The women's movement in Papua New Guinea as a vehicle to enhance women's participation in development

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Abstract

This case study examines the nature and level of women's participation in development in contemporary Papua New Guinea (PNG) through the framework of the local women's movement. Mainstream socio-economic indicators and a review of the macro forces at play reveal the disadvantaged position of women, and expose the remarkable barriers to participation they are facing. Yet, despite those challenges, women across the country are mobilized through their membership in diverse women's groups, from the remote village group to the National Council of Women. Because of its extensive presence and network, the women's movement is seen as an important vehicle through which the problem of unequal participation in development can be addressed. Central to the case study is the question of how development and participation are defined.

Introduction

The paper begins with a general overview of development and gender issues in PNG, followed by a chronological review of the national women's movement. Women's policies and practices are then analysed from two separate development theoretical lenses. An intervention rooted in grassroots participation and conscientization processes is presented to counterbalance the current practices promoting policy enforcement and implementation carried out by a major fraction of the PNG women's movement. This paper is based on an extensive literature review and participant observation over a 2-year period while working with women's groups in PNG[1]. The study is premised on the underlying hypothesis that top-down development approaches currently used by the women's movement in PNG are not effective due to the lack of grassroots-driven initiatives and the absence of critical analysis of power relations.

Overview of the development context in Papua New Guinea

Although rich in natural resources, PNG ranks 133 out of 177 countries in the Human Development Index, the lowest in the South Pacific region (UNDP,

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[1] The author worked as a CUSO cooperant with the Madang Provincial Council of Women and grassroots women's groups between 2003 and 2005. The paper is an extract of the author's Master of Social Work dissertation.

2004). Economic indicators such as GNP and per capita income are a reflection of income generated by mineral exports and aid received, rather than the much lower income of the majority of the population living a semi-traditional subsistence lifestyle.

Development challenges include poor governance and economic management combined with increased corruption, and a notable law and order problem causing significant human security issues, particularly for women and children. Isolation experienced by whole regions due to harsh geographical terrain and dire infrastructure, and an HIV/AIDS epidemic constitute other development challenges (UNDP, 2002).

The level of debt and debt servicing has steadily increased since the early 1980's, leading the government of PNG to adopt neo-liberal economic policies, such as a reduction in payments to the welfare sector, and increased expenditures in agricultural and mineral export-led economic production. The introduction of user fees for health and education services in the mid 1990's as a consequence of Structural Adjustment Programmes has placed severe strains on people's quality of life (Campbell-Jones et al., 1995; Sepoe, 2000).

Colonial administration and missionization brought about severe changes in PNG's traditional socio-economic and political orders. PNG societies are shifting rapidly from one that was not long ago generally known as self-reliant and communal, to one that is marked by western influences, market economy, and information technology.

At the mezzo level, community-centered development is said to be generally hindered by a cargo cult mentality[2], donor-driven goals, jealousy, lack of structure and responsibility, the failure to involve women and the misuse of money (Berman et al., 2000).

Overview of gender issues in Papua New Guinea

Women in PNG experience gross inequalities in all spheres of contemporary life when compared to men (see table 1). Low female life expectancy, high maternal mortality rate, and poor health among women are said to be caused by hard physical labor and heavy workload, malnutrition, anemia, risky and repeated child bearing, and poor access to basic health services (AusAID, 1998; UNICEF, 1996; VSO, 1999). Low female literacy causes further inequalities in the employment ratios, in favor of men. Women are highly under-represented in the formal employment sector and in political offices. In 1998, gender specific indexes showed gross inequalities, with the GDI[3] value at

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[2] The cargo cult mentality is the expectation and worship of goods and services without any cost to, or action from, the beneficiaries.

[3] The Gender-related Development Index measures achievements in gender development by means of three indicators: life expectancy at birth, educational attainment, and income. The GDI value ranges from 0.00 for absolute inequality between males and females, to 1.00 for full equality.

0.318 and the GEM[4] value at 0.177 (McKay et al., 1999). According to 2004 UN statistics, the GDI is reported to have climbed to 0.536 (UNDP, 2004).

Table 1

	Male	Female
Life expectancy at birth (years)	54.6	53.5
Adult literacy rate (%)	59.5	49.3
Formal employment (%)	82.4	17.6
Administrative & managerial positions (%)	--	12
Seats held in parliament (#)	108	1
Earned income share (%)	84	16

Data Sources: McKay et al., 1999; McLeod, 2002

According to a 2000 WHO report, domestic violence is said to be endemic with over 56.1% of married women being physically assaulted[5]. The same report states that Papua New Guinean men are considered the second most violent in the world after Uganda in terms of assault on women (Kalimda in Post-Courier, April 13, 2005).

