



Deepening Men's Engagement with Supporting Women in Leadership

Part 2: Approaches for Male Allyship in Bougainville

Mercy Masta

DOI: 10.25911/MNS9-RG96
24 September 2024

In the three decades since the 1995 [Beijing Declaration](#), the importance of men's allyship in advancing gender equality has gained prominence worldwide. Despite this, the engagement of males in gender equality programs in the Pacific region remains limited. A significant gap also persists in the availability of practical guidance for individuals and organisations seeking to engage with men in transforming their attitudes and behaviour. Although there is no extensive research available on the effects of involving men and boys in regional efforts, recent studies have explored successful methods for engaging men in promoting women's leadership (Masta et al. 2023).

This is the second instalment of a two-part In Brief series drawing on the authors' doctoral research conducted in Melanesia between 2016 and 2019. Part one discusses how men are essential to women's leadership success in the Pacific, especially in elections. However, shifting men, particularly those with societal privileges, from passive supporters to active advocates or allies for women's social justice can be challenging. In this piece, I explore effective strategies for engaging men in supporting women's leadership and combating violence, drawing on interviews with male allies from the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation (NCfR) in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. I observe NCfR as a model of successful approaches to fostering male allyship and advancing gender equality by selecting allies, providing training and dedicating spaces for men.

Transitioning men from supporters to allies

Being an ally involves more than just offering support; it requires active engagement and commitment. Allies are individuals from the dominant group who actively work to eliminate prejudice in their personal and professional lives, willingly giving up social privileges associated with their group status by supporting non-dominant groups (Brown and Ostrove 2013). Male allies for gender equality help provide a space, voice and recognition for women in the workplace, community and family.

Despite progress in engaging men in gender equality efforts, there is still a lack of focus on targeted approaches that challenge harmful gender and societal norms among men. Such norms significantly influence whether women's economic or political empowerment can lead to broader empowerment. These norms restrict women and hinder

their ability to demonstrate effective agency, often limiting their mobility and determining where they are permitted to go. Alexander-Scott et al. (2016) emphasise that gender-transformative approaches should explicitly address norms related to gender power and violence, as well as broader attitudes and values about what it means to be a 'real' man or woman. Having men involved in women's projects does not translate as allyship if men are not effectively addressing norms that perpetuate gender inequality.

A Bougainville organisation, NCfR, has gone a step further by engaging men as women's human rights defenders (WHRD), that is, individuals who work to promote and protect women's rights as human rights. The next section discusses effective approaches undertaken by NCfR to engage men in the communities in which they work.

A demonstration of men's allyship in the Bougainville context

Women played a pivotal role in concluding the 10-year [Bougainville crisis](#) (1989 to 1998) by actively engaging in the peace process both during and after it. They established and led local organisations like the NCfR to address crisis-related challenges. They also led efforts to educate others about their rights and spearheaded peace-building efforts, leveraging their influence within Bougainville's matrilineal systems (Saovana-Spriggs 2007). Despite women's prominent role in peace initiatives, escalating rates of community and gender violence underscore the urgent need to bolster support for women and their organisations in addressing harmful gender and societal norms, including fostering collaboration with men.

Engaging men as allies is widely recognised by scholars and development practitioners as pivotal to enhancing their involvement in gender equality efforts. According to Flood (2020), men are interested in supporting progress for women, and the best people to engage and work with men are other men. Those who have influence and authority can serve as crucial role models for other men. Equally important is the joint effort by men and women to implement these programs. Emphasising the significance of integrating with established societal relational structures, a male ally states:

Men and women work together to achieve certain family and community goals. So, when we [male

advocates and WHRDs] go into communities, we encourage conversations on gender equality and rights through the existing relationships that men have with men and women have with women. Working together demonstrates our support for women. (Masta 2021:161)

Notably, NCfR observes that collaborative efforts between men and women have proven more impactful than programs solely led by women. The success of the NCfR male advocacy program is underscored by the active participation of male advocates alongside WHRDs. The centre's approach is based on the belief that individual men must take responsibility for men's violent actions. Men participating in these groups feel that they are establishing peer networks that encourage and reinforce their commitment to becoming allies for women (Masta 2021).

