

Women Mediators in Pacific Conflict Zones

Sharon Bhagwan Rolls
femLINKPACIFIC – Media Initiatives for Women

Introduction

I would first like to acknowledge the women of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Bougainville who have willingly shared their stories with me since 2000. The information I share has been gathered from meeting women in conferences and in their home countries, and in this regard also acknowledge the support of UNIFEM PACIFIC for supporting femLINKPACIFIC's documentation and community media initiatives.

I stand here both in my personal and professional capacity, not because I profess to be an expert on peace and conflict, although as a Fiji Islander I have faced our own conflicts.

As a mother I share a dream of other mothers to have peace and security for our children.

I also recognise that the contributions of women working for peace in the Pacific deserve a place not just in the history of the women's movement, but the history of our region, and our world.

The stability of the Pacific countries has been seriously weakened with the armed conflict in Bougainville, the first coup in the Pacific Islands in Fiji in 1987, the ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands, and the coup and mutiny in Fiji in 2000.

However, at times of conflict, women mobilise for peace.

The Paper will serve to:

- a) Highlight and celebrate women's peace initiatives in Fiji, Bougainville and Solomon Islands
- b) Highlight the potential that UN SC resolution 1325 has to support women's participation in all aspects of peace-building.

PART A:

Fiji Islands: The Peace Vigil, the Bose Levu Vakaturaga and the Military Council

Throughout Fiji's history, women and civil society groups have repeatedly mobilized to call for the release of political hostages, a return to parliamentary democracy, and upholding the principles of good governance, democracy and the rule of law.

The history of the women's peace movement in the Fiji Islands dates back to the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The YWCA played a leading role in the anti-nuclear movement during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Young women activists and the student Christian movement were formed at the University of the South Pacific, which became the channel for peace activism.¹

The politics of race in Fiji has impacted women and also influenced women's responses to national crises. Each political conflict has had an impact on our multiracial society, as well as the multiracial networks of women's groups. Women have participated on all sides of the conflict in Fiji, even as supporters of the coup perpetrators. But women have been particularly visible as supporters of peace, although invisible from formal peace processes.

Despite these obstacles, women have continued to work towards peace, equality, and a voice in the future of Fiji. Although women have traditionally been perceived as the peacemakers in the home and family without a voice in community or public affairs, women have been able to use the news-media to mainstream their opinions and to speak a language of peace and justice, especially during the height of the crises in Fiji, through such initiatives as the Peace Vigil. Even though women remain outside of the mainstream decision-making processes, the Peace Vigil and other initiatives enabled women to collectively address issues and concerns using traditional networks:

- In 2000, women were instrumental in maintaining a degree of calm and infusing hope during the crisis. On May 20, 2000, the day after the overthrow, the National Council of Women Fiji, an umbrella organisation and coordinating body for a range of women's organisations and clubs, issued our first media statement denouncing the coup and then mobilized a network of women's groups in Suva to gather for a peace and prayer vigil the following day.

Between May 21 and July 24, 2000, a multiethnic group of women held a daily vigil. What emerged from the vigil were actions of peaceful solidarity and a denouncement of the illegal overthrow of the government. "The Blue Ribbon Peace Vigil" as it became known, played an important role in bringing different communities and groups together to pray for peace and unity in the country. The "Mothers in White" representatives of the Catholic Women's League, a core group of the Blue Ribbon Peace Vigil, gathered at parliamentary complex where the hostages were detained to pray for the hostages, while other women wrote letters of support that provided a sense of hope. "The Blue Ribbon Peace Vigil" also provided considerable solace to family members of the hostages, and became a meeting point for the hostages as they were released from captivity.

How Did We Mediate?

Following discussions at the Peace Vigil, a delegation of indigenous women met with (the late) Ro Adi Lady Lala Mara (then the wife of the President and a paramount chief in her own right). Adi Lady Lala was also a mother of one of the political detainees during the hostage crisis. With her traditional

¹ femLINKpacific YWCA Herstories Interviews with Ruth Lecthe, Susan Parkinson and Suliana Siwatibau

endorsement, a message issued on behalf of the women of the Peace Vigil was conveyed to the Bose Levu Vakaturaga/The Great Council of Chiefs by Taufu Vakatale.²

The message highlighted the ongoing peace vigil action and the collective call by all women, regardless of ethnicity, for the releases of the detained political hostages - and a call especially from the indigenous women, for peaceful resolution.³ Having the statement delivered during the formal meeting was critical to ensure that this esteemed body of traditional leaders heard formally from indigenous women in particular.