Culture is often cited as being an important factor in the marginalization of women in PNG (Korare, 2002). A number of cultural customs contribute to women's vulnerability. With the exception of a few matriarchal and matrilineal societies, PNG is primarily a male-dominated culture, which commonly follows patrilineal patterns of residence and land ownership, and frequently engages in the practice of bride price. Traditionally, payments of bride price played an important role in the complex political and economic systems of the Highlands. Today, it is a simple cash transaction that often presupposes that the husband owns his wife, has the right to beat her, and claim repayment if she leaves him (Brouwer et al., 1998; Garap, 1999; Kidu 2000; Korare, 2002; Sepoe, 2000; Toft, 1985; VSO, 1999).

Additionally, in a traditional culture where tribal loyalty and communal well-being takes precedent over individual ne(Eds), women often find themselves in a disadvantaged position, or at the very least caught between their aspiration for emancipation and the prevalent socio-political and cultural dynamics (Berman et al., 2000; Korare, 2002). As a Papua New Guinean woman scholar points out, PNG women 'express a genuine concern not to antagonize men and be accused of destabilizing family, clan, and community solidarity' (Dickson-Waiko, 2003:99).

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[4] The Gender Empowerment Measure measures inequalities in keys areas of economic and political participation and decision making. The GEM ranges from 0.00 for absolute inequality between males and females, to 1.00 for full equality.

[5] This figure does not include sexual abuse and is thought to be underestimated as many women do not seek help and do not report to the authorities. The author has been unable to locate recent reports on domestic violence in PNG but has heard verbal reports from local experts indicating that over 80% of women are being assaulted.

Shifting gender roles

In pre-colonial PNG societies, gender roles were clearly defined, separate and complementary, and serving the interest of the community as a whole (Sepoe, 2000; VSO, 1999). Men were warriors, protectors, hunters and builders, while women were responsible for tending gardens and pigs, food harvesting and processing, and family care. Women played a key role in economic, social and cultural matters pertaining to exchange and kinship relations, and supported, albeit behind the scene, male decision-making activities (Sepoe, 2000; Sillitoe, 2001).

Both colonial administration and missionization brought about severe changes in gender roles and gender relations. The emerging socio-economic order, influenced by a highly Eurocentric, patriarchal and paternalistic approach, introduced a number of male-biased policies and practices. Wage employment became a male domain causing male migration and increasing women's workload. Women were taught home economics at the same time as their community role was relegated to welfare duties (Lee, 1985; Sepoe, 2000; VSO, 1999).

With independence in 1975, and despite the formulation of populist and gender equality development goals, women continued to be most active in productive and reproductive activities under similar, if not worse, conditions than those of colonial times. Subsistence agriculture remains the mainstay of the family's economy, with women producing the majority of food consumed by the household. In addition, women engage in the informal cash economy by selling garden produce at markets and roadside stalls to pay for their children's school fees and essential household items (Sepoe, 2000).

Evolution of the women's movement in Papua New Guinea

The following section describes three distinct entities within the women's movement in PNG. The first grouping was instigated at the village level from within the institutional framework of the church. The second group evolved in a post-colonial era of progressive thinking and institutionalization of women's issues. Finally, a third category consists of an increasing number of independent Non-Government Organizations (NGO) and Community-Based Organizations (CBO).

Church groups

Women's groups were first established between the 1930's and 1950's by female missionaries and wives of ministers to assist women in becoming better wives and mothers according to the European and Christian housewife ideal. These groups focused mainly on religious instruction and spiritual salvation, as well as baking, sewing, hygiene, and children's care.

In the last two decades, organized church women's groups have begun to expand their horizons beyond domestic and spiritual goals into the public

sphere. The church bottom-up structure, from the village level to the World Church Council, has created a space for women to unite and mobilize, to take on leadership roles, and to participate in civil society. In fact, women's activism through church groups has been hailed by some as an empowering path and a 'catalyst for change' (Dickson-Waiko, 2003; Korare, 2002; Scheyvens, 2003). For instance, some Lutheran Church women's groups are involved in awareness-raising on issues such as health, HIV/AIDS, environmental conservation, violence against women and children, marriage and child custody laws, and women's rights. Other groups are involved in promoting girls' education and literacy programs, as well as women's representation in decision-making bodies (Dickson-Waiko, 2003).

