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WOMEN AND PEACE

**THE ROLE OF SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN IN
CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACEBUILDING**

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Title: Women and Peace: The Role of Solomon Islands Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

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A woman with curly hair, wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt and a red and black patterned skirt, stands in a lush green outdoor setting. She is smiling slightly. In the background, there are many trees and foliage. A semi-transparent green box with white text is overlaid on the right side of the image. In the bottom right corner, there is a large, stylized, light-colored graphic element resembling a traditional pattern or logo.

WOMEN AND PEACE: THE ROLE OF SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACEBUILDING

SUMMARY

While Solomon Islands women played an active and important role in creating the necessary conditions for the Solomon Islands peace process, they were largely excluded from the formal peace processes that brought about the end of the conflict known as the 'Tensions'. This case study examines some of the roles women played during the conflict, as well as in post-Townsville peacebuilding efforts that continue today, while reflecting on the potential for expanding women's roles in dialogue and conflict resolution processes in the future.

Women and peace: The role of Solomon Islands women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding¹

1. CONTEXT

Throughout the period of civil unrest in the Solomon Islands known as the 'Tensions', women played an active role in advocating nonviolence through dialogue, promoting disarmament, and emphasizing shared communal values across the ethnic lines drawn by the conflict. While women were largely excluded from formal peace dialogue processes, their activities were arguably crucial in creating the necessary conditions for the dialogue process that ultimately lead to the Townsville Agreement and the end of the conflict. In the post-Tensions environment, Solomon Islands women have continued to play a role in peacebuilding and reconciliation dialogues at the grassroots level, while advocating for greater recognition of women's specific experiences of the conflict at the national level.

Involvement in peacemaking during the Tensions did not represent a change in roles for women in the Solomon Islands. Indeed, Melanesian women have a long history of intervention in conflict to prevent violence through invoking customary norms and taboos specific to women, as well as traditional perceptions of women as 'peacemakers'. Christian teachings – a pillar of shared Solomon Islands cultural identity – also provide a number of examples of women as peacemakers during times of conflict, arguably bestowing further legitimacy and acceptance of women's involvement in peacemaking². Indeed, church organizations remain one of the primary outlets for women's participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation activities today³. Age also bestows a degree of respect upon women in many traditional Solomon Island communities, particularly in more rural communities, where the 'mature woman' has traditionally been empowered by kastom with a conflict resolution role within the community – for example in Temotu and Malaita by tying traditional 'feather money' to the end of a bow to stop fighting⁴.

1 The authors sincerely thank Honiara-based organizations and individuals who have provided information and advice for this case study.

2 Ibid

3 Leslie, Helen and Selina Boso. 2003. "Gender-related violence in the Solomon Islands: The work of local women's organisations". *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 44(3): 330.

4 Higgins, Kate. 2008. 'Outside In: A Volunteer's Reflections on a Solomon Islands Community Development Program'. *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2008/3*. Canberra: Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, p. 4.

While women's roles during the conflict were largely oriented towards promoting peaceful dialogue and nonviolence, it is important to note that smaller numbers of women were involved in supporting the conflict. In their formal submission to the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), women's groups noted that such roles included harbouring militants, spying or passing information between sides – usually enabled by greater freedom of movement due to perceptions of women as neutral – spreading gossip and even carrying out violent attacks on the mistresses of their husbands while they were away at war, helping to further an atmosphere of animosity⁵. Nonetheless, the submission emphasizes that these perpetrator roles were highly limited and that overall, women were seen as primarily contributing towards peace throughout the conflict.

Women also experienced the conflict in large numbers as victims in many cases of gender-based violence targeted specifically at women. Such violence has been documented extensively, notably in a study by Amnesty International, where it was noted that Solomon Islands women suffered from torture, rape, sexual violence, murder, beatings, arson, kidnapping, looting and extrajudicial detention during the conflict⁶. In addition to physical violence, women suffered from the closure of medical clinics, schools and other basic services and were denied safe access to those that did remain open, meaning that births were often carried out in unsanitary conditions and that children's illnesses and injuries went untreated⁷. Research indicates that women's experience of severe levels of gender-based violence continue to the present day⁸.

The years during the conflict and those that have unfolded since its end have seen women coming together from across the country to engage in a range of activities, laying the ground for reconciliation dialogue and peacebuilding, demonstrating a firm commitment to restoring the social fabric of their communities weakened by the conflict. This case study documents a sample of women's participation in dialogue and other activities, describing how women leveraged customary norms, Christian teachings, their roles as mothers, and the common bond of womanhood to build networks and help end the conflict, while reflecting upon their successes, challenges, and indications for the future role of Solomon Islands women in the post-conflict political environment.

5 Fangalasu, Judith et al. 2011. Herem Kam: Stori Blong Mifala Olketa Mere – Women's Submission to the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission, p. 35.

6 Amnesty International. 2004. Solomon Islands: Women Confronting Violence. AI Index: ASA 43/001/2004.

7 Ibid 14, 54.

8 Secretariat of the Pacific Community. 2009. Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study: A study on violence against women and children. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, p. 3.

2. PROBLEM

Although Solomon Islands women have been recognized for their significant contributions to brokering peace informally and for helping to create an atmosphere of reconciliation, women (along with civil society representatives) were not present either as negotiators or signatories to the Townsville Peace Agreement signed in October 2000 that formally ended the conflict. Many post-conflict initiatives and mechanisms, including the Australia-led Regional Assistance Mission for the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), have attempted to address issues of gender, for example by supporting roles for women. While these efforts, especially those of the TRC, should be recognised and applauded, these roles have remained relatively limited⁹ and against a backdrop of institutional and social marginalisation of women there is arguably a long way to go to ensure women's capacities to contribute to peace and reconciliation dialogue processes are fully utilised¹⁰.

Women were included in the composition of the TRC to an extent that compared favourably to TRCs in other countries, including through two women commissioners (one national and one international) and a good representation of female statement takers (14 of the 30 being female). In addition, the TRC organized a women's public hearing and private focus groups for women, set



9 Charlesworth, Hilary. 2008. 'Are Women Peaceful? Reflections on the Role of Women in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding'. *Feminist Legal Studies* 16, p. 357

10 For a detailed assessment of RAMSI's gender mainstreaming efforts, see: Greener, Fish and Tekulu. 2011. 'Peacebuilding, Gender and Policing in Solomon Islands'. *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint* 52(1): 17–28.

a target calling for 50% of statements to the TRC to come from women (in the end 37% of over 2300 statements were made by women) and developed an in-depth case study on women's experiences during the conflict. However, many of these statements made by women focused on the experience of their male relatives and there are questions about whether such activities provided sufficient psychological support and safe, gender-sensitive ways for women to contribute, particularly about their experiences of sexual violence.

