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# The Kup Women for Peace approach to peacebuilding: taking the lead in the Papua New Guinea national elections

Rachael Hinton, Michelle Kopi, Angela Apa, Agnes Sil, Mary Kini, Jerry Kai, Yanny Guman, and Daniell Cowley

*In seven short years, Kup Women for Peace, a community organisation in Papua New Guinea, has gone from tribal peacebuilding to ensuring a free, fair, and violence-free election in one small part of Simbu Province. The organisation's approach was multi-faceted and locally appropriate, enfranchising many women – and educating men – in the process. In a country where women are marginalised in decision-making structures, the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 could have a major impact on democratic processes and good governance.*

## Women's leadership and representation in peacebuilding

United Nations Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, passed in 2000, reflects a recent growth in women's peace activism. Resolution 1325 is the first formal and legal document from the UN Security Council that requires parties in a conflict to respect women's rights, and to support women's equal participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. Key elements of the Resolution include promoting women's equal participation in decision-making in peace processes; inclusion of gender analysis, women's rights, and gender training in peacebuilding activities; and protecting women and girls in conflict zones. While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, there is a clear need to recognise that conflict has particular effects on women and girls (United Nations 2000).

Women's involvement in peace processes is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of the decision-making process, and to make sustainable peace and development possible (Naraghi Anderlini and El-Bushra 2007). Women's profiles in peacebuilding, however, as in many other areas of life, have been low and undervalued (*ibid.*). History has shown that although women and women's groups are at the forefront of peacemaking efforts at the community level, this does not always translate to the inclusion of women as decision-makers in political arenas.

Women in Papua New Guinea are marginalised from formal decision-making structures. In a modern nation-state, the lack of women in political roles is unjustifiable and discriminatory (Macintyre 2000a, 43). The disparity between male and female representation in parliament is particularly marked. In 2002 and 2007, only one woman was elected, out of 109 members of parliament (McLeod 2002; PNG Electoral Commission 2008; Standish 2007). Despite the central role women played in Bougainville<sup>1</sup> to mobilise communities for peace, they faced exclusion from national-level peace talks, and in post-conflict programmes men were the primary decision-makers (Macintyre 2000a). Martha Macintyre (2000a, 45) points out that at present, in Papua New Guinea, 'peacemaking is mopping up after the men have made a mess of things; the real task is trying to ensure women's full political representation and participation, so that these messes do not arise'.

NGOs, such as Oxfam and national civil-society organisations, recognise the importance of the participation of women, and the importance of women's gender-related concerns, in peacebuilding programmes. However, the work of women peacebuilders, and the role of women in the field of insecurity, remains largely unrecognised at the institutional and public-policy level in Papua New Guinea.

The following case study of Kup Women for Peace (KWP) attempts to fill this gap. It is based on informal conversations with four executive KWP members, four members, and a male and female youth from Kup. Discussions with numerous male and female community members, KWP members, and local leaders about the role of KWP took place informally with the lead author during 2007 as part of Oxfam's partnership with KWP. All quotations come from these discussions.

### Kup sub-district – the context

Kup sub-district is in Kerowagi District, Simbu Province in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Kup has a population of 18,000 people, made up of 12 tribal clans that are dispersed across many small, isolated communities. Many villages are inaccessible by vehicle, and lack access to basic social services. Although remoteness plays a part, the impact of two decades of tribal warfare in Kup has significantly contributed to a lack of social and economic growth in the area. The first tribal fight was recorded in Kup in the early 1970s, and although major fights between tribes ended in 1990, fights between sub-clans continued, motivated in part by election violence (Garap 2004). Kup experienced a downward spiral in social order, laying the foundation for *raskol* (criminal) activity and the withdrawal of services. The effectiveness of the court system, the police, and other law-enforcement agencies of the central government declined. The breakdown in law and order, combined with the culture of 'payback' or revenge for a death, resulted in multiple male deaths and limited opportunities to secure a livelihood (see Dinnen 2002, for a discussion of law and justice in Papua New Guinea). For 20 years, insecurity, violence, and unrest

characterised daily life in the sub-district. Women experienced displacement, rape, harassment, food shortages, and economic hardship, with the government unable to provide the necessary security and basic social services to the population.