Because of the role of the military in both conflicts, and its recurring role in addressing instability in Fiji, women learned to negotiate and communicate with the security forces. In 2000, as a result of discussions at the Peace Vigil, the National Council of Women Fiji made contact with the military, and as a result, the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Ratu Voreqe Bainimarama, brought together the members of the military council and other senior officers to meet with the representatives of the Peace Vigil.

The delegation presented what has become known as “The Women’s Letter.” It outlined various suggestions, particularly the need for Fiji to return to parliamentary democracy, and for the military to uphold the 1997 Constitution as the supreme law of the country. The women also requested that the military respect human rights.⁴ From this initial meeting, women learned the importance of using the language of the military/security sector for future dialogue and peace initiatives.

The letter was received respectfully and favourably, and a critical lesson learnt from this process was to ensure that future communication was more in line with the style of communication that the army was familiar with.

But where have these initiatives led us?

As we are all aware, a conflict does not end just because the overt violence has ended, or because of national elections. Certainly at one level it can be said that Fiji has returned to parliamentary democracy, but whilst the country awaits the outcomes of the legal process including inquiries into the events of May 2000, one critical challenge facing our country right now is how to implement a national reconciliation programme which will not be a ‘band-aid’ for the hurt and suffering caused by both these political upheavals.

Who is going to invest in the women of Fiji to assist us to re-group, review our peace initiatives to date and find a path forward as Fiji Islanders to continue our mediation efforts – at the political or legislative level, while we also continue to work at the community level?

The rise in Christian fundamentalism from certain church groups, which further alienates non-Christian groups, is an additional cause for concern, especially as we continue to experience the outright disrespect towards other faiths by the desecration, in particular, of Hindu temples.

How do we also ensure respect for the rule of law and how do we account for the possibility of the resurgence of violence, as many of the deep seated ethnic concerns, especially by the indigenous community, the corruption and other underlying causes of the coups, remain invisible at national level, although deeply rooted in our own country’s history?

² femLINKpacific IV with Tupou Vere (Keeping Watch)

³ femLINKpacific IV with Susana Evening (Keeping Watch)

⁴ femLINKpacific Interview with Parul Deoki and Tupou Vere (Keeping Watch)

Within these challenges women remain sidelined from the decision making processes both within the national development framework and more importantly within traditional decision making structures – whether it is the Great Council of Chiefs and provincial level or at district and community level.

This was highlighted in December 2003 during the opening of the Women Peace and Security Coordinating Committee (Fiji) on Conflict Prevention and Early Warning by the (then) Chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs Fiji (Bose Levu Vakaturaga) Ratu Epeli Ganilau who admitted that issues concerning women have not been a priority for those in position of influence, not only in institutions of the state, but more importantly traditional and faith based institutions.

Where, then, is the space for us to engage as mediators?

Solomon Islands

The ethnic tension and violence in Solomon Islands has had the most significant effects on women and children. Women have experienced displacement, rape, harassment, and economic hardship, but women have also played a vital role in creating and maintaining peace at the community level.

The roles of women in present conflict can be traced back to their hands-on skills and traditional knowledge, to Biblical doctrines, and to their love for their nation. Women have used their traditional go-between role as an accepted form of conflict resolution.

During the conflict, the National Council of Women (NCW), which is comprised of many women from church-based women's groups, led women's call for peace and democracy. The NCW made appeals for peace directly to the militants and offered food assistance to them. The Council mobilized women inside Honiara to organize formal exchanges of food and supplies with women of the rival ethnic group. The exchanges occurred at checkpoints set up by warring factions.

In Honiara, women's groups of the Solomon Islands Christian Association had to deal with untrained armed elements in the course of their daily lives. When husbands and sons took up arms, women even enforced disarmament.⁵ Women bravely moved between the "bunkers" of different combatant groups, persuading men to lay down arms.

The events of June 2000 constituted the biggest hostage-taking conflict in the history of Solomon Islands. It challenged the current methods and mechanisms designed by and for Solomon Islanders, and in response the Women for Peace (WFP) was formed. Working as a network of women, independent of any political, religious or ethnic movement the group consists of women of all ages, religions, walks of life, and provinces, who reside in Honiara, and includes the sisters of the Catholic Church and Church of Melanesia. It is committed to working on a voluntary basis for peace.

