

Gender and perceptions of political power in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

It is extremely difficult to generalise about any group of people in a country as socially and geographically diverse as Papua New Guinea (PNG). As have women everywhere, the women in PNG have had different life experiences, but they do have one thing in common: they are one of the most disadvantaged groups in their society.

In October 2001, the Women in Politics symposium was held in Madang. The main focus of the seminar was to encourage women to stand for the local-level government elections, as well as the national elections that were being held simultaneously. There was a determination among the women who attended — the 2002 election was going to be the turning point for them. Women seemed more united and focused than ever.

However, as the 2002 election results unfolded, it became clear that women's representation in national politics had not improved. As a facilitator at the symposium in Madang, I had the opportunity to meet women who had contested previous elections and those who were intending to be candidates in 2002. It is through their voices that I was able to obtain a picture of women's growing interest in being involved in politics prior to the 2002 election, despite the almost insurmountable problems they faced (several of their comments are cited in this article).

Culture, custom and power relationships

The most common explanation given for why women in Papua New Guinea are not recognised as equals in the society is 'cultural factors', or the term more commonly used in the Pacific, 'custom' or 'pasin bilong mipela'. Custom is a very important part of PNG society and even for those who have received a Western education or who live mainly in the urban areas, there is little escape from what is considered customary ways. They take on an almost sacrosanct significance and anyone who dares to ignore them is soon ostracised.

Women spoke to me of the importance of culture in their lives, and the need to feel a sense of belonging, yet they were critical of the way in which men are using culture as an excuse to do what they consider is good for themselves. Custom has been deployed by political elites for their own particular purposes. 'Anything that appears to be of great antiquity can be portrayed as carrying greater authority in the present' (Lawson 1997:2). This criticism is not of tradition as such, but rather of the way in which the idea of tradition is sometimes used in the South Pacific. Because something

is considered of traditional significance, its preservation is automatically perceived as essential. In this way, democracy is often viewed as being embedded in the West, when in fact it is a relatively new concept.

Many women in PNG view tradition or culture to be unchangeable, and therefore accept the subordinate role as inevitable. Kanjaljit Soin argues that 'when women believe that differences in status are part of the "natural order of things", they are less likely to challenge how society is organized to benefit men more than women' (Soin 1998:10). In the 1980s, PNG's parliament hotly debated whether to make wife-beating a crime under the Criminal Code. A number of members denounced the bill, arguing they had paid bride price and therefore had the right. Lady Kidu, member for Port Moresby South, encountered a similar reaction in the October 2001 sitting of parliament when she tried to have a private member's bill on rape in marriage accepted in parliament. The reaction of many members was that what occurred in the home was not the concern of anyone else.

Yet there are many women in PNG, who are not prepared to accept this attitude any more, and groups such as the National Council of Women and Women in Politics are encouraging women to vote for a candidate of their own choice, who will be sympathetic to women's issues (Hopkos 2000). Through the determination of politicians such as Lady Kidu, the whole package of legislation on rape, sexual assault, child sexual protection, and new rules of evidence — particularly for women and children — was passed in the last sitting of the national parliament prior to the 2002 election. One woman spoke of how much her culture meant to her:

Culture has played an important part in my life as I feel I have to have my roots; otherwise, I would be someone without a tribe . . . I value the customs and even though I am exposed to the gender concept at the same time, as a traditional woman, I also embrace my culture, because it maintains peace and harmony in our society.

Yet, the culture being referred to here is very different today from what it was 50 or even 25 years ago. Traditional cultures are being abused and the essence of culture is being changed. This view is supported by Sarah Garap, when she writes of the plight of women and girls in the Simbu province: 'There can be little doubt that women in Papua New Guinea society today are viewed and treated differently than their female ancestors were. However, it is hard to unravel genuine tradition from myth' (Garap 2000:162).

