

## ***Ples Bilong Mere*\*: Law, Gender and Peace-Building in Solomon Islands**

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**Abstract** This article discusses women and peace-building in Solomon Islands and the effect of law, theory and practical circumstances on their role. It looks at the place of Solomon Islands women in society historically, with particular reference to war and peace. It then analyses their current status from a legal perspective, looking at the existing Constitution, the proposed Federal Constitution, and relevant aspects of international law. It questions whether gender equity provisions are sufficient to promote participation at a practical level. The article also disputes the effectiveness of various international, regional, and local initiatives, designed to enhance the status of women. The article discusses the application of some of the theories relating to women and peace-building to the circumstances of Solomon Islands. It concludes by looking to the future and discussing means of consolidating women's position, and increasing their involvement in leadership and decision-making.

**Keywords** International law · Peace-building · Post-conflict Constitutions · Solomon Islands · South Pacific · Women

### **Introduction**

Subject to notable exceptions, such as Boadicea, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I and more recently Florence Nightingale and Nancy Wake, women rarely feature in the history of war (Foster 1989, p. 1; MacDonald 1987, p. 1). Similarly, women's role in peace-building has often been overlooked or at least underestimated (Foster 1989). The

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\**Ples Bilong Mere*: Literally translated, this means 'Women's Place'.

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focus tends to be on public actions featuring high profile figures. However, the important role of civil society, including non-government organisations both international and local, is being increasingly recognised. One example of this is the work of the United States Institute of Peace. Resources from donors and grant agencies are at last being directed to extend peace studies into this area and to fund research designed to improve understanding of this role and its effectiveness.

To date, what research there has been has paid little attention to the small island states of the South Pacific, where recent conflict has added urgency to this task. One country which has experienced such conflict is Solomon Islands which, in 1998, began a steady decline into anarchy, fuelled by animosity between islanders from Guadalcanal and those from Malaita (Bennett 2002; Corrin Care 2004, pp. 156–170). The peace process stalled when arms decommissioning exercises failed. In late July 2003, an international peace-keeping force of 2,200 police and military personnel was sent to Guadalcanal, coordinated by Australia, and the rule of law has gradually returned. During the conflict, women's groups joined together to call for peace and democracy. They also played a more active role, crossing boundaries to talk and pray with the warring groups (Kabutaulaka 2002, p. 23). In May 2000, women, especially those in Honiara, formed women's peace groups and were later contacted by women around Guadalcanal who joined them in their peace work to resolve the crisis (Kabutaulaka 2002, p. 23). The conflict exposed introduced systems, intended to uphold the rule of law, as weak and irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> International lobby groups, aid donors and foreign governments, desperate for legitimate, neutral groups to act as local entry points, paid increased attention to civil society and non-government organisations, including women's groups. For women in Solomon Islands, their role in peace-making assisted in dissolving some of the barriers to their involvement in public life. Given that societal values, particularly in rural areas, are essentially conservative and patriarchal,<sup>2</sup> this is a quantum leap from the previous position.

This article discusses women and peace-building in Solomon Islands, although much of the discussion applies equally to other parts of the South Pacific, particularly in Melanesia. It looks at the effect of law, theory and practical circumstances on the role of Solomon Islands women. Setting the scene with a discussion of the historical position of women in Solomon Islands society, with particular reference to war and peace, it proceeds to examine the legal provisions governing the status of women in Solomon Islands today. In particular, it examines the gender equity provisions in the existing Constitution and the proposed Federal Constitution and considers relevant aspects of international law. It questions whether formal commitments to gender equity in the legal sphere are sufficient to promote participation at a practical level. Recognising that legal status is only part of the story, the article draws on a variety of other sources to explore the broader context in which women's role in peace and rebuilding processes occurs. It considers the effectiveness of international, regional, and local initiatives, designed

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<sup>1</sup> A fresh wave of rioting and destruction of property, which broke out after the April 2006 election, raised questions about whether this is just a superficial peace. See further Fraenkel (2004).

<sup>2</sup> For the analogous position of women in Fiji Islands see Fiji Women's Rights Movement and the Crisis Centre (1984, p. 172).

to enhance the status of women. The application of some of the theories relating to women and peace-building to the circumstances of Solomon Islands is then discussed. The article concludes by looking to the future and discussing means of consolidating women's hard won gains and avenues for increasing their participation in resolving the complex problems that Solomon Islands has to face.

At the outset, it is acknowledged that an analysis which discusses 'women' as a homogenous body, particularly in the context of a plural society such as Solomon Islands, runs the risk of oversimplification and generalisation.<sup>3</sup> However, such concerns have to be balanced against the importance of acknowledging the vital role of women in peace-building and discussing the contribution that they have to make. The other question of terminology which must be mentioned is that of 'custom' and 'customary law'. In this article the term 'custom' is used to connote the traditional practices, norms and values of indigenous people, as opposed to the more limited term, 'customary law', which is counter-posed to 'state' or 'formal law', and refers to the rules of custom which are enforced to maintain order and resolve disputes. This should not be taken to suggest that customary law is a homogenous body of law; rather it differs from place to place and from group to group within a country. It should also be borne in mind that custom and customary law are inextricably connected and in Solomon Islands, as in other parts of Melanesia, the values and patterns which they comprise differ radically from island to island and village to village. Further, like the term 'tradition', reference to 'custom' can be misleading. The main problems identified by scholars are that custom and tradition are not static, but are constantly changing (Corrin Care and Zorn 2001, p. 49). Neither can they be said to belong to a fixed period of history, prior to colonisation. Further, the notions of custom and tradition are not objective and distinct concepts, but are often subjectively interpreted to serve symbolic and political ends (Keesing 1960, p. 384; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, pp. 300, 302–305, 336, 357–373; Jolly and Thomas 1992, pp. 241–243).

## The Historical Position of Women in Solomon Islands Society

### Pre-Contact Society

To understand the issues relating to women and peace in Solomon Islands it is necessary to consider them in the context of Solomon Islands society both today and in the past (Bennett 1987). Prior to the arrival of the *araiwao* (foreigners), Solomon Islands societies were essentially conservative and patriarchal. Whilst women had a certain prestige<sup>4</sup> based on their role as wives and mothers and their skills in the garden and home, the status-based society was male-dominated (Muria 1996, p. 7). Even in matrilineal societies, negotiations with the external community tended to be

<sup>3</sup> The author is aware of the dangers of homogenising women and as such has endeavoured to avoid reiterating gender essentialism and suppressing the complexities within such categories of woman. However, she acknowledges that in some instances she may have fallen into this trap.

<sup>4</sup> For a criticism of the stereotyping of Melanesians see Douglas (2000, p. 10).

conducted by men.<sup>5</sup> Women were generally excluded from leadership roles and major decision-making.<sup>6</sup> They remained in their parents' village until a marriage was arranged for them (Foanaota 1989, p. 70), after which they would move to the groom's village (Foanaota 1989, pp. 71–72).