The group also recognizes the difficulties of Guadalcanal and Malaita woman, and encourages them to take an active and leading role in its activities. It worked in collaboration with the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), Isatabu Freedom Movement (FM), churches, non-government organizations, community leaders, chiefs, government and the international community.⁶

WFP members have been involved in various activities, including: meeting with militants, government and police representatives; representation at ceasefire talks; weekly prayer meetings, including the women's plea for peace which was broadcast live throughout the nation; forums and conferences, and visits to displaced families, the hospital and provincial communities, particularly to encourage the reintegration of young militants. During the crisis, WFP members remained in Honiara and worked with other women from other provinces. They mobilized to provide assistance for people in need, regardless of ethnicity. At great personal risk, members of "Women for Peace" also helped to distribute essential basic items to displaced families.

⁵ femLINKpacific interview with journalist Dorothy Wickham, June 2003

⁶ Alice Pollard 2000: Resolving conflict in Solomon Islands: The Women for Peace approach

Afu Billy a leading and respected women's human rights activist and peace advocate of the Solomon Islands observed:

*I think for our women, whatever sort of violence happens, be it in the home or outside, women are very much affected by it and I think women are more responsible not for the violence but for making sure that things are okay, because women look more after the family and when it comes to things like that, they are worried about how the children are feeling and how the violence is affecting the children. Whilst men have those concerns but not at the concern level that women have, because they still have to feed the family, they still have to make sure the kids are comfortable, they still have to comfort the children affected by, or if they are affected they have to settle them down and they are the ones who are responsible for finding safe places for their children when things happen. So with those kinds of responsibility women must have a say in the peace process and the peace building of a country.*⁷

Without access to formal structures for preventive intervention, women's peace building ultimately begins in the home. Initial interventions are often as a wife, mother or daughter of an armed combatant, on either side of the conflict.

In the Solomon Islands, women peace builders went into the camps to talk to the militants, taking with them food and a few basic necessities. Women in the rural communities, such as the Guadalcanal women, went to the bunkers and talked to their sons and prayed with them.⁸

But despite all these initiatives, the actions of women were not incorporated into the formal peace process. Although women played a pivotal role in persuading parties to open up dialogue, women's organizations and other civil society groups were excluded from the official negotiations that eventually led to the Townsville Peace Agreement, as one peace activist told us: "I don't think we were heard, and because of this conflict, men thought that women should not be involved in anything to bring them back from what they wanted to do. And even in the peace agreement meeting we were not involved."

Bougainville

During the Bougainville crisis women were peace makers and bridge builders; women continued their customary role of peace building across the combat lines.

During the crisis, the church structures, which had their own women's groups in place, became the means for the establishment of women and peace initiatives and cooperation among groups, such as the Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum (BICWF). Women, working through their churches, developed a critical link between communities that had been torn apart by the destruction of infrastructure and communications.⁹

The Port Moresby Bougainville Inter Church Women, in a series of petitions to the national government in March 1997, emphasized the importance of dialogue, stating that, "the national government must sit down with Bougainvilleans to work out a long term political settlement. Using force is not an answer to resolving Bougainville Crisis."

In August 1996, the Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum (BICWF) led by Sister Lorraine Garasu and women from United Church, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal churches, staged a Women's Peace Forum with the theme, "In Search of Genuine Peace and Reconciliation." More than 700

⁷ femLINKpacific interview with Afu Billy, 2001

⁸ femLINKpacific interview, Anne Saenemua, Solomon Islands Christian Association/Federation of Women, October 2001.

⁹ femLINKpacific Interview with Elizabeth Momis, October 2004

women made their way to Arawa from across Bougainville. They walked across mountains, and negotiated their way across rapid rivers and rocky roads. Women were motivated by their collective commitment for a renewed women's movement as part of the new Bougainville. The Peace Forum emphasized the need for women to take part in decision-making bodies at the village, district, and provincial levels.

What motivated me was seeing that not many women take part in decision making bodies at the district level and upward to the provincial level and I thought my women from the villages needed someone to voice our issues at upper levels.

- Monica Samu, Chairperson for Bougainville InterChurch Women's Forum

After the meeting, the district representatives formed women's groups to begin negotiating with the combatants. These groups began mediating with the young male combatants in the jungle. In each district, women negotiated with BRA troops. *"Mothers were going in the bush to get the boys. The informal negotiation process was started by the women. I was frightened because we did not know what to expect,"* related Monica Samu.

