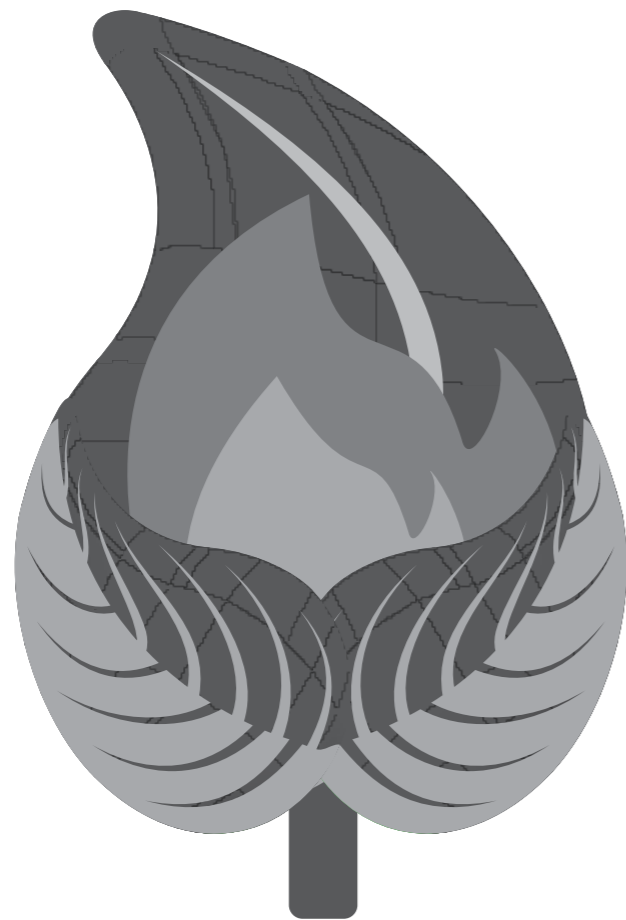


About the Cover

The image on the cover is a re-creation of a graphic that was developed collectively by women participants during the national workshop. Representatives from each regional workshop shared their region's findings with the group and as they spoke, the burning tree was created. The roots of the tree represent the root causes of the tension according to the women participants. The flames represent the violations and the impacts. At times the fire fuelled itself as violations caused impacts, which led to further violations, and so the fire got bigger. With increased violations and their impacts, drops of water started to fall on the fire. Initially they were the women's tears, but eventually they gathered in strength to become bigger drops of water—modes of survival that drew on women's determination and innovation—that ultimately put out the fire. From this, seeds started to sprout, seeds of peace, reconciliation, and renewal. The women wish to thank Galuh Wandita, ICTJ, for leading them in this activity.



28 September 2011
Honiara

Dear Reader,

When asked to write this letter, I found it difficult to choose from my many experiences of post-conflict work for the past fifteen years. Therefore, with all due respect to my elders—Dr. Alice Pollard, Ruth Liloqula, PS Joy Kere, PS Ethel Sigimanu, Martina Ului, Martha Horiwapu, Eunice Mudu, Sisters of the Church, and those unnamed women who worked tirelessly for peace—I salute you for being our heroines, our champions of peace. Here is my humble attempt to share with you the impact the *Stori Blong Mere* Workshops had on my life.

I want to begin by sharing a childhood memory. Many times as a young child, I lay on my mother's lap listening to mother singing a *Gula'ala* lullaby (*suraikwaikwai*, *suraialiboko*—warrior parrot, deaf parrot). This poetic song tells of a woman begging her sons to return to life. Desperately she tells of her sons' disappearance and the woes of truth-seeking. She sings to the ocean, divulging her empty cradle, and calls frantically for the wind to sympathise with her. After a long wait her life returned to normal. Suddenly the lost sons returned to their humble beginning guided by a *lae* (i.e., the *Willie wag tail*). At the appearance of the lost sons, the distraught mother cried with a surge of joy, thus her lyric that was once of gloom changed to one of empowerment.

My experience over the last three months was a maze of interesting events—a rare opportunity through which I learnt by listening to the women's painful past. The space created by the workshops accommodated faith, tears, laughter, jokes, singing, healing opportunities, and personal stories of bravery. Crying women poured out feelings of frustration, ethnic differences, ethnic allegiance, Christian faith, and determination to participate in decision-making as a key ingredient to women's advancement and national development. This women's truth was the beginning of a new era.

Women see peace with a new pair of eyes—they saw the *Stori Blong Mere* Workshops as an opportunity to tell a ten-year-old buried memory. Digging up the past was hurtful but also timely for national healing and sustainable development. Through such processes women could reclaim their space where truth-telling is empowering rather than oppressing. Collectively, women spoke with respect for the leadership of their clans, tribes, communities and the nation, but also articulated the dilemma of exclusion from important processes.

Like the mother in my opening paragraph, for many Solomon Islander women, life returned to normal after the tension, but oh how voices have been silenced! Yet the truth must be told in order to help us address the root causes of the tension meaningfully. Now a question must be asked, "What can women do for our country?" and not "What can our country do for us?"¹ The making of this nation is an ongoing challenge for all of us affected by the tension—survivors, perpetrators, ex-combatants, government officials, and the community at large.

¹ This is a variation of "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" from the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy when he became US President on 20 January 1961.

Last but not least, I want to acknowledge the work of ICTJ in Solomon Islands, particularly the support given to women and their writers' group—*Elsie Wickham, Dr. Patricia Rodi, Anah Vota, and Judith Fangalasuu*. Special thanks go to *Daniela Gavshon, Osborn Cairns, Dianah Hoa'au and Naomi Kinsella*—what amazing colleagues. To *Karen Campbell-Nelson*—I learnt a lot from your wisdom and it is very appreciated. To *Galuh Wandita*—your creativity and expertise on reparations has provided women in Solomon Islands with new insights and an unforgettable image that captures their story. To *Hilda Kii, Judith Fangalasuu, Rendi Solomon, Clera Rikimani and Elsie Wickham*—thank you for co-facilitating the workshops with me.

To my children and grandchildren, as custodians of our God-given resources, respect should be your primary goal. May you opt for living *ofua* (i.e., living together) rather than living alone—individualism is not a pathway for peace and justice.

God Bless,

Ruth Basi Afia-Maetala

National Coordinator, *Stori Blong Mere* Workshops and Women's Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Table of Contents



Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	3
2. Gender Roles in Solomon Islands Society	5
Men's roles	5
Women's roles	5
Solomon Islands women in the pre-colonial period	6
Solomon Islands women in the colonial period	6
Solomon Islands women in the post-colonial period	7
3. What Caused the Conflict? Women's Perspectives	8
Land issues	8
Economic development and benefits issues	9
Ethnic and criminal issues	10
Bougainville spillover	10
Leadership issues	11
4. Women's Silence, Women's Space, Women's Truth	12
Why is it important for us to speak about the past?	12
Women's silence	13
Women's space	14
Women talking truth and the TRC	17
5. Violence Against Women & Making Meaning of Women's Stories	19
Sexual violence	19
Domestic violence	21
Killing	22
Torture and ill-treatment	24
Disappearance	25
Loss of property	25
Displacement	26
Loss of education and health services	27
Living with fear and trauma	28

6. Roles of Solomon Islands Women During the Tension	29
Victim or survivor?	29
Women as heads of households and other role reversals	29
Women as counsellors	31
Women as peacebuilders	32
Women’s role as peacemakers forgotten	34
Women as perpetrators	35
7. How Women Survived the Tension	36
<i>Oh, oh . . . The strength of a woman</i>	36
Credit schemes and business as usual	37
Women’s innovation	38
Prostitution	39
Women’s faith	39
8. Findings	40
9. Recommendations	42
10. Conclusion	45
Annex 1	46
Speech by Joy Kere, Permanent Secretary of Ministry for National Unity Reconciliation and Peace, at closing of National <i>Stori Blong Mere Workshop</i> , Honiara, 28 July 2011	46
Annex 2	49
Let There Be Peace	49
Annex 3	50
<i>Stori Blong lumi</i>	50

Executive Summary



The conflict in Solomon Islands from 1998-2003, known as the tension, had a significant impact on the lives of women. Although Solomon Islands is an ethnically diverse country, there are quite distinct traditional roles played by men and women across all cultures. Traditionally and culturally, women’s work is in the private sphere, raising children and looking after the home. As missionaries and colonisers came to Solomon Islands, women slowly started moving into the public sphere, but in terms of holding public office they generally held only junior positions. With this context as the backdrop, it becomes a little clearer, although still incomprehensible, how and why women suffered what they did during the tension on the one hand, but amazing and awesome to look at the roles they played on the other hand.

Women generally have not shared their stories of the past—their suffering, their pain, their victimhood, and their survival. Although women recognise the importance for the future of reflecting on the past, until now this has been impossible for many. Cultural taboos around discussing sexual violence as well as cultural ramifications with sharing the truth often make women’s silence more palatable for them. For women, truth-telling, although very important, needs to be done sensitively and in an environment where they feel safe. When women do feel comfortable to share the stories of their past, it is apparent to those listening that women suffered enormous violations during the tension. They were victims of sexual abuse, increased domestic violence, killing, torture, and serious ill-treatment. They were displaced and lost loved ones, property, and access to education and health services. Overall, they lived with constant fear and trauma.

Despite the violations suffered and despite the traditional roles women were accustomed to playing, when the conflict erupted women united and took on a formidable role as peacemakers. They proved themselves as peacemakers, heads of households, counsellors, and leaders. There were some women, as there will always be, whose negative involvement exacerbated the conflict, but the overwhelming impression is one of women as champions of peace. They were innovative in their methods of survival, and were inclusive and strong in their resolve to help bring the conflict to an end. Despite this, women were excluded from the peace talks in Townsville in 2000 and even today there are no women members of national parliament.

In light of both the suffering women have endured and their proven capabilities as insightful and strong leaders of Solomon Islands, women make a number of recommendations to the Solomon Islands government via the TRC. Women believe land issues must be addressed; development and services must be decentralised; there needs to be electoral reform; women must be empowered in politics; and the government should be transparent and accountable in fulfilling its obligations to its citizens. Education, including cultural and gender awareness, is essential. There need to be more celebrations of women, such as a national women’s

festival, and the economic empowerment of women. The Bougainville border needs to be strengthened and further investigations and arrests relating to the 'big fish'—i.e., those leaders who played a negative role in the conflict—are needed.

Women believe that there must be a comprehensive reparations package developed to address the harms and the impact of them that women in particular suffered. This includes more opportunities for talking truth, documenting of women's stories, healing, and victim support. Remains need to be recovered, compensation must be given, destroyed houses should be rebuilt, and there need to be traditional ceremonies with chiefs and custom money. There should be a Remembrance Day established, a monument or museum created, and apologies to victims, including sympathy letters from the government.

1. Introduction

Five women have written this submission to the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): Judith Fangalasuu (Malaita) Ruth Maetala (Malaita), Dr. Patricia Rodi (Guadalcanal), Anah Vota (Guadalcanal), and Elsie Wickham (Isabel). The material used for the submission comes from a series of five workshops called *Stori Blong Mere* [i.e., Story of Women] in which a total of approximately 60 women participated. Regional workshops were held throughout July 2011 for women who live in Honiara (but who originate from all over Solomon Islands), Malaita, Guadalcanal, and there was one workshop in Western Province for women from Western and Choiseul Provinces. Regional workshop participants then attended a three-day national workshop in Honiara in July 2011.

Workshop participants were selected based on their roles as leaders and/or as women who have a deep understanding of women's experiences during the tension. During the workshops women discussed their experience of the tension—the roles women played, the violations they suffered, the impact this had on their lives, how they survived, and what their recommendations are for the future. The writers' group was identified during the course of the workshops and this group then spent two months collating workshop notes—including minutes from workshop discussions, one-on-one discussions held with participants, and personal stories collected—academic articles, and various reports.

