

# Road to empowerment

How to protect the fundamental rights of women and girls in two deeply patriarchal societies.

Story: Andrea Close



**AFGHANISTAN:** When Fatima (11) lost her mother, World Vision's counsellors worked with her father on the benefits of girl education so she could attend a World Vision centre for street children. Fatima now dreams of becoming a doctor. Photographer: Narges Ghafary/World Vision



**PAPUA NEW GUINEA:** Training participants discuss mother and child health issues in their community. World Vision conducted a three-day Mother and Child Health Peer Education training session attended by men, women and children in Port Moresby. Photographer: Paula Kari/World Vision

When it comes to comparing Afghanistan and Papua New Guinea, it's easy to spot the differences and Australia's relationship with both countries varies greatly.

Afghanistan is a country of 32 million people with cultural and religious complexity. The mountainous, landlocked South-Central Asian nation has been torn apart by decades of war.

Papua New Guinea is a rain-forest covered Pacific island, home to several hundred tribes, and is one of the world's least explored lands.

But they have a tragic commonality. In Papua New Guinea, at least two thirds of women have experienced violence, and one third have been subjected to rape.

Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan is almost at pandemic level, with up to 87 percent of women having

experienced some form of violence, such as physical, psychological, sexual, economic violence, social abuse as well as forced and early marriage.

These are shocking statistics but, according to aid agencies working in the region, denying these women and girls their fundamental rights to live without fear and persecution due to perceived cultural sensitivities is crippling homes, communities and entire societies.

International development agencies such as World Vision and CARE Australia say violence against women and girls is inextricably linked to a lack of economic independence and a lack of women in decision making positions.

The internal dynamics of these countries are important to Australia, not only in humanitarian terms but also for stability, security and economic growth in the region.



**“The disempowerment is maintained by structures including culture, religion, laws and policies and they are continually reinforced both by women and men.”**



As part of its inquiry into human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region, the Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is hearing evidence of culturally sanctioned violations throughout the region.

The inquiry covers an extensive geographic area on the world map. Connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia, it includes a diverse range of countries from eastern Africa, the Middle East and India through to Australia’s closest neighbours in the Asia Pacific.

The committee heard that a woman’s empowerment requires three things - improving her knowledge and skills which can lead to economic benefits, support from those closest to her, and ensuring that her rights are protected by legislation.

Senior Program Officer at CARE Australia, Elizabeth Cowan, says that for too many, the lack of access to justice keeps them silent.

“The disempowerment is maintained by structures including culture, religion, laws and policies and they are continually reinforced both by women and men.”

Julie McKay, Executive Director of the Australian National Committee for UN Women, says the legal framework may exist but making the leap between customary practice and formal justice is fraught with obstacles.

“Women’s access to formal justice systems and also being able to guide the justice they want from a situation rather than having a system imposed on them, can leave them helpless.”



**TRAINING:**

*(left) A participant preparing her presentation. World Vision’s project supports vulnerable children in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Participants learn about the importance of breastfeeding, immunisation, preparing simple healthy meals from the three food groups and reading simple health charts or illustrations on healthy practises. Photographer: Paula Kari/World Vision*



**PAPUA NEW GUINEA:**

*(left) Children in traditional regalia at a community celebration on the outskirts of Papua New Guinea's capital of Port Moresby. Photographer: Errol Fontanellaz/World Vision*



**AFGHANISTAN:**

*(right) A mother and baby receive support at a nutrition project in Afghanistan, outside Herat City near the Iranian border. Photographer: Chris Weeks/World Vision*

## "We are looking to develop a partnership to build trust with both men and women"

The vast majority of these women's voices are never heard. Their stories go untold. In a patriarchal system, a man's voice is most powerful.

Therefore, significant attention has been focused on the attitude of the region's men and boys, in particular their attitudes to violence and the real threat of what can happen if the status quo is altered.

In its submission to the inquiry, World Vision says patriarchal systems of belief reinforce the dominance of men and boys over women and girls in all aspects of public and private life. This culture of dominance is deeply entrenched and is accepted by men and women alike.

Policy Adviser at World Vision Australia, Erin Goddard, says it is not surprising that there is resistance to change when gender roles are so entrenched.

"There is clear anecdotal evidence, particularly in Papua New Guinea, that violence increases when a man feels

his power is threatened. Engagement with men and boys to explore the positive aspects of masculine identities is needed," said Ms Goddard.

Human Rights Sub-Committee Chair, Philip Ruddock (Berowra, NSW), said fathers and husbands often feel the pursuit of independent goals can take the woman away from her regular household duties and obligations to her family.

