



## Gender in political transition

### Bougainville's peace process

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# Gender in political transition: Bougainville's peace process

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**Conciliation Resources** is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. Our **Accord** series informs and strengthens peace processes by documenting and analysing the lessons of peacebuilding. Accord **spotlight** provides focused analysis of key themes for peace and transition practice.

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Cover photo: Ceremonial dance marking the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement © AusAID

# About the report

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This report explores how gender dynamics shape decision-making, power and influence in Bougainville, and how this changed during the peace process and post-agreement political settlement. Bougainville's strong history of women's civil society activism and grassroots participation in peacebuilding has not always been reflected in formal, customary and faith-based decision-making processes. Yet the political transition process following the Bougainville Peace Agreement in 2001 did provide opportunities for greater inclusion. Recent initiatives led by woman leaders and the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) – such as the passing of the Community Government Act in 2016 and the establishment of the ABG Office for Gender Equality – suggest recognition by a wider range of Bougainvilleans of the need for change.

An assessment of achievements and challenges to date provides a clearer understanding of how Bougainville's political landscape can support more diverse access to and influence over decision-making at multiple levels. The report first unpacks the formal and informal customary and church structures that have shaped and contribute to ongoing gender imbalances; it also looks at the approaches and strategies Bougainvillean women have used to increase their agency and influence within formal, faith and customary institutions, including international human rights frameworks. Moreover it provides suggestions for further research and analysis, and recommendations on how a more gender balanced and inclusive political settlement can be promoted in Bougainville, plus the role of external actors in supporting these outcomes.

The report is informed by discussions that took place in Bougainville with 15 stakeholders (10 women and 5 men) in December 2016, and a three-day joint analysis workshop in February 2017 with 30 participants (25 women and 5 men). Participants attended from all three regions of Bougainville (North, Central and South) and included community leaders, local government politicians, former ABG politicians, representatives from local peacebuilding groups, women's groups, churches and young women. A smaller focus group was also conducted with four men from civil society and church institutions.

A gender-sensitive approach was used to understand how women and men access and influence decision-making in formal and informal spaces – drawing attention to how relationships between women and men impact access and influence, the social norms that shape these relationships, and how these shift at times of social and political change.

This was one of three gender workshops conducted by Conciliation Resources and its partners to explore political settlement beyond elites; two other gender workshops took place in Nepal and Colombia in 2016. The workshops have looked at how diverse groups in conflict-affected contexts understand and experience change in transition processes, in particular access to political decision-making and influence, and security and socio-economic resources.



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# Key messages and recommendations

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- **The crisis and peace process in Bougainville have provided opportunities for women to participate in formal political structures, but this has not been matched by women's ability to influence decision-making more broadly.** Bougainville has a strong history of women's civil society activism, with women playing key peacebuilding roles during the crisis and peace process, including in the Bougainville Constitutional Commission. Yet women were largely absent from formal peace negotiations and subsequently only a small number have been able to engage effectively in formal politics. Women can have key leadership roles within Bougainville's largely matrilineal society, but in practice access to and influence on decision-making is primarily shaped by male-dominated customary and church structures and values. Progress from participation to influence will therefore involve efforts at formal and informal levels of society.
- **While international gender frameworks have empowered some women, many Bougainvilleans (men and women) consider them restrictive and culturally unsuitable.** International and Bougainvillean concepts of gender can differ widely, and this lack of shared clarity often creates misunderstandings which affect perceptions and support for international work on gender. For example, international interventions that only focus on women's inclusion through political empowerment often overlook the complexity of masculinities, violence and insecurity in Bougainville. A better understanding of the customary and religious systems that shape gender roles and perspectives could make interventions more effective. International actors should build on existing Bougainvillean civil society work to contextualise rights-based frameworks.
- **International approaches often overlook men's roles in transforming gender relations.** Bougainvillean men are currently engaged in a limited, simplistic and often tokenistic way in gender work, which focuses primarily on women. This has contributed to negative male attitudes. In addition to women, influential men at all levels of society must be engaged in change processes. For example, women's and men's church associations can help create space for dialogue and action. Bougainville civil society groups have taken the lead in including men in gender work; international organisations should learn from and support them.
- **International organisations and the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) should collaborate more with community-level institutions.** There is a common perception in Bougainville that international organisations such as the UN, and bilateral donors, neglect to listen to or work with community-level structures and institutions when developing gender and peacebuilding goals and strategies. International organisations and the ABG should also work to strengthen cooperation between customary, faith and formal institutions to achieve agreed goals, for example through the new community government structures.
- **Political reform processes present opportunities to reframe gender roles and for women to enhance their political influence.** For example, the Community Government Act 2016 creates space for women to take up community-level leadership positions, and in passing this act the ABG has shown willingness to support more equal representation for women. As the region heads towards the target date for the referendum on Bougainville's political status, increased public debate on Bougainville's political future offers further opportunities for public dialogue on gender balance and the status of women in political decision-making.