To foster male allyship, it is crucial to create dedicated spaces for men to learn and reflect on healthy masculinity, alongside women's spaces. Organisations should involve men in examining masculinity and gender norms, and their impact on relationships and inequality. Encouraging men to understand their role in promoting gender equality can inspire allyship.

The NCfR offers men's hubs — drop-in centres designed to be safe spaces for men to unpack and address the underlying causes of violent and unequal attitudes. These hubs provide sensitisation training on women's rights and counselling for men, and work towards rehabilitating male perpetrators of violence within families and communities. Men engage with NCfR's trained male advocates to openly discuss personal stories relating to harmful behaviours and commit to challenging them. Says one participant:

When we [men] are together, we are rejuvenated. After these meetings we feel empowered in our knowledge and understanding of our [personal] situations, we come back stronger, and we find strength to continue doing what we are doing [advocating for women's rights]. (Masta 2021:143–44)

Effective training methods build men's knowledge, engage their emotions and develop their allyship skills (Masta et al. 2023). Culturally recognised practices in the Pacific like *talanoa* (dialogue) or *tokstori* (storytelling) also effectively engage men in discussions through openness, mutual respect and sharing.

Conclusion

In the journey towards advancing gender equality, it is

evident that concerted efforts are required to engage men effectively. The NCfR in Bougainville exemplifies successful strategies for engaging men as allies in promoting women's leadership and addressing gender-based violence. By selecting male allies, providing safe spaces, offering training and counselling and fostering peer support networks, NCfR's men's hubs empower men to take responsibility for their actions and become allies for gender equality.

Moving forward, it is crucial for women's organisations and communities to continue acknowledging and supporting men's roles in promoting gender equality. By providing dedicated spaces for men's learning and growth, encouraging critical reflection on gender norms and fostering collaborative efforts, we can inspire more men to become allies and actively contribute to advancing gender equality and women's leadership.

Author notes

Mercy Masta is a Research Fellow with the Department of Pacific Affairs at ANU.

References

- Alexander-Scott, M., E. Bell and J. Holden 2016. *DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. London: VAWG Helpdesk.
- Brown, K.T. and J.M. Ostrove 2013. What Does It Mean to Be an Ally? The Perception of Allies from the Perspective of People of Colour. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43(11):2211–22.
- Flood, M. 2020. Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention. In L. Gottzén, M. Bjørnholt and F. Boonzaier (eds). *Men, Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence*. London: Routledge, 155–69.
- Masta, M.N. 2021. Pacific Masculinities: Exploring Men's Perspectives and Experiences of Masculinity, and Efforts to Engage Men and Boys in Preventing Violence in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. PhD thesis, RMIT University.
- Masta, M., S. Garap, S. Ford, E. Jackson and A. Gyles 2023. *Approaches to Engaging Men in Support of Women's Leadership in the Pacific*. Women Leading and Influencing.
- Saovana-Spriggs, R.V. 2007. Gender and Peace: Bougainvillean Women, Matriliney, and the Peace Process. PhD thesis, ANU.



Pacific Research Program An Initiative of the Australian Aid Program



Australian
National
University

Department of
Pacific Affairs

Development
Policy Centre

**LOWY
INSTITUTE**

The **Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA)** is the leading international centre for applied multidisciplinary research and analysis concerning contemporary state, society and governance in the Pacific. DPA acknowledges the Australian Government's support for the production of the In Brief series. The views, findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Australian National University or the Australian Government. The Australian Government, as represented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), does not guarantee, and accepts no legal liability whatsoever, arising from, or connected to, the accuracy, reliability, currency or completeness of any information herein. This publication, which may include the views or recommendations of third parties, has been created independently of DFAT and is not intended to be, nor should it be, viewed as reflecting the views of DFAT, or indicative of its commitment to a particular course or courses of action.

dpa@anu.edu.au

bellschool.anu.edu.au/dpa

[DepartmentofPacificAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/DepartmentofPacificAffairs)
 [@anudpa](https://twitter.com/anudpa)

[DepartmentofPacificAffairs](https://www.linkedin.com/company/DepartmentofPacificAffairs)

ISSN 2209-9557 (Print)

ISSN 2209-9549 (Online)