

Gender Equality Theology and Essentialism: Catholic Responses to Gender-Based Violence and Inequality in Papua New Guinea

Anna-Karina Hermkens
Macquarie University

Roselyne Kenneth
Independent Scholar

Kylie McKenna
*University of
 Technology Sydney*

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how Christianity, and in particular Catholicism, is deployed in response to gender-based violence (GBV) in Papua New Guinea. It provides insights into the various ways the Catholic community, Church, and its clergy respond to and manage GBV. Focusing on a case study in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, the article reveals how Gender Equality Theology is used and received to address GBV in this region. What transpires is that despite supporting social change, Gender Equality Theology also advocates a particular status quo by essentialising gender relations, and thereby excluding non-binary gender identifications and relations. The article will discuss this paradox, highlighting the importance of vernacularisation and how despite its conservatism, Gender Equality Theology provides victims, survivors, counselors, and activists with resources to respond to GBV and change gender inequality in the region.

Keywords: Christianity, Catholicism, gender-based violence, gender equality, Papua New Guinea, Autonomous Region of Bougainville.

INTRODUCTION

In his ‘Letter to Women’, Pope John Paul II (1995) acknowledges that throughout history, women have been excluded, ignored, underestimated, mistreated, and violated. Significantly, he refers to history and culture as being crucial factors contributing to women’s structural inequality. While history and culture have certainly impacted women’s social position, particular notions about gender and gender relations are also firmly anchored in the Church’s patriarchal biblical ideology. Catholicism, and religion in general, plays a crucial role in the organisation and reinforcement of particular gender ideologies and relationships. Combined with patriarchy and cultural notions of gender and gender inequality, Christian values and doctrines have had a significant impact on how women have been perceived and treated (for example Ruether 1993), at the same time shaping women’s responses to the abuse they suffer (Brown and Parker 1995:36; Hemer 2019; Hermkens 2008; Manning 1999). Moreover, as we detail later, the Catholic Church has been instrumental in advocating the current anti-gender movement and ideology (Case 2016). At the same time, it has criticized and supported the

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eradication of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and gender inequality. We examine this paradox by exploring Catholic responses to GBV and gender inequality in Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) proclaims itself as a Christian nation.¹ Christian values are part of the Constitution, and a recent proposal to have the Constitution amended to formally declare PNG a Christian country has been approved by the PNG National Executive Council (Oge 2020). But it also has an international reputation for the 'endemic' GBV that is believed to prevail in the country (Independent State of PNG 2016:38; Macintyre 2019:294). Although there are structural problems of underreporting, and limited data on experiences of GBV among men in PNG,² violence against women is identified 'as the most serious human rights problem in the region' (*cf* Biersack and Macintyre 2016; Jolly 2012; Jolly et al. 2012; Macintyre 2019:292). It is important to recognise that forms of GBV are diverse, and there are geographic variations in potential contributing factors. Some scholars have attributed the high level of GBV across PNG more broadly to 'customs', such as persistent attitudes to gendered authority, local 'understandings of gender difference, discipline, and the resort to violence as punishment' (Macintyre 2019:292), and as such 'the acceptance of certain levels of violence' (Hemer 2019:306). However, as also stressed by Macintyre (2019), the underlying factors for the high level of GBV in PNG are much more diverse and complex. Factors include alcohol abuse (Banks 2000:89; Biersack 2016); limited employment opportunities for women and financial dependence, which makes it hard for women to leave abusive situations (Macintyre 2019:292); changes in the practice of brideprice (Eves 2019); the transgression of gender roles and patriarchal authority (Banks 2000:95; Kidu 2000:30; Macintyre 2012); improvement in women's economic situation (Eves et al. 2018:19); witchcraft and sorcery-related violence (Forsyth and Eves 2015); HIV positive status (Lewis et al. 2008; Lusby 2013); and broader social and cultural changes brought by modernity (Eves 2021). In the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB), the widespread GBV, domestic violence, sorcery-related violence, human rights violations, and post-traumatic stress are all issues that are perceived as an enduring impact of the decade-long civil war that took place between 1988 and 1998 (Jewkes et al. 2017; Tonissen 2000).

Significant efforts have been made across PNG institutions to respond, intervene, and attempt to mitigate GBV. The PNG government is a signatory to United Nations conventions and treaties that require implementation of laws that protect human rights, including the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Legislation relevant to GBV was introduced seven years ago, *via* the Family Protection Act 2013 (FPA), and the introduction of family protection orders (FPOs). These civil restraining orders were intended to provide another option of protection for domestic and family violence survivors (Putt and Kanan 2021). Other examples of institutional reform include: the establishment of Family and Sexual Violence Units (FSVUs) across PNG, including two in the ARoB; donor funding for specialist services that focus on victim support; training and awareness raising of key justice stakeholders, and; the Special Parliamentary Committee on GBV in 2020, which held public hearings and publicly released its interim report (Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence 2021).

Despite PNG's commitment towards realising the ideals of gender equality, various reports and statistics highlight the 'significant lack of progress towards realising these commitments and ideals, and the reality of all forms of inequality' (*cf* Anderson 2012a:241; Putt et al. 2019:3). For example, while the issuance of Interim Prevention Orders (IPOs) has increased since 2017, and these orders appear to have improved feelings of short-term safety, the degree of awareness of FPOs and the application process is generally limited (Putt and Kanan 2021:xiii). Applicants thus often appear confused about the process in District Courts, and 'courts are not designed with the safety of court

users in mind...’ (Putt and Kanan 2021:xiv). Additional to concerns regarding community awareness of legislation, there is apprehension about law enforcement capabilities and commitment. There are particular concerns about police attitudes (Putt et al. 2019:3), which has prompted calls for more informed case management (Howes et al. 2017:67). In 2014, Human Rights Watch found that police and prosecutors rarely pursue criminal charges against perpetrators, even in the most serious cases of rape or murder. Too often police were simply ignoring their claims or telling them they should go back to their husbands. ‘Police will tell them “go back and solve it at home”’ (GARRET 2015). This absence of police support was also prevalent in Hermkens’ research on violence against women in Port Moresby and Madang (Hermkens 2008). With law enforcement absent or neglecting women’s dire situations, women facing domestic abuse are often left to resolve the ‘issue’ themselves, or with the help of their Church.