# Colonialism, crisis and change in Bougainville

Bougainville, the most remote island province of Papua New Guinea (PNG), is situated approximately 900km from mainland PNG. Prior to colonial rule in 1884, Bougainville was a collection of mostly matrilineal societies, where women derived customary authority and status through traditional systems of land ownership and management. Under these systems women were custodians of the land and the source of family and community life, determining kinship ties and land inheritance, while older men were visible spokespeople, communicating collective decisions. Colonial authorities spread Christianity, resulting in fundamental changes to the customary legal, political, socio-economic and familial structures.

PNG has approximately 7 million people speaking around 848 different languages, which makes it one of the most linguistically heterogeneous countries in the world; Bougainvilleans make up 5 per cent of the total population with 25 language groups across 10 major clans.<sup>1</sup> On PNG's independence in 1975, negotiations on Bougainville's political status took place with the province's leaders asserting their distinct cultural identity, geography and language. However, the PNG Government granted Bougainville only limited devolutionary arrangements.

A violent conflict, termed 'the crisis', emerged in the late 1980s, initially in response to mining activity. During the 1970s and 1980s the gold and copper mine at Panguna in central Bougainville was one of the world's largest, and the backbone of the PNG economy. However, the widespread environmental impacts, failure to equally benefit communities, and the influx of a non-local workforce and other social changes caused by the mine, became entangled with the call for self-determination. From 1988 until a ceasefire in 1998 the crisis spread across the region involving various Bougainvillean armed factions and the PNG Police and Defence Force.

The crisis destroyed much of the island's infrastructure; a large proportion of the population was internally displaced and up to 20,000 died as a result of the conflict.<sup>2</sup> Both women and men supported the armed struggle, and while women were not combatants they provided shelter, fuel, food and care to combatants and communities during the crisis.<sup>3</sup> Many young men were co-opted into fighting, and women and children suffered further because of a lack of basic healthcare and schooling. Violence against women increased during the crisis and women were disproportionately targets of physical and psychological violence, including sexual assault.<sup>4</sup>

At different stages of the crisis women were credited with helping to promote the conditions for peace by brokering local-level ceasefires, convening key meetings, and persuading men on all sides to engage in the peace talks. Yet, there is a disconnect between the vibrant activism and peacebuilding leadership of local Bougainvillean women during the crisis and their influence over the negotiation process and the final text of the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA). Women were largely excluded from the several rounds of peace talks that led to a ceasefire in 1998. The 2001 BPA was a "carefully crafted top-down political settlement" brokered by leaders and senior members of armed groups and existing male political elites, with significant involvement of international peacebuilders.<sup>5</sup>

The peace process re-negotiated Bougainville's political institutions and structures with the BPA creating an Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARB) and the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), which held its first elections in 2005. The post-agreement environment created a measure of access to formal political decision-making. The Bougainville Constitutional Commission (BCC) was tasked with writing the Bougainville constitution, and was established

1. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/papua-new-guinea-population/> (Accessed 20/12/2017)