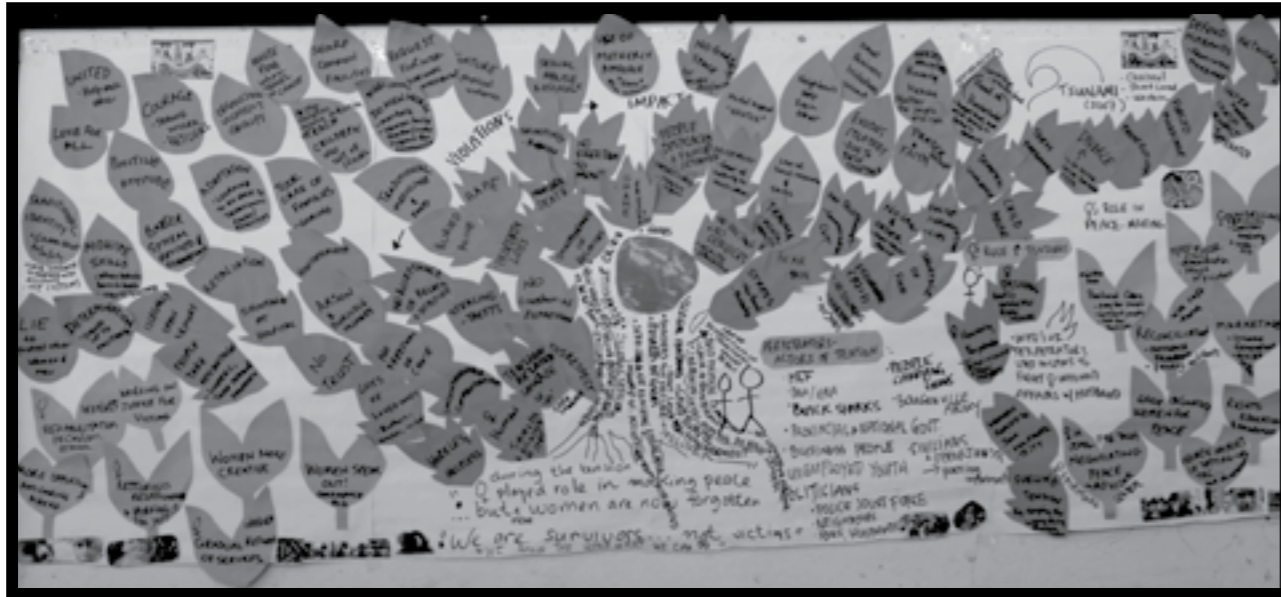
The culmination of the workshops and the work of the writers' group is this submission to the TRC that is the story of the women of Solomon Islands. It describes their roles throughout history, their struggles, the violations they suffered during the period known as the tension, and their survival. Their stories must be told to ensure that such violence does not happen again in the lives of their children, their grandchildren, and future generations. These stories have been told with many tears as the present is confronted again with painful memories of the past. It is a depiction of the conflict as women saw it, experienced it, survived it, and have been impacted by it across Solomon Islands.

The submission also brings the women's recommendations to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission so that steps can be taken to bring about justice, healing and closure that will allow women to move on in life.

It has been a long journey, a ten-year march from the time women and their families had to flee for their lives from the direct line of fire from militants, to the present where words such as reparations and justice are being voiced. However, the truth must be told, whether from a person who demands justice and closure, from the perspective of someone who wants to simply forgive and move on in life, or from the perspective of those who wish to recognise the vital role women played during the tension. This vital role included women negotiating for

peace with their “sons” in the militants’ bunkers and lobbying for international intervention when the state powers had fragmented to a dismal breakdown of law and order.

With tears and with one heart, the women of Solomon Islands hold hands to tell their stories. They tell with painful clarity the violations they suffered and how they survived so that history is not repeated. This history is “her story”. Let Her Story be told as that is one of the available opportunities to publicly recognise and acknowledge the role Solomon Island women played in the conflict and what their experience of the past conflict was. So, come and listen to the story of women—*kam herem stori blong mifala olketa mere*.



The original flame tree image was created during the National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop.

2. Gender Roles in Solomon Islands Society

A brief description of the typical roles Solomon Island men and women have played throughout history, in particular during the conflict, provides an important backdrop to better understand women’s experiences of the tension. It is worth noting that the roles of men and women as outlined below do not vary greatly even in matrilineal societies.

Men’s roles

Men are usually seen as the leaders, being in charge of both the nuclear and extended family. As the more physically strong, they are seen as being more powerful and so were the headhunters, *ramos* or *taovia* (i.e., warriors/saviours) of times past to being the protectors and defenders of families today. They carry out the heavy tasks of clearing virgin and secondary forests for gardening, selecting and cutting down trees to use as beams and rafters for houses, sewing sago palm leaves, building houses and shelters for their families, making canoes and fishing nets, and going deep-sea fishing. However, as their work is cyclical, men have more leisure time compared to women. Men have also been the shields for their sisters, mothers, and womenfolk against the hypnotic powers of the *veleman* (i.e., custom man or magic man) and the evil eye of the sorcerer. They are also defenders of their sisters’ integrity and dignity. In them is vested the role of spokesperson within the family and the tribe. They are the custodians of the land, decision makers over its management, and are responsible for the settlement of disputes.

Women’s roles

Women, on the other hand, are the child bearers who ensure the continuation of the clan and the tribe. They are the first teachers of their children, protecting and nurturing them and keeping the family together by being a role model for the children in what they say, how they behave, and the work they do. According to traditional roles, women are expected to stay at home and do domestic tasks such as fetch the water; wash the clothes; prepare and cook the food; sweep around the house; weave the mats, food baskets, and string bags; and show hospitality to the extended family and visitors. Women till the land, plant the crops, weed the gardens, harvest the crops and carry them on their heads or backs, feed the pigs, and grind and smooth shells into shell money. Their work is the daily grind and the livelihood of the family depends on a woman’s ability to put food on the table. Women are also seen as counsellors and peacemakers in the family, jumping in between two people in a dispute and saying words such as, “If you so much as cross my feet you are not a man!” This is akin

to the saying, 'over my dead body', and is used to prevent further continuation of a fight or conflict. Despite their essential role, women must not contradict the decisions of men.

Although the TRC mandate only covers the period from 1 January 1998 to 23 July 2003, a review of women's experiences and roles before, during and after colonialism helps to place women's experiences of the tension within a larger history. It also helps us to better appreciate the new roles women played during the conflict as leaders, heads of households, and strong, formidable peacemakers.

Solomon Islands women in the pre-colonial period

In the past women played a very important role in organising and providing the human resources to make things move. In accordance with the traditional roles explained above, women gave birth and raised children, providing the backbone for strong societies. They provided food for feasting and ensured families were intact by teaching morals and values, and by providing wise counsel in agriculture, marriage, organisations, and community work. As women slowly embraced new roles, they moved away from traditional roles such as oral historians, often forgetting that their role as educators in the home is critical to peacebuilding and harmonious living.¹ As one Guadalcanal woman puts it, "We often forget our *tutungu* [i.e., genealogies or line], creating problems for ourselves because we do not pass our knowledge to our young people."²

The arrival of missionaries from all over the world prior to the British rule, some as early as the 1600s, brought about changes in women's traditional roles and activities. Activities and organisations for women initiated by missionaries encouraged women to move from the privacy of their homes into the public sphere. Through missionary efforts and other 'out-of-school' programs, an environment was created for girls' participation in the public sphere.³ Women entered the formal education system and then later became teachers and played other roles in the public and private sectors.

Solomon Islands women in the colonial period

Solomon Islands became a British protectorate in 1893. In 1899, the British protectorate boundary was expanded with certain transfers from German rule. Such arrangements between colonial administrators during those years paved the way for a centralised politics that later affected Solomon Islanders as they migrated to the city to seek employment. Arbitrary borders affected people's movement and had an impact on immigration and security policies.

¹ Women in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies once held precious genealogical information, but slowly left the role behind to the men.

² Tutungu means genealogy, Guadalcanal woman, personal communication with Ruth Maetala, 29 August 2011.

³ Ruth Maetala with Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard, "Turning the Tide," in *Being the First: Storis Blong Oloketa Mere Lo Solomon Aelan*, eds. Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard and Marilyn J. Waring (Honiara: Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands—RAMSI and Auckland: AUT University, Institute of Public Policy and Pacific Media Center, AUT University, 2010),

Interaction with missionaries and traders became an effective means of creating change—good and bad—for Solomon Islanders. This meant women had their share of the same change. During this period, owing to the colonial administration, women entered the work force as secretaries, teachers and later as administrators. On the flip side, there was an increase in domestic violence because women were out of the home a lot of the time and therefore unable to look after domestic affairs. Out of this a culture of house girls developed as women needed other women to help them with household chores in order to simultaneously have a paid job and ensure that domestic work was not neglected.

Following the establishment of the colonial administration, World War II broke out in 1942 causing closure of girls' schools and other missionary outreach activities to improve the lives of women.⁴ The war destroyed villages in Guadalcanal and the Central Islands Provinces, but due to insufficient records there is no way to determine what transitional justice mechanisms or efforts at reparations may have existed during this time. There was no formal acknowledgement of what the women suffered during this period. Additionally, weapons and ammunition remaining from the war became the new guns used by the "boys" in the tension from 1998-2003.⁵

Solomon Islands women in the post-colonial period

Women in the post-colonial period began to experience change as the country received its political Independence from Great Britain on 7 July 1978. As a young nation, Solomon Islands inherited many things from its colonial past. The influence of missionaries and colonisation had encouraged women to move from the domestic to the public sphere and this movement increased dramatically in the post-colonial period.

⁴ Ruth Maetala, "Turning the Tide".

⁵ Women who went to the bunkers used the term "boys" to refer to the militants on both sides of the two warring factions. This term reinforced their roles as mothers—a role which demands respect.

3. What Caused the Conflict? Women's Perspectives

Solomon Islands independence was a major advancement for Solomon Islanders, but with it came enormous challenges. Between the years 1978-98 Honiara in particular witnessed many minor outbreaks of ethnic tensions. Social disruptions would result from disagreements between different language groups, but nothing compared to the ethnic tension in 1998-2003. Women felt that they knew the ethnic tension was coming. As a woman leader pointed out, "We knew about this tension way before 1998 . . . We know where the first meetings were held."⁶

Women acknowledge that there is no one single root cause to the conflict. The many root causes of the conflict are interrelated and are set within a global landscape of change and development. Hence any proposed resolutions should be multi-faceted.

Land issues

The dynamics surrounding land are of major significance and, therefore, need careful and deliberate consideration. The challenges faced concern the traditional versus the introduced systems and understandings about land and land governance. Traditionally, land belongs to the tribe, which includes tribal members from the past, the present, and the future, with people normally living on their land and within their land boundaries. Important decisions over the land are, therefore, collective and never by any one individual. Land governance and decision-making over the land is by virtue of one's rank in the tribe and for some islands this follows a patrilineal system (e.g., Malaita), while for others it is a matrilineal system (e.g., Guadalcanal).

This difference sometimes causes friction when men from patrilineal customs marry women from matrilineal ones. In matrilineal systems when a woman marries, she has power over the husband in relation to land rights—rights to its use and its inheritance. When a woman from a matrilineal system marries a man from a patrilineal system, inevitable conflict arises. For example, a family with a Guale mother and a Malaitan father will have land rights in both Malaita and Guadalcanal, but often will choose to live in Guadalcanal because they will have access to Honiara and the opportunities therein. However, what then often happens is that the men from the patrilineal system assume rights to the land of their wives and this causes conflict.

⁶ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 4 July 2011.

The tribal members responsible for land governance and making the major decisions over the land are not owners, but custodians and, therefore, must always put tribal considerations above individual interests. Of course this all changed with the global spread of imperial powers and the introduction of their economic, social, legal and governance systems. For Solomon Islands, this meant that the new British Colonial Administration needed to acquire land from the indigenous tribes to host a base from which it could work. This also meant the introduction of a British land tenure system and legal framework to govern the land that the country has adopted since independence. Under the introduced system, land could now be leased to individuals. Imposing the notion of individual ownership onto the prevailing traditional landscape of tribal custodianship gave vent to tensions between the two systems that need to be resolved. Furthermore, although tradition dictates that land is communally owned, with the introduction of cash and the concept of individual ownership, this system has eroded and personal interest supersedes that of the tribe. What also happens is that in negotiating sales and leases over land, men exercise their rights as speakers and community leaders, and, therefore, engage in land negotiations that override and dismiss the women's traditional land rights.

