



Thematic Brief | Women, peace and security in the Pacific

This Thematic Brief provides information and analysis about women, peace and security in the Pacific Islands region. The brief has been written for the Support Unit of Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*), connecting more than 170 gender equality initiatives supported by the Australian Government and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries.

Pacific Women is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. It partners with governments, local and international non-government organisations (NGOs), private sector, disabled people's organisations, coalitions and others to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women and to end violence against women and girls. The emphasis for *Pacific Women* is on partnerships and locally-driven development.

Pacific Women supported initiatives respond to the commitments in the 2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration, while also supporting Australia's Pacific Step-up and its Partnerships for Recovery approach of working together with Pacific partners to address COVID-19 impacts on women, girls and their communities.^{1 2 3}

Five Key Messages

The following five key messages help explain underlying issues about women, peace and security and why *Pacific Women* is supporting this work. This includes a need for formal recognition of women's role in conflict prevention and recovery plus humanitarian crisis response, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic response.

These messages reflect the United Nations Security Council endorsed resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in October 2000. The resolution drew on lessons learned on peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Resolution 1325 calls on countries to address the impacts that conflict had on women and girls and advocates for women's participation in peace and security processes as a critical step towards conflict-resolution.⁴ The women, peace and security agenda rests on four pillars: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery.

The five key messages are:

1. The skills of women as mediators and decision makers need to be recognised and included in peace negotiations.
2. Women are often the most affected by conflict violence and increasing securitisation. The presence of armed forces has increased through national COVID-19 responses.
3. Women are already active in conflict prevention, post-conflict recovery efforts and humanitarian crisis response, such as COVID-19, and this needs to be formally recognised and supported.
4. The gendered approach to security sector governance needs to be enhanced.
5. Women's access to and participation in governance processes must be sustained.

Message 1 The skills of women as mediators and decision makers need to be recognised and included in peace negotiations.

Why?

Women of all ages play an important role in brokering peace because they help to foster and maintain confidence and trust in communities and can address issues of concern to women and marginalised groups. Women's role in conflict mediation, building trust and dialogue, educating children and counselling family members not to engage in violence are common themes in communities across the Pacific.

The evidence

Since 1992, women have represented fewer than three per cent of mediators and eight per cent of negotiators to major peace processes. These numbers have not markedly improved since the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000.⁵

In other regions, when women have meaningful roles within peace negotiations, they expand the scope of peace agreements to include broader social development priorities and needs, which are vital to ensuring lasting peace and security.⁶ Studies have demonstrated that the direct involvement of women in peace negotiations increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 per cent and the probability of it lasting 15 years by 35 per cent.⁷

Many researchers have also shown that peace starts with families, in the way women and men relate to each other and ways in which children are educated.⁸

There is a need to create safe and enabling spaces for women's participation. Organisations can help facilitate space for women to engage in peacebuilding in the local community and build on the safe spaces women have already created for themselves. This requires the creation of formal peacebuilding mechanisms at the community level, as well as informal safe spaces for women to collectively organise to discuss issues that are important to them.⁹

'In the Pacific region, women have been greatly marginalised from formal decision-making structures as a result of the predominantly patriarchal governance structures from the time of colonial administrations and continuing after independence. Yet, despite such obstacles, in Bougainville and Solomon Islands, as well as Fiji, women were instrumental in brokering peace during the height of crises and continue to play a vital role in building and sustaining peace in their communities.'

Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls, Technical Adviser, Shifting the Power Coalition, Fiji¹⁰

Message 2 Women are often the most affected by conflict, violence and increasing securitisation. The presence of armed forces has increased through national COVID-19 responses.

Why?

Conflict and violence can significantly affect women and girls through issues including, but not limited to, gender-based violence including sexual exploitation, torture and abuse. In addition, women become increasingly responsible for maintaining the family and community as men depart to fight. There are many women in the Pacific who are actively working to create peace, often at great threat to their personal security. The COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated a highly securitised national response; armed forces have been employed to maintain borders and curfew, conduct civil engagement and testing and deliver aid. The presence of armed forces, who are overwhelmingly male, increases the possibility of exploitation and abuse of women and girls, as well as heightens the atmosphere in the community of intimidation and fear.