2. Saovana-Spriggs 2000

3. [http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/ddr\\_casestudybougainvillepapuanewguinea\\_unifem\\_0.doc](http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/ddr_casestudybougainvillepapuanewguinea_unifem_0.doc) (Accessed 20/12/2017)

4. Jewkes 2013

5. Braithwaite *et al* 2010



Women at forum for peace. © Joy B

in 2002 under provisions of the BPA. It included three women's representatives who advocated for a guaranteed voice for women in any new political institutions. As a result, three parliamentary seats were reserved for women under the 2004 Constitution (out of 40 seats: 7.5 per cent), along with three reserved seats for ex-combatants. Additionally, the Constitution guarantees women a seat in the Bougainville Executive Council (BEC), ensuring their participation at Cabinet level.

Since 2005 only one woman has won an open seat. To address this, the ABG with the support of civil society has introduced several additional regulatory measures, including: the *UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 Women Peace and Security Action Plan* (2013); and the *Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Peace and Security policy* (2016), which highlights the importance of women's active decision-making at all levels of government. More recently the ABG created an Office for Gender Equality to ensure the integration of gender equality across ABG departments, policies and programming; and the Community Government Act 2016, which sets out equal representation of women and men at local government level (see 'Gender and formal institutions' on page 11).

Bougainville's political settlement is still dynamic and being shaped by developments in formal and informal institutions and processes. For example, the BPA stipulates that a referendum on Bougainville's political status preference is to take place within 10 to 15 years following the setting up of the ABG. A target date for the referendum has been set for June 2019.

To date, women's influence in peace and post-transition processes has largely corresponded to their gender roles in customary structures, for example, as mothers and landowners. It is unclear whether developments in inclusion in the formal sphere post-crisis have shifted these gender roles or are equally rooted in them. In order to understand why change has been partial in gender terms, it is important to look at how inclusion has been negotiated so far, and how systems encouraging male-dominated decision-making have remained resilient – in particular the interplay between customary and religious structures and the contemporary formal political architecture. The following sections look at the factors that shape gender relations in Bougainville, in particular in the post-crisis period, before exploring areas where inclusion and more equal access to decision-making might be supported.

# Contested understandings of gender

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In Bougainville and the Pacific region more broadly, gender roles and relationships among women and men are heavily influenced by customary systems – and these have been influenced more recently by colonialism and the influence of the Church. The roles that women and men currently play in society are shaped by values and principles emerging from multiple and overlapping institutions and structures.

Some workshop participants described the ‘complementarity’ of gender relationships between men and women in Bougainville, where men typically have direct leadership roles, and women have relational power associated with customary systems of land tenure and familial status. This reflects the importance placed on the domestic unit in Bougainville, drawn from Christian models of kinship, which situates the male adult as head of the household but allows for a degree of partnership and consultation in the husband-wife relationship.

*“I think at the cultural level, [gender roles and relations are] probably based on the traditional roles that women and men have played. And I think in a lot of senses, you could also call that not so much gender equality but gender complementarity... where both sexes complement each other... because traditionally that’s what they have done”*

**Workshop participant**

In Bougainville, the matrilineal and complementarity aspects of society were perceived by participants as affording women relatively better status than in many other parts of PNG and the Pacific region. Yet some participants also recognised that gender discrimination is still widely prevalent (and, for many, undesirable) within both informal customary and church structures, and the post-crisis formal institutions. Additionally, women and other marginalised groups (including young men and women) are often excluded from decision-making.

A more transformative gender approach that reassesses current relations between men and women and the systems that sustain unequal influence, requires understanding Bougainvillean perspectives of gender. Workshop participants explained that in Bougainville, the term ‘gender’ is almost universally understood to mean ‘women’. It is strongly associated with international human rights norms focused on the promotion of gender equality, which is equated with ‘women’s empowerment’. Both concepts of gender and gender equality are generally perceived to be Western or external notions that did not fit easily with Bougainvillean cultural understandings of gender roles, and are not broadly accepted by men or women. The framing of the workshop reflected these concerns about terminology, exploring the different experiences of men and women, and how they can access and influence power.

