

Changing lives: Promoting sustainable development through women's education and networks in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

Increasingly, both globally and in Melanesia, researchers and policy makers are cognisant of the significance of local agency and coalitions in promoting sustainable development (Laws 2013; Hudson et al. 2016). This is particularly evident in Papua New Guinea (PNG), a country in which, as Edward Laws (2013:3) writes: '[o]verseas aid appears to have made rather limited positive lasting impact on the most pressing development problems'. Seeking to address this lack of effect both in PNG and elsewhere, there is a renewed emphasis among academics and development practitioners, on understanding local political dynamics and solutions. As part of this, it is important to analyse success stories and to consider the role of secondary and higher education in the promotion of progressive coalitions and alliances (ibid:24).

Analysing a success story in the context of PNG, I discuss the role and operations of the Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Club in Port Moresby, arguing that this group provides a model of good practice in an age of inequality. Demonstrating the significance of local leadership for social change in PNG, I suggest that BPW provides an exemplar of 'quiet' (McLeod 2015) feminism in Melanesia. Challenging what I perceive to be a repeated devaluation of women's activism and involvement in small 'p' politics, I argue that BPW is effectively advancing gender equity through its commitment to creating long-term social change. Contributing to the impetus to listen to 'local women's views about how empowerment can be achieved—views that often differ from those of donors' (ibid:5)—the paper adds to the literature on Pacific women's leadership. As such, it has implications for scholars and practitioners seeking to promote gender-inclusive and sustainable development in the region.

Research method

In September 2015, I travelled to Port Moresby to conduct in-depth interviews with BPW members including those on the club's executive board. Since its inception, BPW Port Moresby has focused on providing scholarships for girls and women who would not otherwise be able to complete their education. To gain insight into the effects of these scholarships, I interviewed previous and current scholarship recipients, as well as teachers who provide a crucial link between BPW and the young women who require financial assistance to continue their education. During this phase of the research, I learned about additional women who had been involved members of the club. On my return to Melbourne, I conducted a further four interviews with these additional women, via phone, email or in person. In total I interviewed 16 women. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations referred to in the remainder of this paper are derived from this research. Because of their association with BPW,

the women I spoke with are identified in the research, as agreed during the consent process. The one exception to this is a student who shared sensitive information about her family and whom I have identified using a pseudonym. Members of BPW have approved the publication of the findings as represented here.

Prior to analysing BPW in more detail, it is helpful to consider the history and shape of women's groups in Papua New Guinea. I do so in the next section in order to illustrate the social context in which BPW makes its contribution.

Women's groups and coalitions in PNG

In her recent article on a women's boarding house in Port Moresby, Melissa Demian (2016) notes that there have been few studies of the informal association of PNG women outside the demands of kin group affiliation. Demian suggests that this is because women's informal non-kin based associations have 'only recently become visible as a social form'. Yet women's groups have existed in churches across the country since before Independence. As Bronwen Douglas (2003) notes, while outside researchers may consider church groups 'unfashionable' they have long provided forums for women to gather for support, conduct fundraising and lead community activities and training. Although discussing the Pacific (and not only PNG), Abby McLeod's more recent article on women's leadership (2015:13) also captures the significance of church groups for women's activism.

Put simply, women's church groups have provided a safe 'leadership training ground' for women throughout the region (Douglas 2003; ... Pollard 2003...). [They] have increasingly performed both consciousness-raising and activist roles, discussing and drawing community and state attention to a number of issues affecting them such as domestic violence, reproductive health and literacy (Dickson-Waiko 2003). Today, women's church groups form the cornerstone of women's civil society participation, with vast networks connecting regional, national, provincial (or island) and local groups, often with reference to broader global agendas.