Gender inequality is a feature of life in Kup, and here, as in other parts of the highlands region, women have a lower social standing than men. Women face unequal opportunities in education and access to the labour force. Young women often face extreme pressure to adhere to the societal norms of early marriage due to the pretence that the marital relationship will provide social and economic security. Women face the burden of a heavy workload, and violence against women is often condoned under the pretext of family sanctuary (for further analysis on the status of women in Papua New Guinea see Macintyre 2000b; Brouwer *et al.* 1998).

### The Kup Women for Peace initiative

It was in this context that Kup Women for Peace was formed in 1999. Women who had experienced the effects of two decades of tribal warfare began to mobilise others from different sides of the conflict, to put pressure on traditional leadership to stop the fighting. A peace march organised by KWP was held by women from rival tribes, who had not seen or spoken to each other for many years. This call for peace was an opportunity for women to promote a unified front to male leaders and combatants. It also enabled KWP to open up and facilitate mediation and discussions among the enemy tribes, to raise awareness of the cost of conflict for both men and women, and the opportunities and means with which to seek a way out.

Since it was breaking with customary practice for women to lead discussions on issues considered the domain of men, KWP adopted a non-aggressive, long-term strategy to '*winim bel*' (win the hearts) of male leaders and men, based around cultural norms of respect and humility. Leaders began to acknowledge the efforts of KWP to change existing patterns of dispute resolution and the rationale to use violence. Jerry Kai, a KWP executive member, recalls, 'for many men, it was the first time to hear the painful stories of women. I remember being at a public forum and a leader said "*mi laik kamap meri na wearim skirt*" ("I want to become a woman and wear a skirt"). The leader went on to encourage other men to recognise the role of women as human-rights advocates. Jerry continues, 'male leaders gave women the mandate to lead and said that "we will stand behind you and we will move forward and support you. We can't do it. Men fight, we argue. Our way leads to violence". Although KWP has presented a challenge to male dominance in Kup, its aim is to work in partnership with traditional structures and male leadership.

KWP was instigated by four women (one of whom was not local, but who provided guidance and advice), who lived close to the roots of the conflict and experienced its

devastating impacts. With no formal peacebuilding training, the women were breaking new ground outside their sphere of experience. Over time they have had the opportunity to travel, receive training, and network with other organisations in the Pacific, to share their experiences and keep abreast of new peace initiatives and ideas. The organisation now consists of an executive (governing body) and structural coordinators representing each functional area of KWP programme activity, which make up the Collective, and Steering Committees. The Steering Committees are made up of traditional leaders and village representatives from the 12 major clans, which report to the Collective. Excluding the executive which is predominantly female, there is an equal representation and participation of men and women members throughout the structure.

KWP has defined the scope and priorities for peacebuilding in Kup. The organisation's primary objective is to reduce conflict and build peace through the cessation of tribal and gun violence. KWP education and awareness-raising about peace and security are based on concepts of co-existence and co-operation, and they involve engaging with groups across the conflict divide. KWP members 'camp out' and have a physical presence on the battlefield, in order to alleviate tensions between the parties, preventing the exchange of gunfire and the onset of a large-scale tribal conflict. Acting in a go-between role, they mediate and open dialogue between the conflicting parties, often filling the gap left by the formal system. As a village court magistrate expresses with some frustration, 'now two tribes in Kup want to fight. The KWP community police have gone to the area and are camping out to stop the fight. Kup police have made no response. The community police are doing the work for nothing while the Kup police are being paid for nothing'.

