

Turning negatives into positives: the life and work of Naomi Yupae

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SUMMARY

This article explores the life story of Naomi Yupae, one of the founders and the first executive director of Eastern Highlands Family Voice (EHFV), an organization based in Goroka, Papua New Guinea (PNG). A proud Bena Bena woman, Naomi was one of only a handful of women in the pre-Independence era to gain a scholarship to pursue secondary schooling in Australia. The article discusses Naomi's experiences as a student and her determination to come back to PNG to maintain her cultural connections with her people and contribute to development in PNG. Naomi's professional contributions as a researcher and social worker are discussed and evaluated.

This article tells the story of Naomi Yupae, the inaugural executive director and one of the founders of Eastern Highlands Family Voice (EHFV), an organization that supports families experiencing violence and conflict. In documenting Naomi's story, the article provides a vital account of a woman who is a role model, and simultaneously helps to address the paucity of biographical material about Papua New Guinean women (Figure 1).

Between February and April 2012, I conducted four interviews with Naomi Yupae in Goroka, in the Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The following account of Naomi's life is based on these interviews. The article also draws on personal correspondence with Naomi and correspondence with other friends and colleagues able to provide insight into Naomi's life and leadership.

Naomi's family and childhood

Naomi was born in 1957 in the hamlet of Sekeluga in Samogo village in the Bena Bena area of PNG's Eastern Highlands Province. She describes her childhood as a 'very happy' one characterized by love and discipline. Naomi is the oldest daughter of Kiyae and Yupae, who had seven children (five girls and two boys). Naomi says her parents had an arranged marriage and worked hard

and cooperatively to raise their children in a peaceful and productive environment.

Naomi's village was distinctive in that it was organized to reflect the values of cleanliness and discipline. Naomi recalls, for instance, that there was a bell for everything, including getting up, bathing in the river and commencing the Sabbath, celebrated on Saturdays because the family were committed Seventh-Day Adventists. Naomi grew up with her cousins as playmates and in a context in which her uncles and other relatives shared the task of raising the children according to their Christian values.

Alongside being great believers in discipline, which was woven through all aspects of their life, Naomi's family were strong advocates of education, including for girls. This was unusual, particularly at this time, not least because girls who went to school were seen as 'cheap', as a result of being exposed to inappropriate ideas and opportunities. Naomi's father, Yupae, was unconventional in that he did not discriminate on the basis of gender. Naomi is grateful for her family's belief in education, saying, "[I was] probably one of the few Bena women that got access to education... I salute them for that vision and dream that they had for us children." The forward-thinking nature of Naomi's family was also evident in other ways.

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Figure 1. Naomi Yupae.

For instance, Naomi says that during her childhood speaking Tok Pisin was associated with status and that her family were known for 'speaking pidgin a lot'.

Life was not entirely pleasant, however. Naomi topped her class at Magitu Primary School despite the fact that some of her classmates were much older. As a result, she experienced bullying at the hands of 16- and 17-year-old boys who were jealous of her achievements. Too afraid to report them for fear of further reprisals, she put up with this for some time. Eventually, however, she told the teacher, who threatened the boys that if it ever happened again they would be beaten themselves. From this time, Naomi was no longer bullied at school. Moreover, by standing up for herself, she had learned a lesson that would prove valuable in later life.

Leaving Papua New Guinea

When Naomi was in grade five, teachers by the name of Thelma and Rudi Peperkamp came to teach at Magitu Primary School, bringing with them the daughter they had adopted from Milne Bay. Recognizing their

young daughter's attachment to Naomi, the family incorporated Naomi into their lives. This led to her accompanying the family to Coogee, a southeastern beachside suburb of Sydney, Australia on a Christmas break in 1969. Here, the 11-year-old Naomi started to experience another life. The visit was also fortuitous in that it introduced Naomi to a place in which she would soon be spending her adolescent years.

On returning to PNG, Thelma and Rudi encouraged Naomi to sit the IQ test at the International School in Goroka. On the basis of her grade six results (96%) and high marks in this test, Naomi was awarded a scholarship to St Catherine's Church of England Girls' School, a prestigious private school for girls located in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

When Naomi left PNG in 1970 to attend St Catherine's, she was 12 years old. Having no idea of the world to which her daughter was going, Naomi's mother composed two mourning songs as an expression of her grief. Of this time, Naomi says:

"She cried a lot when I went to school in

Australia. In Bena culture they compose songs depending on what happens in the life of somebody, so she composed two songs that were like crying songs, very sad songs, and even till now the women sing that song when we cry for dead people; or if a sad situation happens we always sing these songs.”