Due to a lack of services available across sectors in PNG for GBV survivors and health-related issues in general, particularly in rural and remote areas (Putt et al. 2019:3), Churches and religious organisations frequently take the lead in providing support and shelter for victims of GBV. Moreover, PNG Churches have been important in promoting women’s rights and ending gender violence, even though this has occurred ‘from a Biblical rather than a secular humanist perspective’ (Biersack and Macintyre 2016:31). This means that discourses about gender equality and human rights are interpreted through Christian ideas about ‘women and men’s common humanity’ (Macintyre 2019:293). Furthermore, foreign aid agencies increasingly partner with local faith-based organizations, which implies ‘that a Christian-inflected understanding that Women’s Rights are Human Rights has currency throughout urban and rural areas’ (Macintyre 2019:293).

In this article, we will provide an overview of the role of the Churches in addressing GBV and gender inequality in PNG. We will focus on Catholic responses to gender inequality by concentrating on the content and use of the ‘Theology of Gender Equality’ document by local agents in local communities. This document was authored by Rev. Dr. Cliff Bird and Rev. Dr. Seforosa Carroll for Uniting World (the Uniting Church in Australia) in cooperation with several members of the PNG Church Partnership Program (CPP). Interested in how the ‘Theology of Gender Equality’ document is used to advocate Gender Equality Theology (GET) in PNG, and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB) in particular, we show how local Catholic organisations, and local female Church and community leaders that are tasked with disseminating GET, interpret and vernacularize its message, thereby highlighting local opinions and voices. Instead of providing a detailed ethnographic account of how GET is appropriated in one particular community, we aim to provide a more general overview of how religious documents like the ‘Theology of Gender Equality’ are constructed, translated, disseminated, and understood.³ In doing so, we emphasise that although Catholicism may at times be at odds with secular western ethics of gender and development interventions, it resonates with Bougainville ethics of motherhood, relationality, and complementarity. As such, our case provides a more complex and nuanced perspective, countering popular and academic understandings that religion normalises gender violence and depresses women’s rights (McPhillips and Page 2021). Instead, we highlight that the translation, or ‘vernacularisation’ (Merry 2006) of women’s rights through a Biblical, rather than a secular humanist perspective (Biersack and Macintyre 2016:31) can be more effective. Coupled with the fact that the reach of the Church far exceeds the reach of the State in PNG, Christian interventions of gender inequality and GBV are more likely to gain wider traction than Government policies. In the following sections, we will delve deeper into the interplay between Christianity and gender inequality, and the role of the PNG churches in combatting GBV, which is followed by our case study of Gender Equality Theology.

GENDER INEQUALITY AND CHRISTIANITY IN PNG: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES

Various socio-economic inequalities and cultural power structures ingrain gender inequality and sustain violence against women in PNG (for example Eves 2019; Eves 2021; Eves et al. 2018; Jolly et al. 2012; Toft and Bonnell 1985). Power structures include a strong emphasis on patriarchy and traditional images of manhood that privilege masculine leadership, hierarchy, discourses, and culture (Eves 2012:2). The introduction of Christianity at the turn of the 20th century, created 'new domesticities and gendered modernities' (Choi and Jolly 2014:xi), thereby adding new layers of gendered value systems in PNG. It has been argued that the first missionaries' gendered approach, and efforts to transform gender norms 'did not displace traditional notions of gender hierarchy, but merely reinscribed them in a different form' (Eves 2012:3).

While in many places in PNG, the gendered power structures that posit men in dominant and women in submissive positions are still in place, changes are happening as well. For example, as argued by Beer (2018:349) 'PNG's middle-class women are responding to new agendas of gender equity and participation set by international views regarding the rights of women' (see also Hemer 2017). As detailed in Spark's work (2017:123) in PNG's capital Port Moresby, urban educated working-class women feel that Christianity promotes gender equity, with no preference for men to take the upper hand. However, in both similar and other settings, Christian women and men may firmly posit the husband as head of the family (Anderson 2012a:239; Eves 2012:4; Hermkens 2008). Beer (2018:349) argues that these contradictions reflect differences between urban and rural settings, leading to tensions between men and women, but also between urban women active in the economic sector, and rural women involved in the subsistence economy. In short, religiosity and piety, as well as cultural and socio-economic factors along with geographical context shape PNG women's and men's understanding of gender and gender equality. In order to address GBV and gender inequality across PNG's diverse socio-cultural and geographical settings, both the Government and international donors have created collaborations with PNG's main Churches. As stated by the PNG Government in its *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence (2016–2025)*:

Churches play a major role in supporting the rollout of provision of Health, Education and Spiritual Development across the nation, but more so in the most remote communities where government services are lacking. The prevention of GBV and the services for survivors of GBV touch upon all interventions provided by churches. Churches have a duty to address family problems, including GBV [...] (Independent State of PNG 2016:41).

THE PNG CHURCH PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM, GBV, AND GENDER EQUALITY

All Churches in PNG strongly object to GBV and advocate for Human Rights (but see Beattie 2014). In fact, they play a central role in 'influencing positive attitudes on gender equality as part of their effort to eliminate gender-based violence (GBV) in Papua New Guinea' (Australian High Commission PNG n.d.). This occurs especially through the Church Partnership Program (CPP), which created the Theology of Gender Equality document. Established in 2004 with help of Australian aid, the CPP unites the seven main-line Churches of PNG (Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, and United Churches). The main goals of the CPP are to 'improve

delivery of basic health and education services across the country, with a focus on five key areas – gender equality and social inclusion, peace and prosperity, disaster risk reduction, education and health’ (Australian High Commission PNG n.d.). Collectively, the CCP covers over 70% of the 95% of Papua New Guineans who identify as Christian’ (Australian High Commission PNG). As such, it has ‘the potential to address cultural barriers to development, particularly development of a Gender Equality Theology (GET), integration of GET into education and theological training curricula, and using GET as a basis for gender mainstreaming’ (Quality and Technical Assurance Group 2019:vii).

