

What we can learn from the women human rights defenders in Bougainville

Autonomous Region Of Bougainville Papua New Guinea

SHARE

October 13, 2018

A learning brief produced by International Women's Development Agency documents lessons learned about working with women human rights defenders in Bougainville. These women are working with a clear and passionate mission: 'As women human rights defenders, we are committed to building our nation, Bougainville, to be free of violence where women and men are equal.' (Bougainville Women Human Rights Defenders Guiding Principles and Values)

Women human rights defenders are recognised by the United Nations as women who, individually or collectively, work peacefully on behalf of others to promote and defend internationally recognised human rights. They challenge violence, discrimination and injustice.

The experiences of women human rights defenders in the Pacific Women-funded From Gender Based Violence to Gender Justice and Healing project are examined in the learning brief. The brief offers lessons from the work by the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation over three years supporting a network of 1,982 women human rights defenders as agents of change.

The project uses advocacy, prevention and response initiatives to address gender-based violence. It provides rights-based services, including safe accommodation, counselling and case management, to women and children who have experienced violence. A complementary men's hub works with men, including perpetrators of violence.

The learning brief notes that women human rights defenders face unique risks which are specific to their gender and driven by deep-rooted discrimination against women. Challenges include gender-based violence, the burden of unpaid care work and gender stereotypes which restrict women's participation in decision making spheres. Despite the work they

undertake to support others, many women human rights defenders are not recognised for their leadership and contribution in their communities.

The experience in Bougainville showed that when working with human rights, one must always consider engaging with the cultural and spiritual (theological) parts of life. The worldview of the indigenous groups in Bougainville closely connects these concepts. The Nazareth Centre's program educated women human rights defenders and male advocates through the lens of cultural, theological and legal approaches. See the [Human Rights and Gender Justice Toolkit](#) for tools and suggestions.

The project demonstrated that to lead responses to and prevent gender-based violence, women human rights defenders need a knowledge of human rights, gender equality and gender-based violence. They also need confidence to implement activities and skills to provide basic counselling and refer women to other services.

A further lesson is that an effective network of referral partners is needed. Demand for services for survivors of violence increased following community awareness sessions and as networking with other service providers – such as police, family support centres and hospitals – improved. Women human rights defenders are often the first point of contact for survivors of violence and they need to be trained to provide information about services available in their communities.

The learning brief highlights the success of taking trainings to local communities rather than bringing participants to central locations, allowing savings in travel and accommodation costs for participants. A balance of district level and community level activities is preferable, as there is also value in bringing participants to a centralised location.

In the brief, Alodia Males, a young woman human rights defender in Tinputz District, explains the significance of the women human rights defenders: 'In my opinion, women human rights defenders are very important because women are [the] backbone of the community. Women are power. We women human rights defenders must also work to improve our community, so that we are free. So that we can walk freely and not be afraid.'

The full learning brief can be downloaded here :https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/NCfR-WHRDs-Learning-Paper_final_Jun18_online.pdf