Public hearings, in particular, have been criticized as being an unsuitable forum for women to make statements given that in kastom such public forums are generally the domain of men, and women are unaccustomed to or discouraged from speaking out in such a setting. The lack of anonymity available to women (as well as men) making even private statements to the TRC in village settings contributed to their reticence in speaking about their experiences and in particular identifying perpetrators due to feeling vulnerable to acts of retribution. In addition to these efforts by the TRC, a group of women came together to write a complementary submission to the TRC, which was presented in 2011. The TRC's final report (which at the time of writing had been submitted to Cabinet but not publically released) references and discusses the women's submission in addition to material drawn from the TRC's own research, public hearings, private hearings and statement taking activities.

Post-conflict justice mechanisms and processes have also tended to exclude women and gender-specific issues. A notable example of this has been the so-called 'Tension Trials'. Supported by RAMSI and led by the government, this series of trials has sought to bring to justice perpetrators of crimes committed between 1998 and 2003. While it may be said that the Tension Trials have made public and addressed a number of crimes, no known efforts have been made to formally address conflict-related crimes committed against women, including acts of sexual and gender-based violence. Most of the perpetrators of these crimes still go unpunished today, largely as a result of structural limitations such as lack of facilities for rape investigations, the distance of villages from courts, and threats of abuse to witnesses¹¹.

While such exclusions have likely been unintentional, they have resulted in the relative marginalization of women from the vital phases of post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. While in some Pacific contexts, women have taken on active roles in conflict resolution dialogue and peacebuilding that have helped them to transcend traditional gender roles and enlarge their space for participation in the post-conflict political environment – as has been

11 Amnesty International, 32.

demonstrated to some degree in Timor Leste and Bougainville – some critics argue that this has not been the case in Solomon Islands. Katherine Webber posits that there has not been this kind of transformation in the Solomon Islands context specifically because women’s activities were based on gendered stereotypes, which have “reinforce[ed] dominant gender hierarchies that devalue women and women’s activities”¹². Indeed, only one woman has served in Solomon Islands Parliament since independence, and despite women’s noted contributions to peacebuilding during the conflict, no women were elected in the 2001 elections, the first to follow the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement¹³ – a situation that has only recently changed with election of Vika Lusibaea in a Malaitan by-election called after her husband, former militant Jimmy Lusibea, lost his seat due to his conviction of a Tension-related offense.

Finally, widespread stress and trauma stemming from violence experienced during the Tensions continues to be a problem for a number of Solomon Islands women, according to a former Caritas counsellor who believes that working through these types of lingering psychosocial issues is a prerequisite for peace to fully take root in Solomon Islands society. Family issues also abound in many conflict-affected communities, with pervasive levels of domestic violence – internationally shown to be associated with conflict situations – a widespread problem in Solomon Islands. While limited data makes pre- and post-conflict comparisons difficult in Solomon Islands, recent research into sexual and gender based violence suggests a persistent pattern of disturbing levels of violence against women throughout the country. The 2009 survey carried out by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community with support from UNFPA and AusAID found that 2 out of 3 Solomon Islands women aged 15 to 49 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence at the hands of a partner, and more than 2 out of 5 reported having experienced it in the previous 12 months¹⁴.

Many families are also suffering from the effects of displacement, including the breakup of family structures and the loss of spouses or children. In these cases, women bear a disproportionate burden, either financial or psychosocial, and state capacity to deal with these issues remains a challenge. Women’s groups, however, have stepped up to begin to fill this need – another area of involvement that this case study will explore.

12 Webber, Katherine and Helen Johnson. 2008. 'Women, Peace Building and Political Inclusion: A Case Study from Solomon Islands'. *Hecate* 34(2): 83–99

13 Roughan, John. 2001. 'Silence greets election of new Solomon Islands PM'. *Pacific News Bulletin* 16(12): 3.

14 Secretariat of the Pacific Community. 2009. *Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study: A study on violence against women and children*. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, p. 3.

3. PROCESS

The emergence of women's groups provided women peacemakers with a vehicle for their peacemaking efforts. Key among these was Women for Peace (WFP), a group formed in 2000 at the height of the conflict as an independent and neutral group of Solomon Islands women committed to working on a voluntary basis to restore peace¹⁵. Their activities included bringing food to the combatants – many of them quite young – praying together, and using their traditional roles and image as mothers to encourage the men to lay down their weapons to end the suffering of their communities. Those involved in WFP noted that one of the reasons that women were able to organize through the conflict and in its aftermath was because the bond of womanhood was seen as stronger than that of ethnic divide, particular given the large number of inter-marriages across the different Solomon Island ethnic groups.

Through these groups women were able to combine their resources and channel their efforts towards ending the conflict. Through their involvement, either from within these groups, or individually among their families and communities, women worked to leverage traditional conceptions of women as peacemakers to intervene in the conflict in various ways¹⁶ gradually creating an environment that was conducive to bringing about peace through dialogue. Women have extended their involvement to the post-conflict peacebuilding that continues



15 Pollard 2000, 44.

16 Leslie, Helen. 2002. 'Gendering conflict and conflict management in the Solomon Islands'. *Development Bulletin* 60: 13–16.

today. As we note later, this raises important questions about possible scope for further recognition of women peacemaking processes, including through a concerted effort to involve women in dialogue and conflict resolution processes.

The rise of women's groups

In the early days of the conflict, women recognized the need to organize in order to amplify their collective strengths and maximize their impact. Women's organizations such as the National Council of Women (NCW) and WFP were among the first of such organizations, formed out of a recognition that the collective empowerment of women through women's groups could help to promote a culture of peace in the face of violent conflict¹⁷. Many such groups were faith-based in origin, born from a long tradition of women's church groups working within and across Solomon Islands communities. As such, one of the most notable interventions pursued by women's groups during the conflict was to cross battle lines to hold prayer meetings with combatants. Such activities underscored the shared bond of strong Christian faith, seeking to remind the combatants of a larger sense of shared Solomon Islands identity that transcended ethnic and communal lines, while also emphasizing Christian virtues of forgiveness and nonviolence.