War was a male domain and a testing ground for warrior leaders. Raids were planned and executed from the men's house and women were often victims: killed, raped or taken captive. At the end of hostilities, feasts were held to symbolise the restoration of peace and harmony. Only men participated in these (Foanaota 1989, p. 71; Wasuka 1989, p. 99). If compensation was required, custom goods produced by women, such as baskets, ropes, mats and ornaments, would be exchanged. In some cases the women themselves would form part of the compensation.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst women had little autonomy in Solomon Islands societies, they were often valued members by virtue of their role as child bearers, producers of food and managers of domestic affairs (Pollard 1998, p. 1). This status carried with it the benefits of prestige and protection (Nesbitt 1986, p. iv). The customary rules of close-knit groups provided social security for women, as well as children and the old or disabled.

In some groups, women had a special role in conflict resolution. For example, Pollard records that *Areare* women could control warring parties by standing between them and stating that continued fighting would be equivalent to walking over the women's bodies. As male contact with a woman's body was *tambu* (forbidden), the fighting would cease (Pollard 2000, p. 44; Narakobi 1980, pp. 34–37, 71). However, this is not necessarily indicative of wider political power. Cross-culturally, the symbolic use of the body appears to be a common form of expression by those who do not have an effective political voice (MacDonald 1987, p. 19).

## The Protectorate

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the *araikwao* began to arrive, bringing with them different customs and culture.<sup>8</sup> During the Protectorate era, the British administration introduced different patterns of law and government.<sup>9</sup> English legislation and common law and equity applicable to “local circumstances” were applied (Corrin Care 2002).<sup>10</sup> However, this made little difference at village level,

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Maerua v Kahanatarau* [1983] SILR 95.

<sup>6</sup> The exception appears to be a tribe on Guadalcanal which recognised women as chiefs: Tovua (2004).

<sup>7</sup> For a recent example of this in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, see *In Re Willingal* (unreported, National Court, Papua New Guinea, Civ Cas N1506, 10 February 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Alvara de Mendana arrived in Solomon Islands in 1568, in search of King Solomon's gold.

<sup>9</sup> In 1843, the southern islands of the Solomon chain became a British Protectorate. In about 1890, German interests in the northern islands, apart from Buka and Bougainville, were transferred to Britain in exchange for recognition of German interests in Samoa. The basis of government was provided by the Pacific Order in Council 1893 (UK). It is interesting to note that this Order still governs certain matters in Solomon Islands, for example, religious marriage between expatriates.

<sup>10</sup> Pacific Order in Council 1893 (UK), s 20; Western Pacific (Courts) Order 1961 (UK). Between 1893 and 1960, law was also provided by King's/Queen's Regulations, made by the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific in Fiji. In practice, common law was often applied without consideration of whether it was suitable to local circumstances. Between 1960 and the date of independence, Ordinances were made locally by the Legislative Council (known as the Governing Council between 1970 and 1974).

where customary settlement of disputes relating to matters other than land was encouraged as a cheap means of social control. In 1942 the position was formalised by the establishment of ‘native’ courts, “constituted in accordance with the native law or customs of the area” of their jurisdiction.<sup>11</sup> These courts resolved disputes between indigenous parties resident within the area in which they were established, on the basis of customary law applying there.<sup>12</sup>

The colonial authorities did not seek to redress imbalances of status or gender. To the contrary, they sanctioned chiefly status and entrenched male power in the introduced organs of government (White 1992, pp. 73–108). The work of Christian missions brought about important changes in culture (Bennett 2002, p. 4; Early 1998, pp. 276–277, 318–319, 305–306) although there is some dispute as to whether this had a positive or negative impact on women (Early 1998, pp. 311–312; Scheyvens 2003, p. 2). As stated by Pollard:

Colony and missions had some direct impact on the lives of Solomon Islands women but both presented strongly masculine images. Colonial administrators were male and they recruited and trained men to be leaders while women remained in the villages. Missions were from the outset headed by men and the early Catholic missionaries were all unmarried priests and brothers. As missions and later churches spread and developed throughout the islands, male missionaries outnumbered female and men dominated ecclesiastical administration. (2003, p. 4)

The lack of gender reform by colonial authorities in the Protectorate is hardly surprising, as women were still fighting for equality overseas. It was only 19 years prior to the establishment of the Protectorate that a woman’s property ceased to pass to her husband on marriage in the UK.<sup>13</sup> Women did not get the vote there until 1918,<sup>14</sup> the suffrage movement having in the meantime given rise to the establishment of the first organised league of women for peace, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, in 1915 (Foster 1989, p. 1). Coincidentally, the Protectorate was established in the same year that women were recognised as having a separate identity for property and contract purposes in New South Wales<sup>15</sup> and women of European descent won the vote in New Zealand.<sup>16</sup> Women were not granted the right to vote in Solomon Islands until 1974.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Native Courts Ordinance 1942 (SI) cap 46, s 3.

<sup>12</sup> Native Courts Ordinance 1942 (SI) cap 46, ss 6 and 10. These courts have been renamed as “Local Courts” and an appeal to Customary Land Appeal Courts has been introduced: Local Courts Act (SI) cap 19. It has been argued that custom has been adulterated by colonisation: see, for example, Keesing and Tonkinson (1982). This argument perhaps underestimates the resilience of customary law.

<sup>13</sup> Married Woman’s Property Act Amendment Act 1874 (UK). The Act was copied into New South Wales law in 1879: Married Women’s Property Act 1879 (NSW).

<sup>14</sup> Representation of the People Act 1918 (UK).

<sup>15</sup> Married Women’s Property Act 1893 (NSW). Women were granted the right to vote in NSW in 1902: Women’s Franchise Act 1902.

<sup>16</sup> Electoral Act 1893 (NZ).

<sup>17</sup> British Solomon Islands Order 1974 (UK).

After World War II, social changes gathered force. Overseas, women who had stepped into male shoes for extended periods of time on the land, in the munitions factory, in the armed forces or as head of the household, did not meekly revert to 'type'. Rather, women asserted the right to continue to seek greater autonomy. In Solomon Islands, a slower, more gradual process delivered some degree of freedom for women. Introduction of a cash economy led to migration to urban areas for work. Women as well as men were allowed to leave home before marriage for this purpose (Foanaota 1989, p. 70). They were also allowed to leave home to take up educational and training opportunities, many of which were provided by Christian missions. Women found "new opportunities for social activity, for status advancement and for the exercise of influence through membership of [religious] organisations" (Foanaota 1989, p. 71) such as the Mothers' Union (Anglican) and the Women's Band (SSEC). The resulting changes to customary patterns led to a weakening of leaders' authority and increased autonomy for women (Foanaota 1989, p. 70).

## Independence

Solomon Islands was granted independence in 1978. The independence Constitution was drafted in London and appended to a United Kingdom Order in Council (Ghai 1988, p. 45).<sup>18</sup> The Constitution displays a commitment to individual freedom and equality, in the form of human rights provisions.<sup>19</sup> However, customary law is exempt from the provision guaranteeing freedom from discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Further, the Constitution expresses pride in custom and pledges to "cherish and promote the different cultural traditions". Given the patriarchal underpinnings of the customary system, this pledge establishes a conundrum for politicians and the courts. Are they to promote human rights or are they to promote custom? In practice, the Constitution has little application to the daily life of most Solomon Islanders, particularly those in rural areas, where customary beliefs and practices are still strong.