# Understanding post-crisis gender relations in Bougainville

Participation in both informal and formal institutions has generally been influenced by customary structures and the Church, with women and men having varied access and influence in each of these decision-making spaces. Despite a range of measures post-crisis – including reserved seats for women in the BPA and significant financial and capacity support from international donor partners – women’s influence in decision-making has been limited in all these spaces, except in civil society.

## Women in civil society

There is a well-established women’s movement in Bougainville and a number of groups were active prior to the crisis. For many women’s rights advocates the crisis prompted their activism, and the existence of a resilient civil society today in which women have a prominent role is widely seen as a legacy of the crisis and peace process. The crisis saw an increase in the number and membership of women’s organisations, as well as the number of high-profile women leaders in civil society and church-affiliated organisations that influenced the peace process. Women’s groups received support from international development organisations to participate in international meetings, including the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, allowing some women from civil society and faith groups to emerge as international leaders and spokespeople.

Achievements highlighted by workshop participants included women successfully leveraging power to achieve reserved seats, and the important role of peace groups associated with the women’s movement during the crisis. For example, women who persuaded their sons to demobilise and return to their villages are often credited with starting and sustaining the peace process. This view highlights the potential and agency of women in peacebuilding; however, narratives of Bougainvillean women as peacemakers linked to motherhood can reinforce rather than support change in perceptions of the roles men and women should and can play in society.

Participants identified that international women’s and human rights frameworks have helped support the women’s rights movement, especially after Bougainvillean women from different sides of the crisis attended the Beijing Conference. International gender norms have been used pragmatically and strategically by Bougainvillean women activists to challenge women’s loss of status, lack of formal employment opportunities and low levels of participation in formal governance structures.

Women’s groups have also successfully lobbied for and supported the development of local frameworks to implement international resolutions post-crisis, such as the 1979 *Convention on all Forms of Violence against Women* (CEDAW) and the 2000 *UNSCR 1325*. The development of the *Bougainville Women Peace and Security Action Plan* and the *Women’s Empowerment, Gender Equality, Peace and Security* policy to contextualise these international instruments, have been particularly important in strengthening local claims for rights and recognition, as has working in partnership with diverse groups of Bougainvilleans (young women and men, religious leaders, ex-combatants) to progress their implementation.

## Gender and security

Workshop discussions on security – physical and economic security in particular – provided key insights into how gender relations operate in Bougainville, and the impact of the crisis on them. Participants highlighted that men and women divide labour within households and communities in Bougainville, and have differing access to resources and earning power. Women are generally responsible for the family’s economic security, yet their income-generating work is concentrated in the informal sector, such as selling food at markets or at roadside stalls. Men typically have more access to formal economic activities such as cash crops and business initiatives. Some women identify that customary norms and men’s attitudes are barriers to women

entering the formal economy, compounded by women's limited access to banking services. Participants asserted that any new political settlement must incorporate specific gender and security measures, to support personal security (cultural and physical); economic, environmental and food security; and political security (equal representation of women and men).

Participants also identified that levels of insecurity and violence in Bougainville, in particular levels of gender violence, were exacerbated by the crisis and have remained high since. Some Bougainville women have highlighted "a strong connection between violence against women and militarisation of Bougainville society"<sup>6</sup> and recent studies support these indications of high levels of gender-based violence.<sup>7</sup> A rise in societal violence is often linked to the emergence of 'hyper-masculine' gender identities and attitudes – destructive and exaggerated masculinities often linked to ongoing post-conflict trauma experienced by ex-combatants.<sup>8</sup> This is often identified as limiting the expression of customary relationships that value both women's and men's roles.

## Custom and gender roles

Custom plays a significant role in how gender identities, roles and expectations are constructed in Bougainville. At all levels, access for men and women to decision-making is strongly influenced by customary structures of authority. These were once grounded in matrilineal systems, but have changed over time. Customary structures and social practices often enjoy more respect than formal political structures, and hold greater relevance and influence in everyday governance and life at a community level.