As the conflict spread, WFP and its women's movement grew as well, expanding from its original base in Honiara to reach out to incorporate other women's groups across Guadalcanal and Malaita, staying true to its ethos of serving as a neutral body independent of religious, ethnic or communal ties¹⁸. With their expanded membership, WFP activities were able to broaden in scope, with weekly prayer meetings held and occasionally broadcast nationally.

WFP leaders were also able to leverage their growing national recognition to obtain meetings with combatant leaders, government representatives and police. The aim of these meetings was to promote mutual understanding between the different parties, with the WFP members sharing perspectives gathered from both sides with the ultimate goal of lessening the animosity, fostering an atmosphere of greater trust, and opening up the space for dialogue and peace negotiations – initially, on a humanitarian level, to allow for exchange of food, goods and medical supplies across battle lines, but with the larger goal of paving the way for formal ceasefire negotiations. WFP members also promoted the wearing of symbols of national unity, drawn from the colours of the national flag, in order to promote national rather than ethnic or clan solidarity¹⁹.

17 Leslie and Boso 2003, 329

18 Pollard 2000, 44.

19 Pollard 2000, 45.

Building bridges, crossing battle lines

Throughout the conflict, women's groups engaged in activities designed to build bridges between warring parties, opening up opportunities for dialogue. Women often did this by using traditional authority bestowed upon them as mothers to have their voices heard. Indeed, one WFP leader notes that an objective of their meetings with combatants was to ensure that they understood the impact that their actions were having on women, children and other vulnerable groups on both sides of the conflict²⁰. Women's groups such as WFP and NCW as well as the Mothers' Union were noted for moving between the roadblocks and bunkers of warring parties, using their power as mothers to persuade combatants to lay down their arms and allow women from both sides to trade essential supplies or travel through the frontlines to seek medical assistance for their families²¹. The same WFP leader also describes how women would negotiate with combatant leaders for the return of child soldiers, again drawing upon their moral authority as mothers²² and demonstrating their ability to be active drivers of peace dialogue processes.

In an interview with one women's group member – and later National Peace Council monitor – it was noted that a common experience for women and families during the conflict was food shortage due to disruptions in supply caused by the conflict. When times became desperate, women took it upon themselves to cross the blockades and approach the militant bunkers to negotiate for free passage to markets, often at great peril.

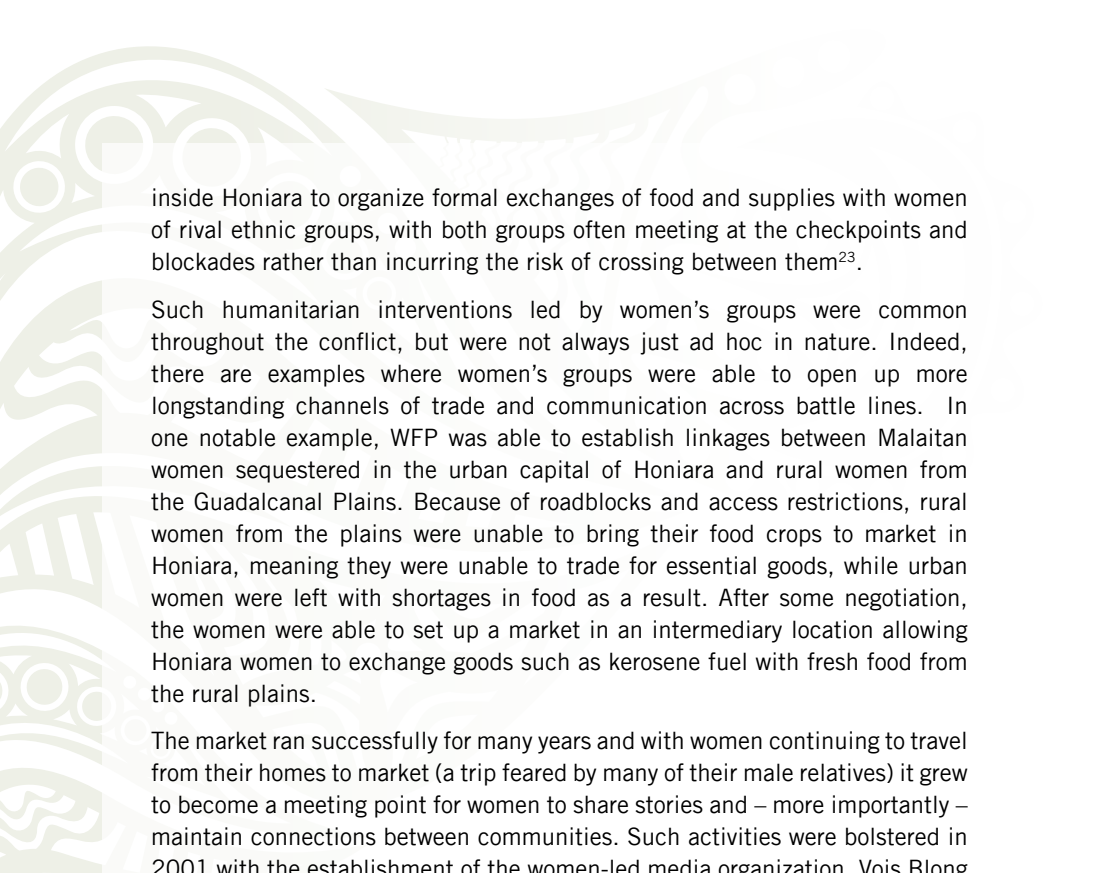
The former peace monitor explained that these requests were routinely denied under suspicion that the women were going to spy or take food back to opposing combatants. She recounted one incident in which a group of 50 women were stopped at a roadblock by a number of armed and angry combatants and denied passage to the town to trade for food. At that point, the mother of an infant waved one of her child's diapers as a white flag of peace, begging the combatants to "think of the children". This appeal proved to be effective, and eventually, the women were able to cross the blockades in order to trade for food and other essential goods they could bring back to their families.