The evidence

Women have different informal networks from men and are often the first to identify conflict in a community. On a daily basis, Papua New Guinea's Highlands Women Human Rights Defenders Network deals with issues such as tribal warfare; sorcery accusation-related killings; gender-based violence, including rape, torture, domestic violence; and sexual abuse.¹¹

Kup Women for Peace was formed in 1999 with the intention of 'daunim hevi bilong ol mama' (reducing the sorrow of the mothers). It formed following 30 years of chronic tribal violence within the Kup region, a sub-district in the Simbu Province of Central Highlands in Papua New Guinea. Women leaders from four warring clans put aside tribal allegiances and joined forces to reverse trends of tribal fighting and associated gender violence. The Kup Women have had notable success promoting peaceful development in the region. There is now increased freedom of movement, the fast resolution of interpersonal and tribal conflicts, the return of government services (including police officers and nurses) and the promotion of a sense of self-help and civic pride among post-conflict communities.¹²

"I did not complete my studies because of tribal fighting, but I want young women who come after me to have a good life" – Mary Kini, a human rights defender and a peace builder from Papua New Guinea, made 'secret plans' to bring peace to her community. After years of intertribal violence that engulfed the district of Kup, in the mountains of Papua New Guinea, she teamed up with Angela Apa and Agnes Sil to end the fighting.¹³

Mary Kini, human rights defender and peace builder, quoted by UN Human Rights Office 2012¹³

In the now Autonomous Region of Bougainville, women were among the most affected during the civil war. The increased risk of rape, torture and abuse restricted their movements and ability to express their views. Lack of access to healthcare increased maternal and infant mortality rates; but it was the support of women to the peace movement that contributed to the end of the conflict.¹⁴

Solomon Island women were very active as mediators in their country's civil conflict between 1998–2003. Initially, these interventions were largely ad hoc, but as the tension intensified, women advocating for peace began to collectively organise and formalise their responses. In May 2000, women held a roundtable discussion in the capital Honiara and released the Women's Communique on Peace.¹⁵ This communique outlined a number of activities to be undertaken by women 'to contribute constructively and meaningfully to the peace process'.

Shortly afterwards, several formal women's peace-building groups emerged. The best-known of these was the Honiara-based 'Women for Peace' group, which had the goal of enabling women to contribute to the peace process.^{16 17}

The Fiji Women's Forum, a coalition of women's NGOs, was founded in 2012 to enhance women's representation in Fiji's democratisation process. In all its outcome statements, the Forum addresses the role of security forces in the move to democracy and advocates for the vital role women play, including women with disabilities, in peaceful democratic transition.¹⁸ In Fiji, there is also Transcend Oceania, a member of the Shifting the Power Coalition advocating for gender, positive masculinities and non-violence through engaging men and boys as partners for prevention of violence against women.¹⁹ These cross-gender dialogues train men by taking them through dialogue processes to help them understand what violence against women is, and how they can support women and reduce violence against them.

Women and girls are at risk of violence and exploitation due to increased securitisation, which often occurs in some countries as part of their national response to a crisis such as COVID-19. The vulnerability of women and girls to harassment, rape and sexual exploitation (including sex exchanged for food and basic goods) increases under securitised conditions such as states of emergency and expanded police powers.²⁰ In Fiji, particularly during the COVID-19 response period, the NGO Coalition on Human Rights (NGOCHR) increased its advocacy for human rights during response activities.

Message 3 Women are already active in conflict prevention, post-conflict recovery efforts and humanitarian crisis response and this needs to be formally recognised and supported.

Why?

Despite women and young women's productive efforts in Pacific Island countries, their participation in formal conflict prevention, post-conflict recovery efforts, and humanitarian crisis response is still not fully recognised. This is notwithstanding the commitments made by Pacific Forum Leaders, who adopted the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012–2015).²¹

Peacebuilding in the Pacific region requires a balancing of traditional and customary practice with modern governance, including accountability to human rights. This involves engaging with indigenous leaders and church leaders; and creating space for peace education, peacebuilding dialogue and mediation. Women and youth of all diversities must also be enabled to access all decision-making spaces.²²

The evidence

'I was part of Women for Peace when we went to visit the warring parties from both sides.'