Despite the potential outreach of the CPP in combatting GBV and gender inequality, its translation of the international donor ‘gender agenda’ has been problematic. As discussed by Anderson (2012a:244), ‘for all the CPP partners, the “gender agenda” represents a struggle to negotiate the goals, the concepts, the language used, and the practices for achieving those goals’. Gender is ‘an extremely sensitive issue within the churches, and some (male) church leaders are observed as being resistant to “the language that Westerners use about gender”’ (Anderson 2012a:245). As such, the vernacularisation of the international ‘gender agenda’ requires ‘translation of rights and gender into a biblically sensitive language’, while the ‘approach to gender expressed in biblical, faith-based language requires translation for the donor community’ (Anderson 2012a:245). Anderson argues that ‘the processes that shaped local Christianities are also at work in the churches’ translations of the “gender agenda”, and in their role as agents for gender justice’, developing their own approaches to gender work in line with and support of ‘the churches’ mission to “live the Gospel”’ (Anderson 2014:1357). These processes of vernacularisation and translation are further complicated by the fact that the churches within the CPP have diverse and inconsistent views on issues of gender equality and gender violence (Eves 2012:2). Not only are some churches conservative with regards to their views on the proper roles and behaviour of women and men, while others are more flexible and progressive (Anderson 2012a:242), but, as we show below, Church clergy have different views as well.

Both as a CPP member, but also prior to its membership, the Catholic Church ‘has been at the forefront of the churches in responding to domestic violence in Papua New Guinea’ (Eves 2012:4). In 1987, the Catholic Bishops Conference publicly stated that marriage must be a free contract between equals and that violence between marriage partners is unacceptable (Bradley 1990:157–58; Eves 2012:4). Moreover, pastors preparing couples for marriage were directed to instruct both parties that bride-price does not legitimise wife-beating (Bradley 1990:158). The 2006–2010 Catholic Church National Pastoral Plan also contained specific initiatives to address domestic violence, instructing all parishes to adopt ‘protective action strategies in situations of domestic violence as a Christian obligation for all’ (Eves 2012:4). The Pastoral Plan also prescribed that training programs for counseling on domestic violence should reach each parish at least every three years (*ibid*).

Despite CPP outreach and leadership training, as well as Catholic directives and individual advocacy by Catholic clergy, such as Prof. Fr. Philip Gibbs (Gibbs 2012, 2015) and Sr. Lorraine Garasu (in the ARoB), some Catholic Church representatives are still rather conservative. For example, when asked about the view of the Church on gender violence in Lihir (PNG), a Catholic family life teacher stated ‘[...] it was acceptable for a man to “tell off” a woman if it had the basis of teaching her appropriate behaviour. However, if it was extreme verbal harassment or physical violence then it was not acceptable’ (Hemer 2019:306). In the same setting, Hemer observed that the Catholic Church and family life leaders would not encourage or even support women to access services, like safe houses, or to lay charges through the Family Protection Act. Instead, Church leaders

preferred to manage cases locally, ‘and do so through the informal method of counseling couples’ (Hemer 2019:306). Hermkens (2008) experienced a similar situation in Madang, where one of the parish priests encouraged women to stay in abusive relationships, to be patient and submissive, and show forgiveness towards their husbands to maintain their marriage (see also Fig. 1). This shows that the protection of the marriage unit may be the core concern for Church leaders, rather than the protection of individual women (see also Hemer 2019:306).⁴ Moreover, it also reveals how Church clergy draw upon and promote gender essentialism: the notion that gender differences are significant and innate, resulting in different behaviour displayed by men and women, which constitutes their respective roles within the family and society at large. This comes to the fore in how the Theology of Gender Equality has been accepted and promoted across PNG by the Catholic Church in its fight against GBV.