"As you seek to change the status quo, it undermines men's authority and their traditional decision making and they can see this as quite deleterious," Mr Ruddock said.

Paul Kelly, Principal Executive at CARE Australia, says that any program's potential success stems from the initial approach to the community as a whole.

"The important thing is not coming in with a sense of 'We are right and we'll fix things for you.' It is about having a more humble approach," said Mr Kelly.

"We are looking to develop a partnership to build trust with both men and women, understand what the challenges are and what the perspectives of the people we are going to work with are."

Education programs targeting men and boys are underway but cycles of generational abuse are hard to break, according to Julianne Scenna of World Vision.

# Bougainville's agents of change

**E**vidence shows that the end of wartime violence can see the beginning of an increase in gender-based violence. So how do women move from powerless victims to empowered agents of change, particularly when they live in a patriarchal society?

Following a peace agreement between the Government of Papua New Guinea and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) to end the 10 year civil war, the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) was formed, with elections for the first Parliament held in 2005.

Rose Pihei is the Minister for Health and one of three who, since 2010, hold reserved seats for women in the ABG, along with MPs Joan Jerome and Elizabeth Burain.

Bougainville has one of the lowest rates of female representation in government in the world. Credible recognition within the Parliament is of critical importance if political gains are to be made, so what kind of reception did the three women receive once in the Parliament?

"The attitudes from the men were very negative. 'What do you think you are doing? Women can't do anything in politics,'" said Ms Burain.

"Our ideas were not listened to for quite some time," added Ms Jerome. "We had to be persistent."

The three colleagues have much in common. All were heavily involved in brokering peace between warring factions in the lead up to the new government and were reluctant politicians at first, but felt compelled to stand for election.

"These women I had advocated for, these communities needed a leader and they wanted me to speak for them. I could not stand by passively," said Ms Pihei.

Essential to running for office was getting the OK from family, which all three women had to seek. Ms Pihei's husband initially said no when she asked him if she could stand for election but changed his mind after seeing first-hand the plight of the local women.

"Encouraging women to be self-reliant but to work alongside their male



PACIFIC PARLIAMENTARY PARTNERSHIPS PROGRAM, 2014: (left to right) The Hon. Joan Jerome, Minister Rose Pihei, Her Excellency, the Hon. Deborah Stokes and the Hon. Elizabeth Burain.

counterparts is one way of uniting our people," she said.

The three agree that the women of post-conflict Bougainville are suffering more than ever, with a recent UN report showing that 80 per cent of Bougainville men reported using sexual or physical violence against a partner.

**"Encouraging women to be self-reliant but to work alongside their male counterparts is one way of uniting our people."**

During her time in Parliament, Rose Pihei has been the driver of the Bougainville Gender Policy and the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan but she says gender-based violence in her home country is very bad.

"We have an issue with a 'lost generation' who never went to school or had a job. They would now be aged 30 - 45 and they think that it's normal to fight and be threatening to others."

With more women speaking out for themselves, again the issue of male disempowerment comes to the fore. The parliamentarians are encouraging others to show that women can have power without taking it from men.

Joan Jerome said that mentoring programs are underway and things are looking positive.

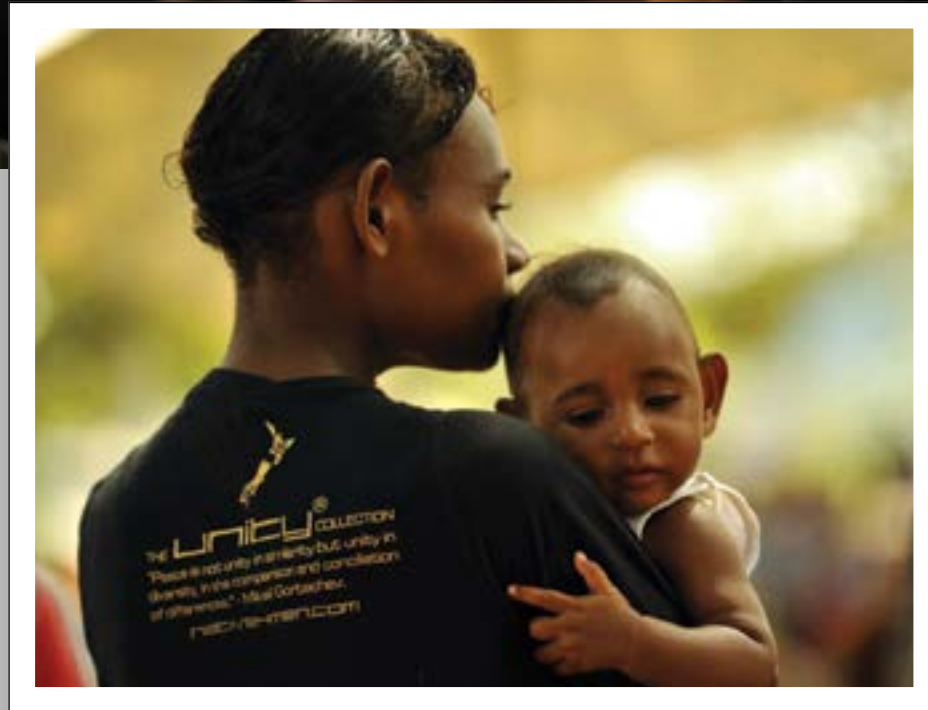
"We have been running workshops and I believe one or two new women will stand in the next elections. Our three positions show others they can do it and we would like to see other women join us."

