

Tonissen, M, 2000. 'The relationship between development and violence against women in post-conflict Bougainville', *Development Bulletin*, no. 53, pp. 26-28.

The relationship between development and violence against women in post-conflict Bougainville

Michelle Tonissen, Community Aid Abroad—Oxfam Australia

Introduction

The number of conflicts fought between and within countries has risen since World War II. One consequence of conflict is increasing violence, especially violence against women. As Sorenson (1997:26) suggests, 'organised violence may be linked to increases in domestic violence, and women may experience an escalation of violence as a result of conflict'. It is, therefore, an important topic of investigation because violence against women is not only a social issue, in health and human rights terms, but also a development issue. This paper examines these issues, using Bougainville as an example of a society that has experienced conflict and where violence against women is prevalent. Key issues will be discussed in the context of the wider Pacific region.

Recognition of the development–violence connection

During the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–85), violence, and particularly violence against women, was acknowledged as an important element in development discussions, not only economically but also socially and culturally. A general definition of violence against women includes domestic verbal and physical abuse, rape and sexual assault, incest, and female genital mutilation (de Bruyn 1995:11). When the UN Conference on Women met in Beijing in September 1995, the issue of violence against women formed a key part of the discussions.

There is little doubt that violence against women is a cost to development in terms of health and loss of productivity, and there are other costs that are not so obvious but that are equally important. Violence prevents women from exercising their rights to achieving social and economic equality, hampers their ability to organise and, ultimately, is a major obstacle to their empowerment and full participation in shaping the economic, social and political life of their countries.

There are still relatively few documented studies on this connection between development and violence against women, and even fewer in the context of a post-conflict society, so there is very little literature from which to draw conclusions. This is particularly the case for Bougainville, which is emerging from nine years of conflict.

Post-conflict violence can follow not only overt warfare but also human rights violations, political violence, or economic and social crises. In post-conflict societies, violence against women in particular may be viewed less importantly, as violence becomes generally pervasive and legitimised. Whether Bougainville is 'post-conflict' is still being debated. According to Harris (1999:40), a post-conflict environment may be characterised by a signed peace accord, a process of political transition through elections or a coup, increased levels of security (broadly defined), and a perception that there is a real opportunity for peace and recovery. Bougainville has elements of all of these key characteristics.

Gender relations in Bougainville

The people of Bougainville can be divided into 19 distinct groups, each with its own language, customs and traditional practices, and a further 35 dialects. These cultural differences were probably closer to the geography and associated patterns of contact with other language groups or islands. Conflict between different groups was commonplace and varied between cultural groupings, but evidence suggests that violence between women and men was less prevalent than in other Pacific societies. A partial explanation may be the matrilineal structure of many of the groups (for example, the Nasioi). Most Bougainvilleans trace their clan through their mothers, and land ownership in most communities is traced through the mother. Although the roles and status of women varied considerably between language and culture groups, the idea of balance and the practice of reciprocity held social responsibilities for both women and men. Because they had designated roles, women and men understood their place in society.

The onset of armed conflict in Bougainville (1988–97) changed many things, not least the roles and responsibilities of women, men and children, and, more importantly, gender relations. Women, in particular, have suffered as a result of the conflict, through the loss of family and friends, reduced levels of trust and security in their society, and the increasing violence against them. Violence in many forms is far more prevalent than before 1988, so much so that there are fears that high levels of violence may be a long-term consequence of the nine-year conflict. Accordingly, there is concern about how best to sustain long-term peace, security and development in Bougainville.

Elsewhere in the Pacific

The end of a war does not automatically lead to the end of insecurity for populations affected by armed conflict. In some parts of the island, especially in central and south Bougainville, the hindrance to the restoration programme is exacerbated by continuing violence. In addition, it appears that women are suffering the consequences of men's disillusionment with change. As El-Bushra and Lopez (1993:7) state: 'in post-war situations, the reintegration of (mostly male) ex-combatants into society gives rise to problems of self-esteem and sense of responsibility for men, who may take out their problems on their women-folk'. This appears to be especially the case in Bougainville, (and more broadly in the Pacific Region). With little or no education, few employment opportunities, boredom and homebrew alcohol in plentiful supply, the level of law and order problems have intensified. Included in this is the issue of violence against women.

