Practical Notes

Women's groups for whom? The colonisation of women's groups in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

Women's desks have long been a feature of the political machinations of most developing country governments and are often seen as a strategic move in gaining access to the international funding which is available for women-specific activities and projects (del Rosario 1995). But despite the conceptual shift from women in development (WID) to gender and development (GAD), gender issues still tend to get distilled down to 'the women project' (White 1994; Harrison 1995). Within this depoliticised environment, women's groups are seen by international donors as the principal means of 'dealing with the issue of gender' (Harrison 1997:127). Often, this special focus is viewed as an opportunity for women to 'catch up' with men in having access to social and economic development opportunities. Yet important questions arise: Women's groups on whose terms? Whose interests do these groups actually serve? Are women's longer term strategic interests relinquished to the shorter term personal gains that accrue from membership in these groups?

This paper explores these questions in the context of a women's network in Papua New Guinea (PNG), and from my own association with such a network in West New Britain province. The Gloucester District Women's Council (GDWC) had become the central focus of the WID component of the Kandrian-Gloucester Integrated Development Project (KGIDP), a joint AusAid and PNG government venture. My association came just after the KGIDP and reflects a mere snapshot of the women's organisational history. It is when this snapshot is 'repositioned' within the historical context of most women's groups vis-à-vis the state, and with current development concerns with participation and gender, that trends begin to emerge upon which we should reflect.

The project

The KGIDP sought to provide 'substantial capital input' into an area recognised as disadvantaged, isolated, and less developed than other parts of the country. It would do this by increasing household incomes and improving the delivery of social services (AusAid 1997a:vii). This area was also considered by the provincial government to have considerable development potential through revenues earned from logging. The project's life-span was officially from 1993 to 1997, preceded by a protracted planning and design phase that began in the late 1980s with the request from the provincial government for technical assistance in preparing an area development strategy. During this phase, extensive studies were conducted, including an in-depth baseline survey and a gender mainstreaming and women's programme analysis. However, owing to the unwieldy nature of the project
components and the time pressure from increased logging activity (operations were already underway in 10 of the 15 forest areas of Kandrian-Gloucester), a ‘sense of urgency pervaded the project design and inception process’ (AusAid 1997a:2). Many of the project components and issues were downgraded. Among these, a community planning approach and gender mainstreaming were abandoned in this perceived ‘state of emergency’. This coincided with the second phase (1994–1995), in which the project was effectively suspended both by AusAid and the provincial government, pending restructuring. In the final phase (1995–1997), the project shed five of its 13 original components to focus upon those activities falling under forestry, the environment, agriculture, construction, health, ‘WID’, and management. This was intended to direct financing into the components which ‘had a chance of lasting success’ (AusAid 1997a:3), and also coincided with the targeting of the women’s network for project assistance.

The women and their network had a specific role to play as participants of a WID programme that aimed at ‘reducing inequality and fostering the inclusion of women in the planning and implementation of programmes and other activities in West New Britain’ (AusAid 1997a:8). These objectives were to be achieved through strengthening the network of women’s groups and councils, building a resource centre and a guest house, training and awareness activities focusing on family life issues, village sewing and baking projects, and a trial credit scheme. Despite the aim to include women in the other project components, few did involve them in their planning and implementation owing to ‘cultural and social impediments’ (AusAid 1997a:19).

The women

The Kandrian-Gloucester region encompasses many diverse cultural groups, each with their own language, customs, and social mores. These groups share their remoteness—both physical and symbolic—from the more developed regions of West New Britain and Papua New Guinea. While there are some variations in gender roles, generally men are the principal decision makers as well as dominating most political and ritual activities. The women, owing to their subordinate position and their preoccupation with their traditional productive and reproductive responsibilities, are generally less ‘accessible’. They are not easily able to gain access to new economic opportunities such as those offered by logging or by a major integrated development project.

