

## A case study of Mona's transition from secondary to tertiary education

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### Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore and document educational transition experiences for female students from secondary to tertiary education in PNG. A qualitative approach was used to gather data from twelve young women, six from urban settings and six from rural settings, in a university in PNG. Out of the twelve young women, one of the findings of a young woman, named 'Mona', making the transition was significant so it is presented as a case study. This study suggests that, to enable more women to make a successful transition to university, parental support, role modeling and cultural change are essential. This process will require the support and cooperation of all stakeholders.

**Key words:** educational transition, matrilineal, patrilineal, Papua New Guinea, cultural change

### Introduction

Overall, there are relatively low levels of education in Papua New Guinea, especially for women (Unesco, 2007). Women who are educated in PNG come mostly from coastal and urban areas. In these areas they may have better access to education because of easy access to schools and the increased likelihood of having socio-economic support from their families (Geissinger, 1997; King & Hill, 1993; Spark, 2010). Toliman (2000) and Weiner (1999) mention that women who come from matrilineal societies in PNG are given more opportunities to pursue their education than those in patrilineal societies. In a matrilineal society, a family's heritage (land, etc.) is passed on from mothers to daughters and women when they are married live on their land. Women are respected and given leadership roles for example, clan leaders in PNG.

In the patrilineal society a family's heritage moves down the male line. For example, Kewa (2007) said that "As a woman in this part of PNG [patrilineal society], I do not even own any land. I live my life at the mercy of my brothers, fathers, uncles" (p.18). Kewa (2007) has given very comprehension coverage of how women are treated in a male-dominated society, particularly the patrilineal society of PNG. As soon as a woman gets married, she leaves her family to live with her husband's clan. Women have less say in what is going on in the family unit and the wider community. Leadership roles and all decision making is dominated by males. Women are under-mined in PNG's patrilineal societies as compared to the country's matrilineal societies (Brouwer, Harris & Tanaka, 1998; Kewa, 2007). However, Dovona-Ope (2008) and Toliman (2000) have argued that educational opportunities for

women in both types of societies are slim because when it comes to decision making on who is going to school priority is given to males.

PNG's gender equity policy (Department of Education, 2003) calls for a fair representation of both genders in education. However, even with the introduction of the gender equity policy women are still under enrolled, underrepresented or outnumbered by males in education as well as job opportunities (Department of Education, 2003). In 1998 Brouwer and colleagues commented "The low enrolment of women at all levels means that this is not likely to improve dramatically over the next decade" (p. 34) and this has proved to be the case. The enrolment figures of women are still low compared to those of males at all levels of education (Education Statistics Office, 2005). The women experience challenges with their education because they tend to be overlooked or ignored by the education system and other immediate stakeholders. To enable support to be provided to assist more women to access tertiary education and to enable them to be successful when they are still studying it is important to understand more about the experiences of those women who are attending tertiary education setting in PNG. One aspect that seems of particular interest is the transition period itself as they move from school to tertiary education. Currently, education authorities and other immediate organisations may not be responding to and addressing women's issues of educational transition from secondary to tertiary level in PNG.

### **Literature review**

Every year women in PNG and other Melanesian countries are given the opportunity to participate in tertiary education through aid agencies such as Agency for International Development (AusAid) (Spark, 2010) and New Zealand Development Scholarship (NZAID). Akao (2008), Kilavanwa (2004) and Vali (2010) were examples of women benefitting from NZAID scholarships. Women are progressing in education and are competing with men in education even so the number is slowly increasing. Geissinger (1997) interviewed 27 educated women from PNG to find out the challenges they faced as educated women. Educated women in PNG face challenges both at home and at the workplace. A recent study by Spark (2010) in PNG examined case studies and identified the following challenges faced by educated women: male jealousy and anxiety about educated women as competitors, female jealousy and suspicion about educated women's opportunities and morality; active discrimination against women, including in relation to promotions, the provision of accommodation, and the opportunity for further study; the absence of formal childcare; and culturally entrenched notions about women's roles. (p. 28)

Despite the fact that women are educated they still are not free from humiliation and oppression in PNG society. Investigating women's leadership positions in three ethnic groups, New Zealand Maori, Pacifica and Melanesian, Strachan's (2009) qualitative study identified issues that affected women. Strachan, (2009) found that the potential of women engaging in educational

leadership positions started with women's and girls' access to education. If girls and women were able to complete tertiary education they were likely to find employment in the public and private sector and to earn leadership positions (Strachan, 2009). The factors that affect women's educational transition to higher education in PNG are discussed in the following sections.