Noting the incorporation of politicised agendas into church activities, McLeod's analysis suggests that the historically troubled relationship between church groups and more globally-oriented organisations may be less oppositional than previously. Shortly after its establishment in 1975, PNG's National Council of Women (NCW) was perceived by women who were active members of church groups as 'a threat to their identity' (Samana 1989), dominated by urban educated women who were out of touch with the needs of 'grass roots' women and as having 'principles that conflicted with Christian norms' (Sepoe 2000:183; Douglas 2003). To address this in the 1990s, the PNG NCW worked hard to form links with church groups, 'in particular by

forging closer linkages with the major national church women's organizations' (Douglas 2003:14).

Since this time there appears to be more cooperation between church and state run women's organisations, an approach reflected in a greater overlap in terms of agendas, including, for example, the promotion of gender equality as part of what it means to be a modern Christian (see McDougall 2003; Cox and Macintyre 2014). Today Papua New Guinean women, particularly those living in urban areas, are likely to be members of church women's groups, with some also being involved in more rights-focused organisations, thus making once significant divisions less so. Moreover, the PNG NCW is less active and influential than it was historically, since the death in 2014 of its long-serving president, Scholla Kakas and because of funding cuts.

Perhaps partly as a consequence of NCW's perceived decline, but more likely because of the increasing influence of global human rights discourses (Macintyre 2012) in PNG, several new women's rights and interest groups have formed in recent years. Typically based in Port Moresby, these have developed in response to two main themes, women's economic empowerment and gender violence. Examples include the Business Coalition for Women (est. 2013); the Port Moresby Chamber of Commerce Women's Advisory Centre (est. 2011); the PNG Women in Business Foundation (est. 2006); and on the goal of ending violence against women, the National Haus Krai movement (est. 2013); Coalition for Change (2012) and the Leniata Legacy (Kaperi Leniata Project). Most are led by educated, urban women, with some being funded primarily by overseas agencies or donations from individual contributors. Some of these coalitions will persist to create a positive influence on development in PNG; others may be short-lived. But in the increasingly 'gender aware' climate, BPW has a long-held reputation for transforming the lives of girls and women through education.

BPW Port Moresby: History and purpose

BPW Port Moresby is a chapter of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW). BPW International was founded by lawyer Dr Lena Madasin Phillips in 1930. It is a network of business and professional women that has affiliates in 80 countries in five continents.

The Port Moresby chapter of BPW is a local branch of the international BPW organisation. It was established in 1982 by Carol Kidu (now Dame Carol Kidu), the Australian-born PNG politician who served three terms in the PNG National Parliament and was the only female Member of Parliament for two of those five year terms. Kidu served as Minister for Community Development under Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare from 2002 until 2 August 2011, and as Opposition Leader from February 2012 until her retirement from politics in July 2012. She became known for her passionate campaigning on poverty alleviation, against domestic violence and child abuse, and for the empowerment of women.

When Kidu established BPW she was a teacher and a writer of school textbooks who had seen firsthand the need to

actively promote the education of PNG's girls and young women. Kidu brought women together in Port Moresby BPW to establish the now highly-respected scholarship program for girls. When BPW began most members were expatriate women. Their overarching aim, however, was radical in the context of PNG—the empowerment of women through education. The club also gathered 'like-minded people', creating opportunities for women to socialise and network at monthly meetings. It is worth noting that a number of the most committed and influential expatriate women involved with BPW over the years have been married to Papua New Guinean men, as was the club's founder, Dame Carol Kidu. They include Judith Bona, Susan Baing, Diane Purare and Yogi Barampataz, all of whom have made PNG home and in doing so, implicitly challenge simplistic divisions about 'insiders' and 'outsiders', a perspective captured in Diane Purare's recollections of the club:

[BPW] was quite low key and was not intimidating like some clubs which were mainly involving expatriate women. PNG women felt welcomed. A number of us had PNG partners and families so were very much a part of an extended family (email to author, 27 October 2015).¹

Fundraising and membership

Yogi Barampataz has been a BPW member since 1989 when she moved to Port Moresby from Washington with her Papua New Guinean husband. Since then, she has managed the scholarships program in a volunteer capacity, including keeping detailed records of the previous and current costs. Barampataz says that the goal of 'progressing women' has always been 'close to [her] heart' and that assisting BPW to enable girls to complete their schooling was 'an obvious thing to do'. She said that in the early days of the 1980s and '90s, BPW raised funds by hosting theatre and arts nights. Members cooked food for the patrons and their only costs were 'paying Moresby Arts Theatre for the seats'.