Traditionally, senior men dominated community-level decision-making in customary structures, and men were generally viewed as responsible for security and leadership in the public sphere. Women under the matrilineal system in Bougainville were customarily recognised as landowners; while their views were generally expressed through a male family or clan representative, they had status and influence

on community decision-making through their position as landowners. This form of partnership between male customary leaders and female landowners was seen as vital to providing social goods within communities.

Participants asserted that women in contemporary Bougainville shoulder more family responsibility than in the past; that cultural norms from elsewhere in PNG privileging men are increasingly influential; and that traditional structures holding women in high esteem are less salient. This has led to reduced access for women to customary decision-making spaces, and a decrease in their influence over community decisions, particularly on land and resource use.

*"Our history is fading – traditionally it's the women who own the [land] title, but practically it's the men who are managing it and making all kinds of decisions without consulting the women. So there is no economic security."*

**Workshop participant**

For example, women's economic security and status in their clans and communities was customarily linked to matrilineal land ownership.<sup>9</sup> These matrilineal land ownership systems have eroded over time, marginalising women's decision-making roles on land issues. Participants noted that environmental and land insecurity disproportionately impact women in Bougainville, who are responsible for the majority of farming and for learning new processes to ensure that food is available – for example, the preservation of food and organic farming. These threats to food production compound women's economic and food insecurity.

Female workshop participants felt that these changes could be addressed by safeguarding women's status as landowners, increasing opportunities to expand women's leadership roles at the clan level, and ensuring women are meaningfully included in all decisions about land. Participants cited examples of women

6. Hakena 2005: 165

7. Fulu *et al* 2013

8. Alexander 2012: 212

9. Most parts of Bougainville have matrilineal land ownerships traditions; exceptions include areas such as Buin, Siwai and Nissan Islands.

being directly involved in discussions between landowners and Bougainville Copper Limited, the legal entity previously responsible for mining in Panguna, about compensation payments. Several women have taken part in negotiations as representatives of their respective landowners' associations, while others have been involved as landowners and representatives of women's groups.

## Church structures and gender roles

Church leadership has significant influence in setting and reinforcing societal and gender roles. Approximately 97 per cent of the population identify as Christian, with the most prominent religious institution being the Catholic Church. Due to the deep respect the Church has at all levels of society, the participation of local faith-based organisations and religious leaders is important to the acceptance and success of initiatives to support gender equality in Bougainville.

Colonialism and Christianity were viewed by workshop participants as positive in some ways – for example, Christianity's assimilation with customary structures – but negative in others, in particular their role in limiting women's influence in decision-making within formal and customary political structures. Men typically dominate religious leadership, while women are generally responsible for the bulk of the church's day-to-day work. The leadership opportunities available to women are usually only within women's associations that sit outside of the mainstream positions of authority (such as priests, bishops, pastors and ministers). As a result, women's church organisations are not well integrated into church leadership structures.

*“Women are just a token presence at meetings; [we] need to have more of a say.”*

**Workshop participant**

Yet the Church has been a vibrant platform for women's groups and women-led civil society to influence community-level decision-making. Since the 1960s the Catholic Church has created opportunities for women to organise and mobilise for social change through church-affiliated women's groups, many of which have been highly

effective. For example, church groups, in particular the Catholic Women's Association, played an important role during the crisis – providing space for women's peacebuilding leadership in prayer groups, peace marches, and facilitating talks between opposing groups.

Participants noted the potential for women to play greater leadership roles in mainstream Church institutions in the future, but recognised this would take time and a significant cultural shift within the Church to institutionalise increased women's influence. They called for greater recognition of the leadership and peacebuilding capacity of existing faith-based women's organisations. Participants suggested that Church leaders of men's and women's associations could first work separately on gender issues, before working together to influence church hierarchies and constituencies. They suggested engagement with biblical references as an entry point to address gender disparities.