Many of the women in this region have had the opportunity to join women’s clubs and groups since colonial rule. Often, these were set up under the direct supervision of government welfare officers or church leaders—all men—with the intention of assisting women to become better wives and mothers as based on the ‘European housewife ideal’ (Lee 1985:224). These village-level groups could thus be used by the women to signal modernity while at the same time maintaining the image of good Christians and citizens. This ‘domesticating’ role was then the only one available to women since, with the concurrent missionisation and colonisation of PNG, women were excluded from a whole range of colonial institutions.

With independence in 1975, plans were made to end the ‘grosser forms of colonial dictation’ (Lee 1985:223). The rhetoric of the time called for a rapid increase in the equal and active participation of women in all forms of economic and social activity. Women’s groups were seen as a practical strategy to achieve this end and, as such, have undergone a series of restructurings post-independence, the latest being the Organic Reforms of 1996. Ideally, these groups are viewed as ‘the voice for women in the province, in the absence of women in
decision-making positions especially in provincial parliaments' (Nakikus et al. 1991:43). Others are less optimistic, seeing the historical precedents as an ‘unhelpful legacy’: a model of women’s advancement based on the baking of scones and the embroidering of pillowcases (Schoeffel 1983, in Lee 1985:223).

As part of this ‘practical strategy’, the government set up a ‘non-government’ structure of women’s councils. West New Britain, like the other 18 provinces of PNG, has a Provincial Council of Women (PCW). The women’s groups are theoretically clustered together within their respective regions (district women’s councils) and come under the PCW umbrella which in turn falls under, and is meant to function as, the ‘action arm’ of the National Council of Women (NCW). Women’s issues are jointly shared by the Women’s Division of the Department of Religion, Home Affairs and Youth (DRHAY), and the NCW. This superstructure, considered by some to be bureaucratic and unnecessarily complex, varies between provinces in the degree to which it is operational; in many cases, the provincial structure is largely theoretical. There are some examples of sustained collective action by women’s councils, the most notable being the East New Britain Council of Women, but these are the exceptions which prove the rule.7 In the case of West New Britain, the KGIDP took the opportunity to revive what was a largely conceptual network and chose to focus on the Gloucester District Women’s Council.8

### A repositioning

While the women’s groups and their network have gone on much the same since their inception in the late 1970s to their juncture with the KGIDP, development priorities have shifted. In the late 1990s, themes of popular participation and concerns with gender equity, among other priorities, have been adopted, incorporated, manipulated, and ignored to varying degrees by development actors—whether the state, the donor agency, or the beneficiaries themselves. These concepts, through their ‘variety, complexity and flexibility’ (Harrison 1995) leave them open to interpretation. What should be viewed as conceptual strengths may, in fact, be vulnerabilities.

As Harrison (1995:39) states, ‘[g]ender is often portrayed as a technical concept which, if only better understood, could be integrated into the planning process. However, an understanding of gender issues from a feminist perspective introduces questions of power, control of resources, and conflict which are potentially challenging and certainly difficult to deal with.’ Development practitioners tend to shy away from such complexities and challenges preferring instead their ‘simple principles’ and ‘methodological tools’ (ibid.).

Participation is also elusive to define and contain. As with gender and the green movement, the mainstreaming of participation has imposed its price: ‘[i]ncorporation, rather than exclusion, is often the best means of control’ (White 1996:6). Table 1 demonstrates the ‘diversity

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Table 1: Interests in participation
of form, function and interests’ (ibid.:7) which participation can take.

Participation may be and mean many things for many people at once, including the project beneficiaries. As Pigg (1992) argues, the discourse of development is appropriated by local people who may reinterpret it, but whose connection through its reinterpretation still grounds it in the international institution from which it originates. With the adoption of these development catchwords and phrases that can become potentially strategic sources of wealth, power and upward mobility ‘[e]veryone wants a piece of the development pie’ (Pigg 1992:511).