Economic development and benefits issues

Closely related to issues surrounding land is economic development. With the introduction of plantations, large tracts of tribal land were sold at prices which the later generations of the tribe were not happy with and for which they want fair and just compensation. This is the case with Honiara where the *Tandai* tribes who are custodians of the land have expressed grievances over the lack of just and fair compensation for giving up their land for the capital city and other economic development projects.

With land being a major factor in the economic development equation of land, labor, and capital, tribal land has become a commodity that can now be bought and sold. Other complications were added when enterprising tribal members took advantage of the new landscape and started selling tribal land to other Solomon Islanders or even selling the same piece of land to more than one person.

Guadalcanal is host to the capital as well as to a number of big-time operations such as the palm oil plantation on the eastern plains, coconut plantations along its western shores, and the only operating gold mine. There is no recognition that these projects are on matrilineal land and so the royalties are paid to male tribal leaders; very often women do not receive any of these benefits.

Economic development on Guadalcanal, therefore, has been a major attraction that draws ethnic groups from the other islands. This is especially the case with many people from the nearby populous island of Malaita who, over the years, have moved to find paid employment and have also settled on Guadalcanal. While development seems to flourish on Guadalcanal, other provinces receive very little attention from the national government.

Ethnic and criminal issues

Other tribes who sought prosperity on Guadalcanal came with their different values and practices. This often led to a clash of cultures and resentment among Guales of others imposing their values on them as the host community. For example, where Malaitans settled, their patrilineal values seemed to be superimposed on the Guadalcanal matrilineal values, resulting in a resentment of the new hegemony. One Guadalcanal woman recalled, "There was the Mt. Austin triple murder case in 1988 where a mother, daughter, and son-in-law were brutally murdered; then another case in Kakabona in 1984; and the 1970 case of Benedict Kinika."⁷ These were some of the few reported cases that stirred up Gualé resentment and ill feeling towards other groups, especially towards Malaitans who were suspected of committing these crimes. In 1998, a rape case was reported in Tasahe, West Honiara. Women felt that one of the issues involved stemmed from a lack of respect for the traditional landowners who were the hosts of Honiara City. Gualé women, therefore, felt it essential to educate people about land protocols and local customs regarding treatment of people.⁸

Bougainville spillover

The neighboring island of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (which is closer to Solomon Islands than to the rest of PNG) experienced conflict prior to the tension in Solomon Islands. Border crossings are common as traditionally people on the two sides are related to each other and have interacted with each other over generations. How the conflict on Bougainville contributed to the conflict in Solomon Islands is commonly referred to as the spillover effects. They ranged from the negative, such as raids by Bougainville militia on villages in the bordering islands of Shortlands and Choiseul, and the movement of guns across the border from Bougainville to Solomon Islands, to the positive, such as hosting the Bougainville displaced people and providing medical care for them. Additionally, there was a spillover of ideas that influenced the concepts of freedom and liberation professed in the name of the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), whose name was similar to the Bougainville Revolutionary Army before it was renamed to Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF), and Isatambu Freedom Fighters (IFF), later renamed Isatambu Freedom Movement (IFM). Women in Western Province believed this directly contributed to the tension. Militants from Bougainville also influenced the tension and fear generated in the border communities with practices such as wearing masks and army uniforms. Women perceived that the infiltration and the strong influence of Bougainville militants went unmonitored because Solomon Islands border patrol was weak.

⁷ Participant, Guadalcanal *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 15 July 2011.

⁸ This sentiment was shared by many participants at the Guadalcanal *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 15 July 2011.

Leadership issues

The 70-80 language groups and numerous tribes on the different islands were incorporated into the British Solomon Islands Protectorate with a colonial administration to look after its affairs. When the transition was made in July 1978 there were only six secondary schools and a handful of university graduates.⁹ By collaborating with British administrators, Solomon Islands was still heavily dependent on outside assistance to ensure formation of the new Solomon Islands. The challenges and experiences took new turns and twists as different leaders took the newly independent nation forward into the twentieth century. Successive leaders made decisions that often resulted in social discontent and exacerbated brewing issues around land and development that ultimately led to the tension. It is worth noting that since independence in 1978 there has only been one female in national parliament. While it cannot definitively be said that the lack of females in national leadership positions is a root cause of the tension, it is worth questioning what, if any, impact women in leadership might have made to addressing and quelling the rising tension. As will be discussed later in this submission, women have displayed their strengths as leaders and peacemakers. Having a more representative government that included the full and equal participation of women might have led to decisions that generated peaceful outcomes.

⁹ Stephen Sherlock, "Behind the Solomons Crisis: A Problem of Development," Research Note, no. 2, 2003-04 (Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library, 30 July 2003); <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rn/2003-04/04rn02.htm>.

4. Women's Silence, Women's Space, Women's Truth



Ruth Maetala, national coordinator of the workshops and the women's submission, is moved to tears as she promises to the women she will do her best to put their stories and their voices into a meaningful submission to the TRC.

Why is it important for us to speak about the past?

In advocating for and sharing their truth, women note the worthy customs of the people of Solomon Islands to be actively and effectively at play when it comes to truth-telling. Telling the truth is a powerful tool that can be used for different purposes.

Looking back at the past is essential for many reasons. Here are some of the views shared by women: "So that things that happened in the past don't happen again for the sake of our children."¹⁰ "[To] understand the conflict [in order] to make good decisions for the future; we don't want it to happen again."¹¹ "Restoration and healing take place when we look back."¹² One woman highlighted the need for a proper healing process, pointing to the fact that this has not happened. The nation should talk about the past to ensure that healing takes place for all parties whether they are survivors, victims or perpetrators.

Furthermore, women want the truth to be told so the government will pay attention to the suffering of women. Women feel that if as a nation Solomon Islands do not realise the challenges and failures it has experienced it will hinder development in the country, because without the truth "we will not see the opportunities in the future and we will not have direction."¹³

¹⁰ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 4 July 2011.

¹¹ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 14 July 2011.

¹² Participant, Western and Choiseul *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 21 July 2011.

¹³ Participant, Western and Choiseul *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 21 July 2011.

Women see the benefits of talking about the past, saying that they are "[p]roud to come back and put things right; to help create a platform for change, recognition and forgiveness."¹⁴ Some women seek to tell the truth and share their stories, while others have reasons for remaining silent.

Women's silence

There are strong negative cultural stigma and taboos attached to violations such as rape and there is a risk that truth-telling may lead to further violence, therefore, women will tend not to talk openly about this and will be reluctant to report it. As a result, they tend to carry the psychological burden alone, which is often to their detriment.

Recounting the past is an almost torturous task for some women. One woman leader recalled,

I eye-witnessed three cases of rape and torture. During the ethnic tensions I moved around a lot, but there was no one doing counselling and anytime I want[ed] to go for counselling I got a sudden pain in my heart. I witnessed things that I don't want to talk about. There are three cases where I had to pay for people's lives to get them back from the enemy with my own money. It's not good for me and I don't feel like talking about it because whenever I do, it's just really painful. I don't want to report my cases to the TRC because it's just too painful what I witnessed. Talking only brings me to the bad feeling, like someone has taken a knife and is ripping my skin off, or piercing my heart.¹⁵

For women, sometimes their silence is louder, stronger, and safer than anything they say out loud because of the risks involved in telling their stories. For example, telling the truth can be used against a perpetrator as it could attract compensation claims from the victim's relatives to the perpetrators or the perpetrator's relatives. If compensation is not given, then this may lead to payback that fuels conflict if the victim's relatives seek to avenge the violation (depending on the type of violation and the families involved). So one reason that women may hesitate to tell the truth is because it may lead to further violence.

Another reason why women keep silent about violations they suffered during the conflict is the fear of repercussions. This is due to cultural upbringing that makes deciding when and where to speak important considerations for maintaining peace. For some women, what happened to them when they were single women would be better off forgotten to ensure present marriage relations are peaceful.

Alternatively, a woman who tells the truth may be beaten by her father, uncle, brother, or husband who might believe it is her fault and seek to punish her because of the "shame" that she has brought to the family. Truth-telling often separates families, communities, and individuals. This is why so often truth is strategically concealed.

¹⁴ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

¹⁵ Participant, Guadalcanal *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 15 July 2011.

In many cases of sexual violence like rape, the woman is forced by her parents and relatives to marry the man (i.e., the perpetrator) if both are single. In past times, the 'eye for an eye' rule applied where the perpetrator was either murdered by the woman's male relatives or compensation was demanded. However, this would only apply when someone witnessed the violation. When someone sees a violation take place it is treated as far more serious than when someone hears about it. This has significant implications for the women victims in Solomon Islands, but especially in Malaita where a husband has paid a bride price for his bride. If in the course of marriage a husband causes physical harm to the woman so that she goes back to her parents' home, but then eventually returns to her husband, she is obliged to pay compensation. This often amounts to a woman paying to return to a violent situation. Practices like this are a serious barrier to women sharing their experiences because they side with the man's position as there is no one advocating for the women's needs and rights. In situations where there has been no bride price, women are freer to leave their husbands if the relationship is violent.

Besides the threat of violence, there is also often little incentive for women to tell the truth and share their stories. There are no reparations programs to ensure healing for victims, and no special programs for survivors and perpetrators of violence against women during the tension. Women who experienced physical or sexual violence seldom talk about such cases as violations of international human rights or domestic laws. In the case where a woman was raped, even if the traditional and formal justice requirements are met, the victim remains traumatised and compensation that may be provided for in a court judgment may exclude her. As one victim asked:

Where do women get satisfaction? I was raped and my perpetrator went to court and I was left out of the process. I didn't feel like the prosecution did anything for me, it just made me drag up what happened and how I felt.¹⁶

Traditional reconciliation ceremonies have been utilised in almost all major cases of sexual and domestic violence, those related to the tension as well as those that were not. Because the transfer of compensation is usually done between male relatives, women who experience loss of loved ones and property, or violations themselves are often excluded.¹⁷ This means that the compensation is done to pacify the male relatives rather than to heal the victim. Where women experience sexual abuse, traditional reconciliations have been done, but they have been for the victim's family, not the victim. What happened to women during the conflict was painful, but very little has been done to heal these painful experiences.

Women's space

In cultures across Solomon Islands, a woman has personal space that demands respect and holds value. The personal space of women and women's groups is critical for harmonious living in society. Often conflict happens when this boundary protecting women's space is crossed by force (violence, including rape, is inflicted by a husband or even by a brother). As

¹⁶ Participant of Guadalcanal *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 21 July 2011. This case was not a tension trial but exemplifies how the formal justice system does not necessarily satisfy women victims of sexual abuse.

¹⁷ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 27 July 2011.

Pollard stated, "Among the Are Are, any male contact with or over a woman's body is *tambu* (forbidden) and would require compensation . . ." ¹⁸ The intention of compensation in this context is to demand reparation for the pain caused to the woman and shame particularly to her male relatives, including the father, husband, brothers, uncles, and male cousins.

On the other hand, when women witness cases in which the personal space of women is breached, then it is also the responsibility of the witness to remain silent or report the case to relatives. Women expressed this in different ways. One woman said, "Imagine the pain from 1999 to now, with being silent—the voiceless mother. Who will now be the voice for them [i.e. the victims]?" ¹⁹ Another continued, "Because of our culture we don't talk about these things. We're not like white people who say, 'My name is X and on this day I was raped.' We have our taboos." ²⁰ But women also realise the importance of speaking the truth. "If we cannot talk about these things, then we cannot make it stop, it will continue." ²¹ It is important however to understand the cultural issues at play when women choose to or choose not to share their story.

Women also spoke about the need for women's space and for forgiveness after the tension. "*Mifala laekem fo talem stori blong mifala bat mifala fraet iet nogud na olketa kam aftarem mifala.*" ["We want to tell our story yet we are afraid that someone will come after us"]. ²² Women expressed the need for an avenue through which they can tell their stories or express themselves without fear, threats, or reprisals. They also wanted a space to let the perpetrators know how they felt about the violations done against them before they could forgive them for the wrongs they did.

Me laek fo talem man or boy hem killem son blong me that me sore tumas hem killem son blong me, but me forgivem hem and me laek fo hem kam stap wetem me mekem hem changem son blong me.