Institutionalised groups

With independence approaching, the progressive National Eight Point Plan was launched in 1973 calling for the equal and active participation of women in all forms of social and economic development. From this point on, the PNG women's movement entered a long period characterized by the establishment and constant restructurings of women machineries, in parallel to numerous congresses and conventions with a women agenda (Brouwer et al., 1998; Lee, 1985). The gender equality engagement was reaffirmed in the National Goals and Directive Principles of PNG's Constitution, in the 1984 National Development Program for Women, in the 1991 National Women's Policy, and in the ratification of CEDAW in 1994 (Brouwer et al., 1998).

The National Council of Women (NCW) was established in 1978 as a NGO by an Act of Parliament, with financial backing from the national government. NCW was to act as the national coordinating body responsible for articulating women's ne(Eds) to the government and for monitoring government action (Lee, 1985). Within a year, Provincial Councils of Women (PCWs) were set-up as action arms of the NCW. The role of PCWs is to link national and community (district, village, church) women's groups, to ensure that urban and rural women have equal opportunities to participate in, and benefit from development, and to be, in the absence of women in decision-making positions, the legally recognized voice of women in provincial parliaments (Nakikus et al., 1991; NCW PNG 2000; Author's communication with MPCW members, 2004).

The Councils of Women's network continues today to maintain close ties with government departments responsible for women's issues. The NCW and its network has adopted the government structure as defined in the 1997 reform known as the Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government (OLPLLG)[6]. The incorporation of the OLPLLG structure by the women's

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[6] The Organic Law brought about major organizational and structural reforms within PNG political and administrative systems, setting out powers, functions and responsibilities for each level of government: national, provincial, district, local level and ward governments. Additionally, the OLPLLG stipulates the appointment of women seats on government assemblies and committees, and a commitment to support women's organizations within the NCW network (Government of PNG, 1998a; 1998b).

movement was intended as a strategy to counteract the geographical and infrastructural barriers, and the women's groups' diversity, with the expectation that the benefits would trickle down to grassroots women.

Councils of Women tend to be donor-driven, lacking vision and efficient management practices, and characterized by internal politics, in-fighting, and personal political ambitions (Appleford, 2000; Lee, 1985; Sepoe, 2000; Author's observation and communication with women leaders, 2003-2005). Finally, urban councils of women's executives are usually composed of a homogeneous group of urban middle-aged and middle-class married women with a long history of involvement with the women's movement.

Independent groups

Parallel to institutionalized women's groups, the late 1980's saw a number of non-government women's organizations sprout, initiated by urban educated women, each seeking to tackle women's under-participation from a focused stance: Women In Politics, Women And Communication, Women In Law, Business Women Association, and Women In Management.

Additionally, membership and adherence to village mama groups is widespread in PNG, touching women from all walks of life and in the most remote areas of the country. While the vast majority of village groups are church-based, some groups have formed independently according to clan linkages and specific aims. Grassroots women's groups partake in initiatives such as income-generating, self-help, and skills development, and tackle social, cultural and political issues which they deem important to their lives, to their community's well-being and to nation-building.

Theoretical framework

As a profession concerned with the marginalized population and social justice, social work considers the nature of people, society and social problems from two competing perspectives: the order and the conflict perspectives. The order perspective views society as a unified and consensual system, and promotes conformity and adaptation of its members to the existing social arrangements. In the conflict perspective, social work looks at existing structural inequalities, and deals with the liberation of people from socio-political and socio-economic bondage through social and structural changes (Mullaly, 2002).

Within this overall social work framework, the author has adopted a two-leveled development perspective. This approach serves to understand the global and local socio-political environments which have shaped the local women's movement and have a bearing on the participation of women in development, and to elucidate the disadvantaged position of women.

At the macro level, modernization and dependency ideologies (Isbister, 2001; So, 1990; Wilson & Whitmore, 2000), and gender-related development theories, such as Women In Development (WID), Women And Development

(WAD), and Gender And Development (GAD) (Humble, 2001; Wilson & Whitmore, 2000; Young, 2002), were chosen for their great influence on international development thinking and practices.

At the mezzo level, Rothman's threefold typology of community intervention (locality development, social planning, and social action) is referred to when examining current and proposed practices (Rothman, 1995; Rothmans, Erlich, & Tropman, 1995). Sepoe's models of women organizing in PNG further elucidate the analysis (Sepoe, 2000).

The psychology of oppression and liberation theories offer a link between macro and mezzo theories and practices by highlighting how personal and socio-political structures intertwine. It proposes a conscientization process that combines personal and interpersonal consciousness-raising with political activism (Freire, 1996; Moane, 1999; Mullaly, 2002; Scott, 1998).