Similarly, the NCW, comprised of women from church-based women's groups akin to the membership of WFP, also led calls for peace for humanitarian purposes and used the traditional perception of women's neutrality to enable them to act as go-betweens during the conflict. The NCW mobilized women

20 Ibid, 44.

21 Bhagawan-Rolls, Sharon. 2006. 'Women as Mediators in Pacific Conflict Zones'. Women in Action 2: 32; Amnesty International, 54; Higgins, 4.

22 Pollard 2000, 44.



inside Honiara to organize formal exchanges of food and supplies with women of rival ethnic groups, with both groups often meeting at the checkpoints and blockades rather than incurring the risk of crossing between them²³.

Such humanitarian interventions led by women's groups were common throughout the conflict, but were not always just ad hoc in nature. Indeed, there are examples where women's groups were able to open up more longstanding channels of trade and communication across battle lines. In one notable example, WFP was able to establish linkages between Malaitan women sequestered in the urban capital of Honiara and rural women from the Guadalcanal Plains. Because of roadblocks and access restrictions, rural women from the plains were unable to bring their food crops to market in Honiara, meaning they were unable to trade for essential goods, while urban women were left with shortages in food as a result. After some negotiation, the women were able to set up a market in an intermediary location allowing Honiara women to exchange goods such as kerosene fuel with fresh food from the rural plains.

The market ran successfully for many years and with women continuing to travel from their homes to market (a trip feared by many of their male relatives) it grew to become a meeting point for women to share stories and – more importantly – maintain connections between communities. Such activities were bolstered in 2001 with the establishment of the women-led media organization, Vois Blong Mere Solomon (VBMS) (The Solomon Women's Voice), which broadcast stories of women reaching out across battle lines, peace advocacy messaging, and personal stories of how women were working to transform conflict, inspiring others to take up similar work in their own communities²⁴.

Women reached across the battle lines in similar ways to ensure that they could continue to uphold their traditional roles as mothers and provide for their families, thus maintaining a degree of social continuity in the face of conflict. In addition to establishing trading lines between communities, women were also noted for establishing microenterprises, including making the goods used in *kastom* ceremonies and other essentials that were unavailable when access to markets was impossible, and some even continuing in their (unpaid) public service jobs, keeping some basic services running throughout the conflict. In their formal submission to the TRC, women even spoke of providing microloans to one another to help their families get by financially while their husbands

23 Bhagawan-Rolls, Sharon. 2006. 'Women as Mediators in Pacific Conflict Zones'. *Women in Action* 2: 32. Isis International.

24 Maebuta, Jack and Rebecca Spence. 2009. 'Attempts at Building Peace in the Solomon Islands: Disconnected Layers'. *Reflecting on Peace Practice Project: Cumulative Impact Case Study*. Cambridge: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, p. 28.

were away at war²⁵. By carrying on the activities that kept together “the fabric of society” during the conflict – growing crops, engaging in trade, raising their children –Solomon Islands women provided a “foundation upon which peacebuilding could proceed” ²⁶.

Women’s role in formal peace processes

While there are some suggestions that women were in fact invited to attend talks in Townsville leading up to the Townsville Peace Agreement, it seems that objections by one of the warring factions to the involvement of any civil society representatives following early iterations of formal talks²⁷ combined with problems relating to choosing female representatives meant that in the end, women did not take part in the process that concluded with the signing of the agreement in October 2000. Women were, however, able to exert a degree of influence on some of the earlier dialogue processes that preceded Townsville. Notably, WFP representatives were invited to an earlier round of ceasefire talks held aboard a vessel moored off Honiara in 2000. Over 100 women (and some men) representing women’s organisations, churches, NGOs, government and individuals also came together in May 2000, at the height of the conflict, in a round table conference on Safety and Security of Women and Children convened by the Minister for Women, Hilda Kari. The conference participants drew up a Communiqué which made a range of recommendations to government, police and the warring factions, urging them to end the violence, and take measures that would end the suffering of women and children.

The document also committed the women present to a range of activities, both publicly and within their families that they would undertake to contribute to the forthcoming Solomon Islands peace process. The document would become the framework upon which WFP would operate in the peacebuilding and reconstruction phase following the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement.²⁸ Despite being unable to participate in the formal Townsville talks, one WFP leader notes that the WFP and other women’s groups did welcome the signing of the agreement as well as the opportunity to review it and work towards its implementation²⁹.

25 Fangalasu'u et al., 37.

26 Corrin, Jennifer. 2008. 'Ples Bilong Mere (Women's Place): Law, Gender and Peace-Building in Solomon Islands'. *Feminist Legal Studies* 16: 188.

27 Fraenkel, Jon *The manipulation of custom: from uprising to intervention in the Solomon Islands* (2004) p. 96

28 Pollard 2000, 44.

29 Pollard, Alice. 2003. 'Women's Organizations, Voluntarism, and Self- Financing in Solomon Islands: a Participant Perspective'. *Oceania* 74: 52.

Post-conflict reconciliation-building

Women's peacebuilding activities did not end with the conflict; indeed, women were able to further leverage their collective strengths and image as mothers and peacemakers to promote a climate of reconciliation and restoring of inter-communal ties in the years after conflict.

Due to the longstanding connection between women's groups and churches across the country, Christian leaders often reached out to women to involve them in their own outreach efforts following the conflict. One WFP member recounted an incident where she was invited to join a Catholic priest to give a talk to a community heavily affected by the conflict and with a number of former combatants, many of them youth. She described feeling afraid to go because she knew that people had been armed; however, when she arrived, she was surprised to discover that they too were equally afraid. They remained traumatized by the conflict and harboured lingering feelings of animosity, with former enemies now having to live together within the same communities. While there, she talked to a large crowd of young people and women about peace, encouraging them to look after themselves and one another, drawing on shared Christian ideals of forgiveness and love. In the end, she said the people were happy to have her there, demonstrating the power that women could have on fostering reconciliation.