[I want to tell the man or boy who killed my son that I regret that he killed my son, but I forgive him and I want him to come and live with me to take the place of my son.]²³

This view harks back to tribal wars when one tribe would give the opponent a child as compensation for having killed a member of that tribe in the context of a conflict. Handing over a life would be a sign of lasting peace. While this traditional sentiment does not necessarily reflect what the majority of women would want today, it does reflect a common feeling of the need and desire for a space to share one's feelings.

The women's workshops provided a space where women were able to open up and share their experiences. A clear example of this was at the National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop when, at the end of the first day, women asked for the program to stop and four women came forward to tell their stories. These women felt that they needed to share their experiences

¹⁸ Alice A. Pollard, "Resolving conflict in Solomon Islands: The Women for Peace Approach," *Development Bulletin*, The Development Studies Network Ltd., no. 53 (2000), 44.

¹⁹ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

²⁰ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

²¹ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

²² Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

²³ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 28 July 2011.

and their pain with the group, but that until then there had not been the right opportunity. They felt that in the context of this workshop, surrounded by other women in a caring environment, they were safe and supported to tell their story.

Women are committed to telling the truth and voicing their concerns because they want those in authority to know the truth about the many violations they suffered and to know that those who perpetrated sexual abuses against women during the tension are yet to be prosecuted for their wrongdoings. Furthermore, women are committed to telling the truth because they believe they play a vital role not only as managers of their family's welfare, but also because they can foster economic development in their communities. Therefore, women not only want to see justice done to the perpetrators of the tension, but also want the victims to receive full reparations for the violations done against them. They understand that for this to happen, the truth must be told. Many women see truth-telling as key for achieving lasting peace, but at the same time they are fearful for their security. For many women, the consequences of telling the truth are uncertain and daunting. Having a safe space to tell the truth helps women overcome their fears.



A representative of the women participants, Martha Horiwapu, hands over a symbolic women's submission to the Chair of the TRC, Father Sam Ata.

Women talking truth and the TRC

Women endorse a truth-telling mechanism like the TRC as a potential space for women to tell their stories and believe it is one of the building blocks to sustainable peace. However, some of the TRC methods may have been a barrier to truth-telling for some women in some instances. Women experience conflict differently than men and culturally, do not openly discuss sexual violence. In many cases, daughters do not even discuss sexual violence with their mothers because of cultural taboos. A public hearing unfortunately becomes a barrier to telling the truth when women have sensitive stories to tell.²⁴



Dignitaries listen to the women as they present the outline of their submission. Seated left to right, TRC Commissioners: Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, Sofia Macher, Father Sam Ata, and Caroline Laore; and government leaders: Joy Kere (Permanent Secretary of Ministry for Unity, Reconciliation and Peace), Ruth Liloqula (woman leader), and Janet Tuhaika (Head of Women's Development Division, Ministry for Women, Youth, Children, and Families).

In order to have a full picture of the past and to record a holistic truth, it is essential that women are involved in processes that will contribute to the final report produced by TRC—hence this submission written by women of Solomon Islands. To date there have been hardly any transitional justice mechanisms that have fully engaged women, and no reparations for women victims of the conflict. Therefore, it is very important that women's stories and perspectives are communicated to the TRC.

²⁴ Woman leader, Rannogga, Western Province, personal communication with Ruth Maetala, 21 July 2011.

Women are also mindful that there are degrees of truth. For example, many women were unaware that closed hearings were an option and the main perceptions of hearings were that they were public hearings broadcast on the radio and television. Not only does this make women afraid to contribute, but many women also question whether what is told (by both men and women) is “public truth”, i.e., where the person sharing the truth has the audience in mind and so amends and edits the story accordingly. It is in the interest of those speaking at public hearings that some things not be spoken in public as it is not certain whether there is real repentance and whether people are ready to forgive. One woman said,

I still haven't heard the government admit they are the perpetrators in the conflict. Why do all victims contribute, but government doesn't own up. We are tired of being interviewed as fools. I've been interviewed, sent papers [for reconciliation], I just dumped them. I've collected firearms; I've collected ammunition day and night. What else do you [i.e., the government] want from me? You spent millions of dollars and the government [leaders] just relax and don't take the responsibility. So where is the truth? We've had enough of giving the information, what else is left for us to give you? Our lives?²⁵

As this woman explains, some women are looking to hear the truth, not just to share their truth.

²⁵ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

5. Violence Against Women & Making Meaning of Women's Stories

Unsubstantiated rumours about containers of weapons and of an organised Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) had been circulating around Honiara in the late 1990's, but the hasty arrival of displaced Malaitan settlers by the thousands into Honiara in June 1999 was the rude awakening that the “Happy Isles” had disintegrated into a lawless state. There was substance to the rumours after all. For weeks, civilians were crammed into the multi-purpose hall in Lawson Tama, the Pavilion at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), and the Rove Police Station. People were ill prepared for their loss and the conflict that ensued. At these publicly shared facilities, both women and men had to endure the loss of privacy, lack of basic amenities and a place for proper ablutions. Reports of marital problems were common as husbands became suspicious of wives talking to other men and vice versa. For women especially, the threat of sexual harassment was very real. Throughout the period of the tension women suffered sexual violence, increased domestic violence, torture, and ill-treatment, loss of loved ones, loss of property, displacement, and loss of access to services.

Words and phrases Solomon Island women used to talk about their experiences and what they heard from others during the tension are guided by cultural norms and beliefs. They often chose their words very carefully when talking about subjects that are culturally sensitive, or sharing stories they know might endanger their lives and that of their families. In some cases, the words chosen by women also provide insight into the cultural challenges and stigmatisation women face in addition to the pain caused by the violation itself. It is important to define and clarify the terms that women have used when telling their stories along with a brief description of the context of the violations so that readers can make meaning of women's experiences and perspectives of the tension, which was a socio-political crisis. This is necessary in the Solomon Island context where Pidgin words were borrowed from English and other languages, but have come to bear a different meaning to their literal meanings.

Sexual violence

“Women arrived [at the Catholic Church] and they came with torn clothing. What does this indicate to you? That they've been sexually abused? What happened to the mummies? The men said nothing.”²⁶ Although the silence regarding sexual violations during the conflict period is deafening, women nonetheless are reported to have suffered rape and other forms of sexual abuse. When women say that “*olketa militants spoilem me*” [“the militants spoiled me”] or “*hem spoilem me*” [“he spoiled me”] they mean that they were raped.

²⁶ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 28 July 2011.



Mary Bollen, President of Guadalcanal Council of Women, is overcome with emotion as the symbolic women's submission is handed over to the TRC.

Women also spoke about unwanted pregnancy of their daughters as *babule karange* (literally translated as crazy pregnancy, meaning pregnancy without a husband) as a result of rape during the tensions. Both married women and young single girls were raped at gunpoint and this resulted in unwanted pregnancies. Sexual violence was used as a weapon to humiliate the other party. One woman recounted that during the tension a husband was forced to watch the rape of his wife by militants.²⁷ Women and girls generally spoke about how they were treated with disrespect, in particular suffered sexual harassment during the tension by those who were armed, regardless of whether they were married or single, young or old. Some were *karange nogud nao* (literally translated this means crazy, not good now), which means they were severely traumatised and suffered mental illness.

²⁷ Participant, Western and Choiseul *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 22 July 2011.

In the Western Province, one workshop participant said she knew a pregnant woman who suffered a miscarriage as she was repeatedly raped.²⁸ Other women recounted stories of having foreign objects being inserted into women.²⁹ One woman told of a child soldier who said to her "I was one of five sons. My father was handicapped. I was forced to fight and hold guns. I raped the anuses of three women bending down in their gardens."³⁰ In a case such as this, there are clearly women victims, but because of the culture of silence, women do not discuss the rape and abusive behavior directed at them.

Men not only raped women from the opposing side. For example, a Japanese woman was raped at a research centre at Aruligo on Guadalcanal. There were also reports of rapes in Honiara that happened in broad daylight by attackers from the same ethnic group as the victim.³¹ The high number of rape incidents during the tension were the result of the general breakdown of law and order at the time. Women attribute other incidents of rape, however, to the men trying to instill fear, and in some cases to frighten women trying to broker peace through disarmament.³²

In Western Province, one woman spoke in a near whisper,

*Our people too were victims. One man lived responsibly with his family, but militant comes and takes child away and raped the child. Father was held at gunpoint and his daughter was raped in front of his eyes. In another case, in Gizo, a wife was taken away and raped. Now the husband no longer lives with his wife. He left her.*³³

There were many cases of sexual violence during the tension, but despite the numerous "tension trials", to date not even one militant has been prosecuted for committing such a violation.³⁴

Domestic violence

The breakdown of law and order during the tension extended right down to the family unit. While family break-ups and marital discord were common in pre-conflict years, the rate increased alarmingly during the conflict with the sudden rise of men in arms or in uniform with plenty of cash to throw around. In Chemistry, O₂ stands for oxygen, where two molecules are attracted to each other to form the element oxygen. In Solomon Islands, the term was coined to describe men or women acquiring another partner and vacillating between the legal wife or husband and a second partner—O₂ or even O₃, O₄, and O₅. The chemistry might have been there, but legally it was a wrong compound, and in a bid to keep their families intact some women took the law into their own hands by retaliating against women who had affairs with their husbands (see section below on "Women as perpetrators" in Chapter 6).

²⁸ Participant, Western and Choiseul *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 22 July 2011.

²⁹ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

³⁰ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

³¹ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

³² Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

³³ Participant, Western *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 22 July 2011.

³⁴ Court cases that seek to prosecute people for tension-related offences are commonly referred to as "tension trials".

Women reported other women being regularly beaten, resulting in fractured limbs and bodies, shredded and burnt clothes and personal belongings, and the abusers generally thinking women too weak and dumb to escape the brutality.³⁵ However, women remained silent, especially those with children, for fear the prosecution of an abusive spouse would result in a loss of income for the family. A mother admitted taking her frustrations out on her daughter, bashing and beating her up, while a father reportedly bashed his son to the point of death.³⁶ The term “panel beating” became slang for pummeling another person, and wives were reportedly “panel beaten” by their husbands.

Killing

Workshop participants also spoke about their loved ones being killed: “. . . olketa killem hem nogud and hem dae . . .” [“. . . they hit him and he died”].³⁷ These killings were committed during the height of the tension because of a person’s home of origin or because of their affiliation with a particular militant group. Innocent men and boys were killed just because they came from Malaita or Guadalcanal, regardless of whether they had joined one of the militant groups. One distraught mother recalled, “My son did not join GRA or IFM. He came to the Honiara Central Market and did not return home. Next thing I hear was that his head was found in the car park.”³⁸

One workshop participant never had the opportunity to tell her story to the TRC. The workshop was her moment to share her experience as part of her quest for complete healing:

We went to work for the church of Melanesia at the station in Tabalia [in Guadalcanal] in 1965. I am part Ata’a and Kwara’ae married to Takwa in North Malaita. I had six children—three boys and three girls. My third child, a son, was killed in the ethnic tension. When it [the conflict] happened, my son was still alive, but we were displaced with many others. My family was housed at the multipurpose hall for two weeks to wait for our repatriation to Malaita. Because we served the church at Tabalia for many years, we were part of the people there and the people there allocated a small piece of land near the station for my family, which we built our house on. We had done the Guale custom for the land and we were well looked after by the people as we continue to serve the church.

When we were housed at the multipurpose hall in Honiara, we were visited by the government representatives and we were given food while we waited. The government representatives came and told us that the ship will take us back to Malaita. Liofagu was chartered to take us back. When we arrived at the multipurpose hall, we asked our son to go quickly to Malaita and build a small leaf house to wait for us. He was a willing boy and he obeyed and did what he was told. He built a quick temporary shelter with the help of others and he came back for us. My husband and I asked him to bring shell

³⁵ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

³⁶ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

³⁷ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 27 July 2011.

³⁸ Guadalcanal woman, personal communication with Ruth Maetala, 13 August 2011. GRA is short for Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army that later came to be called the Isatambu Freedom Movement or IFM.

money to send for his brother’s wife in Tabalia. I warned him that it was dangerous to go back to Tabalia. We had left some of our relatives behind in Tabalia because how we moved was really quick and unexpected. I said, “Don’t go to Tabalia because there was a road block.” I pleaded, but despite this he told us that he will go on the church truck to bring his aunt and give the shell money for his elder brother’s wife.