When the veneer of gender and participation is peeled away, and their meanings and interpretations problematised, repositioning women’s groups within these frameworks suggests trends which should also be questioned. They suggest that women’s groups, by their single-sex nature, take the sting out of any type of gender analysis. A conscious shift from ‘gender relations’ to ‘women’s issues’ becomes possible and simple principles and tools can then be applied in this depoliticised environment, free of ‘cultural and social impediments’. For participants of the KGIDP, this has meant that the discourse of gender could firstly be moulded by the donor to fit its methodological tools and time constraints and then translated into the personal strategies of the beneficiaries. The result, while still connected through the appropriation of the term(s), bears little resemblance to a feminist understanding of gender analysis.

Further, when we apply the diversity of form, function, and interests that participation can take to the GDWC, it presents a simplified ‘picture’, useful for this discussion, of the variety of meanings of participation for the development actors acting upon and through this women’s association.

For the government, the existence of women’s groups in West New Britain province may serve to demonstrate that it is ‘doing something’ for women. Its interest in women’s participation may be construed as legitimisation. Perhaps also in a country as diverse and geographically challenging as PNG, women’s groups may serve a more instrumental function, representing, as it were, unification across cultures and regions. This may not be unrealistic given that women’s groups were previously used by missionaries as a ‘civilising’ or ‘domesticating’ tool. In addition, it is assumed that women have an innate inclination to work together while men are not ‘arranged’ in this way. There is rarely, in PNG or elsewhere, any mention of ‘men’s groups’ unless these have a productive purpose such as those associated with a farmers’ group or a business guild. Groups, it appears, are seen as the natural medium of women, not men, and the means or ‘special focus’ from which women can ‘catch up’ with men.

Why do women go along with this? It may serve their personal interests of inclusion. This network of groups has existed in a nominal, not a functional, sense. The women on the council of the GDWC were not particularly concerned with the nuances of the women’s network, its function, or even the reason for its existence. They all, however, appeared pleased that it existed. It was an opportunity for them personally to gain access to power and status, however limited. These women were closer to the top end of a provincial structure that expanded exponentially down to the village-level mama groups, each properly constituted with elected officers. This allowed some women to hold several titles simultaneously or to exchange their title at the annual election. The groups and their office holders may have largely been intended for display, by both the government and the women. The fact that an international donor, AusAid, took particular interest in their network further legitimised their importance.

With the injection of donor interest, the women’s personal strategies of gaining access to symbolic resources were expanded upon to include physical ones. Resources

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were built for them (a guesthouse and various resource centres), given to them (drum ovens and sewing machines), and loaned to them through the trial credit scheme. In my conversations with them, the women were very enthusiastic about this period in their history. It had been fun—a luxury even—in their otherwise daily struggles. At no time was it suggested in our initial discussions that their struggles could actually be taken up by the network, that these networks were the ‘voice’ of women in the region.

Even the credit scheme, an opportunity for enhancing women’s status through an independent source of income (AusAid 1997b), did not achieve its objectives in any straightforward manner. In many cases, the women would quite openly request loans on behalf of their husbands or other family members. In one instance that I witnessed, a young woman looked furtively back at her father for the ‘answer’ when questioned by the credit officer as to the productive use of the loan. Everyone in the room, including the credit officer, knew who the intended recipient was. Perhaps understandably so as *bisnis* (business) was a relatively new concept to these isolated subsistence farmers and fisherfolk. *Bisnis* was also largely seen as men’s business. Very little had appeared to challenge this belief, certainly not the WID component of the KGIDP.

Finally, the role of the donor agency must also be examined. In White’s framework (1996), AusAid has disturbed the equilibrium that had been maintained between the government ‘doing something for’ women, and the women, through collaborating with the government, enjoying some limited prestige and power. Disrupting the status quo may not necessarily be viewed negatively in this scenario, but in bequeathing assets to this geographically challenged and functionally marginal network, were unrealistic assumptions made on their behalf? Where once this women’s network had a nominal form—serving their personal interests of inclusion, and the government’s of display—it is now expected to perhaps be more representative or transformative in nature, serving as a means to women’s empowerment through ownership, both symbolic and physical. With the pulling out of the KGIDP, the women are now expected to own their association, collectively manage a guesthouse, generate income, and manage a credit scheme. Clearly, many assumptions have been made about their willingness and ability to do this.