However, there is some evidence of a new form of feminism stirring in the villages of Solomon Islands, fuelled by new breed of development initiatives focused at grassroots level (Scheyvens 1995, p. 7). Scheyvens (1995, p. 7) considers that, although these initiatives may not yet be widespread, they are significantly empowering women and giving them agency over the development of their country. She suggests that such grassroots initiatives contribute to a transformation of gender relations in Solomon Islands and thus embody considerable implications for change in rural communities (Scheyvens 1995, p. 7).

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<sup>18</sup> Solomon Islands Independence Order 1978 (UK). There was extensive consultation in Solomon Islands prior to the enactment of the Constitution. Further, a delegation from Solomon Islands travelled to England to discuss a draft, but those discussions lasted only for 10 days: Report of the Solomon Islands Constitutional Conference (1977). However the final version of the Constitution did not deal with many important local concerns and bears all the hallmarks of a Foreign Office creation.

<sup>19</sup> Constitution of Solomon Islands 1978, ss 11 and 15.

<sup>20</sup> Section 15(5)(d).

Despite these developments in Solomon Islands, on the whole, there is little evidence of change. Outside the customary and rural spheres, women have fared little better. The patriarchal underpinning of the social structure has been carried forward through the colonial administration into the present era. Since independence this has been slow to change. In the most recent elections, the one female Member of Parliament, who had been the Minister of Lands and Housing, lost her seat (International Parliamentary Union; *Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership Solomon Islands* 2003). The Ministry of Youth, Sports and Women, established in 2002, has been dismantled.<sup>21</sup> Women have not been appointed to high ranking legal office.<sup>22</sup> Although the office of Chief Justice and two out of three puisne judges are now held by Solomon Islanders, there have been no female appointments at this level. There have been only two female appointments to the magistracy out of a total of nine. There has been only one female appointment to the Local Court bench out of a total of 940.<sup>23</sup> However, the number of women lawyers has dramatically increased within the last few years<sup>24</sup> and women have been employed in the Attorney General's Department and Public Solicitor's Office.<sup>25</sup> In 2006, female lawyers formed their own professional association, the Women in Law Association of Solomon Islands. In February 2007 this Association ran a legal awareness workshop on matters of concern to women, such as domestic violence and maintenance, at the Christian Care Centre in Honiara.

At the enforcement level, the number of women in the police force has risen dramatically since the first females were recruited in 1976. In 1992 there were 50 female police officers (Amnesty International 2005). By 2003 there were 66, of whom four held senior positions (about 6.2%) (UNIFEM 2006). Following a recruitment drive initiated by the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in 2004 (SIBC 2004, p. 2) there are now about 144 women in a force of about 1,000, which constitutes about 14% (Australasian Council of Women And Policing 2005).

## The Constitutional Status of Women

### The Independence Constitution

The Preamble to the Constitution of 1978 pledges to “uphold the principles of equality”. This aim is pursued in Chapter II of the Constitution, which sets out fundamental rights modelled on Western documents.<sup>26</sup> Section 15(1) prohibits

<sup>21</sup> Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands Bill 2004, Preamble.

<sup>22</sup> There was an exception in the early 1990s, when the same woman lawyer was appointed as Registrar General and then as Chair of the Trade Disputes Panel. She has since returned to private practice.

<sup>23</sup> The court in which she was a justice is presently not operating.

<sup>24</sup> The proportion of female students studying at the University of the South Pacific has raised steadily from 44% in 1996 to 50% in 2006.

<sup>25</sup> In fact the Public Solicitor's office had a female legal officer from the early 1990s until she left to go into private practice.

<sup>26</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1953.



discrimination on grounds including gender. It provides that, “no law shall make any provision that is discriminatory either of itself or in its effect”. Section 15(2) provides that “no person shall be treated in a discriminatory manner by any person acting by virtue of any written law or in the performance of the functions of any public office or any public authority”.

However, s 15 is subject to provisos, set out in s 15(5), which exempt certain categories of laws from the protection provided in earlier subsections. Paragraph (a) of s 15(5) validates discriminatory tax and revenue laws; paragraphs (b) and (c) exempt laws relating to non-citizens and more particularly laws applying personal laws to non-citizens in certain areas, such as estate matters;<sup>27</sup> and paragraph (e) exempts land laws. Paragraph 15(5)(f) permits affirmative action, stating that s 15(1) shall not apply to laws for the advancement of disadvantaged members of society. Paragraph (g) follows on from this, allowing special laws to be made for disadvantaged groups. However, such a law need not necessarily be advantageous to the group in question, provided it is justifiable in a democratic society.

Paragraph (d) of s 15(5) has proved controversial, as it provides that nothing in any law shall be held to be discriminatory to the extent that it makes provision for the “application of customary law”. It is unclear whether this sub-section is intended to exempt all customary laws from the anti-discrimination provision, or whether it should be interpreted more narrowly to limit exemption to laws governing the *application* of customary law.<sup>28</sup> In other words, only a law designed to provide guidance on when or how customary law applies, rather than a customary law per se, is to be exempt. This interpretation is supported by the use of the word “application” in other sections of the Constitution (Corrin Care 2006, pp. 100–128).

In theory, independence heralded an era of liberation for women, with a spirit of reformation accompanying constitutional guarantees. However, until the High Court or Court of Appeal confirms the more liberal interpretation of s 15(5)(d), the Constitution cannot fulfil its pledge to “uphold the principles of equality”, as customary law may be shielded from attack on the basis of discrimination, leaving women without protection where it is most obviously needed.

## The Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands

On 13 September 2004, Solomon Islands Cabinet endorsed the final draft of a new Constitution, which introduces a federal system. This document was prepared under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The Rights

<sup>27</sup> Section 15(5)(c) is intended to legitimise legislation such as the Pacific Order in Council 1893, which governs the application of certain British laws to British subjects.

<sup>28</sup> In *Tanavalu v Tanavalu* (unreported, High Court, Solomon Islands, Civ Cas 185/1995, 12 January 1998) Lungole-Awich, J favoured a wide interpretation, but this view was *obiter*, as the case was concerned with the interpretation of s 33, Solomon Islands National Provident Fund Act, cap 109, which provides for the application of customary law. In fact Lungole-Awich, J was of the view that the word “law” in s 15(1) did not include customary law, so the anti-discrimination provisions could never apply to strike down customary law, but this is clearly incorrect. The decision was upheld by the Court of Appeal: *Tanavalu v Tanavalu* (unreported, Court of Appeal, Solomon Islands, Civ App 3/1998). See also, *Minister for Provincial Government v Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly* (unreported, Court of Appeal, Solomon Islands, CAC 3/97, 23 April 1997).



Chapter was prepared and lobbied for by the Regional Rights Resources Team (RRRT) (RRRT 2004, p. 3), a regional body funded as a UNDP project. This chapter takes a more robust approach to women's rights than the existing Constitution. Whilst there is no rhetorical pledge of equality, it is constitutionally guaranteed as a fundamental right and freedom.<sup>29</sup> Further, the right to freedom from discrimination is separately guaranteed.<sup>30</sup> No concessions are made to the circumstances of Solomon Islands, the exceptions to the anti-discrimination provision appearing in the current Constitution having been omitted. However, the Bill states that a "Federal law may provide for areas of legitimate exception to this general freedom".<sup>31</sup> Customary law is specifically stated not to apply if it is inconsistent with the Constitution, a State Constitution or an Act of Federal or State parliament.<sup>32</sup> This clearly indicates that rights to equality and freedom from discrimination will prevail over customary law. However, this raises the dilemma of how to promote rights of cultural and linguistic communities, which are also constitutionally enshrined.<sup>33</sup> There is no provision for resolving such conflicts and it is likely to pose a significant problem if the Bill becomes law in its present form.