When he arrived in Tabalia the next day, he got to the women (including his aunt, my sister). When the helicopter was sent to pick up the women and children, the young men were left behind. The GRA commander in that area threatened them, so Mama [Father] Richard mobilised the boys and prayed for them and ask them to leave [because] if not the GRA will come and burn down the station. After he prayed for the boys, he sent them on the way by themselves. For the whole week, the Malaitan boys walked in the bush from Tabalia to Honiara. On the way, they were very hungry. My son got weak from hunger and could not walk any longer in the bush. So when they got to Vura they left him there and a Hilux [a type of truck] passed by and an ex-police officer picked him up and took him to his house. The ex-police officer told him that he would cook for him and let him go. So the man hid my son in his house, but somebody saw this and reported to the GRA. There was an argument, I heard, between the GRA and the ex-police man before my son was taken away. The GRA took him and killed him around the Vura area. To this day, I don’t know what really happened. This is the only story I heard from some other boys who arrived at the multipurpose hall safely.

*I don’t know whether my son was killed at Taboko or where. I don’t know what the truth is. I already forgive the person who killed my son. I just want his bones back so I can bury him properly. I also want the person who killed my son to come and live with me instead of my son. As a result of this incident, my husband and I were separated because we could not come to terms with the impact of this. My heart is still broken and I will never forget what had happened.*³⁹

Although mostly men were killed, women were also victims of killings. “Women witnessed things like women [being] buried alive. There are lots of stories to tell and they still need to come out. There are women who saw their husbands burnt alive.”⁴⁰ When interviewed, a woman recalled, “*Rili anti blong mi olketa killim i dae wetem hasban blong hem long nara saed. Olketa berem wetem hasban blong hem long wanfala grev nomoa.*” [“My real aunt and her husband were killed on the other side [i.e., Weathercoast of Guadalcanal] and were buried together in one grave.”]⁴¹ Women at the workshops did not have any sense of how many women were directly killed in the fighting, but were certain that many were killed.

³⁹ This story was shared by one of four women who came forward to speak at the end of the first day of the National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

⁴⁰ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

⁴¹ Guadalcanal woman, personal communication with Ruth Maetala, 29 September 2011.

Torture and ill-treatment

Women spoke of horror stories about their husbands and sons being blindfolded, butted with a gun, or their bodies being mutilated before they were shot dead.⁴² They used the phrase “olketa killim nogud” to refer to cases where their relatives were tortured, mutilated, and shot dead.

Mi barava no lukim family blong mi from 1998 go go kasim taem wea RAMSI hem kam long 2003. Sapos mi herem wanfala sut aot, mi wari fogud nogud na wanfala family memba hem dae moa. Diswan hem kasim mi afta pis hem kam becos brada blong me and cason blong mi dae long Kakabona . . . olketa sutim olketa long dea and olketa killim nogud nao.

. . . mi blong Weda cos, and olketa samting melwan MEF, GRA and Harold Keke an evri pipol long dea—hem kasim hait olsem hem hapen dat barata blong mi hem killim nogud nara barata tu. Taem joen operason go kasim narasaed, village blong mi witnessim totsa ia taem Harold Keke kam, olketa angolo blong mi long dea nomoa. Olketa kam insaet long village blong mifala . . . evri mere ran go long busi nao ia an mifala herem suti aot insaet village. Harold Keke hem stoppem olketa fo kuki long naet, becos olketa no save laetem faea. Suti out hem hapen and anti blong mi hem wanfala retired nurse, hem talem olketa gele ia “taem sut sut ia hem stop, bae iumi des go lukim wat na happen.” Taem sut sut ia hem stop, olketa wakabout go long vilage an findem dat olo mere grand mother blong me hem dae nao. Olketa leavim grandmother blong mi and olketa go and check insaed vilage ia an findem wanfala boy wea hem haf weda cos and western wea olketa barava killim nogud nao becos brain blong hem kam aut nao and hem stap long graon.

[I didn't see my family from 1998 until 2003 when RAMSI arrived. Whenever I heard a shoot-out, I was worried someone I knew had died. This affected me after peace had come because my brother and cousin had died in Kakabona . . . they were shot.

. . . I am originally from the Weathercoast, and the things amongst MEF, GRA, and Harold Keke and the people on the other side [of Guadalcanal]—my brother killed my other brother. When the joint operation went to the other side, my village witnessed torture when Harold Keke came, my uncles were there [i.e., in the village]. They came inside my village . . . every woman ran into the bush and heard a shoot-out in the village. Harold Keke stopped them from cooking at night, because they couldn't light a fire [as it would attract his attention]. The shoot-out happened. My aunty was a retired nurse, she told the girls [in the family hiding in the bush], once the shooting stops, we will go check on them. When it stopped they went into the village, but my old grandmother died. They left my grandmother and went to check in the village, and there was a boy who was half western, half Weathercoast, who was tortured, mutilated and shot dead with his brain out.]⁴³

⁴² Participant, Honiara Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 5 July 2011.

⁴³ Guadalcanal woman, National Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 26 July 2011. Harold Keke was the leader of IFM on the Weathercoast side of Guadalcanal.

While few women spoke of being tortured directly by militants, some did share stories about abusive behaviour or ill-treatment that women suffered. Women's movements and behavior were also policed. On Guadalcanal, women were forced to wear grass skirts in keeping with the Moro cult movement. One woman reported, “I was imprisoned for three days because I would not wear a grass skirt. I was given no water during the day, only a little bit at around six o'clock. I was not allowed to go out anywhere because I would not wear a grass skirt.”⁴⁴ Other women, detained by men for questioning about their movements, were accused of being spies for the spears, i.e., traitors.⁴⁵

Disappearance

Women spoke about losing their loved ones—husbands, sons, brothers—both in Guadalcanal and Malaita: “son blong me hem lus nating” or “husband blong me hem lus” which means a son and husband were either murdered or disappeared and never found. Women spoke about how they wished for the remains of family members to be returned to them for proper burial. Women who suffered such horrifying experiences were severely traumatised and needed proper counselling as told in the story below:

Boy blong mi hem 15 years old nomoa . . . hem no go fo fight ia. Hem go long Aligator Creek fo salem simoka and hem no kam baek nao...hem lus nating nomoa. Mifala no save who na tekem hem or wat na kasem hem...olketa mas killem dae nao.

[My 15-year-old son was not a militant. He went to the bunker at Alligator Creek to sell tobacco rolls and never returned. No one knows who took him or what happened to him to this day.]⁴⁶

Loss of property

The loss of property was enormous. People were forced to abandon properties developed with hard-earned income and the sweat of one's brow, and houses were torched to the ground or looted and ransacked. The houses of settlers from Malaita and other islands living in Guadalcanal were burnt by the GRA as the settlers fled into Honiara. In retaliation the Guadalcanal villages of Kakabona, Aruligo, and Visale were burnt by the MEF (Malaita Eagle Force). Armed groups also confiscated vehicles and goods from canteens in both towns and villages whenever the need arose. Women feel they still haven't been compensated and that fulfillment of what were often bogus claims for lost property satisfied only a few.

While some women were fortunate to receive partial payment from the government for their lost property claims, the majority of workshop participants expressed their dissatisfaction with how funds for lost property were allocated to their respective constituencies, claiming

⁴⁴ Participant, Guadalcanal Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 15 July 2011.

⁴⁵ Participant, Honiara Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 4 July 2011.

⁴⁶ Participant, Honiara Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 5 July 2011.

they were unfairly distributed or misappropriated by their Members of Parliament at that time.⁴⁷ Some women reported that they did not receive even one cent from the government for their lost properties, and expressed how difficult it was for them to recover their lost properties over the last ten years.⁴⁸ Some spoke of how some women made bogus claims for lost property, and received payment from the government of more than a hundred thousand Solomon Island dollars.⁴⁹

Displacement

Women used the phrase “*ronem mifala*” when they spoke about being forced to move out from their homes and properties. Some women used the term ‘*disples*’ to refer to people from Malaita and other provinces displaced from their homes during the ethnic tension. Women told stories of how during the height of the tension they and their families were forced to move out from their homes that were built in various parts on the east, west, and southern parts of Guadalcanal. Some groups were forced to leave their homes by the Guadalcanal militants and other groups were forced to leave by the MEF. This sometimes resulted in death. A few old men and women in Guadalcanal died from exposure to the natural elements as they were forced to abandon their homes and move inland to escape the heavy shelling from the MEF and the police patrol boat.⁵⁰

Women also spoke about how they lost all their means of livelihood, including homes, during the tension. Some of the women used the phrases “*me lusim evri samting*” or “*evriting blong mifala lus*” to express the magnitude of loss they experienced during the process of forced displacement.

Mi woman long Makira ia but me married long Malaita. Mifala stap long ples ia long Tenaru Mala ia fo ova 30 years nao. Mifala stap gud nomoa and olketa pipol long Guale ia no likem mifala go, but olketa long MEF na kam and ronem mifala and se fo mifala mas livem ples ia nao. Mi sore long haus kapa blong mi and evri samting mifala wakem long dea.

[I am a woman from Makira but married to a Malaitan. We stayed in Tenaru for over 30 years now. We stayed there in peace with the people of Guadalcanal and they didn't want us to go but the MEF came and chased us away and told us to leave the place. I regret leaving our house and everything we worked for there.]⁵¹

Those displaced from Guadalcanal felt a double blow. Not only had they lost all their sources of livelihoods on Guadalcanal, they were also ostracised when they returned to their blood and kin because of the pressure it placed on the host families. While there was some attempt to absorb these huge waves of migrants, it was a disruption to people's lives. Lack of garden spaces and the pressure to survive led to stealing from food gardens and other

⁴⁷ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

⁴⁸ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

⁴⁹ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

⁵⁰ Participant, Guadalcanal *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 15 July 2011.

⁵¹ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 7 July 2011.

natural resources. Law and order was difficult to maintain, and the newcomers, who brought with them their own sets of problems, disrupted normal life. A woman who was married to a man from another island faced considerable challenges having to weigh up if she and her children were safer by staying with her (the wife's) family or with the husband's. One woman, whose family was on the Weathercoast, but who was based in Honiara with her Malaitan husband and their children, explained the torment she faced when trying to decide where to go. “I was caught in the middle and didn't know what to do. I didn't want to make a decision where anyone would lose their life.”⁵² Such difficult decisions were commonplace with so many inter-island marriages.

Loss of education and health services

Schooling was disrupted as schools closed down in Honiara and around Guadalcanal. Children were transferred to schools in the provinces or took long, enforced ‘school breaks.’ A Western Province woman noted that,

. . . during that time, school girls who should have gone further with their education lost opportunities in terms of scholarships. This was a big setback as SICHE [Solomon Islands College of Higher Education], the only tertiary institution that our kids can access, is in the heart of the tension area, Honiara. Young women who were affected should have been teachers or nurses, but now they have lost that opportunity so we feel our children have been marginalised.⁵³

One woman told how her Masters Degree took ten years to complete instead of three years because she was displaced during the tension and did not have access to educational facilities.⁵⁴

Health services were also difficult to access. Women spoke about how women died because of the lack of access to medical services during pregnancy, birth, and post birth. After the shooting of a patient in National Referral Hospital in Honiara, the only hospital in the capital, women feared coming to the hospital. Pregnant women had to give birth in the bush using traditional midwives and resorting to herbal medicines. One woman from Western Province recalled, “Two women gave birth in a clinic. There was a shoot-out and the women fled the clinic to hide in the bush. One woman died from hemorrhaging, and her baby died as well.”⁵⁵ Although it is hard to put a number on such tragedies, they seemed to happen much more frequently during the tension.

⁵² Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

⁵³ Participant, Western and Choiseul *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 22 July 2011.

⁵⁴ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 4 July 2011.

⁵⁵ Participant, Western and Choiseul *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 21 July 2011.