Naomi valued the rich and stimulating environment that St Catherine’s afforded. In particular, she appreciated the school’s focus on supporting young women to develop to their full potential, and the sense of discipline and Christian values that strongly echoed her family’s values. While ‘speaking out loud’ was a challenge, she says the school taught her to analyse and assess knowledge independently. Because there were five other girls from PNG there, she was never entirely alone and together they shared a sense of representing their country, especially in sport. Demonstrating her leadership, Naomi was a prefect in year 12.

Despite these positives, Naomi’s experiences in Australia opened what seemed an unbridgeable gap between herself and her people in Bena. When she first returned to PNG for the school holidays, for example, Naomi was unable to understand her own Bena language, saying it sounded to her now unaccustomed ear like ‘gibberish’. She recalls trying to explain television and trains to her family and her feeling that such things were beyond their imagining. As a result of the gap between the two worlds, Naomi withdrew into herself, learning, at a young age, to cope with her bicultural experience on her own. She says that neatly folding her private school girl’s uniform at the end of the school year was like ‘shedding her skin’ in preparation to become a ‘village meri’. When she returned to the village for holidays, Naomi learned to fit in rather than spend energy longing for the things she missed about her life in Australia – or about PNG when she was at school in Sydney.

By the time she completed her secondary schooling, Naomi was determined to return to PNG and establish her roots as a Papua New Guinean. This was her response to the gulf between herself and her people. Valuing her identity as a Papua New Guinean above any opportunity Australia could offer, Naomi elected to study social work at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in Port Moresby.

She did so between 1976 and 1979.

Returning to Papua New Guinea: marriage and children

Describing her decision to study social work as her ‘response to being Papua New Guinean’, Naomi points toward her reason for returning to PNG – namely to reconnect with, but also to serve, her country and its people. While acknowledging the privileges of her education in Australia, Naomi considers that being away during her adolescence led to a gap in her education in terms of her knowledge of Bena customs and PNG history. She said this was evident when she returned to attend university in PNG. Discussing the small group of students who had been away at Australian schools and with whom she attended university, she says:

“When people were dressing up in their cultural things we weren’t, we found it hard... We were pretty much like an isolated kind of people, ‘cause when people were speaking their language and doing their traditional songs we found it a bit hard for us... I missed the opportunity to learn about the PNG history and culture ... I have never adorned myself in the traditional Bena ‘bilas’ and I think that’s one thing I really missed.”

As with her decision to study in PNG, rather than Australia, Naomi wanted to marry a man from her place of origin in order to reconnect with and uphold her Bena heritage. The following excerpt explains how she felt at the time:

“I want to find my roots. I want somebody who can culturally understand me and my extended family, and those choices I make are not only about me but it’s about my father, my mother, my extended family who love me so much. And because I come from a very loving family, extended family, those decisions were very important to me. And I wanted somebody who could understand and identify with my culture, my people, the language.”

Naomi and her husband were together for a total of thirteen years, during which time Naomi had two children, a son and a daughter, born four years apart. They had a traditional marriage in which her husband’s family in Bena paid bride wealth in the form of cows

and pigs to Naomi's family. While Naomi says there were 'good times', the relationship did not last for various reasons despite Naomi's best efforts. Throughout the difficult times in her marriage, Naomi received support from her friends and colleagues and she remains grateful to those who provided this love and care.

Working life and the importance of institutional support for women

After graduating from university with a degree in social work, Naomi took a job as a project officer in the Office of Information. A year later, in 1980, she commenced a new role at the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) in Madang. Here, she worked under Professor Peter Heywood, then Deputy Director of the PNGIMR, who managed the nutrition program. Prof. Heywood says of Naomi:

"It was exciting to find someone like Naomi – smart, conscientious, energetic, good English, social science background, pleasant, engaging personality, good sense of humour, willing to ask what we were doing and why, but still very much connected to her village in Bena Bena." (personal communication with the author)

Naomi's capacities as a social science researcher were also noted by Professor Michael Alpers, the Director of the PNGIMR between 1977 and 2000. Prof. Alpers worked with Naomi when she moved to the IMR in Goroka.

"Naomi stood out in [the field] ... context as intelligent, tough, sympathetic, meticulous and flexible, an unusual mix of good qualities that fitted her ideally for working in the community. ... She was highly regarded by everyone at IMR and would have had a great career as a social science research worker." (personal communication with the author)

For her part, Naomi recalls the high calibre of training she received at IMR, describing it as a workplace in which she learned a lot:

"They helped me to do some, pick up some research skills and work with a lot of people from other countries and ... it's there where I started to ground myself in a lot of the work ethics, work value, because a lot of them

were very professional, well-educated and well-renowned scientists like Dr Michael Alpers, who was the director of medical research, and Dr Peter Heywood and Mr [Ray] Spark, who was our lab manager. ... I looked up to them as ... leaders in their own field, but they did a lot even despite their status; they were also people who were willing to train a lot of Papua New Guineans in the field of research."