Although the following excerpt is about Bougainville, there are rising concerns that this may be becoming an all-too-familiar scene throughout the Pacific:

Power at the barrel of a gun is being misused and abused. It has enabled young men to settle traditional scores which has resulted in in-fighting within families, relatives and clans. Women and children are of course once again in the thick of this confusing state, in some cases being used as shields for protection and to stop the violence.

Men (in Bougainville) vent their frustrations and feelings of helplessness on mothers and children, they become very aggressive and violent, abusive and in most cases bash up their wives and children. (Savaona-Spriggs 1993)

This example highlights the consequences of the interaction between young men, alcohol, guns and conflict, the most serious of which is increased violence against women. Often, the conflict is divided along religious and ethnic lines, which further

intensifies tensions between individuals and villages. Women are often the victims in the campaigns against the 'other side', creating an environment of fear and uncertainty. There is no doubt that social, economic and individual factors have contributed to the intensity of violence against women in Bougainville. People have suffered not only physically, economically, socially and politically, but psychologically as well. If violence against women is to be significantly reduced, then men, women and children will need to examine and adapt their attitudes and behaviours.

Violence against women is now being debated and discussed at national and regional levels in several Pacific Islands. Some of the practical achievements over the last 15 years to address the issue include increased services, law reform, training, research, campaigning and community education. Twenty-three crisis counselling, community education and advocacy programmes have been established in the region, including ones relating to the impact of alcohol and unemployment. In Papua New Guinea, the Simbu Counselling Centre and the Individual and Community Rights Advocacy Forum deliver services for women who are victims/survivors of violence. Similarly, in Fiji, the Women's Crisis Centre has three new branches to cater for increased demand for services. Members of the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women, such as Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (see Helen Hakena's article in this issue), are in complete agreement that the issue of violence against women cannot be adequately addressed without education to change attitudes towards women.

Leitana's approach

Leitana, a Bougainville non government organisation (NGO), is attempting to find ways to challenge the individuals and organisations that have used violence in the past, and not allow them to rationalise its use in the future. Almost all the communities that Leitana works with have common problems relating to violence and alcohol. Leitana works on the assumption that homebrew leads to aggression and violence within the home. Violence is being openly discussed in ways it has not been in the past, in terms of the physical effect – in particular, the abuse and domestic violence towards women – and the consequences this has upon society as a whole. By understanding the influences that have shaped gender relations in Bougainville, organisations like Leitana are better placed to plan policies that address the constraints that hinder women's participation in the development process.

Key issues for the future

Of particular importance to research in societies under stress is the integration of gender analysis into the development process. Success will be achieved if a combination of community-driven decision making and organisational development is implemented. Furthermore, it is important to take a more inclusive approach to human rights and gender in the post-conflict setting and to include women's social, economic and political rights in the discussion. There are several reasons why there should be further support for research and thinking in gender analysis in post-conflict situations. The effects of armed conflict on any community are often devastating in social, economic and cultural terms. Other elements include changes in population balance between men and women, and subsequent changes in the division of labour, often resulting in gender relations being contested, such as increased urban and domestic violence and women being excluded from peace negotiations.

Therefore, it is important to examine gender issues in peace-building initiatives, because conflict is a gendered activity and because women and men experience conflict

differently. Women, as well as men, have a fundamental stake in building peaceful communities. Peace is a prerequisite for achieving the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment and some would argue that such equality is necessary for true peace (broadly defined). A gender and development analysis should, therefore, be an automatic element in the planning of strategies, as it would seek to trace the ways in which changes in the rebuilding of society impact upon gender relations. In particular, it would look at the extent to which women's marginalisation is increased during and after conflict, as well as whether there are opportunities for improving their position as a result of the changing situation.