The process began with formal consultations with the chiefs in each village to decide when the mediation visits would occur. 'The chiefs had to say, "yes" in order to ensure our safety,' said Samu. Permission also had to be sought from both the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) and the BRA.

Many of the women had to deal with very aggressive behaviour from the young armed combatants:

[When] we went they asked us not to go further to their camps but to meet them half way. They had all their guns pointing to us. Some of them were from our village . . . some of them were more aggressive than the others. We told them to come home. It wasn't easy. They were saying we were trying to get them to be afraid of the PNG DF. That was my first trip and only trip to the bush. The second trip comprised of women leaders from districts, church leaders, government leaders . . . They continued to go regularly, going in to talk to them.

- Monica Samu, Chairperson for Bougainville InterChurch Women's Forum

Women had to learn to negotiate and communicate not only with local armed combatants but also the PNGDF. In the Siwai District, in the South of Bougainville women and peace groups offered the PNGDF strategies for negotiations with their sons, with the combatants:

We started women's group in their peace group. And every Sunday after church we come together and talk. And make plans. So the first time the security force landed in that was our chance to go and hear with those people if you here to see us the people of Bougainville to make peace then you have to support our plan.¹⁰

Traditional governance structures were also an important forum for women's intervention in the conflict. For example, Terese Jaintong capitalized on her traditional role as a landowner and worked with the chiefs in the bush during the conflict. She assisted in establishing the Council of Elders (COE), a local level government body to negotiate with Francis Ona; she was a member of the Evaluation Committee, and was one of the first women who negotiated with the Bougainville Revolutionary Army.¹¹

¹⁰ femLINKpacific Interview with Helen Ikilai, October 2004

¹¹ femLINKpacific interview with Teresa Jaintong, October 2004

According to Jaintong, traditional structures also gave rise to peace building at the community level. Women were among the first to intervene as peace builders, as traditional landowners meeting with the combatants of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and as mothers who sought out their sons in the bush and encouraged them to lay down their weapons. At the same time, women's peace efforts were also being forged by women working within the combatant groups, such as the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom (BWPF), which was born out of the women's network within the BRA.

The existence of parallel peace and reconciliation structures within the BRA enabled peace efforts at the community level, especially as combatant leaders recognized the need to end the war and to stop a new generation from growing up in an environment of armed conflict. According to James Tanis, former member of the BRA and now a peace advocate, even the BRA had a Ministry of Political Education and Reconciliation, whilst the Bougainville Transitional Government had peace committees. The Bougainville Interim Provincial Government established the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom (BWPF), a parallel structure to Bougainville Provincial Women's Council (BPWC).

The Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom network was a peace building initiative for women who were living in the jungle in BRA-controlled areas. Women met together in the jungle, organized prayer vigils, and distributed relief assistance to widows and displaced families. Throughout the war, women did not stay silent out of fear but instead continued to advocate for peace. Women also struggled to manage the scarce resources available during the period of conflict. Despite the severe restrictions on freedom of movement, which limited women's access to market gardens, they continued to provide for their children and their family networks.

The effectiveness of women's actions was reinforced by the fact that Bougainville/Papua New Guinea is a matrilineal society where women carry respect and authority. The peace initiatives by women on both sides of the conflict gave birth to the process of reconciliation and opened up mediation and negotiation between the BRA, the people and the PNG Government.¹² Unfortunately, this authority did not influence national level decision-making. In 1998, despite women's successful efforts to implement a permanent cease-fire (which has held to date), women were left out of national level negotiations and post conflict programmes.

In 1998, a Women's Statement was delivered to the Leaders Meeting at the Bougainville/Papua New Guinea Peace talks. In the statement, the women of Bougainville demanded a tangible role in the long-term peace process:

We are continuing to work with the communities, in getting the communities to deal, and work out strategies for themselves that will prolong peace that will really attain peace, because we believe that the absence of war is not the end to the violence. We believe and we see that there is still a lot of violence in the community. "Women have built bridges between their own families, clans and displaced fellow Bougainvilleans by working for mutual survival, whether it be in the bush, in care centres, or wherever they have hosted strangers in their own communities. Without remuneration they have laboured beside their men to create basic services using whatever talent or means they had to hand. Our menfolk have rediscovered the value of women sharing in the decision-making process and we attest here today to the liberating effect this has had upon our fellow women delegates. As mothers of the land, we take seriously our responsibility to rebuild