Ms Burain added that the reserved parliamentary seats are a good start and that being elected representatives gives them the strength to change the thinking of the whole community by showing men need not feel disempowered by a woman's success.

"It's good for us to know that being a politician requires us to be strong for others. We must convince our young women to be active, to have that drive to be leaders of the future.

"Our male colleagues are now beginning to realise and acknowledge publicly that we are performing very well. For a patriarchal society, it has been a great breakthrough."

**Women's economic empowerment and access to leadership are intricately tied up with the violence they may face.**



**AFGHANISTAN:**

*(above) Feroza, 6, is a student in Gaza, a small village north of Kabul, Afghanistan. CARE funded the construction of a library at the school. Photographer: David Rochkind/CARE*

**PORT MORESBY:**

*(left) A mother and her child watch the celebrations in their community, on the outskirts of Papua New Guinea's capital of Port Moresby. Photographer: Errol Fontanellaz/World Vision*

“Awareness and education, flyers and posters are good in ensuring that people have a basic understanding of issues but there also need to be safety nets and intervention procedures and frameworks to ensure that people are able to speak out,” she says.

The sub-committee heard that women's economic empowerment and access to leadership are intricately tied up with the violence they may face.

Australia is currently assisting with establishing mobile banking services in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the region, to allow women to manage their own finances and gain economic empowerment.

Here is where the approach is so crucial. Women who earn their own income are at risk of experiencing physical and/

or sexual violence, according to Senior Program Officer at CARE Australia, Elizabeth Cowan.

“We work with individual women but we bring them into groups where they are able to undertake collective action of village savings and loans,” she says.

“Before participating in one of CARE's projects in Bangladesh, women were often harassed by men while they were walking to the market. Now, as a result of the increased confidence that they have developed through village savings and loans groups, they are addressing that harassment they have experienced.”

Changing so-called cultural norms and attitudes is a long term commitment. Implementing programs and seeing them bear fruit is likely to take several years and is often seen as a Western import, according to Ms Cowan.



## AFGHANISTAN:

*Nastura, 9, has been attending school in the village of Burikhil for 3 years. When she graduates, she wants to be able to teach other people too. "I like school - it is the best part of my day," she says.*

*Photographer: Kate Holt/CARE*

"In reality, we cannot empower a woman. As a white woman from Australia, I cannot go into a country and hand over some empowerment to a woman. That has to come from the woman herself."

The good news is that there are some heartening stories arising. In Afghanistan, there are more than 8.3 million school students enrolled this year and 40 per cent of them are girls. This compares to only 1 million school children, with almost no girls, in 2001.

Zulaikha Rafiq from the Afghan Women Educational Centre relayed the story of a 28-year-old mother of four from the remote Faryab province in Afghanistan who recently spoke publicly in her country about joining the women's shura (or consultation group) in her village.

"She took advantage of the literacy lessons and with support from her husband and family, has decided to go to school this new academic session," she says.

"The woman was literally trembling and she said, 'I never imagined that one day I would be standing on a stage and talking to people from the Ministry of Women's Affairs and from civil society organisations.'

"With the backing of the international community over the past decade, Afghan women have found their voice and have become a force that cannot be ignored. They now occupy 28 per cent of parliamentary seats as members of the High Peace Council and play a vital role in ensuring that


## Changing so-called cultural norms and attitudes is a long-term commitment.

the issues and concerns of Afghan women are not sidelined in any peace process initiated by the government," Ms Rafiq said.


Access to leadership positions is essential for women to gain more support from the top down (see Bougainville story). That said, the inferior position of women, the sense that they should be subservient to men, that violence within the home is not vulnerable to the laws of the land – these are deeply held views in both countries.

The inquiry continues to hear from various witnesses that it will take consistent, long term commitment from all parties, internal and external, to see real change. ■

### LINKS

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