The paper includes a discussion on participation and agency as key principles underpinning both community and international development (Arnstein, 1969; Barnes, 1999; Cornwall, 1998; Cornwall, 2000; Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001; Oxaal & Baden, 1997; Mayoux, 1995; Mohan, 2002; Sepoe, 2000). Participatory theories and practices that seek to recover the voice of the marginalized, to articulate and systematize knowledge extracted from their experience, and to render them agents of change in development activities, are presented as effective strategies for policy making and program planning and implementation (Chambers, 1983; Chambers, 1997; Fals Borda, 2001; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Green, 1998; Mohan, 2002; Pyrch, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; UNDP 1998).

Dominant analysis and practice

Social and economic indicators combined with macro-economic, geographical, infrastructural, and socio-cultural barriers demonstrate the disadvantaged position of women in contemporary PNG, which impact on their ability to participate in development. In this context, how can a rural woman, mother of 5, illiterate, suffering from reduced immunity, overburdened with continuous and strenuous, unpaid and undervalued productive activities, living with violence or the fear of violence, join in development activities?

Paradoxically, the problem is not how to get women involved; they already are, despite the numerous barriers. Women across the country are mobilized, from the remote village group to the National Council of Women. Given this fact, we look further at how women's organizing can enhance women's participation in development. In this author's view, the questions ought to be directed at how development and participation are defined.

The following section presents how the current approach prevalent within the PNG women's movement defines the participation of women in development quantitatively through institutionalized mechanisms, which is thought to be

impaired by the weak implementation of existing women's policies and machineries.

Problem quantitatively defined and explained as weak implementation practices of accepted policies

This analysis uses mainstream top-down theoretical premises derived from consensus-based ideology, such as modernization theory, WID, and social planning to examine Papua New Guinean women's participation in development. Using quantitative measures such as sex-segregated statistics to assess participation, it concludes that women are not equally participating in the formal sectors of education, employment, and institutional politics when compared with their male counterparts (refer to table 1).

Papua New Guinea abounds with renewable and non-renewable natural resources, which receives much attention from foreign interests, both in the forms of international aid and commercial ventures. At a macro level of analysis, development here is driven by prospects of economic growth under conditions deemed necessary by modernizationists. The introduction into PNG of cash and market economies has spread to most remote areas of the country, and is progressively affecting the traditional exchange-based economy and subsistence living. This approach assumes that given the proper modern conditions, everyone, from the rural farmer entrepreneur investing in vanilla cash crops to the urban dweller gaining employment wages, can benefit from cash rewards and modernity.

In this pro-capitalist context, women have been largely excluded from the cash economy arena. They are poorly represented in formal employment, with a low earned income share, and with limited control over male-dominated cash crop earnings. There is no acknowledgement of women's contributing role in subsistence-based productive and reproductive activities that meet the ne(Eds) of the household.

Participation disparities between men and women persist in non-economic sectors. Statistics and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) clearly indicate the poor representation of women in political office and in decision-making positions.

In light of these compelling data, tenants of the top-down approach readily conclude that women do not partake in development. The analysis further suggests however that existing modern mechanisms and opportunities are adequate and appropriate but are not fully operational due to the weakness of implementation practices as set out in development policies.

PNG's constitutional goals, development discourse and policies, government reforms, and establishment of women's machineries demonstrate a progressive and liberal attitude towards gender equality and rural participation (Appleford, 2000; Government of PNG, 1999).

However, implementation practices are weak and slow in coming. Speaking of the PNG government's rhetoric, Dickson-Waiko states that

> The problem of development is not so much in the area of policy making as at the implementation level (1999:44).

Many women leaders in PNG draw attention to the government's lack of commitment in carrying out its rhetoric, pointing out that governments have failed to inform public servants and the public at large on the content of the reforms, have yet to fill women's representatives positions, and are not allocating sufficient resources to build the women's network capacity and support women's projects. They advocate for existing mechanisms and machineries to be enforced and made operational.

Policy enforcement and public education

The councils of women's network is often represented as being 'the' women's movement in PNG, as its membership connected through vertical and horizontal links reaches far and wide, operating in much the same way as the hierarchical bureaucratic model of women's organizing described by Sepoe (2000). The approach currently used favours the increase of women's participation in development through policy enforcement, public education, capacity building, and the development and support of women's projects. Proposed consensual interventions serve to ensure that women's voice is heard by and within the dominant system, and that women be given equal access to economic opportunities and decision-making powers. It responds to the need for women to be integrated in development. It is assumed that once participation disparities between men and women have been redressed, as shown by solid social scientific methods such as statistics and indexes, it will mean that women are participating in, and benefiting from, development.

