

Women Shaping the Future

INA Focus: Ume Wainetti and her colleagues with FSVAC wrote: -

International Women's Day

In 1977 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution inviting Member States to proclaim a UN Day for Women's Rights and International Peace. Since then, 8th March 8th has been observed as International Women's Day. The purpose of this day is to recognize that securing peace, social progress and full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms requires active participation, equality and development of women; and acknowledging women's contribution to strengthening international peace and security.

For the women of the world, the symbolism of International Women's Day has wider meaning: It is an occasion to review how far women have come in their struggle for equality, peace and development. It is also an opportunity to unite, network and mobilise for meaningful change, regardless of ethnicity, language, culture, economic and political differences.

As we assess the many challenges and struggles PNG women encounter on the eve of IWD, we must take stock of our achievements and determine the way forward.

In 1975 (upon Independence), Dawa Solomon represented PNG at the UN International Women's conference in Mexico. Upon her return the government organised a national women's conference with the National Council of Women being formed. The Women's Division was then established, headed by Jessie Piliwas, as secretariat to NCW. Women's officer positions were created simultaneously in the public service in all provinces.

PNG's National Council of Women (NCW) was a mechanism empowering women to participate in forums to address gender-related issues, including through Provincial Councils of Women. Churches also realigned their focus, including women fellowships to advocate women and gender related issues within church circles and their periphery.

Today we take time to recognise the contributions of Late Dame Rosa Tokiel, first President for NCW, Late Monica Gari -Vice President-Momase, Gima Kalo – Vice president-Papua, Late Anakapu, Vice President Highlands and Apolonia Scocel, Vice President-New Guinea Islands, Tamo Diro, Louis Aitsi and many other women who have gone before us to challenge embedded cultural ideologies and status quo to make these achievements possible. We also acknowledge male leaders who played an import role to achieve these goals. The *NCW Act 1977* was drafted by Late Sir Buri Kidu and presented to Parliament by Steven Tago as a Private Members Bill. John Noel provided technical assistance to women's advisors in the Prime Minster Department.

The Government then declared March 24 as National Women's Day. This day was declared to enable the whole country to acknowledge women's contribution towards nation building – not just as mothers, but in all other areas where women contribute – subsistence gardening, fishing, all other monetary and non-monetary activities.

Our Constitution (National Goals and Directive Principles) recognises women as equal partners in nation building. Although women so far have fared poorly in parliamentary Elections, the Organic Law on the Provincial and Local Level Government allows women's representation in Provincial Executive Councils. The Autonomous Bougainville Government includes 3 women's seats (including a Minister and Deputy

Speaker). Recent discussion by government to have 4 women representatives in Parliament is tokenism; the current 19 regional seats should be women's seats, but must be properly contested.

The National Government has ratified international conventions articulating rights of women and children e.g. PNG has unreservedly signed the Conventions on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and on the Rights of a Child (CRC).

Opportunities are given to women in some fields of education, training, scholarships, with many performing extremely well, but girls are disproportionately dropping out of primary education, with a major drop-off in entries to secondary and tertiary levels. Nevertheless, increased numbers of women are enrolling at tertiary institutions. Women today are entering professions traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering, technicians, mechanics, and pilots and (generally) enjoying similar employment benefits as men. A significant number of women are now in senior professional and managerial positions in public and private sectors; many highly regarded for their professionalism and service commitment.

Despite these achievements, the majority of women in PNG remain marginalized. PNG has the highest illiterate female population in the Pacific, more of our women die at child birth, women must still walk long distances for clean water (if there is any), or reach the nearest clinic, are unable to access legal protection and family planning, whilst (misguided) cultural practices prevail locally justifying torturing and murdering of women as sorcerers, and (with children) suffer totally unacceptable levels of violence. Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee's (FSVAC) data in 2006 shows that:

- The highest percentage of offenders reported is in the age bracket of 31-40 years (62.5%), whilst the highest percentage of victims fall in the age bracket of 21 – 30 age bracket.
- 68.6% of victims of reported cases are married, and an extraordinary 88.3% of recorded offenders married.
- Secondary educational level accounted for the highest of all reported cases, both as victims and offenders, with 38.4% and 36.5% respectively.
- From the 594 cases of violence registered, 530 (88%) occurred at home(s).

International Women's Day's theme this year is 'Women Shaping the Future'. This embraces the perpetual struggles of women for a society entailing equality, fairness and justice for women in every facet of life (decision making, political and economic empowerment); shaping the future, leaving a legacy where our sons and daughters make decisions on an equal footing, where fairness, justice, ingenuity and social harmony prevail, and violence gone from PNG. This is what women in this country strive to achieve.

Part of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's message for 2007 International Women's Day read "what is needed is positive, concrete change that will give more power and confidence to women and girls, and transform relations between women and men at all levels of society. Changes that will strengthen legal protection of women's property and inheritance rights, and ensure they have full access to prevention options -- including use of contraceptives. Change that makes men assume their responsibility - whether ensuring their daughters get an education; abstaining from sexual behaviour that puts others at risk; forgoing relations with girls and very young women; or understanding that, when it comes to violence against women, there are no grounds for tolerance and no tolerable excuses".

Shaping a future requires stupendous leadership from all levels of government and civil society, including private sector.

It was refreshing to hear, Police Commissioner, Gari Baki issuing a stern message to the nation last December condemning violence against women. He was adamant in addressing family and sexual violence in PNG, issuing a circular to all ranks of the constabulary to severely prosecute those committing such crimes, including policemen who abuse their wives.

Prime Minister Somare has expressed frustration and remorse over violence against women, including over reports of senior officials perpetrating such abuse. He echoed the need to shift mindset and attitudes in PNG. Health Minister, Sasa Zibe, similarly called on all men to refrain from committing horrific crime against women and girls and called for those responsible to face full force of law. He sought provision of information into all villages on laws and rights of women and local and district court systems, for awareness and enforcement at all levels. Meanwhile, Archbishop Brian Barnes expressed strong disappointment over Parliament's inadequate response to the petition regarding violence against women presented by Minister Carol Kidu. He highlighted that churches perform a crucial role supporting families to be strong on moral principles.

Whilst varying in emphasis, the sentiments expressed by these high profile citizens present a shared wisdom of creating a safe and secure society for women and shaping a future where equality, fairness and justice prevail.

The findings of two reviews, presented in a workshop last week, help identify challenges; the regional review (assessing practices in addressing violence against women in Melanesia and East Timor) and the national team reviewing FSVAC's Integrated Long Term Strategy. The challenges highlighted are:

- Marked absence of government support in addressing women's issues;
- Deficiency in legislative and legal Process – undermining women's access to justice;
- Substantial lack of capacity within organizations supporting gender and human rights issues; and
- Lack of strong and coordinated women's leadership.

These challenges are not exhaustive but require robust and collaborative effort. Government must take more initiative and ownership of addressing violence against women. Whilst the Prime Minister publicly condemns violence, including against women, expressing deep remorse for survivors and families, he must translate his conviction into action, including real support for organizations fighting the battle.

A National Response Framework

Whilst observing International Women's Day on "shaping the future", it is imperative for stakeholders to establish a national response framework to address effectively all forms of violence against women and children in PNG, starting in 2008.

FSVAC is the national peak-body enabling wider consultation amongst government agencies, development partners, civil society organisations and other stakeholders to foster concerted and sustained effort to halt this continuing blight on PNG society.