### **Factors affecting the likelihood of women's transition to higher education**

#### *Socio-cultural effects on educational opportunities*

Dovona-Ope (2008) and Kewa (2007), writings from a feminist perspective, identified cultural factors and how they affect women's and girls'" educational opportunities in PNG. The socio-cultural backgrounds of all students affected their education but the female gender was most significantly affected in education at all levels (Strachan, 2009). "Being a woman in Papua New Guinea and "fighting" to gain education is a struggle in itself. Many women and girls in PNG today are compromising their education because of so many reasons" (Kewa, 2007, p. 55). One of the likely reasons is the cultural practices of PNG. Vali (2010) and Kewa (2007) both mentioned some examples of cultural barriers which continue to affect women in PNG. For example, women are seen as child-bearers and their role is to look after the household, they are bullied at school by males, forced to get married at an early age (marriages are arranged without first seeking consent from the girl), then work the gardens and look after their husbands and children. Summarising Kilavanwa's (2004) and Vail's (2010) research findings, they emphasised that it is seen as the man's job to work for the family to earn an income as he is considered to be stronger than a woman. The men, not the women, are recognised as the heads of the families, leaders and decision-makers. The men take part in public gatherings and in speech making, not women. Men can go out of the house and stay out for long hours without the women's consent, but not for women; they are expected to stay in the house. If women were to leave the house for whatever reasons without permission, when the husband finds out some women suffer the consequences, which in most cases lead to domestic violence (Kilavanwa, 2004; Vali, 2010). PNG's socio-cultural practices impact female students in education as early as primary school and later affect transition to tertiary education. Toliman (2000) in her conference paper on fighting cultural barriers in education observed that the inferiority of women was deeply entrenched in the cultural beliefs and practices of the people, and for that reason it was very difficult for females to pursue their education beyond the primary level.

#### *Socio-economic constraints*

Another obvious hindrance to education in PNG is socio economic factors. Dovona-Ope (2008) highlighted that the majority of the parents living in the rural areas and some in the settlements of the urban areas are less likely to be able to generate income for their families. The parents are claiming that there are few avenues and means of generating income for their families (Geissinger, 1997). In identifying parents' perception of socio-economic constraints, Gibson

and Rozelle (2004), Spark (2010) and Strachan (2009) found that sending children to school in PNG is a problem because many parents cannot afford school fees. Due to the inability of the family to generate sufficient income to meet the educational needs of all the children in the family, girls' education was overlooked and boys were given first priority. Geissinger (1997) in her qualitative study of girls' access to education in PNG revealed that most PNG female students tried their best to compete with others to find a placing at vocational schools but it was the school fee that constrained their enthusiasm. Similarly, Spark (2010) and Gibson and Rozell (2004) added that limited financial resources allowed boys to continue their education while girls' education was sacrificed. Women's and girls' education was not a major concern for families, particularly in rural areas, because parents' perception of educating girls was still culturally oriented where males are advantaged in most areas. According to Dovona-Ope, (2008): When the average income per family is very low, it places a considerable burden on many parents and guardians, despite government subsidies provided to assist parents with the cost of educating their children. To raise such amounts of money to pay for their children's school fees and other educational costs was often difficult for many families who were from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many parents represent 85% of the population who live in villages and survive on the subsistence economy or who live in urban settlement where the income per day is very small. (p.101). Drawing from various studies conducted in PNG, it is evident that lack of socio economic support from parents in PNG impacted the young women's access to education at all levels. Parental SES may have a more serious impact on educational choices for women in rural areas than in urban areas. Most parents living in urban centres in PNG have some means of paid employment, unlike the rural parents who depend mostly on cash crops and selling produce at the local markets (Toliman, 2000).

### **Rural and urban drawbacks**

It is significantly important to note that PNG has rural and urban areas and these contexts affect women and girls' education (Department of Education, 2002; Geissinger; 1997). Several authors have drawn attention to the effects of rural and urban settings on female students' educational transition at all levels of education in PNG (Geisinger, 1997; Toliman, 2000). In relation to education, the rural setting appears to be a drawback for girls and women's access to education (Department of Education, 2002). Young women who come from the very remotest rural settings of PNG are more disadvantaged than others who come from less remote areas because of not having access to schools, having to walk long distances and other social issues such as rape. (when girls are walking long distances to school) (Department of Education, 2002). Strachan (2009) emphasised that because parents see males as more able to put up with challenges while traveling to and from schools in the rural areas, and they were therefore privileged over females regarding educational opportunities. It therefore appears that the geographical features and make-up of the country combine with social practices and attitudes hinder females' education in rural PNG (Department of Education, 2002; Geissinger, 1997). The Department of Education (2002) has identified the problem of

inaccessibility as starting as early as primary school. As a result it affects all subsequent educational transitions. Furthermore, there were other reasons why rural parents were reluctant to send their daughters to school. They feared that when the girls were educated they might marry men from other cultures and would not come back and help their parents when they grow old. They also feared that their daughters might get pregnant and would not complete their education (Dovona-Ope, 2008).