Women are becoming more and more aware that the custom that they value and respect is not the same today as it was when they were young. Women were respected in the society as wives and mothers and this gave them a certain amount of 'power', maybe not as a spokesperson but as a decision maker and a force behind the men in her household. Anthropological research (Barlow 1995, Fergie 1995, Maschio 1995) on the traditional role of women supports the view that women in many parts of the country used to have more power in their society than they have today.

It is important to note here that the traditional concept of power has a very different meaning to that of the modern sense of the word, which denotes political or economic control. The whole concept of politics, as it is practised in PNG today, is a foreign import. That is probably why politics has become so dysfunctional, and why the western concept of majority rule has taken on a completely different meaning there.

Colonisation, development and women's power

Colonisation and development have been major contributors to the decline in the status of women. The missionaries, with their Christian family models, where a woman's primary role is that of a wife and mother, may have added to this (Drage 1994, Wormald 1994). Certain aspects of modernisation, such as education and health services, liberated women, but issues of development altered their power. Women were excluded from taking a role in public affairs.

Post-independence governments, despite paying lip service to gender and development policies and being signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have also pursued development strategies that do not have a great deal to do with gender equity (Connell 1997). Instead, they have promoted male dominance in politics and used culture and tradition to legitimise their actions. As a consequence, women have been excluded from major decision making, and issues of importance to women have been ignored.

Religion and women's power

Despite the role that religion has played in the demise of women's power, many consider the women's fellowships that they belong to as a central factor in their advancement as leaders within their communities. They are grateful for the educational opportunities that the mission has given them, the encouragement they received to pursue higher education, and the many employment opportunities in mission schools or health centres. Many women believe the roles they have played on church committees have given them valuable leadership experience and confidence. Their faith in God also has given them the strength to put themselves forward in politics despite the odds against them. Some women consider strong a Christian commitment to be a prerequisite for any aspiring politician.

One woman from the ethnic group Motu-Koita (centred in the heart of Port Moresby, the national capital) believes that the women in her area are more interested in church activities and they try 'to push politics away'. However, she thinks they do believe in using their influence with the men, while letting the men be the leaders. One woman said:

We do not have the desire or challenge to enter politics, unlike the sisters I have seen at this symposium. It has really taken my attention to see how involved the women here are in local-level government and community affairs and their aspirations of going into the political arena. On my side they are more involved in church-oriented activities. I have learnt a lot from this symposium with these women attending.

Women and political power

Yet women are becoming more and more convinced of the necessity to be represented in the national government. A man I interviewed in Port Moresby summed up the feeling:

I think there is just the need for a woman's point of view; a man can never do that no matter how much he tries. I think it is more of a gender balance, not so much for numbers' sake but I think there just needs to be a stronger voice and more women can do that.

American surveys suggest that:

even a few women in the Legislature have a good influence on the male politicians — women aspire to build consensus and create a harmonious workplace — and there has been a discernible shift in the men towards a more participatory, less autocratic style [Dysart et al 1996].

One aspiring female politician concluded:

that women will bring the balance that is so urgently needed. Men for too long have dominated the country and the country is in real trouble. It is important for men to realise that we want to work with them to improve the country.

Is it merely a matter of convincing the voters that women are needed in the political process or are the issues more insidious than that? The political system in PNG is inherently discriminatory and this greatly affects women's chances of being elected. The voting system is first past the post, and in the 1997 election there was an average of 21.8 candidates per electorate (Kauilo 1997:9). There is a tendency for people to vote along tribal lines, the winner representing the most populous tribe in the region. Wealth is another factor: 'People look upon successful wealthy people for help, guidance and leadership without giving any consideration to other qualifications and qualities a leader should have' (Kaumba 1989:50)

Culture and political power

In many Papua New Guinean homes, women do have a strong influence; they make the important decisions about bride price and ceremonial activities. Their opinions are sought by their husbands or male relatives, especially during important occasions when decisions have to be made about which pigs to kill, or how

many yams or bundles of sago to contribute. The woman is the decision maker behind the scenes. As one aspiring female politician from Madang commented:

That power of making decisions and influencing is the one advantage we can utilise and we can help to make women aware of this. Power sharing is one thing that is important. They have the power to influence their husbands and their brothers. This should be used.