According to modernizationists and supporters of the WID perspective, development is primarily defined as economic growth. Hence, giving women access to economic opportunities will endow women with economic power and rewards. Extending from this principle, giving women access to political and decision-making opportunities, will confer women with political power and rewards.

The councils of women network presumes that they can effectively use the structure set out in the Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government to reach out to rural mama groups, and integrate them within a united women's movement. The structure from the National level down to the Provincial, District, LLG, and Ward levels is recognized as an adequate instrument to increase women's voice and participation in development, and to meet constitutional goals and existing development policies' objectives.

Furthermore, the women's movement in PNG has adopted a stance that endorses partnership between men and women, between governmental and non-governmental sectors, between urban and rural areas, and amongst

women's groups, assuming that the interests of all parties are reconcilable. Underlying their activities is a strong desire not to antagonize any parties but rather to enlist the support of leaders, and abide by prescribed consultative and collaborative standards and procedures.

Skilled in political manoeuvring, urban elite women leaders see themselves as representing the interests of Papua New Guinean women, and acting as brokers between the women's community and government officials. In order to reach the majority of the women population and support the implementation of policies at local levels, institutionalized women's groups utilize a social planning approach, combined with some aspects of locality development, as the primary models of community-level intervention. They follow a top-down data-driven course of action that endorses policies and strategies made at higher levels. Equipped with pre-determined agendas, councils of women deliver information and technical assistance to rural women's groups, with the aim of enabling rural women to take advantage of the opportunities available to them for input into local policy and program development.

Inspired by the locality development model, rural outreach and community mobilization constitute secondary intervention strategies with multi-fold objectives: to instigate a sense of civil responsibility among women in rural communities; to build the capacities of rural women's groups; to promote membership in the national network; and to generate a coordinated and concerted input in policy implementation.

With respect to public education, institutionalized women's groups engage in the dissemination of information contained within existing laws, policies, structures and programs to key players, mainly women leaders and public servants (men and women), in both urban and rural settings. For instance, they deliver workshops on the OLPLLG, outlining the roles and responsibilities of each player in local development, highlighting the provisions for women's representatives at each level, and advising on implementation processes.

At the policy enforcement level, the women's movement lobbies the different levels of government to operationalize the various women's machineries. For example, the MPCW works to ensure that all seven district councils of women within the province are firmly established with elected executives and active membership. They do so by mobilizing women at the community level and offering leadership training and organizational development advice. In addition, they urge government leaders to appoint women representatives at each level of government and within each governmental unit.

Other common initiatives include the development of women's training programs, women's projects, and women's NGOs. For example, until recently, MPCW was offering workshops on cooking, baking, sewing, and bookkeeping to support small-scale income-generating projects, as a way for women to gain individual and/or group economic power. Other capacity building initiatives aim to equip women with a skill set that will facilitate their entry into the labour market. Women In Politics (WIP) is one example of a women-specific

NGO with a mission to increase women's political participation in institutional politics. They offer leadership training, encourage women to run for political office, and assist women with political campaigning.

Although the rationale behind the intervention as carried out by the councils of women is sound, several flaws can be identified. First and foremost, there is an underlying assumption that the problem of women's participation is easily definable and resolvable. Secondly, the presumption that the women's movement is cohesive contradicts the verbal acknowledgement of the infamous 'women's politics', and minimizes the broad diversity contained within. Thirdly, the lack of critical analysis of power relations, of top-down external forces and policies is counterproductive to the liberation process. The focus on women as the unit of analysis, and the limited attention paid to the sources and nature of women's discrimination, is keeping the PNG women's movement trapped in an outdated and incomplete WID stance.

Alternative analysis and intervention plan

This alternative analysis is rooted in a conflict perspective and grassroots-driven ideologies and suggests that women's participation in mainstream development is poor because women's policies and practices in PNG are externally-driven, and disregard power imbalances.

Four main arguments are presented. First, the impact of global forces on Papua New Guinean's lives in general, and on women's lives more specifically, are viewed as detrimental. Secondly, women's participation is expected to take place within an externally-driven and top-down system/structure. Thirdly, women's participation is assessed through restricting quantitative measures. Assumptions about political participation lead to a lack of recognition of women's activities and roles. And finally, the legacies of colonialism and missionization have led to internalized oppression.

Problem qualitatively defined and explained as externally driven women's policies and practices

Globalization forces have caused an enormous impact on Papua New Guineans lives. Capitalist driven development, market economy, waged employment, urban migration, and large scale resource exploitation projects are but a few introduced phenomena that interfere with a 10,000 year old traditional subsistence lifestyle.