### **Women role models**

Having role models motivated and encouraged women to enter the education system and study and complete their studies in the PNG context (Strachan, 2009). Strachan's (2009) intensive research in Educational leadership in the Melanesian context has identified the importance of women role models as part of the motivation and encouragement of women in educational leadership. Strachan (2009) mentioned that "Melanesian girls lack women role models in education, in politics and to a lesser extent, in the community" (p. 103). She also drew on the research of Kilavanwa (2004) on women principals in PNG, which showed that only one woman was a principal of a secondary school. In identifying women role models, Akao's (2008) and Vail's (2010) research on women educational leadership interviewed a number of inspiring women in leadership positions. Having such well-educated and successful career women in PNG and in the Solomon Islands had a positive effect on young women. The young women saw these women as role models and this impacted both their choice of and transition to tertiary education. Interestingly, most of these educated women are seen in the urban areas. Dovona-Ope (2008) reflected on her experiences of how her parents, especially her father, perceived that education encouraged him to send his children to school. She stated that she saw her father as role model; as some-one who inspired her in her education and career despite being a male in the PNG society. Dovona-Ope (2008) and Geissinger (1997) highlighted that in rural PNG young women were struggling to make a start in their lives. They needed role models to motivate them and to help change the views of their parents so that they could get an education similar to that available to their male counterparts in a male-dominated society.

The literature highlighted the factors that tend to impact and hinder young women and girls in education in the PNG context. These include socio-cultural barriers, socio-economic constraints and rural drawbacks. Nothing is said in the literature about educational transition for women in the PNG context and there is no research regarding students undertaking educational transition to tertiary education in PNG. Therefore, this prompted me to research young women's experiences of educational transition from secondary to tertiary education in PNG. The findings of this study can document the experiences of educational transition for women in higher educational institutions in PNG. The findings may also shed light on the underlying factors that affect rural and urban women in educational transition so that strategies can be developed to overcome the challenges.

## Research methodology

A qualitative approach was used to gather data from twelve young women, six from urban settings and six from rural settings, in a university in PNG. Semi-structured and focus group interviews were used, with a thematic approach for data analysis to provide a comprehensive knowledge of their experiences of educational transition. In analysing the themes it was clear that the students from the rural areas were disadvantaged when compared with the girls from urban settings. One participant, Mona, who came from a rural setting in one of the remotest places in PNG, stood out as someone whose experiences did not fit the trends that were evident both in the literature and some of the data from the other students. Despite many disadvantages Mona experienced a very positive transition, both from rural PNG to town/city life and from secondary school to the new challenges at university. This article presents her story as an illustrative case study to explore the experiences of a student like Mona, who had managed to succeed this far against the odds.

## Results and findings

Decision to come to university: Mona described her decision to choose university study.

*It is my decision to come to university, is like no one forced me. It is my own little secret, because I really wanted to come here. I didn't even...even though no-one informed me or gave me information about universities but through reading books and finding information about universities while in secondary school. I preferred to come to [name of university]. I decided to apply and come here. I liked taking up responsibilities and taking a lead in doing activities which were ignored by my peers. By engaging in extra activities I thought I could make it to university and take part in other activities different to what I was doing.*

When asked who inspired her, she stated that no-one inspired or motivated her to choose university studies. She was self-motivated to choose university study.

*No-one inspired me to come to university. Back at home no woman went beyond secondary schooling to attending a university. I was thinking secretly if the boys can go to university why not me or us girls? This raised my morale and gave me the strength and courage to do better. I am from [name of the district] in East New Britain and the village that I come from is [name of village]. It is on the boarder of [name of the provinces]. My village is very remote and inland. There is no one, especially females, coming to university. I am proud to be the first one to come to university. Even though no-one inspired or motivated or even supported me I made it to university. I worked hard, that is why I ended up here [name of university].*

After she was given the placing at the university her family had a lot to say to her. She was discouraged by her parents but her aunty persuaded her parents to allow her to study at the university.