¹² Saovana-Spriggs, 2000

*peace in our hearts and create a peaceful environment that will improve the quality of all our lives.*¹³

But, despite women's prominence in the peace process, women received only 6 out of 106 seats in the appointed Bougainville/Papua New Guinea People's Congress in May 1999.¹⁴

Women were absent from the Peace Process Consultative Committee (PPCC). This committee is chaired by the UN, and oversees the peace process, in particular the weapons disposal programme of the Bougainville Peace Agreement. Apparently, one of the reasons women have not been appointed to the Peace Process Consultative Committee (PPCC) was that the representatives of the ex-combatants were not comfortable with the inclusion of women.¹⁵

The new constitution for Bougainville was formulated by the Bougainville Constituent Assembly (BCA). The Assembly included the following women: Elizabeth Burain, Monica Samu, Lucy Madoi, Agnes Nara, Genevieve Pisi, Therese Jaintong, Martha Turatis and Dorcas Awaso.

Last year, three women – Magadelene Toroansi, Fancesca Semoso and Laura Ampa - were elected to the three regional seats (North, South and Central) reserved for women in the new Autonomous Bougainville Government (provincial government). It should be noted however, that women did not contest other seats in their own constituencies. So there is an important need to invest the leadership capacity of the women of Bougainville to assist them to be more involved in formal decision making structures of the new Bougainville in order to ensure a more holistic approach to peace, security and development.

Investing in Rebuilding the Women's Movement

In fact, this is a key requirement in all post conflict situations – the need to provide substantive and long term investment in rebuilding capacity of women leaders. For new women leaders who emerge during times of crises this is not only enable them to take on new leadership roles in all levels of post conflict reconstruction but to also be in a position to have consulted each other – women ourselves, to ensure consensus for a women's platform for reconstruction – within a women's human rights framework.

At the same time, there are existing and underlying causes of division among groups in Bougainville, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. Such divisions will continue to affect women and will impact reconciliation efforts within and among communities.

Women must have the space and support to develop a women's agenda for peace at the local, national, and regional levels. Future peace building initiatives must give much credence and assistance to the need for reconciliation among women leaders and women within their communities. Otherwise, untreated wounds have the potential of developing into renewed conflicts.

¹³ (Delegation included Agnes Titus (BTG Minister of Local Govt.), Josephine Sirivi (Leader of BIG Women's Delegation, Central Bougainville), Therese Jaintong (President of Bougainville Council of Women), Ruth Saovana-Spriggs (Postgraduate student, ANU, Canberra), Sr.Lorraine Garasu (Bougainville Inter Church Women's Forum), Sr.Ruby Mirinka (Co-ordinator of BOCBIHP, Honiara, Solomons), Balbina Kari (Health Officer, Arawa, BOCBIHP Staff, Honiara), Bernadette Ropa (Tarlana High School Principal, Inter Church NGO, Bougainville), Rita Pearson (AusAid consultant, Mosbi), Marilyn Havini (Bougainville Freedom Movement, Sydney BIG office and High School Teacher, Sydney, Australia), Daphne Zale (Bougainville Humanitarian Official, Gizo, Solomon Island), Scholastica Miriori (BIG Overseas Women's Liaison Officer), Joycelyn Tunsio (Buka Trap Group & Women's representative, Kieta), Lydia Pupui (Tinputz Women's representative, Tinputz), Lilly Kuntamari Crofts (Student, Bougainville Freedom Movement, Melbourne), Patricia Tapakau (Arawa District Women's Group), Lucy Madoi (Womens' representative, Kieta-Arawa), Rosemary Dikaung (Literacy Teacher – VTSP), Margaret Barako (Womens' representative, Kieta-Arawa), Lucy Morris (Bougainville Freedom Movement, Brisbane)

¹⁴ from UNIFEM Portal

¹⁵ femLINKpacific interviews in Bougainville, October 2004

PART B: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325

Women have suffered the brunt of the violence, often from both sides, during the conflicts in Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Bougainville. Many of these violations remain invisible from the mainstream peace process, because they have remained undocumented. Yet, despite many obstacles, women in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, as well as Fiji, 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. However, women have been and remain 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.