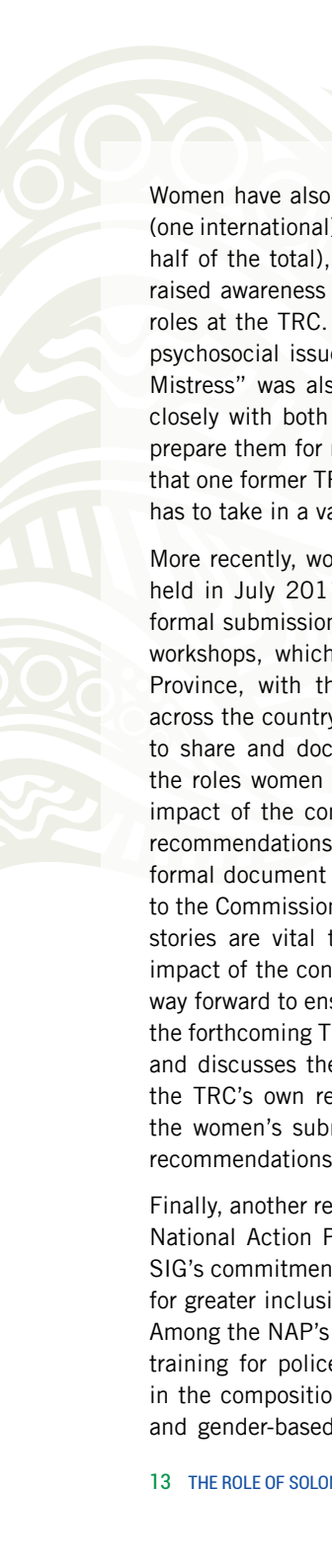
Women were also recruited – albeit in limited numbers – to participate as peace monitors with the National Peace Council (NPC), an organization formed to be a neutral, independent body with largely external support to conduct inter-communal reconciliation and mediation work in some of the most conflict-affected areas of the country. One of the former women NPC monitors described her role as being primarily to monitor conflict in her assigned zone. Usually working in teams, she and other peace monitors would report incidents and help resolve conflicts within communities as they arose. When the conflict in her zone near Honiara settled down, the former monitor reported becoming involved in inter-communal mediation on the remote Guadalcanal Weathercoast.

On arrival in a community, the NPC monitors would split up in order to talk to each of the parties in the conflict, hearing their stories and determining the outcomes they were seeking through mediation. Where possible, the female monitors would talk with the women and the male monitors would talk with the men. Then, the NPC team would meet to confer before returning to the different parties. This shuttle mediation would continue until both sides agreed to a 'bridging reconciliation', with women monitors continuing to work

to build the confidence and capacity of women to bring their own views into the negotiations. The former monitor noted that once given an opportunity to voice their opinions, women were able to bring increased pressure on the parties to come to a peaceful resolution. By describing the impact of the conflict on the broader community, including the women and children, the women were able to appeal to men to look beyond their desire to 'win' and to focus on the long term wellbeing of their communities.

In recent times, there continues to be examples of women using their traditional authority and conflict resolution skills to help maintain order in the community and to look after the wellbeing of women and children. For example, a woman with extensive experience in a range of post conflict counselling and reconciliation roles, has taken on the position of 'Market Mistress' (MM) in the Honiara City Markets. As an area where large numbers of people with different ethnic and kinship loyalties converge, the market is the site of frequent disputes, occasionally resulting in violence. In an interview, the MM recounted dealing with a particularly tense situation. In the early morning hours, someone had been killed near the markets. Recognizing that such incidents were often followed by 'payback killings' or other acts of vengeance, she arrived at the market that morning expecting that it might be the site of such retaliation. When a group of angry young men did indeed arrive, she approached them, putting up her hand to physically demand that they stop. As a noted and respected figure in the community, the youth recognized her, and allowed her to speak. She described approaching them in a "motherly way", sitting in front of them and addressing them as though they were her own sons. She pleaded with them to leave, asking that they not ruin the market, reminding them that the market was a place for everyone in the community. In the end, the young men agreed and left without causing any trouble.

Domestic violence is also a problem that occurs frequently in the markets. In these cases, the MM described how she brings the people involved to the market office for couple's counselling, drawing from her own training in psychology and with an understanding of kastom and cultural practices. She then said that she speaks with each person separately before finally bringing them together for a joint mediation. She sets rules for the joint meeting and ensures that they are followed, including respecting each other and not talking when the other is speaking. This is another example of women, when given the opportunity, using their skills and experience as well as their knowledge of kastom to help promote reconciliation dialogue at the community level in the years following the conflict.



Women have also played a role in the Solomon Islands TRC, with two women (one international) serving as commissioners 14 female statement takers (nearly half of the total), a small number women working as TRC field workers who raised awareness about the TRC prior to the hearings, and in administrative roles at the TRC. In particular, women have played a key role in dealing with psychosocial issues and trauma experienced by the victims. Indeed, “Market Mistress” was also a former TRC worker, who described her role as working closely with both victims and alleged perpetrators to help counsel them and prepare them for making their statements in the TRC’s public hearings – a job that one former TRC worker noted as being mentally taxing for the worker, who has to take in a vast number of “bad stories”.

More recently, women have come together through a series of five workshops held in July 2011 with financial support from the EU, to develop their own formal submission to the TRC. Approximately 60 women participated in these workshops, which were held in Honiara, Malaita, Guadalcanal and Western Province, with the aim of providing women affected by the conflict from across the country with a safe space in which they could finally come together to share and document their stories. During the workshops, they discussed the roles women played during the Tensions, the violence they suffered, the impact of the conflict, as well as how they were able to survive, along with recommendations for the future. The culmination of the workshops was a formal document presenting the experiences and recommendations of women to the Commissioners of the TRC. The workshop’s leaders believe that women’s stories are vital to developing a full understanding of the root causes and impact of the conflict on Solomon Islands society, and are key to developing a way forward to ensure such violence never happens again. It is understood that the forthcoming TRC final report includes a ‘women’s chapter’ which references and discusses the stories detailed in the women’s submission in addition to the TRC’s own research and findings. It remains to be seen to what extent the women’s submission and its recommendations are reflected in the final recommendations of the TRC, and how the SIG responds to the TRC report.

