

# Peacemaking in Solomon Islands: The experience of the Guadalcanal Women for Peace movement

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## Introduction

Guadalcanal is the largest of the nine provinces that make up Solomon Islands. It was famous at one stage in history because of the bloody battle fought there between the Americans and the Japanese during World War II. The province represents 19 per cent of Solomon Island's total land mass and 19 per cent of its total population of 400,000 plus (excluding the population of Honiara city). Approximately 95 per cent of people in the province are Melanesian. This paper briefly describes gender and gender roles in Guadalcanal; the underlying causes of the unrest, according to the people of Guadalcanal; and, finally, the role of Guadalcanal women in the effort to find a lasting solution to the conflict.

## Gender and culture

Gender and gender roles in Guadalcanal are culturally structured according to the traditional values and beliefs of each local community. Roles are positively reinforced at a very early age: immediately after a child is born and the gender identified, the child is raised accordingly. Usually, a boy child is valued more than a girl child, despite the fact that lineage and land are inherited through females. Thus, a boy child is taught to hunt and fish and to be aggressive, while girls are taught the basic roles of the domestic sector and are rewarded for being neat, ladylike, and so forth. In most societies on Guadalcanal, traditionally, an adolescent girl's body is regarded as taboo and not to be touched by any male. During the childhood years, she is allowed to play with her father, her brothers and other males. After the age of 10, she is taught to keep away from the opposite sex. When she is married and has children, her name is not used by her immediate and extended family members; instead, she is named with her first child (for example, 'John's mother').

This is a sign of respect and also helps to avoid incest. Usually, when a fight breaks out between her male family members, she can stop it by using words that relate to any part of her body (for example, stepping over her thighs, head) and, because the boys cannot do that, they will stop fighting. If they don't, a large amount of compensation has to be paid to the woman's female family members as a result.

The gender equality preached by women's organisations in Solomon Islands is sneered upon by Guadalcanal men. To them, it is a threat to their dominance and power over women. Any women's organisations, apart from the church women's groups have a negative stigma attached to them. When men were

interviewed, they admitted that they believe that a woman's role is in the kitchen and that she should not take over the role of head of the family, as supported by the Bible. Gender equality is thus never promoted in Guadalcanal. Our men are very resistant to changing their outlook on the role of women. Thus, in any big decision making process, such as the sale of family land or other matters, women can attend and contribute but it is the men who have the final say. But, once a conflict arises because of a bad decision, the women are sought to help resolve the crisis. However, thanks to Christianity and education, this is slowly changing.

## Causes and effects of the conflict

The Honiara Peace Accord that was signed by the warring parties (Guadalcanal and Malaita), the government and the Commonwealth Special Envoy (Major Sitiveni Rabuka) recognised several root causes of the conflict:

- Land demands – Guadalcanal leaders wanted all alienated land titles, which had been leased to government and to individual developers, to be returned to landowners (including any other land acquired illegally).
- Political demands – Guadalcanal wanted the establishment of a state government in order to have control over: the sale or use of local land; the distribution of wealth derived from local natural resources; and the migration of people in and out of the province.
- Compensation demands – Guadalcanal wanted payment for the lives of its indigenous people, who have been brutally murdered for their lands or for other reasons.

Finally, the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) – now known as Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) – was formed as a result of frustrations over the failure of successive governments to address the demands of the people of Guadalcanal Province.

In the last 20 months, this unrest has created a lot of hardships for Guadalcanal people who are not involved in the conflict. Innocent people have been bashed, tortured and killed, starved and deprived of medical help, education, and so forth. International humanitarian assistance was not permitted to give help to Guadalcanal people. The most affected are women (that is, pregnant and lactating mothers), children and young people. Youths were forced at gunpoint to join the militants. Schools (both primary and secondary) have been closed because they have not received any food or school materials from Honiara. Three-quarters of the clinics on Guadalcanal have also closed

down, due to shortages of medical supplies. Babies are being born in the bush and cannot be vaccinated against deadly diseases like whooping cough, TB, polio, and measles. Food shortages are also being experienced because a lot more people have gone back to the villages. Mothers as primary caregivers forgot their fears and walked miles to town in order to buy or get food and medical supplies for their families and relatives from the Red Cross and other charity organisations.