An Engan woman commented on women having an influence behind the scenes: 'In certain parts of Papua New Guinea, women own the land and women are the great influences in the family. Men appear to make the decisions but it is the women who have influenced him before he comes out to say it.' However, to her this is not good enough. She intends to stand for election in Enga one day:

Women should be given an equal opportunity to participate in all levels of decision making in the country. Papua New Guinea has failed us a lot because it is a male-dominated government, which has not given equal opportunity to women.

Not everyone believes that culture plays such an important role in politics in PNG. One candidate commented that,

It is your opponents that use that culture trick and say that our culture says women should not take a lead in politics. Politics is a concept that has been introduced by the Western world. Our system has been based on the big man but he was a caring person, a person who was ready to defend his community. He was caring, loving. He made sure there was no poverty. He gave land for gardens because he did not want his community to suffer. We do not have this anymore. The male politicians have gone into parliament, they have forgotten about the culture, and what makes a big man. As a result we have leaders who go in there and they couldn't care less about their constituents.

She argued that that attitude should be restored and that it is women who possess that quality, although it has been dormant since PNG entered into Western political ways.

One woman, contesting a seat in Lufa in the Eastern Highlands, did not consider that culture would be a problem for her. She felt confident that her supporters respected her as a woman because it is said, 'Harim tok bilong mama, kos meri karim yu' (Listen to women because they gave birth to you and they should have your respect).

Another woman, contesting a seat in Popondetta in the Northern province agreed that her chances of getting into politics would not be hindered by culture, even though she came from an area where the man is the head of the family and owns the land. She believed that people are aware that they have been suffering for too long, there is a need for a change, and 'A woman is needed to make that change.' The men were also saying that a man had been doing the job for the last 26 years and there had been no development, so it was time to see if the women could do it.

Bringing about change

Transparency International (PNG), which is part of the global organisation against corruption, has suggested that 20 regional

seats be reserved for women for ten years. Both men and women will still vote for the candidates in those seats. The chance of this being passed by parliament is slim, and some women are concerned that men will then exclude women from standing for other seats, as they will see that as an encroachment on their territory. Another alternative suggested is that an extra 20 seats be added to the present 109-member parliament and that these be reserved for women. Others have recommended that there be nominated seats for women as there are in the local-level governments, but many women are adamant that they will not be respected by male politicians unless they win the seats. Is affirmative action the answer? Are the obstacles in front of women too great to overcome?

The movement to encourage women to vote for women is gathering momentum although there are still a lot of issues with which to contend. It is not only the men who need to be convinced that women will be good representatives for them in government: women are not voting for women. An explanation for this is,

They have not been supporting women in the elections because of their husbands or relatives and cultural opinions. Tribal loyalty is a big issue. Women want to vote for a woman but if she is not from that tribe, then that makes a difference. These are the things we need to understand and change.

Conclusion

The majority view is changing, and men are no longer viewed as having the natural right to leadership in PNG. There is definitely a changing atmosphere and a shift in gender relations, particularly among the educated elite. Entrenched attitudes are changing as the role of women as partners in development is slowly being understood. Fewer women are accepting the situation as the 'natural order of things', and more are aware that it is essential for their growth and survival that they understand the changes that the country is going through.

People are hurting because of a lack of development and not enough people-centred government. They are demanding to be better represented, and women have demonstrated in local-level government that they are more than capable of taking on difficult issues. Many believe that women will bring to government the honest leadership and managerial skills that they have demonstrated in many community development programs. All they need is the opportunity to show what they can do.

Note

Comments cited in this article are from interviews in Papua New Guinea over two weeks during Sept/October 2001. They are included in the unpublished Master's thesis 'Women struggling for a voice in contemporary politics in Papua New Guinea', Victoria University 2002.

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