Finally, another recent development has been the drafting of a Solomon Islands National Action Plan (NAP) on Women in Peace and Security, reflecting the SIG’s commitment to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 calling for greater inclusion of women in peace and security programming and policy. Among the NAP’s numerous provisions are calls for the incorporation of gender training for police, military and peacekeepers, incorporating gender balance in the composition of such forces, and greater attention to preventing sexual and gender-based violence. The NAP, still in the final drafting and approval

phase, will sit within the National Peacebuilding Policy Framework currently being established by the Ministry of National Unity Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP), and is designed to “create a unique framework that begins to address women, peace and security”³⁰. The NAP has been developed through a consultation process involving civil society organizations, government agencies, church representatives, international organizations, donors, and UN agencies including UN Women, UNFPA, OHCHR and UNDP, with noted involvement from the women’s group VBMS and the incorporation of information contained in the women’s submission to the TRC.

4. CHALLENGES

Influence of kastom

Many women active in peacebuilding reported that they continue to face difficulties conducting their work given the limitations that kastom places on women taking on public roles. They note that while some chiefs and religious leaders have accepted the involvement of women in reconciliation work and have recognized the importance of giving women a voice, others argue that the involvement of women contradicts kastom and Christian teachings. A former NPC monitor interviewed for this case study explained that while her team was ultimately able to convince the chiefs in the communities where they worked to allow the involvement of the female NPC monitors and to include women’s voices, this was a definite challenge. Similarly, another female peace worker interviewed explained that some church leaders held intractable positions against women’s participation in the public domain. However, many women argued that kastom can in fact be used to their advantage in circumstances where women can use the traditional powers that kastom does bestow upon women, particularly to mothers and elders. Other women peace workers have noted that certain Biblical stories also promote the image of women as peacemakers, which can also prove to be a source of empowerment for women.

Women also note, however, that challenges to increasing women’s participation that arise out of interpretations of kastom could also be beginning to shift through generational change. They argue that gradually, women are increasingly beginning to claim some of their due rights. They explain that as the population becomes more educated, a growing number are beginning to recognize the importance of gender equality, with younger men starting to respect women’s right to participate in public life. Indeed, when one woman recounted

³⁰ Taken from draft text of the NAP.

discussions with her family on entering politics, she noted that while some of her brothers did not support her, some of them did – an indication that attitudes are beginning to change.

Class divides

One woman peace worker mentioned that while prior to and during the Tensions, she felt that women were quick to find ways to connect with each other, in recent times an increasing class divide has resulted in difficulties in bringing together women of different educational levels and backgrounds to cooperate effectively. She explained that as women’s experiences and background diverge, some women look down on others – for example, she witnesses some women with office jobs in town looking down upon rural women. Rather than encouraging each other, this contributes to mistrust and a class divide, which she believes to be one of the reasons women struggle to gain seats in Parliament. This problem has been exacerbated by the arrival of RAMSI, she believes, which has caused rents to rise dramatically in some areas, disproportionately benefitting wealthy property owners and further exaggerating the differences between women from different levels of society. To overcome this barrier, she felt that educated women need to be able to reach out and communicate more effectively with



rural women in order to engage with them, create mutual trust, and forge a bond that can overcome class divides to allow women to work together to rebuild their communities.

Erosion of kastom and traditional authority

One of the problems mentioned by multiple women peace workers was that there has been a breakdown of traditional community governance structures which, while on one hand excluded women from positions of leadership or decision-making, also maintained a level of social order that provided a degree of protection for women and vulnerable members of society. These women suggest that the breakdown of kastom was a direct result of the conflict which eroded structures of traditional authority, and has continued in many communities due to the damage to peoples' lives and the trauma it has left behind. As such, traditional figures of authority, such as chiefs or elders – including women – have lost some of their power and esteem within their communities. Before the Tensions, one peace worker explained, young people respected chiefs and elder women; however, in many conflict-affected areas, things have changed. Young people, particularly those who were involved in, or badly affected by the Tensions, are misbehaving and no longer listen to chiefs or to elder women, making it difficult to bring people together to do the work of reconciliation within and between communities. This problem has been exacerbated by rising levels of drug and alcohol abuse, she noted, indicating that there is a need to target these young people in order to help them change their behaviour.

Justice for sexual and gender-based violence

The women's submission to the TRC notes that strong cultural taboos against women speaking out – for instance, regarding sexual and gender-based violence – remain a barrier to providing justice and redress for victims, as well as psychosocial support and healing. In addition to the cultural stigma, many women also choose to remain silent because they know that speaking out could set into motion a cycle of retribution leading to more acts of violence. Thus, for many women, silence and forgetting is often considered the better tactic for keeping the peace. Women also feel that there is nothing to gain from speaking out about such experiences; instead, they would only be reliving a traumatic experience publicly. Workshops such as those held to gather input for the women's submission to the TRC were praised for providing a safe space in which women could feel free to have their stories heard, allowing them to begin to move towards healing; however, instances of formal justice or compensation for victims remain extremely limited.

Lack of material support and capacity development for women's organizations

Grassroots women's organizations in Solomon Islands largely remain underfunded and under-resourced. In terms of funding, women's organizations must often rely on support from government ministries, international NGOs or overseas donors; however, such funding is often tied to meeting certain mandates and objectives set by the funding organization, which may have limited relation to the needs on the ground. In addition, many of these funding packages are time-limited, and once they end, most organizations have to severely cut back on the scope of their work if not disband altogether. Women peace workers also noted that there is a particular need for capacity building in the area of providing psychosocial support and trauma counselling. While they explained how they were able to draw on prior work experiences or, in some cases, previous training, most felt that this was an area of capacity development that would greatly benefit their work.

5. RESULTS AND IMPACTS

Creation of necessary conditions for peace

Although there were many factors that ultimately brought about agreement among the main warring factions in 2000 and greater social order from 2003, it could be argued that women made an important, if not crucial, contribution to creating conditions in which such a dialogue process could take place. Through their work building bridges between warring factions, maintaining relationships across ethnic divides, highlighting the impact the conflict was having on broader society, emphasising a shared Solomon Islands identity that transcended ethnic and communal lines and promoting Christian virtues of forgiveness and nonviolence, women were able to create an environment that was conducive to peace, and convince key players in the conflict that it was time to end the violence.

Limiting the damage caused by the conflict

The activities described in this case study indicate that women played a key role in not only sustaining a range of essential social and economic functions, but also helping to maintain the moral fabric of society, arguably mitigating some of the conflict's negative impact on Solomon Islands society. While certainly causing widespread trauma and distress, the conflict in Solomon Islands did not result in widespread breakdown of the moral fabric of society.