There are some who would argue that poverty in PNG is relative. For, in contrast with many wealthy western countries, no one in PNG, prior to the market economy and urban migration taking hold, was homeless, landless, jobless or hungry. Papua New Guineans are landowners of a rich and fertile soil that continues to provide the necessities of life. In contrast with the false promises of prosperity offered by industrialization and modernization, semi-subsistence agriculture, combined with small-scale income generating activities, is a viable lifestyle (Melanesian Trust, 2000).

Supporters of the dependency approach would agree that capitalist development imposed by western affluent countries has indeed impoverished many a Papua New Guinean. Self-reliance is progressively being replaced by dependency on foreign aid and foreign ventures, on store-bought food, and on cash to purchase modern amenities and commodities. Communal system and exchange-based economy are eroding with the importation of individualistic profit seeking and competitive values. Large-scale resources exploitation projects are damaging the environment, destroying cultural heritage, and creating much turmoil over land tenure. The quest for modernity, cash earnings, and mass consumption is creating a panoply of social and law and order problems: alcohol use, drugs and gun trafficking, family and community break down, 'rascalism', corruption, and emerging class disparities. Women's low status is exacerbated by capitalist, neo-colonialist and patriarchal influences. In a rapidly changing context, gender roles are shifting adversely for women. From a complementary and valued status, they have become second-class citizens.

The wide ranging effects of colonialism and foreign domination are ever present, yet offer limited benefits to the population. Local promoters of conscientization methodologies hold the view that current neo-liberal development trends are paving the way for a downward spiral into environmental and cultural degradation, economic hardship, political disempowerment, and increased gender disparities.

An analysis of the PNG women's machineries and policy-making through its history reveals a wide range of top-down and externally-driven initiatives spanning over 50 years. By and large, these have been instigated by pre and post independence male government and church leaders (and more recently by urban elite women) within a paternalistic approach (Appleford, 2000; Sepoe, 2000).

Although registered as independent NGOs, questions abound concerning the cooptation of councils of women and their level of autonomy as a forum for political reflection and action (Appleford, 2000; Lee, 1985). In reality, they operate as quasi-governmental organizations, following a government structure, accepting government rhetoric, and relying on government funding.

Gender-related intercontinental trends and ideologies, UN priorities such as the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), and international donors' schemes have also contributed to the externally-driven establishment of women's policies, machineries and programs.

While the authorities played a central role in directing the women's agenda, the vast majority of Papua New Guinean women have had little input into it. Top-down planning and policy-making have failed to incorporate the views, experiences, and political agency of rural women, and may consequently be inappropriate to their daily lives and capacities.

Accordingly the assessment of women's participation also tends to be externally-driven. The quantitative data available on women's status in PNG may be misleading.

The determination of indicators and measures, and the interpretation of available statistics largely come from those in position of power and authority. Western experts, social scientists, feminists and local elites, many of who adhere to western-biased ideological and cultural benchmarks, may hold preconceived notions of development, of gender equality, and of political participation. Qualitative records that look beyond the numbers of women in formal sectors, and integrate a qualitative picture of women's lives and women's political agency are inadequate (McLeod, 2002; Oxaal & Baden, 1997; Sepoe, 2000). Consequently, neither space nor voice has been given to PNG women in order to better explain and interpret the statistics. What the numbers fail to reveal is the significant role that women play in community politics.

Even if all women representatives' positions were filled within the OLPLLG structure, and even if all councils of women were established at the district and lower levels, would women's participation be genuine and meaningful? Would women become actors, creators and shapers in decisions that affect their lives (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001)? Would power and resources be redistributed? While government's rhetoric suggests that something is being done to increase women's participation, consultative initiatives and institutional machineries represent manipulative and tokenistic means of promoting participation (Arnstein, 1969).

Finally, while the women's movement in PNG persists in its struggle to be heard and to give women equal opportunity, their actions remain grounded within an accepted system. Initiatives are undertaken without questioning the dominant ideology, system, and structures. There is an absence of critical analysis of the top-down prescriptive macro-policies and programs, of patriarchy, of gender relations, and of power relations between Northern and Southern nations. The PNG 'gender and development' discourse remains one that is equated with women's issues, without a thorough appreciation for gendered representation, agency, choice and power.

Lee (1985) and Sepoe (2000) both call attention to a state-directed approach to women's development in an incomplete liberal democracy, which

> '[…] neither challenges existing gender relations or emerging class and political interests nor addresses the linkages between these areas which determine women's specific oppression in countries such as PNG' (Dickson-Waiko, 2003:102).

Furthermore, WID type activities, aiming to include women in development through the expansion of women-specific projects and thematic programming, together with WAD activities focusing on income-generating for women, prevail over gender analysis and gender mainstreaming.