Living with fear and trauma

Fear was palpable, like a constant shadow following one around, arising when men with guns appeared or bullets were being fired. The future was light years away and the tomorrows were constantly clouded by the fear of being abducted, of being accused, harassed, or killed. Young girls of school age on Guadalcanal were forced into marriages to prevent them from marrying Malaitan men.⁵⁶ Young boys were forced into becoming boy soldiers, their childhood swept away in the maelstrom of forced conscription. Women and children were coerced into obeying orders in order to survive, sadly, by those who had promised them freedom from the enemy.

Flashbacks are very common, the images vividly etched like movies on a big screen. Even after ten years the memories still have the power to wreck havoc on one's peace of mind.

I was in such a hard place being a Guadalcanal woman married to a Malaitan man. I felt so torn in my emotions and feelings, and on one hand I am so glad that my husband has survived the tensions and that he was not killed during the ethnic conflict although the threat of that was very real. On the other hand, there were times when I felt that if anything happened to my parents, my brothers and sisters, if they were killed, I would take revenge and kill my husband before killing myself. Is that normal for me to think like that? I thought I would go crazy and I didn't have anyone to talk to because my only friend at that time died. It was also a time when you could not really trust anyone because it was not safe. It still affects me today and sometimes I have flashbacks as clear as the movies and I am back there again.⁵⁷

A Guadalcanal woman married to a Malaitan told of her experience when she was eight months pregnant and on the run during the tension. She was forced to comply with militant policy to wear Guadalcanal cultural dress for identity purposes. She also recalled the eve of the day her brother was taken away on a boat and was believed killed in Gizo, Western Province. She remembered,

I was pregnant and the militants pressed the trigger of a high-powered gun by my left ear. The gunshot shook me up. Even till today, my 11-year-old son is still traumatised. He can't sleep for more than five minutes and my kids still have their bags packed in case there is another tension.⁵⁸

The violations perpetrated had and continue to have a resounding impact on people across the country.

⁵⁶ Participant, Guadalcanal *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 14 July 2011.

⁵⁷ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

⁵⁸ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

6. Roles of Solomon Islands Women During the Tension

Victim or survivor?

Generally, women who shared their stories about their experiences during the tension preferred to use the term survivor to refer to those who were directly or indirectly affected by the tension. Although women suffered to a great degree as a result of the violations and injustices incurred during and after the tension, they appreciate the fact that they survived and are able to participate in peacebuilding in the country.

Aside from being victims or survivors, women played a multitude of roles during the tension.

Women as heads of households and other role reversals

During the conflict, there were many reversals of the traditional roles men and women played. Women were able to take on the roles of men quite competently, showing resilience and courage in the face of danger to making life-saving decisions and, because of their neutrality, becoming the human shields for their menfolk as they advocated for peace. Women were thrust into the role of heads of their households not only in Honiara, but also the provinces, notably in Malaita, Western, Choiseul, and Guadalcanal itself. If not for the *wantok* system many would have been without shelter, but women made decisions to open their doors to as many as they could accommodate and provide refuge, sharing all the resources they had amongst everyone living under their roofs.⁵⁹ "Our house is not full yet until even the bathroom and toilet is used as a sleeping space then we will know we have reached full capacity" is how one woman described her house.⁶⁰ Families sent their children to other relatives who were located in safer places. In the provinces, the influx of civilians fleeing to their home islands put added pressure on food gardens. Sheltering displaced people meant there were more mouths to feed, so women resorted to planning the number of meals the family could eat, perhaps only once instead of three times a day. They resorted to leafy greens and root crops that were usually foraged only when harvest was not plentiful. "Even sandpaper cabbage became our staple," said one woman.⁶¹

⁵⁹ The *wantok* system in Solomon Islands is one of the ancient social networks, usually consisting of relatives, people from the same geographical location, or people who have the same dialect. The *wantok* system has served as a safety net for many generations and is presently practiced faithfully, but sometimes becomes a hindrance to development. When cash is involved, people may abuse traditional practices to try and get access to this money and opportunities.

⁶⁰ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

⁶¹ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 4 July 2011.

Women also had to make major decisions regarding the safety of their husbands, sons, and other male relatives. Some women were considered traitors because they hid their loved ones from their own *wantoks*, their own flesh and blood such as uncles, nephews, and cousins. These women were accused of being spies for the other camp.

Mi barava tankim masta that mi stap strong taem mi save haedim hasban blong mi. No mata olketa askim mi ana pointim gana long mi ana se bae olekta kilim mi, mi barava no save talem aot na wea na hasban blong mi stap. No mata olketa bonem haos and evri samting blong mifala, mi hapi dat mi stap strong ana kasem tede, no eni wan long fameli blong mi i lus.

[I thank the Lord that I stayed strong when I used to hide my husband. I was threatened with death at gunpoint about the whereabouts of my husband, but I steadfastly denied where he was. Even though they burnt down my house and we have lost all our personal belongings I feel happy in myself that I stayed strong and to this day I am so fortunate; no one in my family has lost their lives.]⁶²

The Anglican Sisters of the Church of Melanesia aided the safe crossing of the Anglican Archbishop to the other side of a bridge all the while under the vigilant eyes of the two warring parties on either side.

Other role reversals also became the norm. In Choiseul, women and young girls adopted the role of men in building shelters to house the displaced from Honiara, while men congregated to discuss the current affairs. Women also took on roles as community leaders, organising prayer support groups and rallying together to assist women less fortunate, providing young mothers with nappies and baby clothes.

In addition, women were forced into courageous roles, having to take the place of men who were fighting or hiding. One woman recalled finding a boy who had been killed in her village on the Weathercoast,

. . . The women were so brave, no one had buried this boy and they buried the boy because no men were brave enough to come to the village. After this, they went to take my grandmother [who had also died] and buried her too.⁶³

Throughout the tension, women describe their roles as doing what they had to do to bring about peace and normalcy, but "doing what they had to do" translated into acts of immense bravery and courage. For example, it required great courage for Guadalcanal women to do such a normal daily task as going to the market. They had to entrust themselves into the hands of the "enemy", the MEF who escorted them into Honiara and accompanied them to shops there for the purchase of basic necessities. On the part of some militants, the protection they gave to women who were wives, sisters and relatives of their enemies speaks of their humanity and also their respect for women who had approached the bunkers.

⁶² Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 4 July 2011.

⁶³ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

Women as counsellors

Women also had to adopt the role of counsellors. With almost no one in the country trained to provide psycho-social support, and with an increasing amount of traumatised people, women church leaders had to assume roles for which they had no training or experience. Some women recalled 89 traumatised and displaced women arriving at Titenge, on the outskirts of Honiara, from the Weathercoast in October 2001. The people receiving them from Honiara were traumatised by their own experiences, but had to put that aside and care for these women and children who appeared to be in greater need. Within an hour of the displaced arriving, people started to bring in food and clothing, and provided a shoulder for these women from the Weathercoast to cry on. Women reflect on this day with heavy hearts and tears in their eyes as they recall the stories they were told and the scene of devastation that lay before them.⁶⁴



Women representing each province pray together during the symbolic handover of the submission to the TRC.

⁶⁴ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 4 July 2011.

Women as peacebuilders

Due recognition must be accorded to the role women played as peacebuilders. The conflict brought together women from different cultural backgrounds and denominations to work to bring about peace, to seek God's face, and pray for ways to deal with the crisis. Emboldened with an inner courage and with their nurturing roles at the fore, women approached the bunkers, coaxing the militants into laying down their arms.

Mothers, ordinary mothers who were selling cake, who were marketing, who were going about their daily duties arose a week after 5 June 2000 [i.e., a week after the coup]. Why? Because they felt the brokenness more than anyone else right at the moment. They felt the brokenness of family relationships, family unity, friendship, national unity, etc. It takes a while for men to feel this, but the women felt it immediately. They arose out of nothing, with no money and they brought themselves together to call the conflict to end when it was hot. This is a story of confidence, hope, service, of laying down their lives for the country.⁶⁵

The exchange of food is significant in Solomon Island societies and women residents of both Auki and Honiara were able to bring cooked food, and tobacco and cigarettes to the militants' bunkers of both sides. Like errant schoolgirls, they kept coming back to the bunkers to pray with the men even though they had kicked dust with their heels after the IFM had accused them of being spies and aimed their high-powered weapons at them. It was a heart-stopping moment in which women felt all had been lost but their persistence paid off, not with weapons but with soft voices cajoling their 'sons' to see sense and reason.⁶⁶

When the boys were armed with guns, the mothers were armed with peace and passion and love, and this is what their tools were to fight. The women met every morning to pray before they launched out to the camps. They went to the leaders first, then after that the commanders. They had one simple message—"Please lay down your arms and come home, my son."—because a lot of the mothers saw themselves as mothers in general.⁶⁷

Out of tragedy, good is often borne and it was during the conflict that women were able to come together as a lobbying group. Where previously religious meetings had been limited to each denomination, an ecumenical spirit arose and women church leaders and lay women were able to join hands together with women leaders from the government, women's organisations, non-government organisations, and ordinary housewives and mothers. Women from Malaita also travelled to Honiara to convince their sons to lay down their arms.

⁶⁵ Dr. Alice Pollard during a presentation at the Young Leaders' Seminar Series on Gender and Transitional Justice in Post-tension Solomon Islands, 23 June 2011.

⁶⁶ Many participants shared this sentiment as they reminisced about their role in making peace during the Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

⁶⁷ Dr. Alice Pollard during a presentation at the Young Leader's Seminar Series on Gender and transitional Justice in post-tension Solomon Islands, 23rd June 2011.

During the tension we women in Auki came together as interfaith women. Our coordinator was Eunice Mudu. We prayed and fasted because we know and believe that God can bring real peace. There were more than 100 women. We paid our own fares and went and lodged at Honiara High School. We spent one week there. We prayed every night and thank God for His protection. Our aim was to get the message to the MEF so they must quit the fighting and come home. The boys said, "Anything can happen." Women felt that if God timed this for us then nothing was impossible. We visited every bunker, shared the word and prayed for the boys. On the physical side we shared many things but during the tension, God was also doing great things on the spiritual side. While we were lodging at Honiara High School, the MEF leaders came to tell us that we were accepted and they provided transport and food for us to take this mission to the bunkers.⁶⁸



The National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop was an opportunity for women to express their strength in unity.

Women also ventured into restricted areas, taking upon themselves to broker peace between the warring factions and their communities, and to connect with women's groups from the other side. In other situations, leaders capitalised on women's perceived neutrality and brought them in to help broker peace. One peacemaker reflected,

Why? I didn't cause this thing, why did I have to do this? But there wasn't time to even think about this and your own security, you just went . . . The first thing you saw when you went in [to the bunker], you saw all the weapons and so the first thing you had to say was where you were from, your genealogy.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

⁶⁹ Participant, Honiara *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 5 July 2011.

The women would use custom, for example wear long skirts or grass skirts, to increase their legitimacy with the boys. Women used whatever neutrality or perceived neutrality that they had to try and broker peace, and they continue to do this even today.

In 2008, I led the Malaita Catholic women to do reconciliation with Guale Catholic women in Tangarare. When I approached the Father [who was] in charge, he said to me, "You did not fight, why should you go?" I replied, "Men make war, we women make peace." Even when we were preparing to leave Malaita, the men scared us, "They will shoot you." I said to the women, "If you have faith, go; if not, stay . . . the men speak, but they are not active." In the church programs women are champions, so men are following suit. After the mission in Tangarare, a leader of the GRA came and gave an apology to the Malaita women saying that he is sorry to realise that he had killed a Malaita brother and sister.⁷⁰

Women are key actors in Solomon Islands life. They are decisive in decision making, managing the family and community, initiating peace and peace movements, and providing a voice against injustices so that peace, unity and security prevail for their children and loved ones. Women especially accept perpetrators in a community when there is real remorse with repentance and the seeking of forgiveness. Women's ability to forgive and move on is also a strength, often mistaken for weakness.