While the Guadalcanal people's current needs are numerous, psycho-social support is identified as a priority among the population. They have lived in continuous fear for the last 20 months, and many of them, especially women and children, have become disorientated and cannot live normal lives. Young pregnant mothers, admitted to hospital during labour, are unable to care for their newborn babies. However, thanks to the support of the extended family network, the relatives are able to do so.

## **Guadalcanal Women for Peace**

Guadalcanal Women for Peace was established in early August 2000, in close collaboration with the overall Solomon Islands Women for Peace group that was established in May 2000. This group comprises women who are currently residing in town either because they are working or because they are married to men outside of Guadalcanal Province. The group was established because we realised that, since movement in and out of the capital is restricted, we have to engage in some form of activity that will enable us to provide moral support in this time of hardship, especially to our youths, women and children. Although we believe that women need to take a leading role in promoting peace throughout the province, doing so poses a lot of challenges in a male-dominant society. We manage as a team by meeting once a week for prayers and fellowship. It is our ultimate goal to make our men realise that a non-violent solution to this conflict should be a priority.

The group's aims are as follows:

- To make contact with Guadalcanal leaders and women to share experiences and to gain trust and confidence in each other.
- To provide encouragement and comfort to women through fellowship and prayers.
- To listen, share and exchange information and views by women.
- To discuss our roles as mothers in promoting peace throughout the province.
- To assist and strengthen linkages with Women for Peace to carry out peace plans.
- To strengthen and establish links between Women for Peace and Guadalcanal leaders and women to promote peace in families, communities, societies and the nation as a whole.

Since Guadalcanal is made up of four area constituencies (Tasimauro, Tasimate, Bolomona and Geana), the women were divided into four groups, according to the area constituency they are originally from. This is for security purposes and also so that we can communicate with people we meet in our own

languages. Letters and verbal messages were sent in advance (prior to the proposed touring dates for each group) to leaders (chiefs, church leaders, women's groups) to inform them of our coming and the purpose of the visits, and to seek permission from them to visit the areas.

On 16 September 2000, the first group boarded the plane for the southeastern part of Guadalcanal. Unfortunately, they never landed, because Harold Keke (an IFM commander) and his members took the Solomon Islands Airlines plane and pilot hostage on the northwestern side of Guadalcanal. For this reason, the groups closest to where the plane was being held decided to postpone their visit until the situation was resolved. The women from Bolomona visited their area between 29 September and 6 October. On their way, they witnessed a woman giving birth in the truck that they were travelling in. She was trying to get to the nearest clinic but could not reach it in time. This group's survey report confirmed that schools and clinics have been closed. They also reported that they were supported by men to carry on the work. However, a compensation demand for \$1,000 was forwarded to the group's leader, because two of the members who joined them are from Malaita and have been also displaced from Guadalcanal plains. This demand was met by the parliament members (from the Guadalcanal plains) on behalf of our women.

Also, it is also our intention to make use of women at the grassroots level because we strongly believe that, in sustaining peace, capacity building within the local communities must be developed and maintained.

Further, we propose to work closely with community leaders (chiefs, church leaders and women leaders), who also hold other key functions that play vital roles in strengthening and maintaining the relationship among the local communities and civil societies at large. Also, we want to revitalise traditional values, such as communal working together (such as the rebuilding of schools and clinics), to support any activity that will improve the quality of life of Guadalcanal women, children and youths.

Finally, the group's short-term goals are to give moral support to our women, to talk to IFM members about disbanding and returning home to their families, and to identify areas of need among the local communities. Our long-term goals are to conduct awareness programmes on sexual harassment, rape, incest, domestic violence and gender equality. It is our hope to empower Guadalcanal women from all levels to work cooperatively as a team, and to alleviate the suppression of a male-dominant society and make life more bearable for women, children and youths on Guadalcanal.

## **Conclusion**

While conflict is a gendered activity, sustainable peace in any country cannot be maintained unless there is cooperation between government, NGOs and civil society at large. Further, we should work together to fight the injustices that threaten our people, so that everybody can live and enjoy their lives to the fullest potential.