Part IV of Chapter Four of the Bill deals more specifically with the rights of women. Clause 59(1) confers on women the right to full equality, including the right of equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities. Subsection (2) provides that all women are entitled to "the same dignity of the person as men" in political and public life, education, employment and health care; and confers a right to represent the Federal Republic in international organisations. The clause then sets out an exception to the anti-discrimination provisions of clause 29 by making provision for affirmative action by government, which is mandated to:

- (a) protect women and their rights, taking into account their unique status and natural maternal role in society;
- (b) provide reasonable facilities and opportunities to enhance the welfare of women to enable them to realise their full potential and advancement;
- (c) acknowledge the role [that] rural women play in the economic survival of their families and their work in the subsistence sector of the economy and to ensure their participation in the formulation and implementation of development planning at all levels.

The enactment of this clause would make Solomon Islands the first South Pacific island country with such an express affirmative action provision. The reference to the maternal role in paragraph (a) is noteworthy and the ideology of motherhood and its links to women and peace are discussed in the issues section below.

The Bill contains a list of constitutional principles, which the Federal Republic is to strive to promote and observe.<sup>34</sup> These include promoting "the participation of

<sup>29</sup> Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands Bill 2004, chapter 4, part I, cl 25.

<sup>30</sup> Clause 29(1).

<sup>31</sup> Clause 29(3). For an example of such an exception see cl 59(3), discussed below.

<sup>32</sup> Clause 9(2).

<sup>33</sup> Clauses 44 and 53(2).

<sup>34</sup> Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands Bill 2004, chapter 2.

people in public affairs, with particular emphasis on the involvement of women, youth and disabled persons in the political, social and economic life of the Federal Republic".<sup>35</sup> These principles are expressed to be non-justiciable, except to the extent that they are made the subject of other provisions of the Federal Constitution (which they are in this case), a State Constitution or a Federal or State law.<sup>36</sup> However, where relevant, they are to guide the interpretation of the Constitution or any other law.<sup>37</sup> Further, at least once every year, the President must report to the Federal Parliament on the measures taken, and the progress achieved, in the realisation of these principles.<sup>38</sup>

The Bill has still not become law and is under review by a recently formed Constitutional Review Congress. Since the change of government in late 2007, its fate is uncertain (Corrin 2007).

In spite of the constitutional guarantee of equality, the law and politics in Solomon Islands have often accorded markedly different treatment to men and women in practice (Pulea 1985, p. 36). Although there are areas of law where legal barriers have been removed, sex-based inequalities continue to persist in other strata of the decision-making process (Pulea 1985, p. 67).

## International Law

Solomon Islands' reluctance to become a party to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979 (CEDAW) may be regarded as evidence of a lack of political will to change the status quo regarding women. CEDAW, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1979, calls on states to eliminate discrimination against women in the enjoyment of all civil, political, economic and cultural rights. It also puts obligations on states to work towards equality for women, both in public life and in the private sphere, particularly with regard to the family. Solomon Islands finally became a State Party to the Convention on 6 May 2002, nearly 24 years after the pledge of equality was made in the Constitution. Since ratification of the Convention, no plan of action for strategies to implement it has been developed, as required by the Beijing Platform of Action.<sup>39</sup> Nor has Solomon Islands submitted a report to the CEDAW Committee.

At a conference on the post-conflict nation-rebuilding process, the former Secretary General of the National Council of Women, Ruth Maetala, expressed caution about the usefulness of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform of Action (Kabutaulaka 2004, p. 23). She said that women had been "flooded with international instruments" and that they required modification to fit the circumstances of Solomon

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<sup>35</sup> Clause 10(1)(p).

<sup>36</sup> Clause 10(3).

<sup>37</sup> Clause 10(4).

<sup>38</sup> Clause 10(5).

<sup>39</sup> The only regional country to have done so is Fiji Islands, which submitted a National Action Plan to the UN Division for the Advancement of Women on 3 September 1999.

Islands (Kabutaulaka 2004, p. 23). These words were not heeded when the proposed Federal Constitution was drafted. It changes the position of international law in two ways. First, customary international law and the provisions of international conventions, treaties and agreements applicable to Solomon Islands are automatically declared to be part of the law.<sup>40</sup> Second, the Constitution imposes an obligation on the Federal government to honour its international obligations by reporting on time to international human rights bodies on implementation of obligations from human rights treaties and conventions.<sup>41</sup> The government is obliged to offer the State governments the opportunity to participate in the preparation of any report and to disseminate comment on, and recommendations offered by, international bodies to State governments and the general public.<sup>42</sup> The automatic application of customary international law and the provisions of international instruments and the inclusion of mandatory reporting requirements are indicative of outside influence on the composition of this draft. This in particular belies the assertion that this is a 'homegrown' document, expressing the "fundamental aspiration of Solomon Islanders...to exercise their inalienable right to determine freely their own constitutional destiny".<sup>43</sup>

### Promotion of Equality

Outside of the formal, legal sphere there have been a number of important initiatives designed to promote equality for women, which are relevant to their standing in peace-building processes. Some of the most significant are highlighted below, commencing with international initiatives, followed by regional and then local initiatives.

#### Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security

On 31 October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. This Resolution addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women, recognised the under-valued and under-utilised contributions women make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building, and stressed the importance of their equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security. Resolution 1325 urged Member States to increase the representation of women in all levels of decision-making on conflict prevention, management and resolution.

Women's groups in Solomon Islands and elsewhere have seized the opportunity provided by this groundbreaking Resolution with vigour (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, p. 3). Resolution 1325 is highly significant as it has reached the grassroots of

<sup>40</sup> Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands Bill 2004, cl 9(1)(f).

<sup>41</sup> Clause 23(a).

<sup>42</sup> Clause 23(b) and (c).

<sup>43</sup> Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands Bill 2004, Preamble.

women's involvement with peace and given them political legitimacy (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, p. 3). For example, the Gender Affairs Bureau in East Timor worked in close collaboration with local women activists to mainstream gender and to promote women's rights through political workshops (Porter 2003, p. 254). It "has pioneered from scratch the first effectively functioning gender office in the history of peacekeeping" (Mazurana et al. 2005, p. 47). Although this specific example demonstrates the strength of drawing on women peace-builders to further political capacities of local women, there remain major stumbling blocks to implementing the recommendations of Resolution 1325 and a better understanding of the structures and roles of peace operations remains necessary for evaluations and institutional change (Mazurana et al. 2005, p. 17).

## UNIFEM

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is the women's fund at the United Nations. Within the UN system, UNIFEM promotes gender equality and links women's issues and concerns to national, regional and global agendas. It seeks to increase the role of women in the development process, and to promote accountability regarding gender issues. It provides technical expertise on gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment strategies and fosters collaboration between governments and non-government organisations. UNIFEM's work in the Pacific includes efforts to ensure that the commitments and goals outlined in CEDAW, Resolution 1325, and the Revised Pacific Platform for Action (discussed below) are fulfilled.

