

Bougainville Young Women's Leadership Research

SUMMARY

The Bougainville Young Women's Leadership Research Study is the first of its kind in Bougainville, exploring the opportunities for, and barriers to, young women's leadership. This brief outlines the issues, research methodology and key findings.

The project had two key objectives:

- Build the capacity of young women as researchers to undertake this and future research
- Identify the factors inhibiting young women's participation in civil society organisations (CSOs), to both a) inform future program implementation, and b) provide a baseline by which to measure change.

Twelve young Bougainvillean women were trained in research methods. Six teams of two women then undertook research in six districts, covering the three regions of Bougainville (North, Central and South). The teams conducted 52 individual interviews and 49 group discussions. Field researchers participated in an initial analysis workshop and the lead researcher was mentored as a co-author of the research report.

The barriers to young women's participation identified during the research include community and family attitudes, limits to young women's confidence and education, patterns of interaction between older and younger women, and family and household responsibilities. The research also highlights pathways to leadership for young women including opportunities within community organisations, and the motivations that encourage them to join groups such as Bougainville Women's Federation (BWF).

These findings frame recommendations that focus on how BWF can engage and empower young women and create safe spaces for them to contribute to the organisation's work and future. The report also provides guidance for other organisations that wish to understand the perspectives of young women and the issues they face in seeking to participate, develop their skills and leadership experience and contribute to their communities and the sustainability of local women's organisations.

The research was an initiative of BWF. It was led by Richard Eves from the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) at the Australian National University and Isabel Koredong of BWF, and supported by International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), through Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women, an initiative of the Netherlands Government.

THE ISSUE

Papua New Guinea has some of the lowest levels of formal women's leadership in the world. The representation of young women in leadership is particularly low.

In the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, women's organisations are key advocates for women's leadership and important spaces for developing and exercising such leadership. BWF is a CSO that emerged in 2005 following a peace agreement to end a traumatic decade of conflict in Bougainville. Its mission is to build productive communities through networking among women and strengthening women as active agents of change. Of particular importance to BWF and to the future of women's leadership in Bougainville is the emergence of the next generation of young women leaders.

The current generation of BWF leaders are mature and experienced. However, they recognise the need to act now to enable development of the next generation and secure the future of BWF by ensuring it is representative of and relevant to young women. BWF initiated this research to seek the perspectives of women of various ages on participation, leadership and factors that influence their involvement in organisations such as BWF, including relations between generations and openness to young women's contributions.

METHODOLOGY

Nurturing young women researchers through partnership

IWDA is committed to strengthening the capacity of Papua New Guinean women and women's organisations to conduct social research. These organisations understand the issues affecting women and are advocating to decision-makers for change. Conducting research strengthens this advocacy by systematically identifying the issues impacting women and their communities, providing a deeper understanding of underlying causes and contributing factors, and identifying opportunities and enablers for change.

In the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, IWDA saw an opportunity to develop the capacity of a key women's organisation, BWF, to undertake research while also developing the individual skills of a core group of young women. Training of twelve young women to conduct research was undertaken in partnership with SSGM, which has a strong history of training and nurturing the next generation of Pacific researchers.

Investing in young women's potential

IWDA and BWF saw this research as an opportunity to hear directly from young women and to invest in young women's skills and improve their access to other opportunities such as employment.

The lead researcher, Isabel Koredong, participated in the SSGM Pacific Research Colloquium, a two-week intensive workshop, to develop the skills necessary for social science research. The team then jointly developed the research methodology through shared decision-making about the research design and implementation.

The team of young women researchers was trained in the research methodology by SSGM with co-facilitation by the lead researcher. The researchers were introduced to gender analysis and different types of research and research methods. The training emphasised practical skills needed for the fieldwork, including role playing to develop confidence in interviewing and facilitating group discussions. The field researchers were responsible for coordinating the field research in their allocated district and reporting on activities and financial expenditure.

Following an initial analysis workshop involving all field researchers, the lead researcher was supported and mentored in drafting the research report. The report was finalised with contributions from all partners.

Profile: Field researcher

Maryanne Biasi of Torokina District had been with BWF for five months at the time of the research project. Prior to undertaking the training for this project, Maryanne had very low confidence. She felt she was not capable and underestimated herself. This lack of confidence prevented her from being involved in group activities.

Through this young women's leadership research, Maryanne was trained in research methods and approaches and undertook field research. She has since seen considerable change within herself. She's gained confidence to work alongside mature women leaders; established a network with other young women in Bougainville; and become known to other community leaders including chiefs, women leaders, youth leaders and church leaders.

The most important change for Maryanne has been gaining more confidence as a young leader. Since completing the research, she has been participating in community women's group activities, including informing her community of the purpose of the research and her training. The training and the research fieldwork contributed to Maryanne becoming a role model for other young women who have asked about the training she attended and expressed interest in being a part of future training.

KEY FINDINGS

The researchers identified several barriers to young women's leadership. These include:

- Many young women feel they have insufficient education and training and so lack confidence to participate in women's CSOs.
- Young women are also particularly constrained in their participation in CSOs due to the level of personal and home obligations common to their age group.
- Awareness of BWF among young women interviewed was around half that of older women.
- Intergenerational relations between younger women and the current generation of mature women leaders are strained. Younger women feel they are not included, respected or listened to; older women feel young women are disengaged and more interested in socialising. This dynamic hinders young women's opportunities to contribute and pursue avenues for leadership. It also has implications for leadership succession and long-term organisational sustainability. Participation in community organisations including faith-based groups, youth groups and women's groups can offer pathways to leadership for young women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research informed a range of practical suggestions to strengthen BWF and its work to engage, inform and benefit women in Bougainville.

These focus on three inter-related components: engaging young women, empowering young women and reforming BWF to encourage young women's participation.

Specific recommendations emerging from the research include:

- Establish a working group to review BWF and identify opportunities to strengthen inclusion, with working group representation from young women.
- Establish a youth caucus as a safe space for young women, with a representative on BWF decision-making structures.
- Develop an engagement strategy specifically designed to appeal to young women, including consideration of popular activities such as a women's sporting carnival.
- Develop a structured program of training activities to build young women's leadership skills.
- Develop a mentoring program to build skills and strengthen bonds between younger and older women.

BWF will address the report's recommendations in forthcoming programs, with support from IWDA.