Based on the characteristics and behaviors associated with oppression (Freire, 1996; Moane, 1999; Mullaly, 2002), one could infer that contemporary PNG women suffer from internalized oppression at individual, organizational and social levels. Oppression, either on the basis of gender, class, or colonial history, is neither acknowledged, examined, nor verbalized by PNG women's groups. Without a consciousness of oppressive forces, structural analysis can not take hold.

Action research and conscientization

The following intervention proposal is inspired by dependency and liberation theories, GAD, PAR, and social action. It promotes critical process-oriented mobilization and reflective actions at the grassroots level to increase political consciousness, minimize external forces, and validate women's roles in informal sectors. Through action research and conscientization, it questions the sources of inequalities within the dominant system, and seeks to address the unacknowledged experience of oppression by PNG women, and build local-based power towards lasting social change.

Equal participation in development cannot be achieved through nominal participation. Women must initiate and control their actions in order for their participation to be meaningful and transformative (Arnstein, 1969; Mayoux, 1995; Mohan 2002).

The intervention suggests that common assumptions about political participation and political agency need to be revised. Given the reality of contemporary rural PNG women's lives, their heavy workload, multiple responsibilities, and inadequate resource base, the sphere of community politics is a more practical and meaningful arena for women to participate in development and in decision-making (McLeod, 2002, Oxaal & Baden, 1997; Sepoe, 2000). However, women's participation through civil society is misconstrued and undervalued by the dominant system. Locating women's agency where women are most active, and acknowledging their roles and influences in community politics as a legitimate participation arena can set in motion an empowering course of action.

Consequently, a qualitative study of women's contributions in community politics - rather than focusing on the number of women in institutional politics - and of women's productive role in subsistence and small-scale or informal economy - rather than focusing on waged employment in a market economy – is called for. As Dame Kidu, the only woman Member of Parliament, stated at the 2003 Women In Politics Congress, we need to look beyond numbers, at how women are making a difference individually and collectively.

A Participatory Action Research methodology that integrates a pedagogical component, an empowering process, and an emancipatory goal, is recommended as a means to first unearth indigenous interpretations of political participation and locate women's agency. It is further suggested to explore the traditional and post-colonial gender roles and imbalances, and the structures

that reinforce them, in relation to the local cultural setting and the global socio-economic context. Overall, it should aim to facilitate a critical understanding of top-down prescriptive policies, of structural subordination, and of the patterns associated with internalized oppression.

A PAR practice rooted in liberation theories is used to break the silence by asking crucial questions about identity, about gender relations, about historical development in family, community and socio-political structures, and about the impacts of colonialism, development, and globalization (Hope & Timmel, 1984; Melanesian Trust, 2000).

The dominant banking education model, in line with colonial ideals, in which the 'teacher' deposits knowledge to passive receiving 'students', is replaced with a problem-posing educational model where 'participants' are critically co-investigating their realities as active subjects in a horizontal and participatory dialogue with the 'facilitator' (Freire, 1996; Pyrch, 2001). Under this model, the emphasis is on facilitating a process that is grounded in an analysis of oppression and domination, and that stimulates liberating and empowering actions at the personal, interpersonal and social level.

In an oral culture such as PNG, community-based participatory workshops using informal learning processes, visual tools that foster critical thinking, sharing of personal and collective stories, and interactive dialogue tools can provide important insights into the deconstruction of internalized oppression (Freire, 1996; Freire, 1983 cited in Absolon & Herbert, 1997; Hope & Timmel, 1984; Melanesian Trust, 2000). 'Storying', or the art of storytelling so commonly practised in PNG societies, if incorporated in semi-structured consciousness raising activities, can become a powerful tool to build personal strengths and interpersonal connectedness.

Once personal and interpersonal capacities and confidence have been tapped into and built upon at the grassroots level, regional alliances founded in people's power can be formed to initiate political action for social change. For this purpose, an appropriate model of social organizing may be found in Sepoe's networking approach described as an autonomous, decentralized, informal and non-hierarchical network system.

A word of caution is advised here. With the personal-political dialectic premise in mind, a liberation process must be conducted within the cultural setting in which it emerges. A western-type militant and adversarial approach to social change may not be appropriate in a Melanesian context. Furthermore, social activism may be expressed differently within PNG according to regional and ethnic divergences, just as conflict resolution customs in the Highlands differ from those of its coastal and islands neighbours. Consideration should also be given to safety, as some social action tactics may be met with violence and retaliation. PAR can facilitate the emergence of various forms of indigenous activism, based on locally defined claims for social justice which do not clash with local norms and values.