Amid abhorrent acts of violence and abuse, there were also stories on both sides of humanity prevailing – combatants secretly warning their friends in enemy parties of planned attacks, allowing people to escape, and deliberate disobeying of orders in order to save lives. It could be argued that through concerted efforts of women throughout the conflict to remind combatants of their role as husbands, fathers and sons, and through Prayer, emphasising responsibilities to the broader society, and to God, they were able to mitigate, to some degree, the damage caused by the conflict. In doing so, women were able to assist in preserving an element of humanity in Solomon Islands society, despite the atrocities that took place.

Sustained involvement of women in peacebuilding

One noted result of the early work of women’s organizations in peacebuilding is that they have paved the way for the continued involvement of women’s groups. A former WFP worker explained that WFP worked together to form strategies to work towards peace until the arrival of RAMSI in 2003, which formally took over the task of restoring peace and order to Solomon Islands communities. She notes that WFP continues to meet every week, with their focus now shifting towards supporting families. Another peace worker interviewed for this study explained that even though her formal role has ended, she continues to work with the church and provides free trauma counselling and support for people still struggling with the effects of the conflict.



Development of a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women in Peace and Security

While it remains in the drafting phase, the Solomon Islands NAP is an important step towards enshrining measures of gender equality, participation and empowerment into national policy and demonstrates solid progress towards upholding the country's international commitments such as UNSCR 1325 and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Importantly, the NAP calls to “empower women and maximize the diverse strengths they can share in the peacebuilding arena,” reflecting the contributions that women have made as peacemakers during the Tensions and in the post-conflict environment.

Shifting attitudes in favour of women's participation

Despite their exclusion from formal peace dialogue processes, the role of women in building the foundation on which a peace agreement could be reached has now been widely recognized both within Solomon Islands and internationally. This in turn has contributed to wider recognition that peacebuilding and reconciliation work needs to have gender balance and that women's perspectives add value. Indeed, there appears to be increasing support for women's participation more generally. The 2010 RAMSI People's Survey indicated that the Solomon Islands public is increasingly favouring the participation of women in public life. Notably, the survey showed that 84 per cent of respondents said that women make good leaders, with the main reason cited being that “women have an honest way of doing things”, followed by “stronger focus on education, health and/or family”, and their ability to be “good communicators” and “more inclusive decision makers”. Perhaps even more surprisingly, 85 per cent of respondents said there should be women in Parliament; however, this support has not been expressed by people through votes for women candidates at the polls.

Increasing confidence of women

One of the former NPC peace monitors interviewed noted that the women monitors found the experience of working with the NPC to be very positive as women were able to provide each other with much-needed support and companionship, which she believed was key to their success. She found that often after reconciliations and particularly after mediation training, women had more confidence and were given more respect by men. Similarly, while it was at times difficult for women find an appropriate forum through which they could share their stories and experiences, when this has been achieved, it has

been a confirming and empowering experience for the women involved. As Ruth Maetala wrote about her experience as the National Coordinator of the workshops to develop the women’s submission to the TRC, she felt that the workshops were “an opportunity to tell a ten-year-old buried memory. Digging up the past was hurtful but also timely for national healing and sustainable development. Through such processes women could reclaim their space where truth-telling is empowering rather than oppressing”³¹.


6. TECHNIQUES AND VALUES

One of the women peace workers interviewed for this study explained that “As Solomon Islanders, we are a talking community”, expressing a deeply held cultural importance placed on sharing stories, listening, and being heard. As one peace worker noted, people need to tell their stories, people need to feel safe, and people need to move on with their lives – a process that she said starts with listening and telling stories. Reflecting this value, many of the women peace workers interviewed, and indeed much of the literature on women’s peacebuilding surveyed, discuss the central importance of storytelling.

Many of the peace workers interviewed described their role as helping women to speak up about their experiences and to help them to articulate their needs and what impact the conflict was having on their lives. Providing a safe space for women to do so helped them get around the limitations of *kastom*, which arguably limits women from being able to speak up publicly about sensitive issues. Indeed, this was the driving force behind the series of workshops that fed into the women’s submission to the TRC, with the submission noting that many women felt that just having their stories heard and documented was a major step in helping them to begin to move on.

While *kastom* in some respects clearly places constraints upon women, the women peace workers also discussed the importance of working within *kastom* and church teachings and in fact drawing upon these traditional value sets to increase the impact of their reconciliation work. Using the traditional authority and respect bestowed upon mothers and elder women according to *kastom*, the peace workers noted that they were often granted a level of access to communities and individuals in conflict that they would not have had otherwise. They also generally felt respected and listened to, whether in community meetings or in meetings with armed combatants in their bunkers because *kastom* dictates that they be given respect due to their seniority.

³¹ Fangalasu, Judith et al. 2011. *Herem Kam: Stori Blong Mifala Olketa Mere – Women’s Submission to the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, p. i-ii.



The women peace workers were also able to harness such cultural values to help promote an atmosphere of reconciliation and foster mutual respect in communities torn apart by conflict. For instance, drawing on Christian teachings in their work, they were able to remind combatants of the importance of “loving thy neighbour as one’s own” and other teachings that emphasise respect for others despite differences. They also were able to use stories from the Bible emphasising forgiveness, reminding people that reconciliation was not only in the interest of their communities – it was also their Christian duty.

Finally, some women were able to employ kastom in more creative ways to help stop violence as well. For instance, one peace worker told the story of a group of young women believed to be supporting Malaitan combatants by bringing them food and carrying it to the bunkers. However, it was discovered that in fact, they were using beliefs about the power of women to destroy ancestral powers imbued in combatant weapons by walking over them. While they were in the bunkers, they would step over the weapons, thereby ‘destroying’ the ancestral powers held within them, illustrating again one of the ways that kastom could be harnessed by women.

7. LESSONS LEARNED AND OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Kastom and religion can be both empowering and limiting to women

As the examples in this case study detail, women’s relationship to kastom and religion is more complex than it may seem. While on one level, kastom and religion do pose barriers to women’s ability to fully participate in public life, including in peacebuilding, the literature surveyed and peace workers interviewed in this case study uncovered a number of ways in which women were able to harness some aspects of kastom and religion to their advantage. For instance, Solomon Islands women can use culturally embedded power given to elders and mothers to gain respect in communities and allow their voices to be heard. They can also use cultural taboos and beliefs – for instance, against men stepping over women or ancestral powers imbued in weapons that are neutralised when a woman steps over them – to neutralize violence. Similarly, women were able to use Biblical precedents for women’s roles as peacemakers to show that their activities were in fact culturally appropriate as they draw on, rather than overstep, traditional roles granted to women.

