

Women human rights defenders and male advocates: promoting ownership and extending the reach of information

Autonomous Region Of Bougainville Papua New Guinea

SHARE

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The 'From Gender Based Violence to Gender Justice and Healing' project implemented by the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation (the Nazareth Centre) aims to reduce family and sexual violence in Bougainville by addressing the root causes of gender inequality. It does this in multiple ways: operating four safe houses; running and supporting a men's hub; piloting a school-based program; and carrying out human rights skills building, networking and advocacy activities throughout Bougainville.



Discussions at the Bougainville Male Advocates Forum in 2019. Photo credit: Harjono Djoyobisono/IWDA.

The Nazareth Centre trains and supports women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to undertake community-based education and advocacy. Throughout the years, the Nazareth Centre has identified the need to engage, develop and support male advocates who support the initiatives of WHRDs.

Through the community-based activities of the WHRDs and male advocates network, the project has addressed the needs of diverse women, men, girls and boys, including in very remote communities.

‘We use a human rights-based approach to the work that we do,’ said Sister Lorraine Garasu, Director of the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation, speaking after the 2019 *Pacific Women Papua New Guinea Annual Learning Workshop*. ‘[The WHRDs and male advocates] are trained in gender-based violence, human rights, peace building, and family and sexual violence and so they are able to do the work in their communities. Some of them are also trained as community counsellors.’

This enables them to prevent violence in the community as well as, when there are issues, intervene and refer survivors to safe houses. The WHRDs and male advocates also contribute to building a culture that seeks to prevent violence and promote gender equality:

‘Building community ownership... it is the women human rights defenders and male advocates who are leading that work,’ explained Sister Garasu. ‘We depend on the male advocates and the WHRDs to extend and expand the learning, the awareness on how to reduce and prevent gender-based violence in the community.’

And there are signs of positive changes. An independent evaluation of the project documents evidence of transformational change at both individual and community levels in Bougainville. For example, in 2017, 34 communities in North and South Bougainville elected WHRDs as community government ward members. This means that almost three quarters of the 47 community governments in North and South Bougainville now include WHRDs. In addition, 16 male advocates became ward members. This suggests that training as WHRDs and male advocates helps enable women and men to move into other spaces where they can be proactive leaders, participate in decision making and act as change agents to address family and sexual violence and other forms of violence.

However, making the change stick is not always easy:

‘In some communities, we still find that there is a huge challenge,’ she continued. ‘Sometimes it is really hard to get to the local communities and some communities are isolated. Some of the people who we have trained

have not taken on board [the learning] or the way that they are progressing is very slow, so they need more help in that area.’

Sister Lorraine explains, ‘What I see is that we need to have more dialogue with the WHRDs and male advocates on how they can do their work much better,’ she shared. ‘When we organise women human right defender forums ... we have side events where we do training and create space for sharing, networking and learning.’

To continue the momentum of their success and work, the Nazareth Centre takes a comprehensive approach to all the parts of implementing the ‘From Gender Based Violence to Gender Justice and Healing’ project, which includes both response and prevention strategies to address family and sexual violence in Bougainville, as well as encourages WHRDs and male advocates to work together to lead on initiatives.

For example, one of the most recent events organised by Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation was the Bougainville Male Advocates Forum held in Chabai from 23–27 September 2019. Over 150 men, from all three regions of Bougainville pledged their commitment to keeping women and girls safe and to give their support to promoting gender equality within their homes and communities.



At the closing ceremony of the Bougainville Male Advocates Forum, all participants pledged to the commitments that they have developed. Photo credit: Harjono Djoyobisono/IWDA.

From North Bougainville, men also chose to commit to ownership of working with men and boys to promote gender equality; from South Bougainville men committed to reduce family and sexual violence through awareness; and from

Central Bougainville men committed to the promotion of equal participation and positive role modelling.

The important part of this forum was participation of WHRDs to ensure connections and commitment to work together. The role of male advocates is to work together and support work of WHRDs and the Nazareth Centre team to bring positive change for greater gender equality and reduction of family and sexual violence.

Sr Lorraine encouraged the men, stating that ‘to be a male advocate is a lifestyle, not a job and choosing change is foundational to the building of responsible families’ and concluded by saying ‘Bougainville depends on you to lead change for the protection of rights, especially the rights of women and girls which is started by individuals in small ways”.

The Male Advocates Forum, and the Women Human Rights Defenders forums provides valuable opportunities for participants to build connections, strengthen their networks, and learn from WHRDs, national and international organisations and partners to deepen their understanding and engagement in transformational change.

For more on the changes in Bougainville read the Evaluation Report: <https://iwda.org.au/resource/from-gender-based-violence-to-gender-justice-and-healing-project-phase-1-evaluation-report/>.

For more about work of WHRDs read the learning paper *Leading Change in Bougainville: Experiences of Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation and Women Human Rights Defenders*: <https://iwda.org.au/resource/leading-change-in-bougainville-learning-brief/>.

For more on the Male Advocates Forum 2019 read <https://pacificwomen.org/news/press-release-bougainville-male-advocates-forum-2019/>

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