Naomi also values the emotional and at times material support that she received from staff at the IMR:

"They also provided a very supportive environment for me to feel free to say even personal things with them. And in the event of difficulties happening in the family environment I felt free to talk about it and know that support will be coming. I think for a lot of women ... in the workplace ... there's an element of fear that if I share this, what is happening in my home, they might terminate me from my work. So they don't tend to come up-front with the issues that are happening in the home, and definitely it affects the work output performance of employees."

This workplace support continued when Naomi left the IMR in 1986 to work as an officer in the probation and parole service (now known as community corrections). Despite the difficulties she was experiencing in her personal life, Naomi developed a positive reputation here also, making a mark because of her professionalism and intelligence. Beginning in the Eastern Highlands Province, Naomi went on to become the training coordinator for all offices across PNG. She says:

"I was one of the first officers that were recruited for the idea of having a community-based system for PNG based on the Canadian model. There I worked with a lot of Canadian CESO (Canadian Executive Service Organisation) volunteers to develop the system in PNG. And initially I was hired to look after the Goroka, Eastern Highlands provincial office and later on came to be the trainee coordinator. I did all the training, wrote the manuals, did a lot of training for probation and parole officers throughout the country."

Another significant way in which Naomi

demonstrated leadership at this time was in regard to housing. During the 1980s, houses were going on sale through a government scheme designed to assist employees to purchase their own home. The house Naomi was living in came up for sale but when Naomi expressed interest in buying it she met resistance from male employees who said it was her husband's role to provide a home and that she was therefore ineligible to purchase it. To their credit, Naomi's seniors, Mr Walter Nombe (then premier of EHP) and Mr Andrew Ataiya (then provincial secretary), resisted this pressure and, citing Naomi's status as an officer in charge of a government department, said she had every right to purchase the house. The story illustrates both Naomi's strength and persistence and the importance of gaining male support for women's advancement in PNG.

Naomi often says that her life has been one of building success then moving on to commence something new. This is certainly the case when it comes to the establishment of EHFV. In her role with probation and parole she had access to a car, a salary and a degree of power and prestige. When she left there in 2000 to start Family Voice, she had no idea where it would lead. Her decision was motivated by her strong desire to help those experiencing violence, as she herself had for so many years.

Establishing Eastern Highlands Family Voice

"Family Voice for me [is about] personally ... turning my story into positives to support other women and children which has been a passion for me. So I gave it all my best shot. I gave away my personal life, my social life, my church life, my family life to develop this organization to where it is now. And I feel proud that, you know, it's been a personal achievement for me as well as an achievement for women right across PNG."

As the above quotation makes clear, Naomi has put her heart and soul into EHFV. The idea to build the organization was born in 1997 when Naomi spoke about child abuse at a workshop on paralegal training for women. Her talk generated enthusiasm among the women present, who saw the need to establish an organization that would support women and children experiencing violence. Specifically, the women wanted to establish

a non-church organization because as Naomi puts it:

"In PNG, the church is the last place people go when they are having problems. In fact, people will often leave the church rather than mention the real difficulties of their lives."

Moreover, this was an opportune time in Naomi's life because she was not doing any 'real work' in her role at probation and parole. She became the secretary of the organization running monthly meetings with a small group of supporters.

In 1998, the non-government organization Save the Children sponsored Naomi to go to Fiji and attend regional training with the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. This one-month workshop gave Naomi important training and contacts with other civil society and human rights organizations, thereby cementing the idea to establish a similar organization in the Eastern Highlands.

Around the same time, Save the Children New Zealand provided the first lot of funding; the amount of 37,000 kina enabled the fledgling organization to pay Naomi a basic salary and purchase a computer. Between 1998 and 2000, Naomi wrote the constitution for the organization, worked on getting it registered with the government, and clarified with the existing supporters what the goals of the organization would be. Together with other leaders in the Eastern Highlands, including Popsy Vira, Miriam Layton, Agnes Inape, Julie Soso (now Governor of the Eastern Highlands Province) and Ruth Palio, there was a decision to focus on women and children, but also include men. This was because domestic violence was being seen as a 'women's issue'. The women wanted to ensure that men were encouraged to take part in the prevention of violence, whether because they were involved as perpetrators or victims or because they could offer support – according to current estimates from staff at Family Voice, men make up approximately 20% of the clients who come to Family Voice as victims of violence. It was Naomi's good friend, Popsy Vira, who came up with the name 'Family Voice'.

