

Honouring our sister, Agnes Titus

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Agnes Titus (third from the right, back row) presenting the 'Beneath Paradise' initiative to a global audience at the NGO Forum of the UN 4th World Conference on Women, Huairou, Beijing, 1995

Photo Credit: Supplied

In July, we lost an esteemed elder of the women's movement of Bougainville, PNG and the Pacific. Agnes Titus from Nissan Island, Bougainville, was well known and widely respected. She was a wonderful human being who served her people, and particularly the women and girls of Bougainville, for 50 challenging years. Her story is integral to Bougainville's history.

Agnes completed Year 12 at Sogeri National High School in 1973, in the lead up to PNG's Independence. By 1974 she was employed as social welfare officer for Bougainville Copper Limited. Her job was focused on wives of expatriate mineworkers, sensitising them to Bougainville culture and cuisine and to cross-cultural relationships.

During that first post-independence decade, Agnes cultivated the local women's movement, as founding president and a popular educator for the then Bougainville Provincial Council of Women. She was on the mailing list of the Women's Tribune Newsletter, a global quarterly of the UN Decade For Women (1975-1985) that translated the issues and actions of the global women's movement into guidance for fieldworkers like Agnes, helping to localise the global struggle for gender equality and women's human rights.

Agnes' smart leadership was noticed in the emerging Pacific women's movement and its networks. By 1985, she was a sponsored delegate to the parallel NGO Forum at the 3rd UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, where she enthusiastically participated alongside 14,000 representatives of women's NGOs from around the world.

When the Bougainville conflict erupted and the mine closed, Agnes quickly turned to addressing the trauma of what became a decade-long civil war. In 1992, She established Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (LNWDA) with her

teacher friend, Helen Hakena. LNWDA was the first NGO to document, analyse and address the gendered impact of conflict — internal displacement, loss and destruction, and conflict-related sexual violence.

Agnes and Helen attended the first Regional Meetings of the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre in the early 1990s. Thereafter, they became active members of the Pacific Network against Violence against Women. They set up the first women's crisis services in Bougainville.

In 1994, well before email and the internet were widely used, LNWDA joined a loose collective with 13 other Pacific women's NGOs. Under the banner of the Beneath Paradise initiative, local knowledge was transcribed and translated, published and then presented to a global audience at the NGO Forum of the 4th UN World Conference on Women in Beijing — Agnes was, once again, a delegate to this global event for gender equality. While in Beijing, Agnes and Helen presented a moving account of the gendered impact of Bougainville's civil war to a large, global audience.

Agnes and Helen spent two decades building and leveraging their regional and global women's networks. They devised and honed a range of home-grown strategies to mount a women-led countervailing force against the conflict and violence. They tackled the issues of guns and home brew. They worked tirelessly to support Bougainville women to find and sharpen their collective voice and agency — speaking out against the long years of the war, violence, destruction and trauma. They devised smart ways to pass messages through roadblocks and across church networks, to reach women across Bougainville's fighting factions, then engage them in large, galvanising women's gatherings for peace. They broadcast a weekly radio program to comfort suffering women and families but also to reach young male combatants. They prepared and submitted massive petitions to national and global leaders including the then UN Secretary general, Kofi Annan.

LNWDA also worked with Bougainville's armed youth, sensitising them to the suffering and loss of women and girls. Most significantly, LNWDA collaborated with Sister Lorraine Garasu and the Catholic Church, finally convincing large numbers of youth to start laying down their weapons.

Agnes, Helen and Sister Lorraine were courageous Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD), risking their lives and devising a home-grown Women, Peace and Security (WPS) strategy, long before brave women worldwide were recognised as engaged in selfless, life-risking action in defence of others' rights.

Agnes and her "sister WHRDs" prepared the ground for UN Peace Monitors and

many other organisations to enter Bougainville to work for lasting peace and reconstruction. Agnes was appointed women's representative to the Bougainville Interim Government and lobbied tirelessly for women to participate directly in peacemaking negotiations. These "sisters in the struggle", ensured Bougainville's Constitution included three reserved seats for women.

In 2010, UN Women (Pacific) recruited Agnes to establish its presence and programs in Bougainville in very basic, under-resourced conditions. In 2011, Agnes and Helen actively participated in the UN Women Working Group on WPS in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2012, Agnes participated in a groundbreaking, global consultation on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 30 on WPS.

After completing five years with the UN, Agnes joined another female-led NGO — the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation (NCfR), founded by Sister Lorraine to offer trauma counselling and healing across Bougainville society. As NCfR's Advocacy Coordinator, Agnes worked at all levels of Bougainville society. She and Sister Lorraine offered guidance and training to people tasked with establishing the mandatory Family and Sexual Violence Unit at local police stations and the Family Support Centre at the main hospital.

Agnes also continued her work to localise the global WPS agenda, based on UN Security Council Resolution 1325. She was a first responder and negotiator in Bougainville's shocking cases of Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV) in recent years. She led meetings and consultations to push for protection of women and girls and their inclusion in decision-making. Agnes firmly believed that more women are needed in the Bougainville House of Representatives and in Community Governments. She encouraged women to stand against men in elections by her own example, when she stood for her home seat of Nissan in 2017.

In 2019, PNG held a referendum on Bougainville's' future — greater autonomy within Papua New Guinea or full independence. Agnes enthusiastically relayed the overwhelming result (98.7%) in favour of full independence to her Pacific networks.

Agnes continued to travel and work even after experiencing symptoms of diabetes. In 2022, she had one leg amputated. Just a few months ago, in early 2025, Agnes participated (from a wheelchair and with failing vision) in reviews of Bougainville's report on progress made in advancing gender equality to the UN CEDAW Committee.

There are few women leaders in Bougainville or PNG who have worked so consistently for local development for 50 years, effectively connected with and

informed by the global women's movement and tirelessly advocating for her people and her society.

Throughout the decades, with all her knowledge, experience and skills, Agnes remained humble, hardworking, smiling and quietly achieving. Agnes's smart and sometimes wicked sense of humour, and her contagious laugh, sustained the morale of colleagues through their many years of groundbreaking work and stayed with her till the end.

This is what we the co-authors, and Agnes's former colleagues, knew and respected, as we worked alongside her and thereafter stayed in touch. Yet we know that this is only half of Agnes's story, and that there was so much more to be shared including her deep spiritual commitment, important leadership in the Catholic Church, and effectiveness in negotiations with Bougainville's planners, policy-makers and leaders toward gender-just governance of a fully independent Bougainville.

It is our hope that one of Agnes's close colleagues will step up and lead the writing of a book documenting her story.

Author/s:

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Helen Hakena is co-founder of Bougainville NGO Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (LNWDA). Helen led LNWDA for three decades and now continues to work with the vast Catholic Women's Network towards equality, inclusive development and lasting peace.

Julie Bukikun

Julie Bukikun was formerly Head of the UN Women office in PNG/Bougainville, Assistant Resident Representative of UNDP PNG and worked for Pacific Women Lead. She is currently the Regional Coordination Specialist for the UN in the Pacific Region, based in Suva.

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Elizabeth (Sabet) Cox was formerly an NGO worker, PNG/Pacific Program Manager for Oxfam, IWDA and Save the Children, and Pacific Regional Director of UN Women. She now sits of the Board of Dawn, undertakes occasional research and is an active, remote colleague and technical supporter of women-led NGOs in rural PNG.

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