UNIFEM has set up a project office in Solomon Islands to implement a pilot project on gender, in partnership with the National Peace Council, the Solomon Islands Christian Association, Vois Blong Mere Solomon, the Department of Home Affairs, and the Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace. The project, launched in January 2005, has developed a set of gender-sensitive conflict early warning indicators and piloted a system for the collection, analysis and dissemination of relevant data, with the aim of creating a more responsive policy and programming environment for gender-sensitive conflict prevention, and for supporting the role of women and men in peace-building.

## Pacific Platform for Action

In August 2004, the 9th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women was held. The Conference's review of the Pacific Platform for Action (PPA), adopted by the Triennial Conference in 1994, resulted in the Revised Pacific Platform for Action (RPPA), intended to guide Pacific action for the period 2005–2015, with triennial reviews by government ministers. The RPPA grouped the areas of concern for Pacific women under four strategic themes: mechanisms to promote advancement of women; women's legal and human rights; women's access to services; and economic empowerment of women (9th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women 2004). This is an important document in the context of the Pacific, where it provides

a source of motivation and benchmarks for advancement towards a more equitable role in leadership and decision-making for Pacific women.

### Solomon Islands Government and the National Council of Women

In January 2002, Solomon Islands government published its Programme of Action, including the plan to establish the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Women (Solomon Islands Government 2002) to coordinate policy and priorities in relation to the involvement of women and youth in development and nation-building. On women's matters, the Ministry was answerable to the National Council of Women, and its objectives included encouraging women to be "equal partners in the political, economic, social and cultural development of the country" and ensuring that women received appropriate training and acquired skills to enable them to do so (Solomon Islands Government 2002, para 4.1.18). Development strategies to which the Ministry was directed to give special attention included assisting women engaged in business and economic activities and strengthening and coordinating women's activities in overall nation building (Solomon Islands Government 2002). The Ministry program for 2002 to 2005 included the establishment of a credit facility for women and collaboration with churches and other sectors of civil society in continuing training programs for women, strengthening the National Council of Women ((NCW), a non-government organisation based in Honiara), establishing provincial women's councils, and actively involving women in the peace process (Solomon Islands Government 2002). Unfortunately, the Ministry did not survive the reduction of ministries in late 2002. Although justified as an essential step in developing a "fiscally responsible 2003 budget" (SIBC 2002a), it was later announced that the 'redundant' ministers would be retained to head departments in the 10 remaining ministries (SIBC 2002b).<sup>44</sup> Responsibility for women's issues now rests with the Department of Home Affairs, within the Ministry of Provincial Government and Constituency Development.

In the run up to the 2006 elections, the NCW campaigned for women candidates and conducted a voter education project. Eleven women ran for election (out of a total of 453), but they failed to win a single seat. A predominant reason for this was the lack of resonance of the introduced political system and the enduring tendency to vote on the basis of status in local society (Alasia 1989, pp. 137–38). More broadly, the consequences of discrimination in Solomon Islands have been aggravated by poverty and lack of economic opportunities in a society which often hinders the education of girls, by internal displacement resulting from the conflict, and a failing health care system (Amnesty International 2004, p. 2).

### Issues and Theories

The theoretical debate surrounding women and peace, and the inextricably linked concepts of women and war (or armed conflict or violence), has raged for decades.

<sup>44</sup> The departments were subsequently reduced to 15 but have since been increased to 21.

The failure to reach a theoretical consensus may be partly explained by the fact that participants are often motivated by their own agendas and emotions, rather than a dispassionate search for the truth (Woolf 1929). The diversity of views makes it difficult to formulate any concise summary of the issues and theories relevant to women and peace. However, the following words of Cheryl Benard form a good starting point for discussion of the principal themes of the debate:

I think we have first to keep in mind that whatever else it may be about in its concrete instances, it is always also about the fundamental power imbalance between men and women, and it is always also a debate between those who want to change it, and those who want to maintain it (1999, p. 2).

A feminist perspective on conflict has disturbed the academic paradigm as gender awareness has allowed women to make connections between the oppression that is the ostensible cause of conflict and that of the gender regime, that is, patriarchy (Cockburn 1998, p. 8). Many feminists believe war is part of the gendered continuum of violence. From the bedroom to the battlefield, conflict affects women's bodies and agency (Cockburn 1998, p. 8).

There are two distinctly different approaches discernible in the way in which women have viewed and attempted to transform the prevailing imagery of gender, peace and war (MacDonald 1987, p. 1). The first identifies a special connection between women and peace. Peace movements and peace camps are regarded as useful in altering the evaluation and perception of women as well as in attaining peace. The contrary approach considers that the symbolic link between women and peace must be denied if women's status is to be transformed (MacDonald 1987, pp. 1, 21).<sup>45</sup> This approach asserts that placing value on the special connection between women and peace fails to challenge the very conceptions of femininity and masculinity that perpetuate patriarchal militarism and sexism (Bates 2000, p. 77). According to this view, for example, women must be accepted into the military on equal terms with men.<sup>46</sup>

In Solomon Islands, feminism has been more like a ripple than a wave and there has been nothing to prepare the ground for debating the issues involved in the latter approach. Nor should the pattern be expected to follow that in the West. Although there is some evidence of the growth of feminist consciousness amongst Solomon Island women in rural areas, a widespread public struggle for female liberation has not taken place in the South Pacific. This has deprived regional countries of the opportunity to thrash out the local issues and find the appropriate balances. Current female concerns and philosophies largely have a different focus.

Moreover, female commentators are pragmatic enough to realise that radical strategies may be at the cost of the limited but steady progress they have made to date. For this reason, the former approach has been preferred and women call on their special connection with peace in support of their involvement in the process.

<sup>45</sup> This is a view espoused by second wave feminists, but it is not new, having been part of the tradition of social protest and revolution in the East and the West.

<sup>46</sup> An alternative method of achieving equality through liberating men from militarism rather than admitting women to combat was put forward by Woolf (1947, pp. 260–261).

But what is that special connection? Is it a sexual difference; are women more pacifistic than men, an assumption which may arise from constantly linking 'women' with 'peace'? The majority of writers believe that they are (Benard 1999, p. 5). However, there is no agreement on this. A minority of writers assert that women are just as violent as men, but have either lacked the opportunity to put this into practice or have not been given credit for their deeds (Benard 1999, p. 5). For example, the increasing number of women who are combatants, terrorists and aggressive participants in military or liberation struggles flies in the face of the assumed natural peacefulness of women (Porter 2003, p. 261). Particularly where the conflict revolves around national, ethnic, religious or racial identity (such as the Rwandan massacres), women take sides (Porter 2003, p. 261).