## Gender and formal institutions

### The importance and limits of reserved seats

The appeal for reserved seats for women in the ABG arose for multiple reasons. It was an acknowledgement of the crucial part women played in the peace process in Bougainville. Guaranteeing women's representation in formal politics was also seen as maintaining matrilineal traditions as a key aspect of Bougainvillean culture. Many women and some men advocated for reserved seats for women for pragmatic reasons, acknowledging the difficulties women had faced in the past competing against men in political contests. Reserved seats were viewed as the only way to ensure women's representation in the ABG.

While viewed positively, participants also expressed concerns that assigned seats for women might limit the possibilities for their broader formal representation. Since the first ABG, only one woman has been voted into a non-reserved seat, and there is a widely held misconception that non-reserved seats are 'men's seats'. Male participants explained that for women to have greater influence in formal politics they must build consensus and gain the approval and support of primarily male clan

chiefs and elders, and church leaders from their community. Like male candidates, women seeking formal decision-making roles need to be endorsed by influential, older male community and religious leaders who often act as gatekeepers. Participants explained that this endorsement is crucial to the success of women leaders. The formal, church and customary political domains typically remain dominated by men with financial resources and who are endorsed by influential gatekeepers within their community.

Lack of financial and capacity support, and criticism from gatekeepers, husbands, family members and communities, create further barriers to women running for open seats. For example, reserved ABG parliamentary seats are under-funded in comparison to open ones; while the same level of discretionary funding is available to all members, regional women's seats have significantly larger electorates. As a result of a combination of barriers only a small number of women have entered formal politics (primarily via the reserved seats).

Reserved ABG parliamentary seats may also exacerbate the perception that women only have relevant input on women's issues, such as health or education. So while participants praised women representatives for being outspoken on these issues, they also felt that stereotypes may limit women representatives' ability to influence wider societal challenges.

Yet, despite, or perhaps because of these challenges, there was widespread support amongst participants for the ongoing retention of the women's reserved seats. Participants said that this system must remain in place until there are more fundamental changes in how women access decision-making within formal, church and customary institutions. This is an important position for women activists and supporters of gender equality to assert during moments of potential political change.

### Local governance structures

The Community Government Act 2016 constituted a window of opportunity for more diverse political decision-making spaces. The review of community-level governance structures that led to the passage of the Community Government Act 2016 aimed to formalise community governance structures in Bougainville (formerly called Councils of Elders)

and standardise the make-up and selection processes of community governments. Four options for women's inclusion in community government were presented to the BEC, which elected to institute the fourth option – that which provided for the greatest level of women's representation in the formal structure, with equal representation of men and women in each of Bougainville's 33 district community governments. The first community government elections took place in April 2017.

*“When women try to hold positions in community or national government their leg is always tied by a string – do they want to do that or do they want to have their traditional role in the community?”*

**Workshop participant**

This is a significant change from the previous system where women made up approximately 15 per cent of the Council of Elders' membership. The motives of the BEC – a male dominated council – in supporting this option are unclear. The decision could reflect recognition of women's customary roles in community level decision-making, as opposed to ABG-level institutions which are primarily male dominated spaces. However, an Office for Gender Equality was set up around the same time, and taken together these changes could signal the ABG's willingness to strengthen women's decision-making roles and a move towards an incremental increase in women's influence at all levels. One workshop participant suggested the new community government structure could provide opportunities to re-examine the gendered nature of leadership. The new structure could provide a platform for new leadership to emerge, allowing women and other excluded groups to regain space as community-level peacebuilders and leaders.

During discussions, women and men engaged in formal politics were significantly more optimistic on the potential for formal politics to create space for women's representation, and were enthusiastic about the recent Community Government elections and the diversity of new women representatives in local-level decision-making. International development organisations should strengthen the authority and legitimacy of the new structure by engaging with it as a key decision-making body at a local level.

# Strengthening options for change

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A number of different opportunities emerged for addressing access to and influence of decision-making in customary, church and formal settings. Participants also identified a number of other areas where women and men could work together more effectively, using the strengths of existing structures to achieve change.

## Strengthening links between formal and informal institutions

The influence of (male dominated) customary and church structures on access to the political arena at all levels highlights the need – both for international partners and Bougainville’s formal governance institutions – to consult and engage with other societal power structures that regulate decision-making.