Josephine Teakeni, Vois Blong Mere Solomon, member of the Shifting the Power Coalition

Women have generally been the first to actively work across ethnic divides at considerable personal and organisational risk. For example, women have:

- Organised peace vigils (in Fiji during the 2000 and 2006 coups).
- Held negotiations across crocodile infested rivers with armed combatants (Solomon Islands).
- Developed peace education methods and mediated community disputes (Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea).
- Supported soldiers returning from peacekeeping operations and provided technical inputs into defence reviews (regional) and national security policy development.

These are only a few examples of responses to conflict or perceived threats to human security that women leaders and women's organisations have developed and sustained over the years.²³

During the COVID-19 response, women's participation and leadership is essential for an effective response to the pandemic, particularly for mobilising communities and health communications. As governments focus increasingly on long-term planning, it will be important that ministries and departments representing women are directly involved in all social and economic planning and are not relegated to advising on gender-based violence only. Women civil society groups and their leadership are also critical and have been playing a strong role in COVID-19 response.²⁴

In previous health crisis outbreaks, women have been largely excluded from decision making. This negatively affected their own health needs and led to losing valuable opportunities for limiting the spread of the disease.²⁵ Including women in policy spaces and decision making is critical.²⁶

'Women have been sustaining the peace.'

Agnes Titus, Program Coordinator for the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, member of the Shifting the Power Coalition

Message 4 The gendered approach to security sector governance needs to be enhanced.

Why?

Security institutions charged with women's protection, such as the military, civilian police and even peacekeepers, need to be effective and get better outcomes for everyone. Without reform of these institutions, women are unable to hold them accountable.

This includes the role of the military in disasters, humanitarian and crisis responses (including in the distribution of relief) and the organisation of local security.

Local, national and regional deployment plans should be accountable to women's human rights and the women, peace and security agenda. There is a need to ensure training for peacekeeping and humanitarian deployments are not only compliant with international humanitarian law, but also protect the rights of women and girls by ensuring safe spaces for women and girls in the organisation and management of evacuation centres. Advisers from local women's human rights networks should be part of providing pre-deployment training and supporting local engagement.

The evidence

In 1992, Pacific Island Forum Leaders adopted the Biketawa Declaration, with the objective to 'uphold democratic processes and institutions which reflect national and local circumstances, including the peaceful transfer of power.'²⁷ It is within this framework that civil society organisations and the Pacific Island Forum started to cooperate.

The subsequent adoption of the 2018 Boe Declaration by Pacific Forum Leaders paves the way for progressing a more gender and youth inclusive human security agenda in line with strategic focus areas, including climate security; human security and humanitarian assistance; and environmental and resource security. This approach provides an opportunity to enhance multi-stakeholder collaboration at both regional and national levels and enhances a peace, development and humanitarian nexus approach for the Boe Declaration Action Plan. When approaching the difficult issue of how best to respond to the climate crisis, ecologically-just approaches to locally driven solutions should align with, and be accountable to, the gender equality, peace and human security agendas.²⁸

'For example, in (the) Pacific we might say...we are secure because we don't have wars, we have food. We have abundance of food and what does that mean? Is it really security? Do we have the quality of access to that (food) and we do not have wars but we have silence.'

Adivasu Levu, Executive Director, Transcend Oceania in Fiji, member of Shifting the Power Coalition and Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict Pacific²⁹

Actions to help enhance a gendered approach to security sector governance can also include increasing the proportion of women working in security sector governance, such as the police force. The number of women in the police force in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, for example, has increased from three to 10 percent in recent years.³⁰

There is still a need for governments to work in close collaboration with women's civil society to engender security sector governance, including disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes. They can also provide gender-sensitive training for security sector officials.³¹

'For us women, we want priority to total disarmament, we want women's safety because when guns are around, even one gun, scares everyone. Yet politicians are not talking about disarmament. There is no political will. They are not putting people's security first and they are forgetting that women have suffered because of the guns. When women see guns, it brings back the fear and trauma.'