Other positive outcomes may derive from a consciousness-raising process with respect to leadership and power dynamics found within institutionalized women's groups. It can be anticipated that collective power within the women's community could eventually supersede the quest for personal power and prestige, resulting in enhanced team work, solidarity, and coalition building.

Rather than accessing rural population through the top-down OLPLLG administrative structure, the unit of intervention under this approach is referred to as a cluster of hamlets defined by traditional geo-cultural boundaries based on language group and historical benchmarks such as tribal relations and trading patterns (Author's communication with Dr. C. Levy, 2005[7]). Within this unit of intervention, existing women's groups, whether independent or affiliated to a network, are seen as an entry point for implementing the intervention strategies, for as long as their institutional affiliation does not prevent them from engaging in critical analysis.

However, the target of the intervention proposal is not restricted to women alone. Communities as a whole can contribute to, and benefit from, awareness raising and social change. The participation of men, women, young and old, in popular education activities on development for instance, can contribute to the development of an indigenous development paradigm. Additionally, awareness activities on gender-based violence and human's rights, if attended by both men and women, can positively alter gender relations.

Genuine Participatory Action Research is exceptionally time intensive and requires a long-term commitment of human and financial resources to be effective. Mass conscientization may take years to achieve. Since one cannot expect immediate measurable outcomes, the tasks of sourcing resources and sustaining the process over long periods within the limits imposed by poor infrastructure may become an overwhelming challenge. Additionally, the availability of women over lengthy periods of time may conflict with their daily activities.

Another fundamental concern is the question of how such a process may be initiated. Concerns about the role of the 'outside' facilitator need to be addressed. Conscientization initiated and facilitated by 'outsiders' must be carried and sustained through local ownership of the process. Working alongside local people, a facilitator is only a catalyst for engaging and empowering local people into the liberation process. Such action research should be conducted in conjunction with, and for, Papua New Guinean women, who act as advisors, co-researchers, development workers, policy planners, and active participants.

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[7] Dr. Catherine Levy is a linguist who has developed and implemented local language literacy programs with communities along the North Coast of Madang Province since the early 1990's.

Areas of knowledge building

Papua New Guinea has long been considered one of the last great frontiers on earth, and has attracted many anthropologists. If anthropological monographs depicting various aspects of Papua New Guinean societies abound, there are clear gaps in the literature concerning contemporary gender-based issues viewed from a critical development perspective.

First, development literature from and about the South Pacific region, and more specifically Melanesian countries, is limited when compared to other regions of the world. In the international development rhetoric, the South Pacific does not constitute a region of its own; rather, it is tagged onto Asia, its closest geographical neighbour. Aside from geographical proximity however, Melanesian countries have little in common with the Asian context.

Development literature and gender literature from and about Papua New Guinea is not only limited, but tends to originate in an order worldview and fails to provide sound avenues for change based on a thorough multi-level analysis. One of the prime examples is the recognition that church women's groups play an important role in civil society. Yet the analysis falls short of questioning the patriarchal and hierarchical underpinning of church institutions, and the impacts of missionization on traditional societies.

Finally, while there seems to be consensus on the barriers to women's participation in PNG, much is based on the rational empiricism of the West and on the limited conception of participation. The paucity of qualitative data on women's political participation and actions in PNG is compounded by the lack of a common definition of the concept of participation. The numerous disparities in the participation literature lead to challenges in locating it, and in evaluating its effects.

Recommendations on the grassroots intervention proposal have already been made concerning the need for qualitative studies and Participatory Action Research as a starting point for consciousness-raising. Those same recommendations apply in the context of indigenous knowledge building.

Qualitative research is needed to firstly review the broader conceptions of participation and development from an indigenous framework. Once this is completed, and based on the findings, research should focus on the investigation of grassroots women's participation and actions in development activities at the personal, interpersonal, community and social levels. The findings may be used towards the recognition and promotion of women's agency. Such studies can bridge the gap between micro, mezzo, and macro analysis and practice, and be built upon towards the development of relevant and effective strategies.

Finally, development workers and agencies may find such research findings of particular interest. With the current trend in logical framework and measurable outcomes, donor agencies are reluctant to fund development projects that are

process-oriented and based on misunderstood and poorly defined concepts, measures, and outcomes. Yet, donor-driven agendas are often perceived to be a contributing factor in the failure of development projects. Hence, grassroots-driven development proposals grounded in empirical research would stand a better chance of securing funding, which would in turn contribute to knowledge building.

New visions of participation and of development, based on the perspectives of Papua New Guinean women, could bring about an innovative path for the empowerment of women.

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