

Women across the PNG Highlands internally displaced by armed conflict and wars among tribes



Armed conflict in the Highlands of PNG

Papua New Guinea (PNG) achieved political independence in 1975, almost one hundred years after German, British and colonial presence in the coastal, southern and island regions. The mountainous central Highlands region of PNG embraces seven provinces, hosts more than thirty percent of the total national population of approximately 6.5 million people and was first explored only in the 1920s. The region extends from the westerly Enga and Southern Highlands provinces, through the Western Highlands Province, a new Province of Jiwaka, Simbu Province and Eastern Highlands Province. A second new province has been established in the region of PNG's huge Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) deposits, which will be the site of PNG's largest natural resource development for the next 20 years. In the 1950's a central 'Highlands Highway' was constructed and some more remote areas were only being opened up to the Australian colonial administration as recently as the 1950s.

The incidence and impact of ongoing tribal warfare

conducted with bows and arrows, and wooden shields and clubs, across all Melanesian countries (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji) was subdued, quelled and virtually exterminated by the European miners, colonizers and missionaries, commencing in the 1870s through to the 1950s. However, PNG's central highlands region, so recently opened up to the outside world, has never experienced life under effective state law and justice systems. Far from disappearing, tribal fighting in the PNG Highlands has been rapidly and radically transformed with the advent of the cash economy, the accelerated exploitation of vast mineral, gas (LNG) and oil wealth parliamentary democracy and elections. Highland population are now severely affected by sporadic, but intense armed

conflict. The rules of engagement have changed, and the casualties have increased. Homemade and high-powered weapons have replaced traditional weapons. Young men with arms are overruling traditional leaders. Customs which once protected women and children from harm during conflicts have fallen away. Mercenaries have emerged. Guns are a highly desired commodity and feature more significantly in a communities' sense of security than police of state justice systems do.

Contemporary conflicts in the Highlands region are no longer just about every day social and economic grievances (over land, gender relations and power over women, and sometimes, retaliation and revenge for crimes of violence committed against women). Elections and large scale resource developments are triggering new economic and power rivalries between clans. Highlands conflicts are now very much related to which tribe will benefit most from cash-based royalty payments from the global, large-scale corporate resource developers and which tribe will benefit by getting its bloc-voted candidate elected into a seat in national parliament - where he will be bound to represent tribal



*A widow from the armed conflict in the Eastern Highlands province.
Credit: Delilah Sandeka.*

interests and loyalties and control disposable cash in the form of discretionary (or 'slush') funds and will have more opportunities to gain advantage by advancing deals with foreign investors and developers. These are high stakes, no longer fought with bows and arrows, but rather with deadly, high-powered and homemade and factory-made guns. Guns are the new tools of power and influence in the Highlands. They are the currency traded during elections and with some unscrupulous resource developers. Whole populations of villagers – women and men – are expected to contribute to community weapon caches of weapons/village arsenals stockpiled in the name of community security, at a time when weak post independence policing and justice systems appear to be alarmingly neglected, under-resourced, and severely challenged by combatants/warriors in possession of more sophisticated and powerful weapons than those available to state police and military forces.

Culture, custom and violence

Studies in PNG indicate that the Highlands women experience the highest incidence and most severe forms of violence. This is partly related to the failure of state protection and justice mechanisms. It is also linked to extreme manifestations of some cultural traditions that discriminate against women. These include:

Polygamy: the 'custom' of traditional male leaders (known as 'big men') being accorded rights to multiple wives, spanning many generations of women has been distorted to allow any man who assumes or is accorded the title of bigman the right to marry and control the lives of multiple women.

Child Brides: Related to the practice of polygamy, is the tendency of powerful men to seek or be offered young girls as marked brides, sometimes as young as ten years, to men who may be in their 70s, but also increasingly young men who have assumed power through the barrel of the gun, as hired guns (so-called 'Rambos') or as determined combatants or criminals. Armed men can command, or may be offered young girls as brides.