Conversely, the donor may not have grappled with these complexities of participation. It had a WID programme to deliver in the most efficient and expedient manner possible in light of the perceived project environment and its own ‘sense of urgency’. The women’s network presented itself as a natural receptacle for women’s issues and women’s projects. The donor was in a position to decide ‘who’ would participate—women—and in what form that participation (perhaps also meant for display) would take. Dealing with women in a compartmentalised manner and within ‘acceptable’ limits bounded by their traditional productive and reproductive functions served the interests of this group of development actors.

**Conclusion**

Women’s groups in PNG often came into existence under the influence of colonial rule and as an adjunct to the Church. Some 20 years later, their vulnerability to colonisation by other development actors remains an issue for these groups exactly because of their ambiguity of function and purpose. Despite this ambiguity, and in spite of the women subsuming a passive role in the face of the state and the donor, the women themselves are not without their own individual strategies for accumulating symbolic as well as real resources. However, ‘[this] is a strategy that is only open to a handful of women, whose position in society depends on the fact that prevailing patriarchal gender relations are continued’ (Von Bulow 1995, cited in Harrison 1997:124).
On the surface, everyone—the state, the donor agency, and those handful of women—appears to benefit from this development approach to ‘doing something for’ women. Indeed, it is a very comfortable sphere from which to operate. The state, in its masculinism, can shrink away from any radical redefinitions of women’s position, avoiding any claims women may have vis-à-vis men’s vested interests. As Nakikus et al. (1991) state, ‘[m]ale attitudes within the [PNG] bureaucracy are generally negative towards increasing women’s access to resources and information in a significant way’ (my emphasis). Women’s groups, when marginalised from the mainstream systems, are not viewed as ‘significant’ by the state.

Nor need the donor concern itself with approaches that seek to alter social relations between men and women through a redistribution of power. Although the donor may bear good intentions for the enhancement of women’s status through various women-specific activities, assets, and programmes, this improvement is looked at as something that can occur in isolation from men, a sort of ‘win-win’ approach to gender relations. Simply put, women’s groups, free of ‘cultural and social impediments’, fit the donor’s WID agenda. However, in so doing, they may also have reinforced the colonial ‘drop scone and embroidered pillowcase’ legacy, leaving women with a sense that this is the only purpose of a women’s group, that there is no other.

The only actors that appear to pay the long-term costs of this approach are the women themselves. These ‘spaces for women’ have been used, in a sense, as spaces to confine. Gender sensitivity has not been decentralised with the introduction of the Organic Reforms. Resource constraints inhibit gender awareness and training plans at the provincial and district level (Fleming 1996). In West New Britain province, this has meant that the districts of Kandrian and Gloucester continue to have men as the Community Development Coordinator under DRHAY, and that positions such as the Provincial Women’s Coordinator have been abolished under provincial administrative restructuring. Even the newly created local government ‘women’s representative’ position is, in one case, filled by a man. As the AusAid completion report itself concludes, ‘the project was able to achieve little in successfully challenging entrenched biases in the public administration of the province’ (AusAid 1997a).

Another preliminary conclusion, and one based largely on anecdotal evidence, suggests that by simply existing, women’s groups in PNG have continued to aid and abet this masculine tradition within the provincial and district governments. With the new Organic laws, the absence of women in decision-making positions is even planned for, further legitimising and reinforcing this view. At the same time, the National Council of Women (NCW) and its superstructure of provincial groups continue to come under tremendous criticism. Recommendations for the NCW, PCWs, and district councils almost always take the form of the need for more ‘capacity building’, providing an escape valve for other government departments in their inability to work with women. In this way, women are seen as a ‘women’s problem’. Yet women’s groups right up to the NCW tend to operate from separate and unequal spheres of influence, which marginalise them still further from the mainstream. The emphasis is always on women and what they must do to integrate themselves into the development process, never on the process itself. Until the process itself is examined, male gender identities and roles will remain unexamined. And women in Papua New Guinea will have women’s groups.