Helen Hakena, Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea³²

Message 5 Women's access to and participation in governance processes must be sustained.

Why?

Peacebuilding does not end with signing a peace agreement or staging parliamentary elections.

Women's peacebuilding efforts must be sustained through the elections cycle and be included in constitutional reforms to reaffirm the principles of non-discrimination, equality and affirmative action. Women's right to freedom and security, as well as the protection of women participating in constitutional conventions, must also be upheld.³³

The main objective of peace building processes should be to ensure that the post-conflict community is more inclusive of women, including women with disabilities, barriers are removed and human rights are upheld.

The evidence

The Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security³⁴ is a mechanism which can both respond to Pacific Island Forum Leaders' priorities – particularly to increase the number of women in leadership and politics – and mainstream gender equality goals into the broader security agenda.

'To me, peace and human security go hand in hand – we can only achieve peace when there is an effective human security in place. I want to see the next generation of young women become champions.'

Vanessa Heleta, Talitha Project in Tonga, member of Shifting the Power Coalition and Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict Pacific

Considering innovative and practical ways to enhance participation of women and men, and people with disabilities in security policymaking at the local level will ensure these groups are able to contribute their peace and human security perspectives and determine the direction of policy options. It will also give them a greater say over budgetary allocations, including military and defence spending.

National electoral laws can incorporate gender equality quotas and ensure voter registration and education for women and people with disabilities. Enhancing women's participation in electoral commissions and observer missions should also be prioritised. Electoral experts should work with local women's groups and disabled people's organisations to provide relevant training for women candidates and political parties.³⁵

'All of us need to be supporting women, in their initiatives – programs that is there for the women towards peace building and conflict prevention.'

Stanley Holmes, Winds of Change in Solomon Islands

What can be done?

There is a need for greater focus on the critical importance of peacebuilding and recognising women's vital role in building lasting peace and stability. Peace building which is gender responsive requires prevention of violence against women and the recognition of violence against women as a security issue. This involves awareness-raising on women's rights, the different impact of conflict on women and men and a broader understanding of 'peace' at the local level.

Governments, regional organisations and the UN systems should increasingly convene civil society dialogues focused on gender and peacebuilding issues to ensure that issues most critical to women are addressed. A consultative framework should be established which enables women peacebuilders to participate in national and regional dialogues on peace and security, development and humanitarian response.

A standing agenda item on the women, peace and security agenda should be included in meetings which address peace and security. There should be increased support for women's engagement and participation in conflict-preventive diplomacy and the monitoring and implementation of peace and security agreements. Gender advisers and women representatives should be included in election observer missions, peace operations and humanitarian response activities.

Humanitarian responses are commonly controlled by male-dominated international bodies³⁶ and should better prioritise women's rights and have greater space for women in affected communities to lead. At the local level, *Pacific Women* is working to achieve this. For example, in Papua New Guinea, *Pacific Women* supports the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation's work with women human rights defenders in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, and Kup Women for Peace's actions to bring peace to communities. *Pacific Women* also supported education on voting rights and responsibilities and on governance and leadership to women and men across the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in the lead up to elections.

The Pacific is experiencing an increase in climate-induced humanitarian disasters and, in this context, the Shifting the Power Coalition is supporting women to lead emergency response and to take power back into their own hands – ensuring disaster response addresses women's needs. Supported by the Australian Government through *Pacific Women* and ActionAid Australia, the coalition includes femLINKpacific, Pacific Disability Forum, the Pacific Community, the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation, Talitha Project, Transcend Oceania, Vanuatu Young Women for Change, Vois Blong Mere Solomon, YWCA Samoa, YWCA Papua New Guinea and ActionAid Vanuatu.³⁷

Reconciliation processes need to be made more accessible to women with disabilities, with respect to both physical facilities and communication barriers. There also needs to be an increase in the proportion of women in peacekeeping missions.

To engender security sector governance including disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes and provide gender sensitive training for security sector officials, there remains a need for governments to work in closer collaboration with women's civil society.³⁸

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