Since its official establishment on 1 March 2000, EHFV has grown to become one of the most credible organizations in the country

working in the area of human rights, gender and child protection. It is one of the first local organizations in the country to promote the rights of children and has been instrumental in bringing discussion about children's rights to the fore across PNG. During its eleven years of operation, staff in the organization have trained over 600 volunteers in various skills including basic counselling, rape counselling, trauma counselling, child protection issues, peace mediation and conflict resolution. The organization also does awareness raising at both the village and provincial levels. Because of EHFV's strong, positive reputation it has attracted support from, and built partnerships with, various organizations operating internationally, including AusAID (Australian Agency for International Development), NZAID (New Zealand Agency for International Development), International Women's Development Agency and the German Development Service. In addition, local people from the Eastern Highlands, including respected men and women leaders, have supported the organization, whether as volunteers, board members or both. One such person is Mr Hona Javati, who has been a volunteer counsellor since 2001. He notes the way the organization has grown to support men as well as women:

"The counselling here that we conducted initially it was for women and children but increasingly men have been coming in. They have been either phoning or they've been coming in for counselling. So people have realized that she [Naomi] is delivering something that is lacking in the community."

The success of EHFV has led to Naomi being asked to start new branches of the organization in other provinces. While she is happy to share insights and experiences outside the Eastern Highlands, Naomi has declined because of her belief in the importance of integrating local knowledge into human rights promotion. Naomi explains:

"I strongly believe that each province, each ethnic grouping in PNG, have their own specific issues around gender human rights, and you need [to include] the local knowledge into ... developing programs and providing services. We are quite comfortable with providing the services across Eastern Highlands. That for me is all about learning about culture because a lot of the violence that happens is also

very much linked to the way people think and behave, their cultural norms and their values. Understanding that and linking it to gender issues and human rights is very critical to the way we run programs in PNG, especially for women and children."

Naomi's belief in the importance of knowing one's own people and culture underpins the success of EHFV. In addition, she provides empathy and support to all who come through the door at Family Voice. Jean Yano, the program manager at EHFV, says of Naomi:

"To me, I look to her as a role model. I see her character, she's got the strength. When she sees things that need to be done, she gets it done. And how she manages her time in order to help everybody that comes to her and she doesn't send anybody away... Even though she is a very busy lady she has time for everybody, even a little child. She [can] go down to anybody's level and be a friend to anybody who needs a friend. Even as co-worker she can be my employer but she can also be my friend, a mother and a counsellor also. So that's what I admire about her. Even though she has her difficulties she goes out of her way to those who need help."

For Naomi, it is important that she has been able to turn the difficulties she has survived into a wellspring of experience on which she can draw to help others.

"It's how we turn negatives into positives. And whatever positives we have we build on those so we don't do it for ourselves; we also look around and see what everybody's lives are about. And we support them whether it be through awareness or through providing counselling or I think for me ... I walk down Goroka town and I want other women to see me and think that they hear this story – they will say she's done it, I will do it as well. And it's not based on education or based on anything else but it's about this personal conviction that we have personal values, we have personal dreams, and aspirations we have, and moving that forward. And if there are people who are trying to stop us from achieving those good things in our lives we don't have to live with it for life. There are opportunities, there are systems, there are services available where we can seek assistance and support to say, look, I do not want this aspect of my

life, I want to move forward.”

Through establishing, developing and leading EHFV over its first 11 years, Naomi has assisted countless others to move beyond lives characterized by violence to lives characterized by hope.

New horizons

At the end of 2011, Naomi resigned from her role as director of EHFV to undertake further study in Australia. Having won a prestigious Australian Leadership Award to complete a master's in international community development at Victoria University in Melbourne, she has recently commenced studies for the first time since completing her social work degree in 1979. It was challenging for Naomi to relinquish her role at EHFV as the organization has been her life and work since she began working towards its establishment in 1997. Nevertheless, in making her decision to resign, she continues her pattern of making a success of things then letting go to start again in a new direction.

“For me it was a personal dream to go and do further studies, and I suppose in a way that is a challenge to a lot of PNG women as well, because once we get married and we have children – and especially at my age when I'm eligible to be a grandmother – we

tend to live, we stop our lives there and we don't think that [there's] any more future for us in terms of personal achievements. So I am accepting to go on this scholarship. Firstly for me 'cause I'd like to continue to learn and still contribute to the development of PNG and gender issues in PNG, and also I hope that it's a challenge to some of my friends and colleagues and women in general that learning doesn't stop till we go six foot under.”

Reflecting her characteristic determination and leadership by challenging older women in PNG to extend themselves beyond their roles as mothers and grandmothers, Naomi's decision to do a master's will undoubtedly lead to her making further contributions of great value in PNG. As with her previous contributions, whatever she chooses to do when she returns to PNG will be distinguished by her intelligence, strength and empathy. Naomi's embodiment of these characteristics, as much as her achievements, make her a respected leader and role model among both men and women in Papua New Guinea.

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