Notes
1 The women later changed their name to the Gloucester Women’s Association. This was seen (it is uncertain by whom) to be a more appropriate name for their
new business ‘ventures’. For consistency, I will use their original name, the Gloucester District Women’s Council (GDWC).

2 Although the goals of the WID programme included fostering the inclusion of women in the planning and implementation of programmes and other activities, the GDWC did not receive project assistance until the last year, owing to a lack of commitment from DRHAY and other organisations involved in the project (AusAid 1997b).

3 The Kandrian and Gloucester regions together comprise about two-thirds of the area of West New Britain province. Large-scale oil palm and coconut palm production dominate West New Britain’s industry, but have had little influence upon development in Kandrian and Gloucester.

4 Despite variations, few societies in Melanesia had any traditional women’s groups. These may not have developed because of inter-group rivalry, with a woman’s primary loyalty being to her own and her husband’s kin (Lee 1985).

5 This mirrored their traditional positions at the clan and village level where women were also excluded from taking an active part in political and decision-making activities. This is not to say, however, that women were without agency: they could use their key roles in production and their intermediary positions in the kinship system (as in-marrying wives) to influence events.

6 Very broadly, the Organic Reforms are a restructuring of government to decentralise a wide array of political institutions.

7 Of 19 provinces, there are only two regularly cited examples of ‘successful’ women’s councils, that of East New Britain and, to a lesser degree, East Sepik. However, even in East New Britain, where the women have mobilised and challenged the status quo, they have risked having their funds cut off by irate male officials (Lee 1985), which raises doubts about this model.

8 The KGIDP was unable to work effectively with the Kandrian equivalent of the GDWC because of in-fighting among the women in this region.

9 Here I refer to women’s groups that have emerged to meet development goals, or are religiously inspired, not to those formed for explicitly feminist reasons and purposes.

10 Although this does not appear to be so in the case of the Kandrian District Women’s Council where even promises of donor assets could not bring the women together.

11 This appears to be corroborated by the women themselves who did not particularly care which executive position they held as long as they held one. Also, when I asked one executive member (coincidentally, the Local Level Government’s Women’s Representative), why there was a women’s group/network, she could not explain it except to say that they were there to observe National Women’s Day.

12 It could be argued that this trial credit scheme did not achieve its objectives by either financial or impact criteria, with a 90 per cent business failure rate as well as very poor repayment levels (McDowell 1998).

13 Given this analysis, it is interesting to note that AusAid denied a request from the GDWC for six months of operational funds (US$5,000) just six months after the KGIDP had finished and the GDWC was facing bankruptcy. None of the KGIDP’s intended income-generating strategies for the GDWC had proven feasible. Expenditures for the entire project had been approximately US$9.5 million.

References

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Gender impact assessment

Susan Johnson

Why assess gender impact?

Although women are increasingly being targeted in microfinance and microenterprise projects, this does not necessarily mean that gender relations are being taken into account. Rather, targeting women raises a host of questions about the context in which women are operating their businesses or handling finance. These questions need answering if we wish to understand whether women are able to use the services and make the anticipated improvements in their livelihoods (Mayoux 1998).

No intervention can have neutral effects when the players do not start as equals. Gender relations themselves affect a project’s ability to deliver the outcomes and impact that it proposes. Gender awareness in impact assessment starts from recognising that a project will always affect men and women differently. Women face a variety of obstacles or constraints to taking and repaying credit, starting up and developing their businesses, and responding to policy incen-