*My parents really did not want me to come to university because they had these thoughts that women who came to university would find problems and bring problems back to the village. My parents were discouraged by those problems and did not support me. Problems like women getting involved with boyfriend relationships and unwanted pregnancy. These were issues that did not happen in the village. While I was going to school I was living with an aunty. She observed my behaviour and knew I could make it to university. She trusted me and encouraged me to continue my education. She made my parents give me the opportunity to study here [university]. Without her I would not be here. My aunty was uneducated but she knew I can make it as I have faith in Christ. She knew I would have a better life in the future. I was proud with what my aunty did for me. I am just proud of myself ...as she told me something good about myself...when she backed me up. My aunty knew I had the qualities to perform better and succeed. She motivated me and gave me the courage and encouragement to come here [university].*

Description of the physical set-up of the two learning environments: Mona's first impression of the new learning environment was very positive, despite it being very different to what she was used to.

*Comparing this university environment with the previous setting that I came from, I think this is bigger. The environment is attractive, inviting and educational. When I first entered the school [university] I was happy and I felt that I would learn good things and gain more knowledge in this new learning environment because of the facilities. I was happy just to get away from my rural setting to an urban setting. I was not worried, I was happy. It is a pleasure being here.*

Mona described and compared the learning resources at university and school.

*In my previous learning environment the classrooms were all, rotting, run down and not conducive to learning. The library books were also not updated. The learning environment at the university is fully equipped with latest resources like computers, internet and books. In the old setting not all the computers worked. Most of the time students did not attend computer lessons because not enough computers were available. This is the reason why I am not good with computing skills. I lack the most important skill in learning at the university.*

Mona was keen to describe her previous teaching environment at the secondary school as lacking resources to teach. The teachers though they were qualified, she felt did not carry out their responsibilities seriously. She recalled that student behaviour was not good and that teachers showed signs of retaliation by not teaching properly. This was different to what she experienced at the university.

*We had well qualified teachers at the secondary level but from my observation they never taught us properly to get knowledge across. Every time they came to class they showed signs of anger and disrespect towards the students. For example, in our mathematics class we used to hate our mathematics teacher because he never taught us properly. He used to give exercises to do and never explained activities properly for students to fully understand what he was trying to bring across. He could just give us activities and could leave anytime he wanted to. When students went to him for clarification on certain mathematics questions he would tell us to find answers to the problems ourselves. Teachers did not have enough teaching materials and resources to teach. On the other hand, student behaviour was not good and teachers took advantage of that and did whatever they thought would punish the students. Here at the university the teaching environment I would say is very nice, better than at the previous school. Lecturers are friendly and kind, they talk to us nicely and make us feel relaxed and that we want to learn. Lecturers are prepared to impart knowledge to students with the help from resources provided by the university.*

Teaching styles in the two learning environments: Mona observed that the teaching style, the methods and the approaches taken by teachers of the two institutions to impart knowledge to students were quite different. She said that teacher-centred approach was applied in secondary school while student teacher-centred approach was used at the university.

*In our secondary schools the teachers used text-books to give us schoolwork while the teachers used to teach in front. The text-books were available for us to follow through and there were enough books for everyone. Additional handouts were given to help us. Teachers guided us and helped us to learn. They gave and checked homework regularly, especially subjects like biology and chemistry, though not mathematics. The mathematics teacher only put mathematics answers on the board without further discussing answers with the students. If students had problems with mathematics, they would answer the questions themselves or we would go to other teachers for help. The teachers from the previous school did not teach us properly, their facial expressions showed that they hated students. Tests were given at the end of units covered for each subjects. A teacher-centred approach was used in secondary school. I am very happy to be here [at*

*university] because the teachers are very helpful. When teaching they talk kindly to us and make us feel comfortable and this motivates students to learn. They do lecturing most of the time and tell us to do more research to find answers to assignment questions. They provide encouragement by advising us and provide counselling that concerns students' behaviour and about other activities that we should not get involved in, for example getting drunk or involved in boy-girl relationships.*

However, despite finding the lecturers helpful, Mona noted that she experienced some difficulty adapting to the learning styles at the university. She found the way the lecturers were teaching was confusing and she was slow in understanding their tone of voice and the usage of the English language.

*For the past six weeks I did not fully get what the lecturers were lecturing and talking about. I am still adapting. I am trying my best to understand the lecturers and my colleagues too. Sometimes they go too fast. The way they speak English is not what I am used to.*

Before she came to university Mona had no idea what it would be like. She came to university unprepared. It was a new and surprising experience for her.

*No one told me anything about university life. I had not heard about university life before so I was not prepared to move from secondary to tertiary education. I moved to university with less knowledge of what it would be like here at [name of university]. It is a new experience that is full of surprises for me.*

Transitional experiences: Mona said the main challenge she faced at the university was essay writing. She said that she lacked understanding of essay questions and was discouraged when materials like books were unavailable.