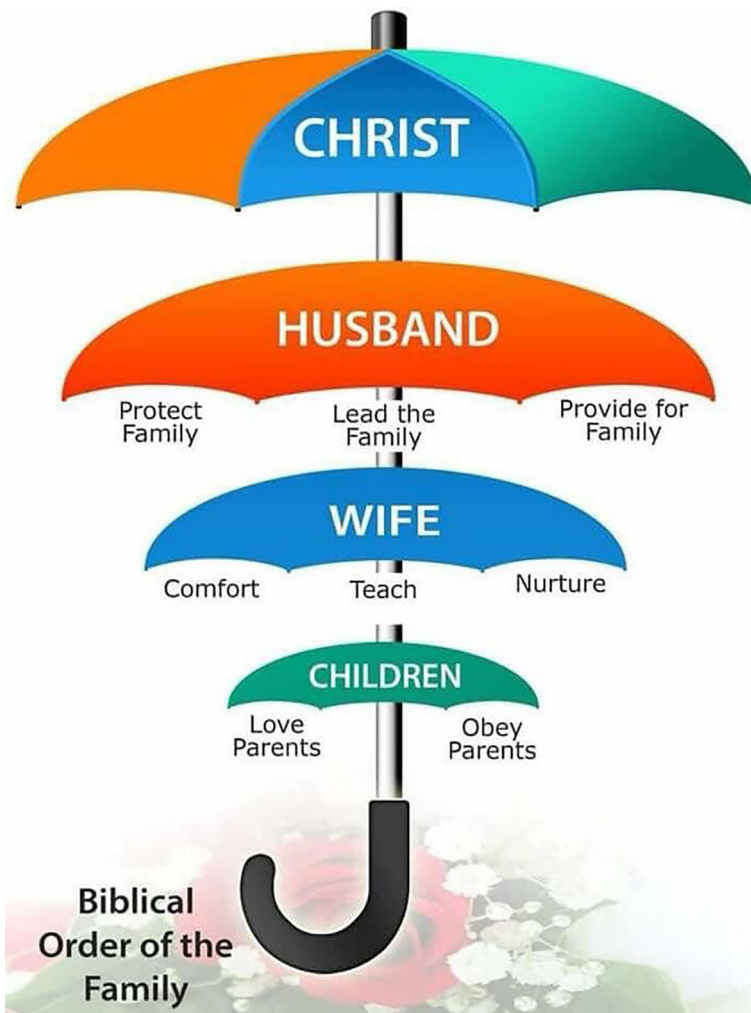


Figure 1: ‘Biblical order of the Family’ posted on an ARoB Catholic Parish Facebook site, 19 November 2019.

THE THEOLOGY OF GENDER EQUALITY

The Theology of Gender Equality document was launched on the first day of the PNG Church Partnership Program (CPP) Forum in the capital of PNG, Port Moresby, in April 2016 (Bird and Carroll 2016). Although the document is authored by Rev Dr. Cliff Bird and Rev Dr. Seforosa Carroll for Uniting World (the Uniting Church in Australia), it was compiled in cooperation with a Theology of Gender Equality Working Committee. This committee consisted of several members of the CPP Church Leaders' Council, as well as the chair of the CPP Gender Committee and the CPP program coordinator. Considering the active involvement of the Catholic Church⁵ and other CPP members, the Gender Equality Theology (GET) promulgated by the 'Theology of Gender Equality' document reflects the common theology and understanding of the seven Partner Churches in PNG. Importantly, the active involvement of the CCP also means that the document is shaped by a Papua New Guinean (Christian) sensibility of what gender and gender equality mean. It is this vision that has been adopted by the PNG churches as their doctrinal position, and what they committed to teaching as part of their ministerial training (Uniting World n.d.). The document also provided the basis for a CPP program titled 'gender strategy', which is to be mainstreamed into all development work in PNG (Bird and Fraser 2017).

Before being introduced in PNG communities, leaders and representatives of the main-line Churches within the CPP were trained in the 'Ten Pillars of Gender Equality' described in the Theology of Gender Equality document, which forms the basis and constitutes the PNG Churches Gender Equality Theology, also referred to as GET, more generally. The ten pillars are meant to 'enable participation and inclusion of both men and women in creating and sustaining communities that reaffirm, respect, and celebrate that being female and male are divine gifts' (Bird and Carroll 2016:2). Facilitating dissemination among the Christian PNG population, the ten doctrinal principles are accompanied by supporting visual material with portraits of PNG people. Shaped by a PNG sensibility, the ten pillars of the GET advocate that:

- (1) Being Human is a Birth Right for all girls, boys, women, and men. According to the Gender Equality Theology, this means that everyone deserves the same and equal privileges and respect;
- (2) Humans are Created in God's Image, which means that God made male and female, which were created both equal and [biologically] different;
- (3) Incarnation affirms our common humanity and the shared humanity of female and male. This pillar shows a banner carried during a rally in Mt Hagen, proclaiming in Jesus' name the area 'free of rape, killings, stealing, violence against women';
- (4) The Gospel affirms human equality, and differences in sex, race, class, disability, age, or religion do not negate this equality in Christ;
- (5) Abundant life (Tok Pisin *gutpela sindaun*). This pillar shows a group of young girls and boys dressed ready for church, highlighting everyone is invited to enter God's kingdom, the abundant life;
- (6) God's kingdom as servanthood. This pillar shows an Anglo-American Bishop with a PNG priest performing Mass. It highlights that serving others 'has the power to transform cultural, institutional and structural injustices';
- (7) Mutuality in Christian Relationships and Marriage, which means that 'both husband and wife submit to each other as unto the Lord. Submission affirms valuing each other as total human beings'. This pillar shows a photo of a newlywed PNG woman and man, clad in a white wedding dress and black suit respectively;

- (8) The Gifting by the Holy Spirit is Inclusive, which means that ‘all [both women and men] are blessed with distinct yet equally important fruit and gifts of the Spirit’;
- (9) Empowering the disempowered. This pillar shows a person in a wheelchair, highlighting the need for compassion and empowerment of the most vulnerable;
- (10) Sex and Gender Roles. This pillar is accompanied by a photo showing a PNG woman and men working together creating a *munu*, an earth oven. This pillar states that there ‘are roles that are biologically sex specific to a woman and roles that are biologically sex specific to a man. These roles have to do with, but not confined to, procreation through sexual intercourse’. Although not defining gender, the pillar states that ‘gender roles are assigned by society and/or culture to a woman and to a man. Thus, it is people who construct cultures and gender roles. It is also people who must change cultures that dehumanize and deny certain groups of people their God-given humanity, dignity and equality. It is important to recognize that women, men, girls and boys are equal, yet different in their make up’ (Bird and Carroll 2016).

The previous summary of the ten pillars of the Gender Equality Theology document shows a religious response to growing (secular) national and international programs, policies, and pressures for gender equality (see also Anderson 2012a, 2012b). Significantly, the Theology highlights that the treatment of, and opportunities and rewards for men and women should be equal. At the same time, it states that men and women, and boys and girls are different, albeit the same in God’s eyes. This message is visualised through the accompanying photos portraying the importance of the nuclear family (wife, husband, and children), motherhood, gender roles, and gender behaviour. In doing so, the Theology of Gender Equality clearly sustains gender essentialism: the belief that biological sex is the primary factor in determining gender. Although pillar 10 emphasises that ‘gender roles’ are culturally defined, it does not state that gender is a cultural construct. Instead, it underlines that there are ‘roles’ that are biologically specific to males and females. According to the Theology of Gender Equality, this not only includes procreation through sexual intercourse but also other roles. This statement clearly shows how GET promulgates the notion that biology defines gender, and that both sex and culture define the roles of men and roles of women. By repeatedly emphasizing God created humans as either male or female (pillars 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10), non-binary sexuality is excluded.⁶ As such, GET accommodates Catholic theology and papal teachings that oppose same-sex marriage, and which perceive homosexuality and transgender identities as ‘conditions’ and ‘moral problems’ (Pope John Paul II 1986).