KWP's peacebuilding agenda, however, is much broader than simply preventing or ending conflict. It seeks to address the structural causes of conflict, and the relationships to other types of violence, such as violence against women, interpersonal violence, and alcohol abuse. KWP programming activities include community law and justice, youth mentoring and leadership, sustainable livelihoods, HIV care and counselling, and community health, including water and sanitation and curriculum development in schools.

### Leading peacebuilding: KWP's gendered approach

Integral to KWP's agenda has been the inclusion of gender issues and challenging gender inequalities in peacebuilding. Mary Kini, an executive member of KWP, recognises that sustainable peace means the full participation of women. She told me, 'because of this we have attempted to mobilise women at all stages of the peacebuilding process'. All of KWP's peacebuilding work integrates gender issues,

in order to challenge the power imbalances between men and women in Kup society, and to promote the development of the whole community, including women and girls.

Tackling violence against women is an essential element to long-term security and development, particularly in Kup, where violence was a way of life for over two decades. KWP organises workshops and campaigns, and conducts training and community education to raise awareness of the existence and unacceptability of this violence, to increase respect and awareness of human rights, and to reduce women's rights violations. Violence is discussed more openly than it used to be, in terms of its physical, mental, and emotional impact on women and men, their children, and on the community as a whole. Issues relating to violence against women are specifically targeted by KWP in the 16 Days of Activism in Papua New Guinea, a yearly awareness-raising campaign against violence and promoting women's rights.<sup>2</sup>

KWP has an expanded notion of security to include justice, good governance, and access to services. It works with institutions to help them integrate a commitment to gender equality into all structures, policies, and procedures that govern conflict. It conducts gender and human-rights training for KWP community police and community justice committees, the Royal PNG Constabulary, village court magistrates, and village councillors. Due to the heightened awareness in Kup of violence against women as a human rights violation, village court magistrates now request KWP to assist in the mediation of relevant cases. KWP advocacy is also currently targeting male dominance of the village court system, and is seeking the nomination and recruitment of women as village court magistrates. KWP also negotiates with the government for communities to receive basic social services. The re-establishment of services is used to reinforce community unity and to increase the prospect of long-term security and development.

## National elections 2007

During previous elections in Simbu Province, corrupt election practices contributed to serious outbreaks of violence and gun crime (Standish 1989, 1996; Dika 2003). This resulted in the deterioration of basic services, the destruction of property, and restrictions on movement (Dika 2003). In Kup itself, interviewees described widespread voter intimidation, and pressure on women not to vote, often occurring before polling day, or before women reached the polling booth. If a woman did vote, her vote was often not cast independently: a husband would 'help' his wife, even when she did not require assistance. Angela Apa, President of KWP, explained further, 'more often, women were not present during voting, fearing the use of weapons, or violence erupting between rival supporters. Voting day was seen as the business of youth. Young men carried guns out in the open and attempted to control polling activities'.

All KWP executives interviewed expressed concern at the many firearms they observed in Kup during previous election campaign and polling periods. Violence between supporters of rival candidates in Kup erupted during the 1997 and 2002 elections. Interviewees' accounts are similar to descriptions of illegitimate election practices that occurred in other parts of Simbu (Standish 1989, 2002), with violence fuelled by the unfair distribution and bulk completion of ballot papers, vote-splitting, ballot papers being stolen or destroyed, restrictions on campaign activities, and inappropriate polling locations.

During the 2007 national elections, KWP took a leading role to improve the validity of the electoral process, and in turn create conditions for peace. Its aim was not simply to police the elections, but to take practical steps to ensure a free and fair process for men and women equally. KWP used a three-pronged strategy to achieve this: voter education activities, the launch of a programme focusing on improving livelihoods, and a Violence-free Election Campaign advocacy project. Due to reasons of space in this article, we focus here on the first and third of these activities.

### *Voter education*

Voter education was conducted over a two-week period, throughout the entire Kup sub-district. It covered issues including the electoral system (Limited Preferential Voting);<sup>3</sup> the purpose and process of the election and political representation; voters' rights; and education encouraging people to think about and define what makes a good leader.