On October 31, 2000 the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This historical document is the first formal and legal document from the Security Council that requires parties to a conflict and the international community to respect women's rights and to support their participation at all stages in peace negotiations, conflict prevention and post conflict

The Resolution calls for¹⁶:

- participation of women in peace processes
- gender training in peacekeeping operations
- protection of women and girls and respect for their rights
- gender mainstreaming in the reporting and implementation systems of the United Nations relating to conflict, peace and security

A Security Council resolution is a commitment made by the United Nations and Members states to take action on specific issues. States are expected to comply and work towards implementation. Resolution 1325, therefore, builds on a number of resolutions and frameworks that set out international commitments to women's full involvement in decision-making, including numerous resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)¹⁷, as well as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Resolution 1325 recognizes that while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, there is a clear need to account for the impact of conflicts on women and girls (especially as the impact of violence against women and violation of the human rights of women in conflict situations is experienced by women of all ages). However, even though women also constitute the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons, they are not just victims of conflicts. In fact women continue to play an important role in conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peace-building.

Links to Other International and Regional Gender Commitments:¹⁸

To date, 11 Forum Island Countries (FICs) (being UN member states) are party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Solomon Islands is the

¹⁶ Fact sheet produced by **Gender and Peacebuilding Working group of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee**

¹⁷ What is CEDAW: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the "women's bill of rights," has been ratified by **183** countries. In its General Recommendation on violence against women, the CEDAW Committee recognizes that armed conflict situations lead to increased prostitution, trafficking in women and sexual assault of women. As well, in the General Recommendation on women and health, the Committee recommends that States parties ensure adequate protection and health services, including trauma treatment and counselling for women trapped in situations of armed conflict and women refugees.

¹⁸ Source: Background paper to the Pacific Islands Forum Gender, Conflict, Peace and Security Regional workshop June 2006

only FIC that has ratified the Optional Protocol to CEDAW¹⁹. All PIF members have endorsed the Millennium Development Goals which includes MDG 3 on Gender Equality and the empowerment of women.

All FICs committed to the 1994 Pacific Platforms for Action for the Advancement for Women²⁰, and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, agreed to at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women. In addition, 11 FICs are members of the Commonwealth and have committed to the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality²¹. All these international commitments to gender equality, reaffirm the inextricable link between gender equality and peace, as well as highlighting the need to improve equal access and full participation of women in power structure, to enable their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

The Pacific Islands Forum is mandated to respond to issues of security at regional level. In 2000, Forum Leaders endorsed the Biketawa Declaration, recognised the need in time of crisis or in response to members' request for assistance, for action to be taken on the basis of all members of the Forum being part of the Pacific Islands extended family. The Declaration highlights that the Forum must constructively address difficult and sensitive issues including underlying causes of tensions and conflict (ethnicity, socio-economic disparities, and lack of good governance, land disputes and erosion of cultural values), while also reiterating the belief in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief and in the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political process in framing the society in which he or she lives.

Furthermore, in October 2005 Forum Leaders endorsed the Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration, of which security is one the four key components. The Plan defines security as "stable and safe social (human) and political conditions necessary for, and reflective of, Good Governance and Sustainable Development for the achievement of Economic Growth." The Pacific Plan has a specific strategic objective to improve gender equality which means that all Pacific Plan initiatives must give due consideration to gender issues and demonstrate positive impact on gender equality, wherever possible. It is therefore critical that regional security initiatives are reconciled to ensure in the inclusion of gender as a crosscutting issue.

Despite a multitude of regional commitments to gender, peace and security, implementation on the ground has been limited.

In conclusion

Women have demonstrated the ability to effectively work together at the local level, but there is a need to strengthen women's and peace networks at the regional level. This requires investment in capacity building and institutional strengthening. Women peace advocates need to be able to exchange ideas and lessons learned from their own Pacific Island experiences.

A reconstruction plan for the Pacific's arc of instability will not be complete without an equitable inclusion of women in the design, delivery and evaluation of all development programmes and plans. The

¹⁹ CEDAW's Optional Protocol contains two procedures: a communications procedure allowing individual women, or groups of women, to submit claims of violations of rights to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and an inquiry procedure enabling the Committee to initiate inquiries into situations of grave or systematic violations of women's rights. In either case, States must be party to the Protocol.

²⁰ In 1994 two of the 13 critical areas of concern were Violence against Women and Peace and Justice. The revised PPA (2004) highlighted Peace and Security as an emerging critical issue for women in the region.

²¹ Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict is one of the four critical areas for Commonwealth action

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 therefore has the potential to provide the necessary impetus to help us make this change.