The Catholic Church’s stand on ‘gender as a cultural construct’ comes to the fore in how, together with anti-feminists and others, it has condemned ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender theory’. The Church perceives this ideology to be ‘the logical result of the liberalization of sexual relations and the consequent degradation of gender, sexual identity, marriage and family in the collective consciousness’ (DeMarco n.d.). For the Catholic Church, this liberalization of sexual relations is incompatible with, and detrimental to the Catholic faith and worship of God. As stated by Pope Francis (2016), ‘marriage is the image of God, man and woman in one flesh. When this is destroyed, the image of God is “marred” or distorted’ (Pope Francis 2016). While Pope Francis urged priestly compassion for individuals grappling with their gender identity or sexual orientation, he also strongly rejected the ‘indoctrination of gender theory’ and its ‘ideological colonization’ (Pope Francis 2016). Instead, the Catholic Church calls for ‘a restoration of traditional gender, marriage, family and sexual identity in pursuit of personal healing,

scientific responsibility and social morality' (Pope Francis 2016). This view resonates with general PNG understandings of gender relations, family, and marriage life.

As part of its anti-gender crusade, the Catholic Church came up with a twentieth-century theological invention: the theory of the complementarity of the sexes (Case 2016; Korolczuk 2016). This doctrine outlines that although the sexes are essentially different, they are not unequal. While Pope John Paul II advocated a more classicist viewpoint, defining complementarity as 'to reflect traditional and culturally determined gender roles grounded in the physiological distinction between male and female' (Lawler and Salzman 2015), for Pope Francis complementarity can take many forms. As he stated, 'each man and woman brings his or her distinctive contributions to their marriage and to the formation of their children -- his or her personal richness, personal charisma' (in Lawler and Salzman 2015). Pope Francis perceives complementarity as a dynamic and evolving idea rather than, as he stated, a 'simplistic idea that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single, static pattern' (in Lawler and Salzman 2015). This seems to imply that, unlike his predecessors, Pope Francis acknowledges that change and social reorganization of gender roles are possible, albeit within the limits of God's given attributes to respectively men and women.

The pillars of GET accommodate and disseminate the Catholic Church's doctrine of complementarity and equality between man and woman. As such, GET provides the Catholic Church, as well as other Churches, with a powerful tool and doctrinal discourse to 'fight the evils of liberalism in the realm of human sexuality' (Graff 2016:268), and to embrace sexual complementarity as its theological foundation (Case 2016:156). However, while upholding the pillars of Christian married life and gender essentialism, both GET and the Catholic Church's doctrine of sexual complementarity are also instrumental in advocating for women's rights and gender equality in PNG and the ARoB. While for many feminists equality cannot be achieved with essentialism at its base (for example Witt 1995), for those combatting gender violence and inequality in the ARoB, this paradox does not exist.

GBV AND THE THEOLOGY OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE AROB

Traditionally, the mainly matrilineal societies of Bougainville highly respected women 'as mothers of the land' (Sirivi and Havini 2004).⁷ Women are the custodians of the land, but also the mothers of their lineage's heirlooms, wealth, and sacred knowledge; of their lineage's history; and of their lineage's customary ceremonies (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:10). Among the Nagovisi in Central Bougainville, women traditionally occupied positions of high status, and women's and men's roles, although distinct, were perceived as complementary (Nash 1978:119). In the chiefly matrilineal systems of Buka, where the first settlers of the land have the most influential and highest position, male and female chiefs ideally have equal status (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:15–6). In addition to high status, veto rights over land issues, and performing important ritual- and social roles, the sexual assault of women was unfathomable according to several of our female interlocutors (see also Nash 1990:132).⁸ While this latter perspective needs to be contextualised in current efforts by both women and men to target GBV in Bougainville, it leaves no doubt that colonialism, missionisation, and recent developments have led to the erosion of women's agency and socio-political standing (Hermkens 2011; Nash 1974). Moreover, the devastating decade-long conflict (1988–1998) generated violence against women from both the PNG Defence Force and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), with rape becoming a weapon of war (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:33; Sirivi and Havini 2004). The traumas of the conflict still impact Bougainville people and communities today (see also McKenna 2019:14; McKenna et al. 2020),

with rape and physical and/or sexual partner violence being perceived as an enduring impact of a decade-long civil war (Jewkes et al. 2017; Tonissen 2000).

Rates of violence against women not only increased during the conflict period (Braithwaite 2006), but further undermined 'an equality between men and women' (Nash 1987:151) and the status women previously held according to the various matrilineal systems of descent that dominate the ARoB societies (Eves 2016a:1). For example, a 2017 household survey of 864 men and 879 women living in Bougainville found that 3 in 4 women had experienced the use of violence and beatings by men, 7 in 10 had experienced emotional abuse, and half of the women interviewed had experienced economic abuse (Jewkes et al. 2017:16). Substance abuse, in particular, is thought to have created a vicious post-conflict cycle in the ARoB, whereby alcohol and drugs are used to forget the trauma of the conflict (Eves 2016a), yet further intensifies interpersonal problems (Jewkes et al. 2017:1). Other factors thought to contribute to GBV in Bougainville include: existing negative gender relations (Eves 2016b), poverty, food insecurity, and limited resource mobilization, childhood neglect and abuse, having more sexual partners (Jewkes et al. 2017:20), and women's income-generating activities (Eves et al. 2018).