Women’s leadership style differs from that of men

In light of the above, the peace workers interviewed for this case study note that culture also influences the way that women are able to take on leadership roles and approach a conflict. These methods may differ from those employed by men, but are no less effective. For example, one peace worker explained that it is not appropriate to confront people standing up and speaking directly as a man would likely do. Instead of trying to be a policewoman or other enforcement figure, a woman should present herself in a motherly way, as this commands immediate respect and grants her near universal authority. However, the women peace workers note that for this to be effective, it is important to ensure that those in the community see you as a role model in your own life as well. Thus, for women in positions of leadership, personal image is very important – in order to be respected as ‘mothers’ of a community or even of the nation, they must also be seen as role model mothers in their own families, Churches and private lives as well.

Men can play a role in supporting women

The women peace workers interviewed for this study mentioned the importance of having men in their lives who support them and appreciate the work that they are doing. Whether they be husbands, brothers, fathers or chiefs or religious leaders, men can provide a level of moral support that will only help to strengthen the impact women can make in peacebuilding and reconciliation work, and further legitimize the participation of women in public life.





Managing cohesion and access

Generally speaking, this case study indicates that women seem to be less divided along ethnic lines and more willing to cooperate to work for peace in their communities. This has been attributed to a strong bond of womanhood and shared duty as mothers that can transcend ethnic divides. A woman peace worker noted that while men simply wanted to win, women “just wanted peace”, and as such, were more inclined to cooperate. Indeed, there was much evidence that women did cooperate across battle lines, united by a shared women’s experience and a pragmatic need to do what was needed to carry out their roles as mothers and provide for their families. In recent times, this cohesion – so critical to the success of women during times of conflict – has understandably been somewhat eroded in a post-conflict environment, partly due to increasing divisions across class lines, and between urban and rural women. A challenge for Solomon Islander women today, as for any large and diverse social movement or group, is to ensure that internal differences do not compromise the effectiveness of efforts directed toward shared goals. A particular challenge is to find ways to include women from rural and remote areas in peacebuilding programmes, including by linking them with existing networks and activities.

The importance of truth-telling

In both the literature surveyed, interviews with peace workers, and in their submission to the TRC, women expressed a strong need to have a safe space in which they could share their experiences and have their stories heard. The women’s workshops that resulted in the women’s submission to the TRC provided this and were widely praised by participants for offering them their first opportunity to have the truth heard and to begin to move on. Having these stories documented in the women’s submission to the TRC also allowed them to be shared with those with decision-making authority, while helping to preserve their anonymity – something many women feel is important to maintaining a feeling of security. Similarly, the TRC has provided an opportunity for over 1,000 women, many of whom live in remote areas and would be unlikely to be invited to participate in provincial workshops, to tell their stories (anonymously where requested), have them recorded and, eventually presented as part of the final TRC report.

The need for acknowledgement and reparations

According to the women’s submission to the TRC, women still seek a “national reconciliation for women” that will formally acknowledge their suffering during

the conflict and allow them to forgive and move on. They also want to have input into any reparations arrangements and land compensation mechanisms that may arise from the work of the TRC. This remains an unresolved issue that could have a great deal of impact towards addressing women's grievances stemming from the conflict.

Women's role in conflict early warning

The women's submission to the TRC notes that "women felt they knew the ethnic tensions were coming" long before they had actually manifest in violence. As a woman's group leader pointed out in the TRC submission, "We knew about this tension way before 1998...We knew where the first meetings were held". This points to a need to ensure that women are recognized for the role they can play in conflict early warning systems as they are often the most in touch with developments within their own communities and among the neighbouring communities in which they trade or have family ties.

How to translate customary authority into wider political and social decision-making

This case study demonstrates that Solomon Islands women have been able to employ a degree of customary power bestowed upon mothers and elders to some effect in building peace during and after the conflict and in garnering respect as leaders of grassroots women's movements. Indeed, some of the literature surveyed goes so far as to note that the conflict was actually empowering for Solomon Islands women as it provided an easing of cultural barriers to women's participation, with women stepping up to become de facto heads of household and communities³². However, these barriers seem to have returned quite emphatically once the conflict ended, and women remain unable to leverage this newfound power or any customary authority to achieve greater inclusion in formal political processes, demonstrated by their lack of success in gaining seats in Parliament. Given that women have been able to make inroads into national politics in similar post-conflict contexts such as in Timor Leste and Bougainville, the question of why such a transition has not been able to occur for Solomon Islands women remains unclear and deserving of more attention.

Balancing Western values of gender equality with kastom

The end of the Tensions brought the arrival of an array of external assistance, ranging from the RAMSI forces to UN and other international aid agencies. While the efforts of these organisations have been generally appreciated

³² Corrin, 189.

by the broader public, they bring with them Western values of gender equality and seek to force a pace of societal change that that can be at odds with Solomon Islands kastom, generating criticism from some Solomon Islanders. Some have gone as far as to argue that the ‘white people’s’ need to institute ‘gender balance’ threw off widely accepted gender structures and ultimately ‘weakened kastom’, infact removing one source of traditional authority women have been able to draw from in their peacebuilding work. How these differing Western and Melanesian values can be reconciled in support of women’s greater participation is an issue that deserves further attention.

Future involvement of women in dialogue and conflict resolution efforts

The valuable, extensive and self-motivated efforts of women to address conflict in their communities during the Tensions and beyond contrasts with the relatively limited participation of women in contemporary dialogue and conflict resolution efforts. Unfortunately, this is the case despite the widespread recognition of the role women played in bringing about the conditions for successful peace dialogue process during the Tensions, and despite the fact that, as shown in this case study, there are opportunities for women to leverage their traditional roles in kastom and the church to bring authority to their peacemaking efforts. This raises important questions about how it is possible to translate recognition of women roles in peacemaking and peacebuilding into concrete opportunities to increase their participation in dialogue and conflict resolution processes in Solomon Islands.