Bride price payments: As the highlands regions transition to a cash-based economy, there is a tendency for customs to be monetized, and women and girls to be commoditized. Buying wives (with new found and sometimes ill-gotten cash wealth) is common, and elevates male status, and at the same time dramatically diminishes the rights and power of women, and the possibilities to end escape bad and violent marriages. Bride price and polygamy combined enables men with money to 'purchase' and control multiple wives.

Beliefs in Magic and Sorcery: Throughout Melanesia, most people believe that some people hold magical powers that can be used for good or ill. Spells and curses can be bought and sold to harm rivals, competitors and to payback or get revenge. Money, lack of basic services, new diseases causing death (e.g. AIDS related deaths) and lack of education, information, communication and state protections have combined to see an escalation in allegations of sorcery being practiced by women (and some men) to harm or kill. The result is increasingly frequent allegations and mob-killings of alleged sorcerers, following deaths, disease or misfortune in the community. Extra judicial pronouncements of guilt, leading to increasingly barbaric and often sexual mob torture and frenzied killings are increasingly common in many parts of the Highlands. Most occur with total impunity.

Other contextual and societal changes

Other contextual and societal changes compounding these problems affecting day to day life and contributing to conflict include:

PNG's HIV/AIDS epidemic: The Highlands region has the one of the world's highest incidences of HIV infection and related deaths, and high rates of infection among women and girls. Women living with HIV suffer more discrimination and neglect, and allegedly murder, than men and when ignorance on the causes, progression and treatment of HIV&AIDS are little known or understood, women are often accused as sorcerers responsible for this and other more recently diagnosed conditions like cancer.

PNG's Gun culture and armed conflict: Across the highlands many men are involved in manufacture of guns, smuggling or guns, leaking police and military weapons and emerging young warlords lead long-distance treks to the coastal ports of Lae or Daru, or across the border to buy guns. Communities collectively aspire and contribute to the highest powered weapons and the best marksmen, killers. Community members unwilling to participate are harassed, expelled and under threat of harm and injury must go into 'exile'. Women and children witness shooting and killing, and are at once reliant on, but terrified by guns, which are also reportedly turned

against them in domestic conflicts, power struggles and instances of sexual abuse, including marital rape. Police are unable to stop wars or attend to crimes because they are very often under-resourced for daily police operations, ill equipped to manage armed conflict and overwhelmed by the superior weaponry held by tribes, communities, emerging local warlords and hired guns. The state has failed to acknowledge, document, monitor or address the very visible problem of widowhood, displacement, poverty and terror experienced by thousands of women in the conflict affected regions of the Highlands.

Drugs and alcohol: Marijuana cultivation is common and widespread as a cash crop in PNG. PNG marijuana, high in THC potent content is smoked across the region, and is linked to rising incidence of marijuana related psychoses. It is the commodity most commonly traded at or across national and provincial borders for guns. Young men high on marijuana or alcohol are accused of frenzy-like torture and barbaric killings of alleged sorcerers. The state has limited control as much marijuana is cultivated in remote places or in the regions most affected by armed tribal fighting that are often declared no-go zones for outsiders, including police, for many years and sometimes for several decades

Globalisation of media and communications: the advent of TV, Video and DVDs have led to a huge influx of affordable B grade movies, and pornographic material viewed in a context of limited or no legal literacy, where Rambo is a popular icon/superhero, CSI normalizes gun violence and victimisation of women, and pornography tantalizes men moving in a world of changing sexual attitudes, norms and behaviours. Sensationalizing armed and violent conflict resolution and desensitizing viewers to guns, killing and sexual violence has potential for huge, negative impact on the daily lives and relationships of women and girls. While mobile telephones have revolutionized communications, with coverage across the most remote areas, the potential for misuse, including victimization and harassment of women by intimate partners, stalkers and enemies has been realized more than the possibilities to use digital communications to educate, inform, connect and protect women and girls.

