsequent penalties that are devastating and damaging to a person's integrity, the community and Bougainville society as a whole, and

2. For further detail, see, Miringka, R. 'Community Developments And BOCBIHP' in *As Mothers of the Land: The birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom*, eds, Josephine Tankunani Sirivi and Marilyn Taleo Havini (Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 2004) p 99 – 108.

3. 'The Devil in the Detail Analysis of the Bougainville Mining Act 2015' (NSW: Jubilee Australia Research Centre, 2015).

may lead to disempowerment, land alienation, and environmental destruction once more.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, there is a connection between women and land that is inseparable. When mining destroys land – and it does – it will have a devastating impact on women. Further, there are some people who cannot fathom an independent Bougainville without mining providing the economic foundation for this to occur. Hence mining is, in my view, one of critical importance to Bougainville's future and one that ought to be an area of focus for women's organisations.

Conclusion

I was invited to the Hahon Reconciliation ceremony on the west coast of Bougainville on March 30th, 2017. The reconciliation ceremony was between the ex-combatants and families of the deceased. Here's part of my

speech, translated into English:

We were very vocal during the peace process.

Since the establishment of the [Bougainville Women's Federation] I have not heard a collective women's voice, expressing their ideas and views on government policy in whatever area the government decides on. You, women, must not think you have no right to follow or scrutinise government policies. You have every right. You are the landowners.

I have not heard a collective women's voice at any time, not once on the mining law, on the referendum. Where do you stand, women?

To our women politicians in Bougainville, how many of you go to women at district level to hold discussions with women on such important issues? You should be the first ones to go, sit down with the women and explain to them what's happening in the government.

I have not heard a collective voice from the women. Today, I call for that"

Bougainville women obviously have a long way to go, to fully realise their political strength and influence. They can draw on their matrilineal authority and power – which would provide a firm foundation on which they can demand more participation and decision-making power in the political system.

I strongly encourage Bougainville women today to examine women's traditional and acquired power and influence demonstrated during the civil war as they undertook peace missions and to draw on that strength again as they attempt to help chart Bougainville's economic and political future. Women in Bougainville have every opportunity under the sun to turn their traditional and cultural sources of power and authority into active participation in the governing of Bougainville – whether it be in the public sector, i.e., the ABG and its bureaucracy, the private sector, local-level government, the churches, local non-government organisations, etc.



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