Since the brokering of the Bougainville peace agreement in 2001 that marks the end of the devastating civil conflict, the Roman Catholic Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation (NCfR) has been one of the most long-standing and important Church-run organisations targeting GBV and other social issues in the ARoB. Under the guidance of acclaimed director Sr. Lorraine Garasu, the NCfR has been a strong advocate for women's rights, reiterating the traditional respect for Bougainville women as mothers, while providing many services, including trauma counseling and legal aid, as well as a variety of training, such as that of the Bougainville Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD).

According to the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), which works with Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Asia and the Pacific to promote women's rights and gender equality, WHRDs advocate for 'reproductive health rights' (including the right to access birth control or the right to make decisions about their bodies), and 'economic rights' (including the right to engage in paid work, the right to own property and the recognition of unpaid domestic work) (IWDA 2019). In PNG and Bougainville, however, the focus of IWDA is on 'promoting women's leadership', 'strengthening women's safety and security', and by creating systemic change 'from the grassroots to shifting laws on women's rights to their land, access to justice and freedom of fear' (IWDA 2019). Despite this narrowed focus on basic human and political rights, women who work as WHRDs in Bougainville (see IWDA 2017; 2018) often experience resistance: '34% reported that men in their communities have tried to stop their work; 42% reported being challenged in public because of their work; and 16% have had someone threaten to hurt them, all because of their work as WHRDs' (IWDA 2019). These statistics illustrate the fragile position of local advocates of gender equality, and the necessity to adjust and translate international discourses to accommodate local values, beliefs, and relationships. The Theology of Gender Equality provides such translation.

In 2016, representatives of Caritas Australia (a Catholic NGO) and the PNG Church Partnership Program visited NCfR for two days and left copies of the Theology of Gender Equality. Since then, under the leadership of Sr. Garasu, the NCfR has been integrating the Theology of Gender Equality into its human rights training and advocacy. Considering the prominent and widely accepted role of the NCfR in promulgating programs across ARoB, this means that Gender Equality Theology has been widely disseminated. According to Sr. Garasu, the implementation of Theology of Gender Equality was 'to address the views from people who think that human rights are not from God' (Interview with Sr Garasu 2020). As expressed by Sr Garasu, the Theology helps people and communities to

understand and realize that women are equal not just in the eyes of God, but as human beings with human rights, and that gender equality is about providing equal opportunities for women and men. It is also used to help keep peace in families, promote respectful communities, and maintain discipline, law and order (Interview with Sr Garasu 2020). According to Sr Garasu and those she has tasked with implementing The Theology of Gender Equality, it is 'very suitable and timely in Bougainville' (Interview with Bernadette and Sr Josephine 2021), as it supports the Project that the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation is currently implementing called 'From Gender-based violence to Gender Justice and Healing'. The theology is disseminated through workshops held at the Nazareth Centre and through the many WHRDs and male advocates trained at the Centre. Talking about GET and explaining its pillars in their local communities, they thereby aim to prevent violence, promote respectful relationships, and maintain peace in families and communities.

TALKING ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY IN THE AROB

Two of the people who are tasked by Sr Garasu to teach communities about GET are Sr Josephine (CSN), and Bernadette, who is a WHRD trained at the Nazareth Centre. They both received their GET training at the NCfR in 2016. As advocates of the NCfR, which is run and directed by women church leaders like Sr. Garasu, these two women likewise articulate the maternal message of the NCfR. They both appreciate the Theology of Gender Equality and the ease with which the pillars are communicated and accepted by the community. According to them, the pillars align very well with Bougainville socio-cultural values, and strengthen and support the Church's teachings on equality and the complementary relationship between men and women, while at the same time, 'the pillars of GET are all progressive because they support the current thinking on gender equality and human rights' (Interview 2021):

Pillar 1 talks about being human is a birthright. When teaching communities about the GET, we cover roles and responsibilities for parents in line with pillar 7 [which states that 'both husband and wife submit to each other as unto the Lord. Submission affirms valuing each other as total human beings']. Questions are raised about when a child's right starts. Is that when a child is conceived or when a child is born after 9 months. Also, what are a child's rights when in the mother's womb? We give the following answer, according to the Catholic faith and biblical perspective, once a child is formed in the mother's womb, the child has all the rights (Interview with Bernadette and Josephine 2021).

This quote exemplifies how human rights are translated and conveyed through a Catholic theological perspective, supporting its anti-abortion premises through human rights vernacular. Similarly, messages about equality are communicated by highlighting the equality of all human beings in God's eyes, while acknowledging that God created men and women differently.

[...] The Theology of Gender Equality teaches us that we are all equal in the eyes of God, including those with a disability. As long as you are a human being, you are equal with the others in God's eyes. This means we have to respect each other. It is good that the Theology of Gender Equality has an impact on the community. Small family groups like my neighbours are also referring to the pillars. You will hear them say: 'Yes pillar 6, or 7 of the Theology of Gender Equality reminds us of God's Kingdom as servanthood and Mutuality in Christian Relationship and

Marriage'. The Theology of Gender Equality is a very powerful tool to get equality messages across our communities (Interview with Bernadette 2020).

In general, when doing GET awareness workshops, Bernadette and Sr Josephine take up to three days at a time to translate and discuss its pillars in each community. While Sr Josephine (CSN) works in various districts and communities, Bernadette, a 58-year-old widow, works in her village, and in the communities that are part of her constituency on Buka island, in the North of Bougainville. At the time of the interview in 2020, she was working with ten different groups in her constituency. These groups, consisting of both men and women, come from villages consisting of clans and or lineages organised based on matrilineal kinship relations, predominantly characterised by a virilocal post-marital residence pattern, instead of the uxorilocal marriage pattern that is common in Central Bougainville (Nash 1974:77; Ogan 1971:83).⁹ The firstborn son and daughter of the eldest matrilineage are denoted with the chiefly titles of *tsunon* and *tuhikau* respectively, and share equal status and honour (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:15–6). Although 'commoner' Buka women are traditionally absent from public life, they have the power to exercise authority, especially in matters concerning land and other inherited rights (Kenneth 2005). However, as in other parts of Bougainville and PNG, gender relations are complex and power relations are continually shifting. Women and men have distinct roles, that although ideally viewed as complementary and supporting each other (Kenneth 2005; Mowbray 2014), may also be valued differently.