The combined gender impact of conflict, custom, drugs, guns and globalization

There is growing evidence of Highlands women's increased vulnerability to violence, including crimes of sexual violence during times of conflict, political instability, natural disasters, and social upheaval, particularly when there is internal displacement of people. This is in turn related to the rapid transition and upheaval of traditional communities occurring in Highlands societies and the pervasive gender blindness and denial of women's suffering. This is happening in the context of challenging



Lilly Be'Soer (second from left) WHRD with survivors of violence (severed limbs). Credit: Lilly Be'Soer, Voice for Change Jiwaka Province, PNG.

family and cultural structures, new social and sexual norms and behaviors, and where the rule of law and access to justice operate at a very low level or are totally ineffective. Rape and other forms of sexual violence are used as a weapon in regional and ethnic conflict, and as an expression of anger, frustration, payback and revenge at family and community level.

The phenomenon of people internally displaced by armed conflict is yet to be named and acknowledged by the state and the world. It is estimated that at any point in time over the past 30 years, several hundreds of thousands of Highlands people experience internal displacement including loss of livelihood and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. The problems stemming from internal displacement are many and multi-faceted. The myth of neighbouring tribes willingly sheltering and providing for 'refugees' from tribal wars, must be dispelled. Living on someone else's land in Melanesia, subsisting and earning livelihoods from another tribe's resources incur cumulative and increasingly monetized debt, humiliation and vulnerability. The gendered impact of internal displacement is distinct. Internally displaced women are virtual prisoners in another man's land. They are powerless and prone to daily discrimination. Their husbands and sons cannot protect them because they have lost their power and security when they fled from their land.

Displaced men plan for future payback. They work hard on the land and save to buy weapons to fight back and reclaim their traditional lands. Women are at the mercy of their host, particularly males who might prey on their vulnerability, and the associated impotency of brothers, husbands and fathers to protect them or access justice when they are subjected to forced marriage, pregnancy, or inability to report rape and other forms of sexual assault.

Highlands women have limited or no access to police or justice during times of peace, but during conflict, their



Credit: Karl Minge, Artist in Residence, University of Goroka.

lives become a nightmare. Highlands women in all seven provinces in PNG report living in fear and terror of the many forms of violence, many involving torture, maiming, mutilation and murder, loss of freedoms of mobility and expression. They express a sense of powerless to protect their daughters. This violence is heightened during conflict and by the presence of guns, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs, the rise of HIV infections, and increasing diagnosis of cancers and other fatal illnesses. Furthermore the lack of state protections and human security and the continuous escalation and cycles of conflict exacerbate and perpetuate their victimization and suffering.

Women in conflict affected highlands societies are in dire need of financial support to engage in economic activity to generate income to meet their family's basic needs

and their own desire to seek justice. Their greatest desire is for peace to be restored soon so that they can return to rightful their homeland; however their aspirations, priorities needs and concerns are silenced by men, guns and the constrained circumstances and poor conditions they live in.

In pockets of the PNG Highlands region, women leaders and activists committed to making and sustaining peace, defending women's human rights and establishing organisations of women affected by conflict are emerging. UNIFEM, as part of UN delivering as One in PNG, is working with frontline Women's Human Rights Defenders and Peace activists, connecting them to

local, national and international human rights networks, campaigns and movements. A range of interventions to support women's empowerment, leadership and participation in actions to end conflict and to end impunity for SGBV committed during conflict are being explored. United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) and other national commitments to advancing gender equality can frame and guide the empowerment of Highlands women. Increased mobilization and coordination, greater access to resources and justice, opportunities to strengthen capacities to end and prevent conflict, build peace and link local and global human rights lobbies and mechanisms are urgently needed and achievable if the Highlands conflict and its severe gendered impacts is acknowledged and addressed.



Women of the Jiwaka province, Highlands region PNG, displaced by armed conflict supported by Voice for Change for their economic and psychological recovery.