

Feminism in Bougainville

ELLENA SAVAGE FEBRUARY 21, 2012



Yesterday I interviewed a former Bougainville Revolutionary Army combatant. I'm in PNG for three months to visit my boyfriend, a linguist who is documenting an endangered Austronesian language here. With an interpreter, we began documenting the former combatant's story, which is harrowing. Beforehand, I wasn't sure about the ethics of interviewing someone about conflict who was a perpetrator in conflict; how to ask important questions but not to retraumatise someone who was a very young adolescent when he first entered battle.

But he was more prepared than I was to fully document his story, which includes details of torture and rape, of cold-blooded murder, and of corpse mutilation, perpetrated by his side and the other sides during the crisis that spanned the 1990s, killing upward of 10 per cent of Bougainville's population.

His story is long and painful, and we're not sure what to do with it just yet, so we'll just keep meeting and piecing it all together.

This was the first time I'd heard about the real events of the conflict: most of the information people give is their frustration at the politics of it, or their disgust at the various factions that emerged, armed and dangerous.

With the support of the Leitana Nehan Women's group, Gregory put down his arms later in the conflict and was heavily involved in weapons disposal programs. He's now a community leader and activist, running programs for young people.

The generation of Bougainvilleans who have school-aged children now are those who were thrown into conflict during their adolescence. Being traumatised and having never had time to be children themselves, Gregory, and other community leaders say many of these folks aren't able to meet the responsibilities of parenthood.

Outside the family there are few resources for their children to get support here, so his ideas are quite radical. His dream is to have a place for troubled young people to access education (education isn't universal in PNG), rehabilitation and other support.

During the war, women's groups in Bougainville were very powerful in providing resources: food, shelter, and educational workshops, to young combatants and other at-risk young people during the conflict. They were successful in disarming many young combatants.

Since the conflict, they have been some of the only organisations to provide trauma rehabilitation services. And all on minimal funds. During the conflict, women cooked food from their own gardens to provide for the young people.

'Women in Bougainville have no choice but to be political,' I was told by a community leader. From housekeepers to businesswomen, they all seem to be pretty fierce feminists. Even random women I meet at cafes and pubs tell me about the work women do in their communities. Different village councils work differently, but some are all women, some are mixed, and some are all men.

Society in Bougainville is matrilineal, but patriarchal; upon marriage, the husband moves to his wife's village. I think this fact eases the usually difficult transition women face taking on public leadership roles for the first time.

On Nissan island, a council comprised largely of women subsistence farmers and service industry workers living in Buka organised to have toilets put in every residence on the island. Domestic roles there have broadened to take on public health and hygiene. I've heard some people say the men on Nissan island are lazy. If this is true, the women seem quite happy to be the leaders in their place.

Bougainville's provincial parliament has three seats allocated to women, and the national government will allocate one seat to a woman in the upcoming federal elections. People here believe it is because of Bougainville's example. There is already one woman in the national parliament, but I'm told she doesn't really count because she's white and Australian, and is married to a very powerful judge.

National elections are in July, and I know one woman who is planning to run. During the last elections, a female candidate ran and came a very close second in one seat. One reason, I am told, is that women who don't know about all of the candidates are likely to vote for a female name.

This might sound like a less than desirable model of democracy, but it illustrates how keen women here are to have representation, and how willing they are to trust other women in leadership roles.

Rebuilding a society after a conflict requires courage and compassion. Data from the conflict is still being collected, and wounds will take a lot longer to heal. The record of the crisis has not yet been set straight. Women's leadership during the crisis provided rare space for young people to be safe, and for traumatised survivors to access support.

Their contributions need to be acknowledged, and supported at all levels of politics.



Ellena Savage is a Melbourne writer and a past editor of the Melbourne University student magazine, Farrago.