On Buka, where women are traditionally responsible for the basic subsistence of their family, there is a strong ethos demanding that women are industrious and hard-working (Mowbray 2014), sustaining their families by working in the garden and doing all the other 'work that mothers have to do to have to help their families' (Interview with Bernadette 2020). Nonetheless, while both women and men are involved in cash crop production, women often do not receive the same revenues (Mowbray 2014:184). Moreover, their labour is generally regarded 'as an extension of their subsistence work and understood as undertaken primarily in their role as mothers' (Mowbray 2014:184). This means that women's work and responsibility to provide for the family often includes covering the costs of those everyday things needed by her family, including clothes, kerosene, transport money, *etcetera* (Mowbray 2014:189). While husbands are expected to contribute to the family's subsistence as well, their incomes are often spent on alcohol or other luxury goods (Mowbray 2014:190).

Considering the above, it comes as no surprise that Bernadette is adamant that couples should receive training on their respective roles and responsibilities, which is delivered through GET. As she told Kenneth in 2020:

This can help men and women to realise their differences and the different roles and responsibilities men and women have towards their families and towards each other. It will help them strengthen their relationship [and avoid violence]. Because sometimes, when they attend such trainings, it really helps to open their minds and eyes to live harmoniously in their marriage.

Bernadette's GET workshops, which she provides in the evening so everyone can attend, disseminate her understanding of gender equality as women and men having 'equal rights, equal opportunities, they are the same with their shared responsibilities', thereby acknowledging that they are 'equal in God's eyes, but different in how God made them' (Interview with Bernadette 2020). As she emphasised, 'men and women must live as one, because a

man's body belongs to his wife, and a woman's body belongs to her husband'. Reflecting upon the impact of the GET trainings, Bernadette reflects:

This training has seen a positive impact. I now hear how people who received the training are saying how the training is helping them because if one does wrong, they will remind each other of the pillars that mention doing the right thing for each other. Men are also reminding women how they are supposed to behave according to the pillars (Interview with Bernadette 2020).

The impacts of the ongoing awareness workshops run by Bernadette and others were also revealed during Kenneth's interviews with 20 male and female Bougainvilleans about gender equality and GET in Buka in 2020. To her surprise, Kenneth found that the Theology of Gender Equality was widely known by both church clergy and laypeople. She also realised the extent to which the Bible has influenced gender roles and perceptions about gender relations in Bougainville, and how this is slowly changing. For example, as a female Church minister stated:

Spiritually and Biblically, the man was designed to be the head of the family, but today we learn that gender equality is to ensure that men and women are equal to participate in anything that we do. In governance, men and women are equal, and in fact, they are equal in any field so that decisions are made fairly to benefit both sides (Interview with a female Church leader, 2020).

To most of the people Kenneth talked to, men and women are equal in God's eyes, but they are different in how God made them, thereby reiterating the pillars of the Theology of Gender Equality, and the doctrine of complementarity promulgated by the Catholic Church and the women advocates of the NCFR. According to the Theology of Gender Equality, 'equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's opportunities, and responsibilities will not depend on whether they are born male or female' (Bird and Carroll 2016). This urge for equity and equality extends to economic and political opportunities for both sexes.

However, while Bernadette and Kenneth's interlocutors all acknowledged and stressed the complementarity between husband and wife, and the sexes more generally, the fact that women and men should have equal opportunities was less accepted. For example, not everyone was convinced that women should have been able to run for the presidential, or constituency seat in the 2020 ARoB elections. As two of Kenneth's female interlocutors argued, 'men are better equipped to be strong leaders and make better decisions, especially since women have not much experience in political decision-making'. This perception of men as decision-makers resonates with the widespread notion that men are the heads of the family and the community at large (see Fig. 1). Moreover, as some of Kenneth's interlocutors stated: 'the Bible preaches that women must submit to men'. They added that when women are expected to be equal to men, this could cause marriage breakdowns, as women are not following the teachings of the Bible.

Kenneth's female interlocutors also said that unhappy marriages are caused by alcohol abuse and gambling, which often leads to domestic violence. Moreover, men not listening to their wives, and refusing to follow their wives into Church were also perceived as resulting in unhappy marriages. To promote respectful relationships, Kenneth's interlocutors all stated that men and women should receive counseling, with a high expectation that Church leaders (as peacemakers) provide counseling and support services to troubled couples and survivors of violence.

Bernadette, Sr Josephine, and others who were interviewed, as well as Kenneth herself, believe that both Bougainville men and women need support and training about their roles and responsibilities. As emphasised by Bernadette and Kenneth, this can help men and women realise their differences and the mutual responsibilities they have towards each other and to their families. Such trainings can help strengthen their relationships because by opening up their minds and eyes to live harmoniously in their marriages, husbands and wives will need to learn to be transparent and honest with each other, and most importantly, learn communication skills to keep their relationships harmonious and peaceful. Moreover, to develop Bougainville, men must shift their mindsets, they need to start thinking 'maternal to protect, care and provide, and enforce'. As argued by Kenneth and her interlocutors, this means that men and women need to work in partnership with each other, but also work closely with their community, the Churches, and the Government so that the men and women of Bougainville can realise the development and peace that Bougainville needs.