Putting these instances of violent women aside and assuming women are more pacific than men leads into the longstanding debate on whether this is a biological difference or a product of education and socialisation. On one side are those who regard biological factors as accounting for the fact that women tend to avoid conflict, are more egalitarian and ready to compromise; as opposed to men who are competitive, hierarchical and risk takers (Benard 1999, p. 3). On the other are those who believe that these differences arise from socially constructed ideas of acceptable behaviour for different genders. For example, Ruddick suggests that women are less prone to conflict and more connected to peace because they learn special lessons in their mothers' houses:

Women are daughters who learn from their mothers the activity of preservative love and the maternal thinking that arises from it. These 'lessons' from her mother's house, can shape a daughter's intellectual and emotional life even if she rejects the activity, its thinking, or for that matter, the mother herself. Preservative love is opposed in its fundamental values to military strategy. Maternal theories of conflict are more pacifist than militaristic. A daughter, one might say, has been trained to be unsoldierly (1995, p. 479).

On the other hand, many women pass on anger and socialise children into "attitudes and practices of hatred, bitterness, distrust, fear and intense 'Othering' of the 'assumed enemy' who often live in the next street or across the road as remains the case in the Balkans and Northern Ireland" (Porter 2003, p. 261). Nevertheless, whilst the prevalent view is that differences may result from both biology and socialisation, the relative influence of each is still fiercely contested (Benard 1999, pp. 3–6).

The association between women and peace is founded on broad stereotyping of men and women and notions of masculinity and femininity that create an image of women as mothers, nurturing, caring, egalitarian and co-operative (Marshall 2000, pp. 7–8). In contrast, men are seen as competitive, aggressive, hierarchical and risk-taking (Marshall 2000, pp. 7–8). Consequently, their gender and activities are viewed as the "root causes of war", whereas women "can bring peace, if only men will let them" (Burguières 1990, p. 4). Moreover, stereotypical essentialising of women as 'victims' and men as 'perpetrators' of conflict assumes universal, simplified definitions (Moser and Clark 2001, p. 4).



Whether by nature or socialisation, the evidence as to whether women are more pacific than men is inconclusive. Further, the assumption of pacifism ignores the fact that women are not always victims, but may be leaders or strong supporters, and that men as well as women are victims of war.

Within the perspective of sexual difference, there exists a more focused claim to a distinctive relationship between women and peace and women and war, based on motherhood (Roach Pierson 1987, pp. 211–213; Key 1916, p. 100). Again, there is a dispute as to whether this is a biological or sociological difference. Olive Shreiner attributes the ambivalence of women to war as stemming from their different role in reproduction. This, she says, gives them the knowledge of what a life costs and how it is easier to destroy than to create (Shreiner 1978, pp. 175–176). Whilst the biological basis of maternity cannot be denied, other aspects of ‘mothering’ are not so easily categorised. The ideology of motherhood has been argued to be a product of industrialisation and capitalism in the 1800s. It has been suggested that the resulting sexual division of labour evolved into the doctrine of separate spheres, which vocationalised and glorified motherhood (Roach Pierson 1987, p. 211). The theory of sexual difference, referred to above, emerging in the new field of sociology, gave scientific backing to these views (Roach Pierson 1987, pp. 211–212).

The relationship of motherhood to peace was reinvented, in what is to some a more palatable form, in a stream of the second wave of feminism, which used the earth mother image to inspire and empower women’s peace groups (Roach Pierson 1987, p. 223). This representation focuses on the life-giving and nurturing features of nature by embodying it in the form of the mother. The peace which mothers promise as custodians of birth can be seen to destroy violence and celebrate nature, thus the relationship between motherhood and peace is forged. Women have drawn strength from the act and symbol of birth and from the passionate labour of women in mothering (Ruddick 1995, p. 244). Ruddick suggests that although a group of mothers, like any other group includes ordinary militarists and peacemakers, the practice of mothering generally opens up ways of thinking and acting that are useful to peace politics (Ruddick 1995, p. 220). The work and love to which mothers are committed, this “maternal politics of peace”, brings to collective peace politics distinctive principles of non-violence honed by daily use (Ruddick 1995, pp. 221, 243). Although maternal peace politics come in various forms as individuals participate in ways that their subjectivities suggest, Ruddick (1995, p. 245) highlights that this politics contributes distinctively to the multi-faceted inventions of peace.

The perspective of motherhood seems to strike a chord in Melanesia. Women often express their role in peacemaking through this medium, perhaps because it is indisputably their own. Solomon Island women came as mothers appealing to the men and boys to end the violence (Pollard and Wale 2004, p. 593). Reference is made to motherhood in two contexts. The first is a justification for women’s involvement in peace-building: the experience and qualities of mothers are directly or indirectly asserted to equip them for the task. For example, Pollard (2000, p. 44), a leader of Women for Peace (WFP), an inter-denominational group of Christian women resident in Honiara, refers to the group’s motherly approach to the task of

peace-building (Pollard 2000, pp. 44–45). In another example relating to neighbouring Bougainville, Tankunani Sirivi (2004, p. 175), discussing the role of women in the reconciliation process, refers to “Our mothering instinct, to nurture and protect human life, [which] saw us calling for no more deaths”. The second is its use in a figurative sense to symbolise the relationship between women, life and the land. For example, Pollard states that, “as mothers of the nation, Solomon Islands women are committed to offering time and gifts in order to ensure a lasting peace” (Tankunani Sirivi 2004, p. 175). Similarly, an account of the Bougainville crisis told by Bougainvillean women is entitled, ‘As Mothers of the Land: The Birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace Movement’. The stories within it constantly make reference to motherhood.

An additional, wider perspective from which a distinctive relationship between women and war and peace has been advanced is in the political arena. Women’s lack of political power and consequent exclusion from the decision making process includes exclusion from the decision to resort to violence (Roach Pierson 1987, p. 206). Whilst this is sometimes regarded as an alternative perspective to sexual difference, for those who accept the latter as a social construct, it is possible to trace both back to the same root cause: unequal power relations. So, just as male domination resulted in a sexual division of labour, it also resulted in women’s exclusion from public institutions and rendered women’s peace work invisible.

Moving from this contentious debate to a more practical level, Benard suggests that there are three important points to consider in discussing women and war and peace:

1. The way that war and peace affect women is in important respects different from the way they affect men.
2. These differences are usually not taken into account either in peace settlements, in post-war reconstruction, in relief work, or even in the governance of civil peacetime societies.
3. Although women are associated with peace, in fact, the relationship between women and peace is not one of straightforward benefits (1999, p. 6).

These points form a useful framework for consideration of the practical position of Solomon Islands women in the next section.

## **Women and the Recent Conflict**

### **War and Peace Affect Women Differently**

Women’s experience of conflict and peace is not built upon a single discourse. The peace-building process in Solomon Islands should be engendered because women and men experience war differently, thus the issue of reconciliation has special importance and specific meaning for women that might differ from its meaning for men (Simic 2007, pp. 1–2). Women are more often than not the greatest victims of war but they also remain the biggest stakeholders of peace (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, p. vii). Specifically, in Solomon Islands, women have been suffering a “double

invisibility” as victims of the conflict and as potential peace-workers restoring human rights and calm to their country (Amnesty International 2004, p. 3).

With regard to the gendered dynamics of armed conflict, Moser and Clark (2001), illustrate several themes reflecting the diversity of women’s experience. During times of violent conflict, women suffer victimisation, most commonly sexual violence and abuse, at the hands of men (Moser and Clark 2001). Gender-based violence often exists on a wide scale before the war but once violence increases, gender based violence does not disappear but rather escalates in size and severity of abuse (Simic 2007, p. 2). This gender-related violence is in itself both complex and diverse, mirroring cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity in society, with consequences that affect such factors as family structure and economic survival (Moser and Clark 2001).