*I have difficulty with essay writing as we did not do much at the secondary level. I am trying my best to catch up with the assignments that are given to me. There are all given through essay writing. The main challenge is essay writing. It is difficult to understand the essay questions and then writing the assignment. There are also fewer resources like books as there are too many students enrolled in the same course. Whoever goes to the library before other students gets most of the books and those who go later miss out on relevant books. We access online resources but we need books too ...to use as references. I feel discouraged, like I am not doing my work. I really need those resources too like books to complete one essay before completing others. Most books should be put in the library that caters for the students' demand.*

Mona said that she overcame the transitional challenges by talking to her friends. She did not ask lecturers to help her and it was not surprising that she did not contact her parents, given the background that she came from.

*To overcome these challenges sufficient books should be made available according to the number of students. I did ask senior students" one of my course mates who is a second year student. I read about essay writing and that helps me a bit. I do not talk to my lecturers about my problems because I have difficulty communicating with them. They are more qualified and I have difficulty approaching them. My parents live in the rural areas. They are uneducated. They do not know what it is like at the university. It is difficult for me to contact them as they have no access to telephones and mobile phones. I did contact them through letter but it takes a while before the letter reaches them. I do call my uncle but it is expensive. I talk to my friends, and most of them ...showed me samples of their essays, making it easy for me to understand the essay formats.*

Mona said that she made friends and belonged to several social groups which included both genders. She stressed that it was fun to share ideas with them and she felt that she had a sense of belonging.

*In [name of university] three weeks ago I joined Legion of Mary, a religious group. I am a member of [name of province] cultural group. I have lots of girlfriends from Madang, Morobe and Sepik. At school I have male friends, especially my class mates they are all my friends. I am not in a relationship with any one of them. I am so scared to establish a boyfriend relationship with the boys. I joined these groups to tell stories and share ideas in class. When it concerns group presentation and group work we work collaboratively and do presentations. We also discuss given assignments and do them individually. Practically, I find it fun and exciting when I talk to someone or anyone. It makes me feel happy as I know I belong to a group.*

General feelings about the transition: Mona generally felt that she tried her best to settle into university programmes. She said she would decide at the end of the year whether it was successful or not.

*I think ...I am still trying to work out whether it is good or bad. Probably at the end of the year I will decide whether it is successful or not. At this time it is difficult for me to decide. At the moment I am doing ok. I am getting along well with friends by talking and chatting. I would say it is successful when I perform academically well. Generally the transition is challenging, exciting and full of surprises.*

The University's support: Mona stated that the university supported her in this transition by providing the learning resources and the university-wide orientation programs to introduce students to certain teaching and learning resources.

*There was an orientation program in the first week and all the HODs talked to the students. The students were introduced to the department staff. Other ancillary staff from the library and IT talked to the students. It was an introductory session.... I think I am already a university student and I feel I should know what I am supposed to do. I have to know all these things like academic writing stuff previously before coming to the university. I should not have difficulty here. The university has provided computers and library for students to use. I use the library and the internet to access information to complete assignments. Additional information for personal knowledge is also obtained through reading books.*

### **Summary**

Mona was the fifth child in a family of eight members. She had come from a rural setting in PNG and had succeeded, against the odds, to make the transition to university. As a female and rural student, she represented underrepresented groups of students studying at the university. Her desire to come to university was encouraged by her aunt when her parents were against the idea of her going to university for cultural reasons. Some rural parents are afraid that they will lose their daughters through education. Despite all the adverse cultural factors, Mona was given the opportunity to study at the university.

Mona's arrival at the university was welcomed by the university's set up and the modern learning facilities provided by the university. She was excited and motivated to experience life at the university without worrying about the challenges. It was Mona's first exposure to a lot of new changes in terms of her life in urban PNG compared to her rural background. The changes and challenges affected her sense of self in the many different roles she played during the transition. She encountered challenges during the transition process but these did not affect her motivation to learn. Her own motivation, determination, perseverance and enthusiasm to learn combined with her interpersonal relationships with others played a significant role in her learning and achievement of goals over time. Mona obtained help, advice and encouragement from friends to sustain her transition to university. The resources for example, knowledge and skills she obtained from others were the sign posts that she used to negotiate her transition to university. It was highlighted in this case study that an individual's positive personal characteristics interacting with the resources provided by the environment fosters developmental changes in individuals and achievements of long-term goals. This was what happened to Mona which enabled her to make a successful transition from secondary to tertiary education.

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