CONCLUSION: VERNACULARISING GENDER EQUALITY IN PNG

Scholars and donor agencies alike often critique the ways religion and culture are invoked in ways that legitimize violence. And indeed, faith and custom may encourage the abusive treatment of women and fuel communal aggression (*e.g.* Hermkens 2007; Jolly 1996, 1997). Some scholars are convinced that the Catholic Church's teachings have reduced and constituted what it means to be a woman 'to an essence that is determined by female biology' (Köhler-Ryan 2020:1). This is exemplified in Pope John Paul II's 1995 'Letter to Women', in which he calls upon women as mothers and wives. However, this gender essentialism, as well as Catholic women's subordinate position and character, has been challenged by feminist theologians in various ways (for example Bal 2001; Köhler-Ryan 2020). At the same time, laypeople have also interpreted Catholicism in progressive and, or egalitarian ways (see for example Fedele 2013; Hermkens et al. 2009). These and other examples show that faith can open up opportunities for both women and men activists aiming to promote transformational gender politics (Carroll 2021; Douglas 2003; George 2015). This is an important and productive counter-argument to adjudications that depict religious and cultural ideologies as broadly constraining for women.

The viewpoints presented in this article illustrate how models of female and male emancipation derived from Christianity gain traction in local communities. And while these examples '... may be unsettling for those of us without faith' (Jolly 2005:154), they are, as rightly emphasised by Spark (2014:9) an important aspect of how women and men construct themselves as 'modern' subjects. Catholicism generates and sustains a highly personal moral framework in which concepts of submission, patience, respect, servanthood, humility, forgiveness, and purity are Christian virtues that all should aspire to, especially women and girls (see for example Eves 2012; Hermkens 2008; Seta 2019). This seems to be at odds with the central ideas of individuality that are inherent in human rights discourse and programs and counseling services by NGOs that stress the need for women to assert themselves, which implies negotiation with husbands in ways that stress equality with men. However, this western ethic of individualism is at odds with the ethics of relationality prevalent across most of the non-western world, including PNG (see for example Strathern 1988). Despite Christianity's focus on the individual in terms of one's direct relationship with God (Bialecki and Daswani 2015:275), the way the Theology of Gender is framed and especially communicated in places like the ARoB through NCfR female church and community leaders, strongly resonates with local ethics about the importance of motherhood, as well of relationality and complementarity between the sexes (see also Mowbray 2014:171).

Moreover, it is a powerful example of how women's rights and gender equality propagated by IWDA and other international donors are 'vernacularized' (Merry 2006): attributed with specific meanings by different people within specific cultural and religious contexts. As shown earlier, religious values are not homogenous, especially not in the ways they are internalized, and combined with other cultural, neo-traditional ideas, norms and ideals (Cox 2017:69). The Gender Equality Theology document, and GET in general, allows advocates of women's rights in Bougainville, such as Sr. Garasu, the NCfR and its WHRDs and others, to address gender equality through their own socio-cultural and religious lens, vernacularizing women's rights in customary maternal, Christian and biblical terms. In Bougainville, gender equality is translated and attributed with specific socio-cultural and religious beliefs aimed at restoring traumatized relationships and bringing development and peace to families and communities.

Thus, although Catholicism is averse to sexual liberation, it also provides victims or survivors, counselors, and activists with resources to respond to or change a particular status quo. For Bougainville advocates, GET urges the transformation of prevalent notions about gender inequality and gender roles, promoting equality and highlighting the importance of 'maternal care' as an attribute that men should also aspire to. This change of dominant masculinities is also apparent in neo-Pentecostal Christianity, which promulgates 'ideas of companionate marriage and the cultivation of an affective self' which implies the fostering 'of masculinities that are more sensitive and less domineering' (Cox and Macintyre 2014:138; see also Anderson 2014). This provides hope that through religious intervention, deliberate change, and a move towards gender equality, and, hopefully, the eradication of GBV, in PNG are occurring.

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ENDNOTES

1. More than 95% of the population identifies as Christian. Most Christians living in the urban areas of Port Moresby and Madang Province identify as Catholic (*circa* 30%), followed by Evangelical Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostals and United Church, while in the ARoB 68% of the population is Catholic (NSO 2011:33).
2. One study reported that 6.6% of men surveyed in Bougainville 'had experiences of sexual victimization by another man' (Fulu et al. 2013:62).
3. Our case-study of the Theology of Gender Equality contains data gathered during in-depth research interviews set up by Hermkens and conducted by Kenneth and two local research assistants with 3 key informants and 20 participants in Buka in 2020 and 2021. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted face-to-face and lasted one-and-a-half hours on average. All interviewees in this research gave verbal consent to the interviews, which were either recorded (if permission was obtained) and/or noted down by the interviewer. Recorded interviews were transcribed and anonymised, with the exception of key stakeholders who are well-known in the region and who consented to be identified in the research. Although the sample of interviews is relatively small, insights obtained by Kenneth's own observations and experiences as a Bougainvillian,

insights obtained by Hermkens and McKenna in their previous ethnographic and social research in PNG and the ARoB, as well as an extensive literature review conducted by Hermkens and McKenna concur with and reinforce the data and arguments presented in this paper.

4. According to the Roman Catholic Church, marriage is a sacramental commitment between the spouses and the Church, and this union should not be broken.
5. Fr Victor Roche, General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference and former chair of the CPP Church Leaders Council, represented the Catholic Church.
6. Unlike in some other areas of the Pacific where there has been an openness to non-binary identity, both culturally and theologically (see for example Carroll 2021), this is in general not the case in PNG, especially not within the Catholic communities the authors worked.
7. Bougainville kinship groups follow matrilineal descent, except for Siwai and Buin in the South coast, Nissan Island to the north-west of Buka, and the Taku, Nukumanu and Nuguria Islands off the north-east coast of Buka (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:8).
8. Nash (1990:132) argues that not only physical violence, but also sexual violence and rape occurred rarely among the Nagovisi.
9. In Bougainville matrilineal societies, post-marital residence patterns are often mixed; with virilocal residence occurring in Central Bougainville (see for example Ogan 1971:83) and virilocal, uxorilocal, or neolocal post-marital settlements occurring on Pororan Island, near Buka (Schneider 2011:193), while shifts in post-marital residence patterns have also occurred (Schneider 2011:192).

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