In Kup, as outlined above, political discussions and voting had previously been considered the domain of men. To overcome this, KWP conducted a mobile voter-awareness and education campaign, reaching men and women equally. The campaign was conducted in 28 villages, covering at least three-quarters of the population.

Posters and pictures, as well as written material, were used, pitched at various literacy levels. Specific material was designed for women, explaining their right to vote and how the electoral and democratic process works to achieve this. One male participant recalled his new awareness of women's right to vote: 'in past elections we had ignored the rights of women, but it was time to let women vote'. Many education activities occurred at night. This strategy allowed women, who had completed their work for the day, time to attend and participate alongside men. Discussing this strategy more generally, Agnes Sil, a KWP executive member, explained that: 'spending time with people, visiting them in their own house, is how we do our work. That way both men and women can get to know us, trust us, understand and respect our work. Then they feel free to discuss the issues with us'.

### *Violence-free Election Campaign advocacy project*

This strategy was more direct in its targeting of political candidates. In conjunction with the launching of the Livelihoods Programme, KWP began advocating for a 'Violence-free Election 2007'.

The electoral candidates who were attending the Livelihoods Programme launch were confronted with a request to commit themselves to a violence-free election, and sign an agreement in public, stating they would not provide guns to young people, or encourage violence. Of the 14 candidates invited, 11 attended. All signed the agreement, and gave assurances that they would support a violence-free and gun-free election. Of the three that did not attend, one shot and killed a man in Kup in an election-related dispute, and a second candidate tried to intimidate polling officials prior to the distribution of ballot papers to polling booths in Kup Station.

### **KWP control of the polling day**

KWP also adopted a leadership role on the polling day itself. Members were able to use innovative – and sometimes unconventional – practices, to ensure a valid political process and fair outcome in the sub-district. For example, at great personal risk, two KWP members guarded the ballot papers the night prior to the election, to reduce the chance of the papers being stolen or signed. Interviewees recall how the candidates and their supporters believed the papers were being held by the Presiding Officer, and surrounded his house the entire evening. In addition, when sorting the papers according to ballot stations, a candidate attempted to intimidate the KWP members and the Presiding Officer to reduce the number of voting stations in the Kup Station area from three to one. Mary Kini and Agnes Sil, who were present at the time, described how they refused to give in to his demands, reinforcing the need to follow due process, and confident that they too were from Kup, with their own clan affiliation and network to support their instructions.

KWP lead the operation of the polling stations throughout the sub-district, and KWP members, including community police and peace mediators, were in attendance at every polling station. Voters were given privacy to vote. Separate lines were established for women and men, so men could not push or intimidate women from the line. There was equal participation of male and female voters. If a man voted, a woman would follow, and tally sheets were used to guide this. If the tally sheets showed the number of men was ahead by five, five women were asked to come forward to vote.

Because KWP members were from the community, it was difficult to double vote. They were able to recognise every voter, knew their clan affiliation, and identified who had to be monitored as a security threat. If someone attempted to double-vote, they were immediately reprimanded by KWP members, and voting was suspended until

the issue was resolved. Voter education had already emphasised the implications of double-voting, voter intimidation, and denying the voting rights of women. Voters were reminded that if these practices occurred, all of the ballot papers from the polling station would be disqualified. Satisfied with what was seen as a legitimate and locally controlled voting process, everyone congratulated each other following the signing of the last ballot paper, and voters, candidates, and scrutineers dispersed. The ballot boxes were locked, and, unlike previous elections, no attempts were made by rival supporters to seize them.

Widespread voter education, combined with a locally respected organisation facilitating polling activities, is seen to have contributed to improvements in voting practices and polling outcomes. As one voter claimed, *'ol mama wok na larim ol wokim long wanem way ol laikim'* ('it is our mothers working so let them do it the way they want to'). Angela Apa explained, 'over the years we have been working we have seen a marked difference in our community. We have respect and when we ran the election they respected us, we gave education, we told them about changes in the law, so they heard it and came to vote peacefully'.