Men returning from conflict often transfer their power to commit violence from the war zone to their family and also to their wider community (Simic 2007, p. 3). Such a link between the conflict in Solomon Islands and an increase in domestic disputes, including the use of violence against Solomon Island women has been observed: “Even if you are not actively involved in the fighting, the tension between husbands and wives in the home was increased due to the changing situation, the frustration and tensions resulted in disagreements over trivial matters” (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2004, p. 35). As a result of extensive community consultation in Solomon Islands, domestic violence was identified as a concern by the NCW in 1988 and shown to be a reality for one in three women in Solomon Islands (Poerio 1995, p. vi).

During the recent conflict in Solomon Islands, women bore the heaviest burden (Leslie 2002, p. 13). Gender-based violence against women and girls was an entrenched feature of the 5-year armed conflict between 1998 and 2003 (Amnesty International 2004, p. 1). Because their gender roles are combined as mothers, housewives, breadwinners and keepers of the family or clan (Pollard 2000), Solomon Islands women also suffered badly from the destruction of the social and economic fabric of society (Leslie 2002, p. 13). Some women suffered a sense of loss of gender identity arising from their inability to access medical attention for their children (Leslie 2002, p. 13) and the loss of their husbands. The recent conflict has also prevented some women from working, resulting in the loss of their livelihoods and, in some cases, their homes (Leslie 2002, p. 13). Solomon Islands women have also been subject to rape and sexual violence. In some cases this has been domestic violence (Poerio 1995); in others it has been inflicted as retaliation by rival forces. At the same time, this abuse has been marginalised, if not ignored. According to Amnesty International, very few such cases of violence against women have been criminally prosecuted (2004, pp. 1–2).

A 2004 report by Amnesty International (‘the Amnesty Report’) reveals the extent of this violence and the lack of accountability, which has been exacerbated by discrimination. However, there is little doubt that, as in most violent conflict, more men than women have died during the crisis. But that does not mean that war is worse for men (Benard 1999, p. 7). Many of them had the empowerment of involvement in the decision to resort to violence. The motivation for the violence

may also be attributed to a male agenda of wrongs to be righted.<sup>47</sup> This argument certainly gains force if there is any credence to the story that one of the grievances of Guadalcanal men that contributed to the tension was that Malaitan men had married women from Guadalcanal tribes and moved on to Guadalcanal land. In fact, a more likely cause was dissatisfaction with the government's failure to decentralise, which in turn resulted in competition for jobs and land when islanders, many of whom were Malaitan, sought work and somewhere to live in Guadalcanal (Kabutaalaka 2001). At a more fundamental level, the cause may be traced to an inadequate framework of government, with no resonance for indigenous people and no accommodation of their social systems or values (Corrin Care 2004, p. 156).

It should also be noted that some differences in experience may be positive. Alongside disempowerment and denial of selfhood, the recent conflict has also acted to empower Solomon Islands women to work for peace and security (Leslie 2002, p. 13). This is discussed further below.

Women are affected by armed conflict in unique ways that require specific attention; thus a peace agreement that does not address these needs exacerbates the existing problems and reinforces power imbalances, thereby undermining any chance of equality for women (Porter 2003, p. 249). The peace-building process in Solomon Islands should be engendered as issues regarding conflict and reconciliation have special importance and specific meaning for Solomon Islands women that might differ from Solomon Island men (Simic 2007, pp. 1–2).

### Peace Settlements and Post-war Reconstruction and Relief Work Discriminate Against Women

The perception of women and their capabilities often changes during conflict. Women are often empowered by the sudden shifts in gender roles caused by conflict which can also open up unintended spaces for empowering women to create structural social transformations and produce new realities that redefine gender (Simic 2007, p. 2). For example, during the first and second World Wars, women stepped into male roles in factories, on the land and at home, joined the armed forces in non-combat roles and travelled overseas as nurses. Similarly, during the recent conflict, the profile of women in Solomon Islands has been raised and their self-perception changed forever. However, women are a long way from achieving equal rights of representation. During settlement talks, the focus tended to be on public actions featuring government or high profile, usually male, figures. For example, the 'negotiations' conducted by Sitiveni Rabuka were lauded by some as landmarks in resolving the crisis (Hassall and Saunders 2002, p. 273). As a result of gendered local politics and asymmetry of gender power, women were excluded altogether from the Townsville negotiations and the signing of the Townsville Agreement by the rival groups, Solomon Islands Government and Guadalcanal and Malaita Provincial Governments in October 2000. Further, a return to peace usually

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<sup>47</sup> Catherine Adifaka, a WFP coordinator, referred to "selfishness, greed and pride of men" as factors in the recent conflict (Adifaka 2004).

means a return to the gender status quo for women, who are forced to abandon the non-traditional roles assumed during conflict (Simic 2007, p. 4).

In spite of this, women were undoubtedly instrumental in the peace process.<sup>48</sup> Church-affiliated women's groups served as a platform for women to speak out against the violence during the crisis (Pollard 2000, p. 44; Scheyvens 2003). Women's groups such as WFP were formed and the NCW banner was used as a central rallying point for all women's groups, which joined together to call for peace and democracy. The NCW's alliance with the Church was highlighted in a high profile service in the Anglican cathedral to pray for peace, reconciliation, good governance and democracy. Women have contributed to peace-building in another, less dramatic way. During the period of civil unrest they continued to go about their business in the villages, tending their gardens, raising their families and generally holding together the fabric of society. Unaware of, or ignoring the stigma of, having been labelled a 'failed state', they provided a vital foundation on which peace-building could proceed (Roughan 2004).

However, in spite of the fact that most aid donors and relief organisations have policies on women, there is evidence of a failure to consult them and to accommodate their needs in the post-conflict rebuilding process. Cheryl Benard, speaking in the context of humanitarian relief as an example of discrimination against women in post-conflict situations, has observed that the disadvantages women experience belonging to one of three categories:

[T]hey can be part of a deliberate mechanism enforcing and maintaining women's inferior social status; they can be an unconscious, automatised part of structural violence against women; or they can be a more or less accidental byproduct of the fact that decision-makers are not aware of and don't consider women's needs and interests (1999, p. 10).

In Solomon Islands, examples falling within each of these categories are not hard to find. Some instances fall across two or more categories. For example, the lack of action to make men accountable for the violence against women that occurred during the conflict, revealed by the Amnesty Report, is partly attributable to discrimination against, and lack of representation of, women. It is also relevant to note that the work of healing the scars of gender-related violence is being carried out mainly by women's groups (Leslie and Boso 2003, p. 330).

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the important role played by women in the peace-making process has won them government recognition, and this may partly explain the agreement to incorporate the specific guarantees relating to women in the proposed new Constitution (discussed above). There is also evidence that some development initiatives focused at grassroots level have broken the home economics project mould (Scheyvens 1995; Lee 1985) for women and empowered and inspired them to work for change on their own terms; to challenge tradition, the government and men where necessary; and to overturn oppressive gender relations in homes and communities (Scheyvens 1995, p. 7).

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<sup>48</sup> For example, in July 2005, three Solomon Islands women were nominated for the Nobel Peace prize for their work during the conflict.