While the Constitution empowers customary leaders and structures in Bougainville to restore justice, peace and harmony in communities post-crisis, in practice there are few mechanisms for formal political institutions to work with customary and church structures. A majority of participants suggested that the ABG should consult and work with customary and church structures more closely, emphasising the important role that tradition and the church play in their day-to-day lives.

Similarly, there was widespread opinion that international engagement on gender lacks consistent links with local-level church and customary structures. It was suggested that without greater engagement with customary structures and faith-based institutions, particularly at a local level, it will be difficult for more fundamental shifts in the roles women and men play to take place. Such an approach could provide new entry points for women’s political participation and influence, and crucially help to ensure the credibility and acceptance of gender interventions.

*“We need to put women in all spaces – if men only attend meetings, men will not take our issues into account.”*

**Workshop participant**

## Contextualisation of international frameworks

While international human rights frameworks have strengthened some agendas, there is also significant resistance within Bougainville to international norms on gender equality by some women and many men. Concerns focus on ‘gender equality’ erasing the distinct roles customarily held by women and men, and the male dominance of decision-making. Some participants highlighted that international gender rights discourses were viewed as disempowering for men.

To date, international organisations have struggled to translate international standards on gender equality into concepts and approaches that communities can relate to across Bougainville. This could be remedied with greater flexibility in the application of gender programming and policy as well as initiatives that explicitly seek to contextualise and localise international gender norms and terminology. Local organisations that have experience of contextualising international instruments and standards could play a key role in supporting this approach.

*“They [internationals] want the same thing as us, they want to help us, but maybe we need to change the wording. We maybe need to change that black and white bold ‘human rights’ into a smaller font.”*

**Workshop participant**

For example, participants explained that some civil society and church groups have used ‘rights and responsibilities’ and biblical approaches to engage in human rights based conversations and awareness raising with communities. Adapting to include a rights and responsibilities approach can ensure that human rights conversations emphasise the individual’s responsibility to uphold the rights of others while also supporting community stability – language which has greater resonance in Bougainville society.

Biblical approaches have translated lessons on basic human rights through bible stories to demonstrate the importance of specific behaviours and relationships.

Participants also suggested focusing on tangible outcomes to advocate for reducing gender imbalance. Linking concepts of gender equality to more sustainable and inclusive economic development, equal access to justice, health and education or more effective political decision-making were viewed as more concrete than the use of human rights-based approaches and terminology.

## The role of men in transforming the political settlement

Male advocates within institutions – and especially those holding powerful positions – are important to help achieve more gender-balanced influence in decision-making. Men primarily hold positions of power at the ABG level, in faith and customary institutions, and fill half the positions at community government level. As men also dominate the consensus-building process in which future leadership is determined, a process to support agreement by male leaders to encourage new women leaders at all levels of the community could produce long term benefits.



Bovo river in Arawa town, Bougainville Island. © Amie Kirkham/Conciliation Resources

Currently, women are usually taken out of their communities to attend gender and peacebuilding trainings, without men. On return, men in their communities often struggle to relate to the new perspectives and terminology they have acquired; this can lead to suspicion or rejection of these ideas. Financial and capacity support to women's organisations has been effective and is still required. However, to ensure broader acceptance, gender work should be expanded to include consultation with men, at both leadership and community levels. Participants suggested that men and women should also undertake training on gender and leadership together to strengthen co-learning and solidarity.

There is also a need to support and expand on existing programmes working directly with men on masculinities and post-crisis trauma. Conversations between women and men could consider how gender and change processes – such as the crisis, hyper-masculinity, trauma and violence – is affecting men and their behaviour toward and responsibilities within their families and communities. The male advocacy programme and men's counselling services provided by the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation were highlighted as positive examples of engaging men on gender-related issues, along with suggestions that more programmes like these should be supported.

International partners should support opportunities for men and women to create joint solutions that are locally designed and owned. The new community government structures and churches could provide space for such opportunities at a community level. Factoring in the differing needs of women and men, capacity building programmes for the new community government representatives could include joint leadership training and joint gender and peacebuilding analysis training.