Women's role as peacemakers forgotten

The tension had a varied impact on women's development—in some ways it was a huge setback for women's development. Women's organisations experienced a lack of resources and were weakened by the crisis. However, the period of the tension was also a period of the birth of many small women's organisations and agencies initiated to improve the status of women. Women made important contributions to restoring peace and order to the country and they saw the tension period as an opportunity for nation building and nationalism. Women mobilised themselves into groups, in particular, the Women for Peace Group, the Guadalcanal Women for Peace, and the Westside Women for Peace. Members of the Women for Peace Group possessed leadership qualities that demanded respect as they negotiated and mediated between warring parties.⁷¹ This attention given to women who brokered the peace was short-lived as male leaders forgot women as key people in the peace process. One woman leader recalled,

One of the most important things is that after the tension, women have been forgotten [for the roles they played] in peacemaking and peacebuilding process. Women were the initiators for peace. They negotiated with the government, development partners, employers of IFM, GRA, etc.⁷²

⁷⁰ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

⁷¹ Alice A. Pollard, "Resolving Conflict in Solomon Islands," *Development Bulletin*, no. 53 (2000), 44-46; and Darcy Tovosia Paina, "Peace-making in Solomon Islands: The experience of the Guadalcanal Women for Peace movement," *Development Bulletin*, The Development Studies Network, no. 53 (2000), 47-48.

⁷² Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 28 July 2011.

Incidentally, there were no women present at the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement. One woman leader said, "We risked our lives at the militants' bunkers, being the human shields for the men, and when it comes to negotiations, we feel the men have forgotten us."⁷³

Women as perpetrators

Generally, women were seen as neutral figures. For this reason they were able to move more freely between enemy lines and were able to go to the bunkers to appeal to the boys to stop fighting. Women generally did not know of any women who held arms and actively engaged in combat with any of the warring parties. Having said that, there were some women who stayed with militants for protection, and there were some young women, especially in town areas, who would go around with the militants. Some women also hid perpetrators in their homes. Women were also sometimes used as spies either willingly, for money, or by force. Women recalled that in the markets you could sometimes hear women passing on information. To a certain extent, this gossiping and passing of information fuelled the conflict, but in other instances sharing information is what women say helped end the conflict.

There was an increasing number of husbands having affairs and in response to this, some women violently retaliated against women who had affairs with their husbands. One woman conceded she had become a perpetrator herself.

I became a perpetrator against other women who I heard were sleeping with our husbands who were militants. I used to encourage my friends for us to go after these women, and I remember one time I used a screwdriver to injure my husband's O2 [i.e., the woman with whom he was having an affair] because I was so angry with him and her. After the tension I called the woman to reconcile with her, so we prayed together and I have now tried to put the past behind me.⁷⁴

Despite these cases of women gossiping, spying, or being violent, the overwhelming sense is that very few women could be described as perpetrators in the tension. The enduring image of women during the tension is one of women as courageous, brave, yet humble, peacemakers.

⁷³ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 26 July 2011.

⁷⁴ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* workshop, 26 July 2011.

7. How Women Survived the Tension

*Oh, oh . . . The strength of a woman*⁷⁵

Social networks and friendships among women became their safety nets during the hard times. Similar stories are told from Choiseul, Western, Malaita, and Guadalcanal Provinces. Although there was a limited supply of basic necessities, neighbours assisted each other.

*I have a close friend (not a relation) who would bring me a bag of rice, money for food and other needs. Although the situation was tough, our relationships became even stronger in hard times.*⁷⁶

*Mercy was huge at that time. Even if someone was not from your family, we still shared money and food.*⁷⁷

In addition to the Women for Peace movement, other women's groups were established to address human rights issues and concerns, for example, the Family Support Center which started in 1995 and became a first point of contact for women who experienced physical and sexual violence. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) received funding from the Community Peace and Restorative fund in 2002 to renovate its premises and strengthen its management. Rural women's associations like Lauru Land Conference, Rokotanikeni, and the Marau association as well as other organisations, sought to address the continued need for empowering women economically and as leaders. These groups further strengthened women's development despite the challenges faced during the tension. The efforts of these small groups have supported the development of women where the national women's machinery experienced difficulty in implementing activities. However, the Women's Development Division of the Ministry for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs has been recently resourced with more staff hoping to close this gap.

After the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement, with a renewed sense of hope, women's groups and clubs also mushroomed both in the towns and villages, and women gained strength, both physically and spiritually, from each other's support. Congregating for vigils and prayer sessions boosted women's courage, and women from Malaita raised their own funds to travel to Guadalcanal to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. On Guadalcanal, Women for Peace groups were formed to meet once a week to pray for peace.

⁷⁵ Lyrics from "Strength of a Woman", a song by American soul singer, Phyllis Hyman.

⁷⁶ Participant, Malaita Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 8 July 2011.

⁷⁷ Participant, Honiara Stori Blong Mere Workshop, 4 July 2011.



Women representing each province lift up their prayers and lights for hope during the symbolic handover of the women's submission to the TRC.

Credit schemes and business as usual

On Malaita, women spoke of seeking loans from other women to help tide them over until they received some income from their husbands and elsewhere. When pay was not forthcoming, further loans were sought from others to help settle the first loan, so some women ended up owing huge amounts of money to a number of creditors.

In Western Province, small business activities kept families afloat as well as the seeking of part-time employment or whatever employment was possible to get. Similarly on Malaita and Guadalcanal, women's entrepreneurial skills contributed to generating much-needed income for families.

When we were displaced, I ran a project under the CPRF [Community Peace and Restoration Fund]/Aus AID to provide income to about 19 displaced families. We needed drills, stones, bits and strings to thread the shell money. So when I got the project of SBD\$7,000I shared all the tools to each family. When one family bought one bag of shells from western Province, after they make the shell money, we expect that three strings are given back to the project and then the shell money is distributed amongst the project members. The income from the project was used to purchase needs like plates, etc. In Langalanga [a lagoon area close to Auki], the shell money has value, so 30 beads to total up the value of the goods from the store.

We had many failures. Sometimes when members go to the market in Honiara they spend all the project money and we have to start all over again. The shop owner will thread the beads and sell them. The beads are very different and have different colours. The rare ones value more than the common shells. They are sourced from Tarapaina [Malaita], Takwa [North Malaita], Northern Langalanga, and Western Province.⁷⁸

Women's innovation

Forced into situations where survival was essential, women became creative and innovative. On Malaita, coconut oil was used as fuel in place of kerosene. In many areas women made soap by mixing Rinso, a powdered detergent, and lime. Women learnt to save and cut costs by tightly managing their finances and changing their diets. For example, a food hardly eaten before such as sago palm was used instead of cassava to make pudding. *Supsup* gardens (i.e., gardens behind the house) were an alternative means of livelihood in Auki where curfews restricted the movement of people to and from food gardens that were a few kilometers inland from dwelling areas. Old canoes and containers were filled with soil and used to plant vegetables and cabbages. Roadside stalls also sprouted along the roads in Honiara and Auki where cooked food, betel nut, and other produce were sold to increase household income levels. Such activities happened more in Malaita where there had been much pressure on those who were displaced, but also among the host families. Despite these innovations, stealing, robbery, and thievery increased.

Stealing increased and our gardens were harvested by many other people. People who stole were forced to steal for survival. Either they steal the coconuts or potato [and take it] to market to get money to purchase soap and other essentials.⁷⁹

Illegal activities such as the brewing of kwaso also generated income for women who had little land to grow food crops to sell. Women would brew this drink made from yeast extract, turning it to a potentially lethal concoction which was 50-80% alcohol and men would sell it in the black markets alongside beer. It is still sold illegally as quality control is not regulated and a few deaths have been reportedly caused by the consumption of the brew. Hard times also saw the rise of con artists seeking to make easy money here or there and women were no exception. One or two women doctored the art of swindling other people's hard-earned money through triangle schemes or charity funds. In their naivety, some people are still waiting for the banks to rain money and would snap one's head off if they were told that someone had been laughing all the way to the bank with their monies!

⁷⁸ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop 7 July 2011
⁷⁹ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

Prostitution

Prostitution and the trafficking of young girls also helped put food on the table. Girls increasingly became involved in prostitution for economic gains because of the need for survival. Many young girls were involved in sex activities with men who are well off and also with fishermen at the Auki wharf. Since the tension, girls are now being sold in the market for sex because of the population pressure and the lack of land to make gardens. Now adults (men and women) are acting as pimps to sell the women at the market.⁸⁰

Women's faith

Solomon Island women suffered many violations during the ethnic conflict and feel they should be duly compensated. Many were victims and are seeking fair justice, reparations, and reconciliation at the national, provincial and communal level. However, their indomitable spirit and fervent faith also enables them to call themselves survivors instead of victims. Their faith and prayers, and their ability to surround each other with support has been their saving grace during the turmoil of the years of conflict.

⁸⁰ Participant, Malaita *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, 8 July 2011.

8. Findings



We have not had the resources to interview and talk with a large number of women—only about 60 women were involved in this process, but they are women who have a deep understanding of what happened to women during the tension. As a result, much of the information we have is anecdotal and hence requires a more comprehensive analysis.

This submission finds that violations committed against women during the tension were mainly related to sexual abuse, killing (of women and of the men in their families), torture, enforced disappearances, loss of property, and forced displacements. Not one of the “tension trials” to address violations during the tension has tried a perpetrator of sexual violence. Stories of violations women suffered, and the difficult choices faced by those feeling “caught” in inter-ethnic marriages while wanting to keep their families safe and intact, reveal the trauma so many women experienced. Although it cannot be denied that a few women were also perpetrators of the conflict, the overwhelming picture is one of women who took on a multitude of new roles during the tension as heads of households; providing shelter, food, and support to displaced peoples; and as peacebuilders who courageously faced the militants to plead an end to the fighting. Equally moving are stories of women’s survival through “business as usual”; engaging in illegal activities (brewing *kwaso* and prostitution); various innovations, such as producing soap and living off of foods in the bush; and their strong religious faith.

The process that has resulted in the compilation of this submission reflects the need for achieving gender justice as a means for sustainable peace. For women in Solomon Islands, peace does not mean exiting from life between two guns. Women look beyond the past and utilise the present to voice out their concerns for future paths.

Our process found that if there are inequalities thriving between men and women, women will continue to pick up the pieces of other people’s mistakes. Fortunately, there has been lots of good work done to minimise the chances of repeating the past, but these efforts are insufficient to solve the problems leading to the tension.

Reforms and reconstruction processes began immediately after the ceasefire, but these processes continue to marginalise women. These reforms have not seriously taken into account women’s issues and concerns prior to the tension and impacts of the tension on women. The country still has to deal with the widespread trauma resulting from the tension, and reparations done through one-off programs, are ineffective. For example, one-year trauma counselling programs do not manage to come close to addressing the huge numbers of people still suffering as a result of the tension.

The conflict clearly affects efforts of advancing the status of women. Rights of women have been violated through rape and other incidents of physical and domestic violence. Although the government has already prioritised the implementation of the national women’s policy, it is evident that implementing this policy alongside other relevant policies would be a huge challenge.

This submission indicates that women have deep insight and understanding of the conflict. Their knowledge of the conflict is useful in predicting early indications of any future conflict. Their experiences of the conflict place them in a strong position to be taken seriously and included as leaders in building the future of the Solomon Islands.

9. Recommendations

After pausing and reflecting on the past—the pain, the struggles, and the survival—we turn to the future and look at what **changes we women want for Solomon Islands** and make recommendations accordingly. As part of these recommendations, women believe it is important that a **comprehensive reparations** package is developed. In thinking about reparations, one woman said,

What we are trying to submit is something to look forward—reparations. We've never been in this situation before, so we don't know what to do . . . Reconciliation—this benefits the perpetrator. Do you ever see a victim with exchange of shell money?⁸¹

What follows is a combination of what the women believe are the changes and the reparations needed to advance the healing of women and all the people of Solomon Islands.

1. As one of the root causes in the tensions, **land issues must be addressed**. Although there have been some efforts to do this they have encountered various problems and the participation of women has been minimal. There should be legislation regarding the sale of customary land; regulations regarding squatting; and legislation to protect land tenure. An effective mechanism to consider land issues, including land registrations, that is accessible and that people understand is needed. It is essential that there is recognition of women's land rights in matrilineal systems and fair decision-making around this. It is also essential that there is representation of women in land reform initiatives.
2. Another root cause identified was unequal development and unequal development benefits. Although this is often raised and agreed to, women feel that **development and services must be decentralised** as this has not happened. There should be fair, transparent, and accountable distribution of benefits and resources across the country; training and education at the provincial level must be increased; employment opportunities created in the provinces; and improvement of information dissemination down to the grass roots.
3. There must be a comprehensive **reparations** program. Priority should be given to those women directly affected by certain violations and their families. These violations include rape, killings, torture, domestic violence, sexual abuse, loss of property, coercion to spy, and victims of the Bougainville spillover.
 - a) Provincial and national government, including the Ministry for National Unity Reconciliation and Peace and the Women's Development Division of the Ministry

for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs; churches; chiefs; community leaders; women's groups, including National and Provincial Councils of Women; youth; perpetrators; and victims should all be consulted regarding the design and delivery of a reparations program. Once the TRC has submitted its report, an **independent body** with **equal representation** of men and women should be **established** and tasked with overseeing the **design and implementation of a reparations program**.

