

# Young women lead the change in Bougainville

Autonomous Region Of Bougainville Papua New Guinea

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‘The [Young Women’s Leadership Project] gave me strength, it made me realise that I can become a woman leader,’ said Elma Vesiana, a young woman from Wakunai District. Her story is shared by many young women from Bougainville whose lives were transformed through the Young Women’s Leadership Project.



*Pictured: Elma Vesiana. Photo credit: Emily Ellis / IWDA.*

The project, implemented by Bougainville Women's Federation (BWF) in partnership with International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) from January 2016–December 2018, aimed to address the needs and ambitions of young women (aged 18–30 years) seeking to increase their leadership effectiveness and provide a safe space in which young women can engage and support each other. The project was funded by the Australian Government in partnership with the Autonomous Bougainville Government and the Government of Papua New Guinea through the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program.

First participating in the project's trainings in 2016, Ms Vesiana now serves as Secretary for the Wakunai Young Women's Association. Through the trainings on leadership and good governance, financial literacy and Family Farm Teams, she learned the skills to budget and manage her money and has started a small canteen; she plans to use the new source of income to pay school fees and improve her family's house.

From 2016–2018, the Young Women's Leadership Project has supported over 120 young women in Bougainville to create new pathways to leadership for themselves. This includes the establishment of young women's associations in four districts in South and Central Bougainville and in five Community Government areas in North Bougainville.

The project also led to positive developments in BWF's organisational structure. Young women's potential for leadership is now recognised by mature BWF women, many of whom have been dedicated mentors for the young leaders. There is greater openness to working together on the part of both younger and mature women BWF members. The project has developed a pipeline of leaders for BWF. It has raised the profile of the organisation and, by increasing the involvement of young women, it has improved BWF's sustainability.

The young women's associations have been the catalyst for a number of livelihood initiatives which will contribute funding towards further training opportunities for young women, like Ms Vesiana's canteen. Young women have established a number of collective and individual livelihood projects and small businesses. Young women's associations in North Bougainville are implementing agriculture and poultry projects and are planning to establish a piggery project. They are also planning to build a resource centre for young women with the profits, providing a safe space for young women to come together and run trainings and livelihood activities.



*Pictured: Florence Tomiets. Photo credit: Harjono Djoyobisono / IWDA.*

The associations are also proving to be a safe space for networking and peer support. As a result of Young Women's Leadership Project, 37 young women took up new, formal leadership positions in 2018 and eight young women ran for Community Government election in 2017. Many more young women have increased confidence and skills for leadership and are leading changes in their communities; young women like Florence Tomiets.

'I see that young women can make changes in the community,' said Ms Tomiets. 'After the program, I know that I can be a leader. I can really stand up. I can advocate for the issues that women are facing I have all this confidence that I can help other women that are being left behind.'

Ms Tomiets is from Malasang village in North Bougainville and was a participant in the pilot of the Young Women's Leadership Project. She said that many people in her community are illiterate and that she wanted to become a leader to support other women.

'After attending the leadership training, I wanted to run for Community Government election,' she said. 'I did not make it but it was a stepping stone for me just trying to experience how it feels to enter or try to go into politics.'

Young women like Elma Vesiana and Florence Tomiets are leading the change they want to see in their communities in Bougainville. Through the young women's associations and ongoing engagement in Bougainville Women's Federation work, they are generating income, fundraising for opportunities to support other young women and demonstrating their leadership and financial management skills to family and communities.

Learn more about the amazing and powerful young women of Bougainville: <https://iwda.org.au/resource/hear-our-voice-stories-of-young-women-leaders-in-bougainville/>

Read the evaluation report on the project here: [https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/IWDA\\_BWF\\_YWLP\\_YWLP\\_Evaluation\\_2019.pdf](https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/IWDA_BWF_YWLP_YWLP_Evaluation_2019.pdf)