## The Referendum

The referendum on Bougainville's political status, currently with a target date of June 2019, is potentially an opportunity to examine issues of gender and political leadership. The lead up to the referendum is currently stimulating increased public interest in and debate on Bougainville's political future and in politics more generally at all levels in Bougainville society. Some of this increased interest is stimulated by multiple public awareness campaigns, for example, those planned by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), the ABG, and ABG/PaCSIA (Peace and Conflict Studies Institute, Australia) supported community referendum dialogue processes. These debate and dialogue spaces provide an opportunity for the insertion of new ideas and narratives by women community leaders, the ABG and Bougainville civil society on gender roles and gender balance in decision-making.

As the referendum approaches, there will be a need for political-level dialogue between the ABG and the PNG government. Whatever the outcome, dialogue on Bougainville's political status will likely continue. Such a dialogue process in itself could provide opportunities for women leaders to participate in political discussions and insert a gendered perspective. In the event that the referendum results in a transition to a changed political status for the region, including the renegotiation of Bougainville's political institutions, this will provide an opportunity for women leaders, at all levels of decision-making, to influence the development of a new political settlement. In such a case, international organisations can also play a key role to bring in comparative experience from other transition processes.

Participants emphasised that progress towards the referendum, with multiple initiatives to increase political debate and awareness, provides an opportunity to expand the way civil society and church groups engage on gender-related issues. Participants suggested that these groups could include both women and men to address gender-related issues, thereby modelling a partnership approach to gender equality.

# Conclusion

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Attempts to address gender and inclusion challenges post-crisis in Bougainville have produced mixed results. While gender norms in customary and faith institutions have mostly remained, there have been some opportunities for women's participation and engagement with decision-making in formal spaces, for example the establishment of the three reserved seats in the ABG.

Participants acknowledged the disconnect between women's influence on community decision-making and their strength in civil society, while being mostly absent in policy-making and political spaces. They also recognised that while male roles in customary leadership and decision-making are reflected in the current formal political system, women's customary influence on such decision-making is not.

Some participants highlighted the 'complementarity' of gender relationships as a goal of gender work, while others (especially woman civil society leaders) framed this as a limited narrative. Instead they suggest a more transformative agenda is needed to achieve equality of access and influence of all women and men across Bougainville. There is also a need to address the root causes of insecurity and violence in order to address the underlying systemic impediments to women's influence. This requires building on concrete peacebuilding achievements since the crisis, while working with customary and church structures. Efforts to strengthen ties between customary and faith-based institutions to any formal institutions continue to be fundamental to linking the different gendered forms of power, influence and decision-making across Bougainville.

It is also therefore necessary to rethink international and local engagement strategies on gender. It is important to promote local ownership and consider community visions of balanced gender relations in Bougainville in order to support the development of a more gender-balanced political settlement. This includes working with both women and men to strengthen the role of both in transforming gender roles and relationships.

This report highlights that while barriers to women's formal participation remain, it will be important to seize the opportunities that lie ahead. The establishment of the Community Government Act and the Office for Gender Equality have provided a potential platform to unlock greater opportunities for more gender balanced decision-making. These efforts should be recognised and supported while being accompanied by research to assess their capacity development needs and impact. In the lead up to the referendum on political status, opportunities to change public perceptions of gender roles will emerge through an increase in public debate, while the post-referendum environment could open further opportunities for institutional and systems change.

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## Gender in political transition: Bougainville's peace process

Women's civil society activism in Bougainville has not always been well reflected in decision-making processes; however the political transition following the Bougainville Peace Agreement in 2001 has provided opportunities for greater inclusion. This report explores how gender dynamics shape decision-making, power and influence in Bougainville, in particular how formal and customary structures impact inclusion. It also looks at the approaches and strategies Bougainvillean women have used to increase their agency and influence within formal, faith and customary institutions. An assessment of achievements and challenges to date provides further understanding of how Bougainville's political landscape can support more diverse access to and influence over decision-making at multiple levels.

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