## The Relationship Between Women and Peace is not Always Positive

Although women are associated with peace, peace does not always have positive results for them. One basic problem is that peace time does not necessarily signal the end of violence against women. As mentioned above, domestic violence is common in Solomon Islands, particularly in Honiara (Poerio 1995, pp. 22–23).

A second problem is that peace does not automatically benefit women in the same way that it benefits men, and may in some cases worsen their situation. When men are away fighting this may have significant benefits for women as a group. As discussed above, the conflict has created opportunities for women, such as a relaxation of the cultural restrictions on speaking out and decision making (Tahu 2004). Women's status has often been elevated at home by virtue of their becoming the de facto head of the household, and abroad when they have taken on leadership roles in women's groups. These benefits may diminish now that the men have returned. Women's work in rural areas may also be increased by the demands of hospitality required by the flow of 'refugees' from urban areas to their home villages, particularly on Malaita (Brown 2001). Further, many businesses closed during the crisis and the job shortage is more acute than before. Competition from women for these positions is likely to cause resentment and could even result in a cultural backlash to force women back to the domestic sphere.<sup>49</sup>

Further, at a more abstract level, the association of women with the notion of peace may mean that they are more likely to be seen as symbols of passivity and domesticity than as leaders or heroes of the conflict or peace process.

## The Future

On the surface, it seems to be accepted in Solomon Islands that women should be involved in the peace-making and rebuilding processes. To argue otherwise would be to belittle their important contribution to date and to deprive society of a significant resource which it can ill afford to lose. Assuming women should be involved, how should they be involved? Benard (1999, p. 14) identifies two possible approaches. The first is widely referred to as the 'add women and stir' approach. This involves simply increasing the number of women involved in the decision-making process. The alternative is to 'change the recipe'. The first approach runs the risk that, whilst the representation statistics may be improved, the system will not really change, or if it does, it will be a very long process. Moreover, while increasing women's participation in decision-making appears to empower women through political agency and enhance substantive equality, there can be no automatic assurance of gender awareness or 'good' governance (Porter 2003, p. 251). The latter involves a much more radical shift, which on a narrow level might include changing the processes of negotiation and decision-making, and on a much broader level might involve the redefinition of what constitutes politics and the way in which they are conducted. It has been shown that

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<sup>49</sup> Benard suggests that this is a common result of peace after war, even of the 'cold' war variety (1999, p. 13).

through community activities, women redefine the parameters of peace-building to encompass both informal and formal processes that build peace, and thus expand the narrower patriarchal definitions of peace-building (Porter 2003, p. 256). In fact, as Benard points out, the two approaches are interlinked and the best result will probably result from drawing on both: “Proportionate *participation* of women in decision-making, and *feminization* or a better cultural balance between what we consider male and female principles, are necessary prerequisites of each other” (1999, p. 14).

Solomon Island women who are already engaged in peace-building processes possess skills that can be further cultivated (Porter 2003, p. 255). At present, a variety of education and training programs are offered for women in small South Pacific countries. However, there appears to be a tendency to provide programs as isolated events and without any systematic follow-up to assess their effectiveness (Jones 1995, p. 36). Although programs concentrating on productive rather than reproductive roles have been gradually introduced, skills taught have often had little market value and have not been accompanied by help in other critical areas, such as marketing and small business management. Moreover, programs are often seen as being about the transmission of knowledge and skills rather than the development of “critical thinking and social analysis skills necessary to confront issues such as gender inequality and discrimination of women on a macro scale” (Jones 1995, p. 33).

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, a study carried out in 1994 in the South Pacific and the Caribbean to assess the contribution of non-formal education and training programs to the empowerment of women showed that there were positive benefits (Ellis and Jones 1994).<sup>50</sup> It was found that the programs investigated in the study had not only provided new skills, but also improved the self confidence of participants and their ability to articulate their increased desire for change and their willingness to act to bring about that change. However, it was clear that not all programs were being consciously used as a strategy to empower women. Some women reported little change in their attitudes as a result of the programs and disappointment was expressed at the lack of follow-up and the failure to take the action decided on during the program (Jones 1995, pp. 35–36).

It seems clear from this that a multi-textured approach is required. Education<sup>51</sup> and skills training must be more rounded, for example, combining production skills with small business management techniques and, more importantly, incorporating strategies for developing transferable skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and planning and organisation. Moreover, education and training must go hand in hand with economic support, through employment opportunities and assistance to establish the type of small businesses that are appropriate in the circumstances of Solomon Islands, such as honey, farms, sewing and fishing.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The study countries did not include Solomon Islands, but did include Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Niue and Tonga, and the more general findings would seem to have some application to all small South Pacific countries.

<sup>51</sup> The adult literacy rate in Solomon Islands is 76.6% (UNDP 2007) but only 56% of women are literate (UNIFEM 2006). Amongst youth (15–24) the literacy rate is only 34.3% overall, with 18.4% women and 50.8% men (UN 2007).

<sup>52</sup> These were the suggested small-scale businesses put forward by Ruth Maetala at a post-conflict nation rebuilding workshop (Kabutaulaka 2004, pp. 14–16).



## Conclusion

The debate as to whether, and to what extent, women are more pacific than men has not been concluded. Further, whilst women's distinctive relationship to war and peace has been recognised, it has not produced a consistent response. The identification of women with peace and motherhood is a two-edged sword, which may emphasise difference and confine women to the domestic sphere, rather than justify their aspirations to equality. It may be more productive to highlight the exclusion of women from the public sphere, which is impossible to defend given the statistics on women's under-representation in high office. In fact, it is possible to draw together the two differences by using the assumption that women have a unique connection with peace to justify the demand for an opportunity to bring this perspective into play in the public sphere, thereby increasing peace and stability in society. The counter-argument, that women's inclusion as leaders would hamper the ability to resort to war, depends on acceptance of the utility of war and, internal conflict aside, this has little application in Solomon Islands. The vital tasks facing the country are nation building and economic recovery in a culturally and geographically divided country, rather than becoming a player in any international power struggle.

In theory, the legal and political frameworks, both under the existing and proposed Constitutions, allow for the involvement of women by 'adding and stirring' or even by 'changing the recipe'. However, at a practical level, commitments to gender equity bear little relationship to reality. The conflict has been an important avenue for the development of the profile of women, but little inroad has been made into the embedded culture of patriarchy. This raises the question of whether the role of women in peace and rebuilding processes can be considered in isolation. Peacemaking is part of Solomon Islands' culture, and ceremonies and feasts are still held to symbolise the restoration of harmony. The inextricable relationship between the status of women and customary society and culture requires that analysis and debate take place in the context of Solomon Islands society as a whole. Relationships between men and women exist throughout society, in rural and urban areas, in the public and private sphere. There is little use arranging a place for women at the negotiating table if they are seated next to the spectre of domestic violence and repression.

These problems need to be addressed broadly if deep-rooted solutions are to be found. Solomon Islands must develop an active strategy to maximise the gains which have been made and overcome the hurdles to women's full participation. When Solomon Islands rises above the current cloud, will a silver lining be revealed in the form of greater awareness of the contribution that women have to offer? The challenge now, for men as well as women, is to realise this potential at all levels of society and in all parts of the country.

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