There was no occurrence of tribal fighting in Kup during or following the election period. Not one of the candidates who signed the agreement with KWP was involved in any election-related disputes. No guns were present during voting, and no ballot papers were stolen or signed prior to, or following, polling. There was marked improvement in the representation of female voters. A woman who had voted was excited by the opportunity: 'all these years I have candidates who I liked but I couldn't vote. Now I voted for who I wanted'. In previous elections, women had prepared to flee from Kup, should fighting erupt. The wife of a KWP member said that this year, 'as mothers, we were relieved of our burden. We didn't have to run away. There was no violence. There were no houses burnt down as in other years'. This was in stark contrast to surrounding districts, which were devastated as a result of post-election violence. Thousands of people were internally displaced, while villages were razed, and crops and livestock destroyed.

Voter education, combined with the Livelihoods Programme, which provided male youth with an alternative to violent election-related activities, was seen by KWP members who live throughout the sub-district as imperative to preventing candidates from encouraging or sustaining conflict. For example, a candidate campaigning in Kup complained about the lack of respect shown to him as, compared with previous years, there was a noticeable reduction in the number of people who had gathered to hear his campaign speech. This was an indication of the population being more discerning about its political choices.

KWP appears to have gained confidence and felt immense pride in its success. The peaceful and well-run election was seen by Mary Kini as a 'dream come true, and the first of its kind in Kup history'. The positive outcome of the election resulted in female executive members of KWP being approached to stand for the next election, a

move that had 'never happened in the history of Kup'. In the 2012 elections, we may see the transformation of the status of women in Kup society culminate with the nomination of Kup's first female political candidate.

This is not to say that election-related problems did not arise. As mentioned above, one of the candidates who did not sign the non-violence agreement with KWP shot and killed a man which, in the past, would have been a trigger of tribal warfare. Instead, the relatives of the candidate attempted to arrest him, claiming that 'he hadn't listened to the advice of KWP'. Although the candidate escaped, KWP was asked by the relatives of the candidate to intervene and mediate the dispute. As a result, the community remained relatively peaceful. It appears that the work of KWP has led to a comparative stability in Kup, and attempts are made to resolve new disputes without resort to violence.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how a real shift in mindsets about violence, peacebuilding, and the role of democratic elections has been closely connected to a second shift in perceptions about women and their roles in the Kup sub-district. Working alongside formal and traditional structures, KWP has played an important leadership role in changing the way the community analyses and defines peace and security. This is evident from the role KWP played during the 2007 national elections to ensure a free, fair, and peaceful political process in Kup.

The women of KWP have invested highly in preventing and stopping conflict, and are motivated to protect their children and ensure security for their families. The activities of these women and other female peace-makers demonstrate their political and leadership abilities, just as they enable women to develop ideals of the ways in which they want their society to improve and change.

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## Notes

- 1 Bougainville is the largest of a group of islands in the eastern-most part of Papua New Guinea, with an estimated population of 150,000 people. The conflict on Bougainville began in 1989 with a dispute over the earnings and environmental damage from a large

- Australian-owned copper mine. The issue became a focus for demands for independence from Papua New Guinea. An estimated 20,000 died in the ten-year conflict which also resulted in the destruction of the island's economic and social infrastructures.
- 2 The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence is an international campaign that was initiated in 1991. It is used as a strategy by women's groups to raise awareness about gender-based violence as a human-rights issue and as a collective call for the elimination of violence against women. The 16 Days runs from 25 November, International Day Against Violence Against Women, to 10 December, International Human Rights Day, highlighting the link between violence against women and human rights, and that such violence is a violation of human rights.
  - 3 The 2007 elections for the national parliament of Papua New Guinea used the limited preferential voting system. This system requires the voter to make three choices of candidates. For a candidate to be elected under the LPV system, they must receive more than 50 per cent + 1 of the total formal votes cast in the election to gain an absolute majority (PNG Electoral Commission 2008).

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