- b) The nation needs to make space for the people of Solomon Islands to **continue talking truth** and **documenting women's stories**. To this end, a unit in the National Council of Women and the Provincial Councils of Women should be established to support the victims and document their stories. The government and donors will need to provide support to enable this unit to be accessible to all victims.
- c) After the tragic past we have been through, we are a nation that needs **healing**. Provisions must be made for group counselling and much more counselling training. There needs to be continued **victim support**. We are aware and supportive of the positive reforms that have been made to protect victims of domestic violence, but feel there is still a far way to go. There should be a housing scheme for victims of domestic violence. Although some exist already (in particular, informal ones), more safe houses and trauma centers should be established in the provinces for domestic violence victims.
- d) Following on from the good work that has already been done, **traditional reconciliation** between perpetrators and victims, in particular families of people who have been **killed**, needs to continue. There should be a **national reconciliation for women**.
- e) There should be a **Provincial Remembrance Day** and/ or a **National Remembrance Day** for those who were **killed or missing** during the tension.
- f) Provincial governments and/or the national government should build a **museum and monument** to recognise the role that women played during the tension.
- g) There should be collective and individual **apologies** to victims of murder, rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence, coercion, harassment, and loss of property at the national, provincial and community levels.
- h) Following on from the TRC exhumations program, the **remains** of those killed should continue to be **recovered and returned** to their families for a proper burial.
- i) The national government must give **compensation**—both monetary and using traditional shell money—to the families of those who have been killed.
- j) There should be community projects that focus on **rebuilding houses that have been destroyed**, and provide roofing and other materials to repair damaged houses.
- k) Provincial governments must write a **sympathy letter to the victims**.

⁸¹ Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop in Honiara, 27 July 2011. Traditionally compensation is for the perpetrator to acknowledge that s/he did something wrong, but is forgiven and to say that this issue between the two parties is over.

4. While women appreciate that a number of high-profile arrests were made after 2003, they wish to see **further investigations and arrests being made**, especially of the ‘big fish’. The women understand that some of the ‘big fish’ were among those who invited RAMSI to come to the Solomon Islands and are still waiting for the day when these so-called ‘big fish’ will be arrested and tried for the part they played in fostering the tension.
5. It is essential that **electoral reform** be actively pursued. The electoral system must continue to be reviewed and **women must be empowered in politics**. Women need to be involved in decision-making and peace processes. We need a **transparent and accountable** government.
6. **Education** is integral to the nation. People need education in other cultures to build up their cross-cultural awareness and sensitivities. Human rights education is needed at all levels and across all groups—village, ward, members of parliament, women, youth, chiefs, and schools. Education about gender and women’s issues is important, in particular for men. Education needs to be accessible for all.
7. We need more **celebrations of women** to foster their unity. One way of doing this could be a national festival for all women of Solomon Islands—perhaps every four years and outside Honiara. This would be an inter-provincial activity that would include a great variety of women, including women who do not always get selected for everything, women who are marginalised, and less educated women.
8. It is important to create more opportunities for **economic empowerment for women**. To this end, one idea is the development of market outlets (craft and food) at the ward level. In addition there should be better access to **micro-credit schemes**, especially for those who lost property during the tension.
9. The **Bougainville border** needs to be **strengthened** to increase security, and reduce illegal border crossing. Victims of the Bougainville spillover should be included in reparations programs.



This is a graphic depiction of the women’s dreams for a reparations program and other recommendations. The women cut down the tree of fire, tore out the root causes, and began to build something new. These are the building blocks to a brighter, better future.

10. Conclusion

It is sad to remember all the memories of the past, but it is comforting, however, to see that finally women have spoken. Women acknowledge and respect the worthy customs of these beautiful “Happy Isles”. Arguably it would be devastating to remain silent about some of the things that women are carrying around as they struggle to live normal lives.



Women who contributed to this submission gathered for a group photo during the national workshop. There were other women involved in the regional workshops and on other days of the national workshop who are not in this photograph.

It is with great respect, to our ancestors and our present leaders that we speak the truth and seek reparations for our lives and for those whom we love. We appeal to your good leadership that our voices must be heard in order for our future to be secure. As one woman said,

I have heard from victims, not just from stories that other people have told. I have heard from victims, one on one. [This] submission must be something that when they [i.e., the TRC, the government, and the people of Solomon Islands] read it, it breaks their heart; that it changes them and that it is something that makes them say this must not happen again.⁸²

The tension created havoc, hostility, and enmity among the people of Solomon Islands. In coming forward to tell their stories and share their perspectives and analysis, women of Solomon Islands hope that justice will prevail and that the Solomon Islands will return once more to being the “Happy Isles” or even better.

⁸² Participant, National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop in Honiara, 28 July 2011.

Annex 1

Speech by Joy Kere, Permanent Secretary of Ministry for National Unity Reconciliation and Peace, at closing of National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop, Honiara, 28 July 2011

I am most humbled to be amongst champions. You are champions, because within your organisations (and personal capacities) many of you are leaders for the cause of empowering women and in promoting women's participation alongside our menfolk in decision-making and leadership, and towards improving the status of women in our society.

To, the young women leaders, how proud I am of all of you in taking up the leadership responsibilities. On behalf of the government, I salute you all and encourage you to keep up the great work.

Today marks the culmination of a series of four regional workshops into the three-day national workshop of Solomon Island women telling and sharing their stories of the ethnic tensions—a process of analysis, documenting, and in making a 'collective submission' to the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We are here for the closing of the series of workshops, which started at the beginning of July.

Some of you might ask why women's stories of the ethnic tension are so important. After all, it has been 11 years since those darkest years of our history and some 8 years on since the RAMSI presence and years of rebuilding in our country.

Over the past years, much progress has been made to date; government is undertaking major reforms—economic, legislative and constitutional reforms— but much work is still required to ensure sustainable peace and development. The future peace and stability and development of Solomon Islands, however, also depends on the role women play at all levels—at policy and decision-making and national leadership levels—in addition to the importance of our roles at the family level.



Much, much more work is required and remains to be done to better our lot. I hope that we all appreciate the process we have engaged in and understand the collective submission of women's stories and recommendations is ultimately towards that end of ensuring women's voice, recognition and active participation in the rebuilding of Solomon Islands.

Some weeks ago, (4-5 July) I also participated in the Honiara workshop. We reflected on our ethnic tension stories as if it happened just yesterday. It was a painful process. I am sure, you also grappled with the questions: Why is it important to document women's stories of the ethnic tension? Why is truth-telling, justice, searching for reconciliation, healing, and calling for rehabilitation and recognition for women in Solomon Islands so important towards sustainable peace and unity? After our stories, then what? What are the TRC and government going to do with our recommendations?

I am most certain that the workshops have provided you with that space to come together, to discuss these questions. Your joint discussions have helped you to answer these questions and which importantly has formed the basis and determined the recommendations of the women's submission to the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I must salute you all for taking up the responsibility on behalf of so many women, to be engaged in the process of documenting the stories of your experiences—experiences of suffering, yet of endurance and survival, your suffering of violence, perhaps how women survived abuses unheard of before in our history, but also how women have risen above all these and became active agents for peace in our society.

I am most impressed with the analysis and mapping exercise (Flame Tree) you have made on the ethnic tension, the impacts of the tension, and also the root causes. Then you also have the teardrops that have helped in putting out the fire, and also the seeds for peace planted by women of Solomon Islands.

And therefore through your stories, what our history has taught us is about the important role of women as active agents for peace, and I note your concerns that these roles must be recognised and continue on in the rebuilding process.

One of the reforms relating to knowing the truth and for the state to acknowledge the truth of what happened was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In 2009, the government, through the MNURP, established the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC Act 2008) to investigate the causes and impacts of the tension by examining the period from 1998-2003. The TRC is to listen to stories on what happened and why the ethnic tension happened so that Solomon Islands will better understand the truth of its past to enable it to move forward to prevent such violence from happening again. An important outcome would be a final report of the TRC and its recommendations to government on many important issues based on its findings. The TRC Act also provides for the government to look into the recommendations and to implement these as government policies and reforms. . . .

The series of workshops are linked to the TRC processes and outcomes . . . These workshops are complimentary and were coordinated by the ICTJ, which was aimed to facilitate a process for Solomon Island women to make a collective submission to the TRC. . . .

I noted from your presentations those of you here have actively engaged in analysing the patterns of abuse and discussed the different roles women played, and the story of survival. More specifically, through the discussions, documentation and presentation of women's stories of the tensions, and . . . through the collective submission to the TRC, you feel empowered that you have contributed positively to the rebuilding reforms currently being undertaken.

Reparations for women are an important consideration under the TRC's work and it is so important that women also have a say towards the TRC report on the matter. . . .

These recommendations are women's statement to government through the TRC about what is important to women following the tensions and what should be part of the rebuilding process. For it is our shared belief that if women are accurately represented in the final report, it will also help future generations to know the story of women and the ethnic tensions.

Furthermore, critical and truthful reflections and documentation of women's experiences of past violence is an essential step towards addressing violence against women and the habit, attitude, and perhaps practice of impunity that contributes to its perpetuation. . . .

To the Chairman of the TRC and Commissioners, it is almost like saying: "This is our all. Reflect these in your report and recommendations." Ultimately, it is the Solomon Islands women's chapter on the ethnic tensions and women's recommendations to the TRC as felt, lived, suffered, endured yet survived, told and retold and written for a better Solomon Islands.

Women leaders let us celebrate our being a woman of Solomon Islands on this journey together. The journey does not end here at this workshop; the journey must continue. The government further encourages you to also use the outcomes of the story and truth-telling processes to provide the basis for advocacy work by your respective organisations. Spread the findings so that Solomon Islands are fully aware! Other organisations are encouraged to do likewise.

In like manner the outcomes will also feed into government policies and programs such as the National Action Plan on 1325 on Women Peace and Security, the formulation of a National Peacebuilding Policy, and others. It will also further consolidate and support other related government policies and programs: the Policy on Violence against Women; key policies on gender equality and women's development, etc.; and . . . other ongoing legislative reforms of government, e.g. constitutional reforms, electoral processes review, etc. and education reforms, etc.

Please be assured, the government eagerly looks forward to the outcome of this women's chapter and recommendations through the final TRC Report. I wish you all the best as you return to your provinces, organisations, and work place. Solomon Island women must continue to journey on to better our lot and in rebuilding Solomon Islands.

Thank you and God Bless.

Annex 2

Let There Be Peace

by Peace Songs Project, Revelation 22

These are the lyrics of the song sung by women during the symbolic handover of the Women's Submission to the TRC at the close of the National *Stori Blong Mere* Workshop.

Let there be peace,
We are God's children.
Let there be peace,
We are one people.
Let there be peace,
We are one country.
Let there be peace
In our nation, Solomon.

Stop the fighting, mothers are crying
Stop the killing, children are dying
Stop the fighting, people are suffering
Let there be peace in our nation, Solomon.

I cry Isatambu,
I cry Eagles,
I cry Solomons.
Let there be peace in our nation, Solomon.

Why should we fight, we are brothers?
Why should we shout, we are one people?
Why should we kill, we are one country?
Let there be peace in our nation, Solomon.



The participants being lead in song by Mary Bollen and Martha Horiwapu

Annex 3



Stori Blong lumi

Many women have still not shared their stories. Some have not shared because they have not had the opportunity and some because they have not felt comfortable doing so. This is your opportunity to make your story part of your book if you would like. Please feel free to document your story in words or pictures in the pages that follow in this book—your book, your history.