There are many factors that may enhance, support or detract from the work of organisations like Leitana, in particular, the role that bilateral agencies, NGOs, governments (national and provincial), and structural, cultural and religious actors have in development projects. Funding arrangements may constrain local NGOs, who are often dependent upon outside assistance. External donors may favour an approach that is in contrast to the complexities of the local situation. There is an urgent need to get governments and institutions in power to acknowledge the importance of women in development, by addressing structures that contribute to a continuation of the status quo. This is especially significant in Papua New Guinea, where one province – Bougainville – is attempting cultural change (that is also part of an independence movement), when changes in attitudes towards women are not taking place or are doing so at a slow pace.

Despite what Leitana has achieved in Bougainville, the lack of established structures, particularly in government, church, and law, to deal with gender violence provides another major obstacle to eliminating violence against women. It was not until the late 1980s that the World Council of Churches acknowledged the problem as an issue needed to address, and attempted to create a more active role in implementing the human rights of women within religions and religious institutions.¹ Religious institutions have, until recently, been slow to respond to issues relating to violence against women. In the late 1990s, several publications sought to challenge the silence of the churches around the world in ignoring the issue, and the negative impact that this has upon the development of societies as a whole. In Bougainville, Sister Lorraine and colleagues of the Bougainville Inter-Church Forum are attempting to address issues relating to women and gender through trauma counselling and discussion groups.

Despite positive advances, the most overwhelming impediment is the lack of acknowledgement of the unequal power relations between men and women. Structural change is ultimately influenced by policy planners, the majority of whom are men, who may not be willing to give up their positions of power. Governments must accept that women are part of the development process and must find ways that combine traditional and modern authority, in order to accommodate both men and women and achieve a balance in the political economy of a new Bougainville.

Conclusion

The representation of violence is a fundamental feature of education strategies for violence or against violence, and is particularly important in Bougainville, where violence has been a way of life for over a decade. The work of organisations like Leitana illustrates the creativity and commitment that staff and volunteers have towards raising awareness on issues of violence and development. Women, and their communities, will benefit directly from projects that promote women's rights, address violence against them, and tackle the growing problem of increased use of homebrew and alcoholism.

Leitana is attempting to define a new approach to development, one that is holistic and appropriate in post-conflict Bougainville. To think of development in opposition to culture and tradition will ensure that policy will not be as effective as articulating an approach that has been developed locally.

A post-conflict environment creates new social structures and ways of working, and the political solution it brings may open up new possibilities for development. Violence against women and women in development are important issues of research in their own right, especially when one considers the links between them. It is vital, then, to focus on the relationship between violence and development, particularly as it relates to women in a post-conflict situation.

Notes

This paper is an edited version of a Minor Thesis, submitted to the University of Melbourne as part of a Masters in Development Studies (Gender and Development).

1. This was acknowledged in the first report written by the UN's Special Rapporteur on violence against women by Christian human rights groups prior to Beijing 1995 (Dutch Human Rights Platform 1995:13, *Violence against women: A Violation of women's human rights*, report of a workshop held during the ECE-NGO Forum, Vienna, October 17–21 1994) and, in the Pacific region, in *Action for equality, development and peace: A challenge to the Christian communities* (1995, World Association for Christian Communication, Pacific Region: Suva).

References

- de Bruyn, M. 1995, 'A gender-based approach to advancing women's social status and position' in M. de Bruyn (ed.), *Advancing women's status: Gender, society and development: Women and men together?*, Critical Review and Annotated Bibliographies Series, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 11–20.
- El-Bushra, J. and E.P. Lopez 1993, 'Gender-related violence: Its scope and relevance', in H. O'Connell (ed.), *Women and conflict*, Focus on Gender, 1(2), June, 1–9.
- Harris, G. 1999, 'Reconstruction, recovery and development: The main tasks', in G. Harris (ed.), *Recovery from armed conflict in developing countries: An economic and political analysis*, Routledge, London, 39–51.
- Savaona-Spriggs, R. 1993, 'Women in crisis in Bougainville', *Peace News*, 2365, April.
- Sorenson, B. 1997, 'Rebuilding after war and conflict: A gender perspective', in *Human rights violations against women during war and conflict*, report of a roundtable discussion parallel to UN Commission on Human Rights, WILPF, Geneva, April, 26–33.