The PNG Government introduced the Tuition Fee Free (TFF) policy in 2012 (Walton and Swan 2014) but prior to this, in families where there were insufficient funds to educate the children, boys were routinely prioritised. Barampataz said that BPW only ever contributed three quarters of the total costs of school fees because they didn't want to 'encourage dependency'.

Barampataz described the club's commitment to encouraging the girls and women who are scholarship 'recipients' to become members. This strategy has proved successful, completing the 'full circle' in which the girls who are supported with scholarships join BPW and contribute to raising funds to support others. Partly as a result of this, but also because of Port Moresby's increasing numbers of professional women, the club's membership has transformed from being an almost exclusively expatriate network to one that is led and dominated (in terms of numbers) by Papua New Guinean women.

This shift in the membership was discussed by several BPW members, including the current Club president, Susil Nelson, who won the Westpac Women in Business award

and was featured in *Pawa Meri*, a documentary series about leading women in PNG (Spark 2012). Nelson said that one of BPW's aims was to increase the number of Papua New Guinean women involved and had Club has achieved this, including at the executive level, with herself as President. BPW's Vice President and Treasurer are also Papua New Guinean.

According to Judith Bona, a BPW member since the early 1980s, Nelson has been instrumental in transforming not only the club's fundraising methods, but its internal diversity and external reach.

She [i.e. Nelson] brought a fantastic ability to see things laterally. So she's got a very, very sound method of networking. If she needs somebody, she's immediately thinking oh this person for this, this person fits here. That's just the way her mind works. And I think that's been really good for the club. And I think that's why ... the people that we've got involved now are from slightly wider roots and I think that's the key to success.

The diversity evident in the club's membership is also reflected in the methods of fundraising which have changed considerably. A number of the PNG women at BPW's helm are respected leaders in Moresby's corporate sector and possess strong networks in companies, including, for example, Exxon Mobil, Steamships and Pricewaterhouse Coopers. Valentina Kaman is a BPW member who plays a key role in raising funds to support the scholarship program. She works for Exxon Mobil and says that the professional women who work for these high profile companies provide 'the bridge' 'translating and communicating the goals and dreams of BPW and what it's doing out there [to] get the corporate buy in to support the programs'. Between 2011 and 2014, BPW funded education for 600 girls and women to the value of PNG Kina 500,000 (A\$250,000).

Two fundraising events in particular are important—the International Women's Day Breakfast (March) and a lunch that BPW hosts on Melbourne Cup Day (November). With the costs of hosting covered by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), BPW sells tickets for these events and uses all the money raised to support the general scholarship program. Nelson says these events are now on peoples' social calendar and that each year there is a 'waiting list'.

With education now free until year 10 (the last year of compulsory education in PNG), BPW has diversified its support to enable women to complete their tertiary education and girls and women to complete non-traditional courses, including science, technology and engineering. This reflects its capacity to respond to local needs as these emerge.

This flexibility and local connectedness was apparent when I met Anna, a 15 year-old girl who lived with her violent aunt—when we spoke her aunt recently had set fire to some of Anna's belongings. With nowhere safe to live, Anna was at risk of dropping out to earn a living on the streets. I communicated this to Bona: she said that BPW would provide the necessary funding to find Anna safe housing in the city. This exemplifies the ways in which BPW's 'local-ness' makes it possible for them to find the

right solution to comply with the International Federation's aim of 'creating a nurturing environment...for women's development'. From a distance, it would be difficult to understand that a safe place to live might, in fact, be a young woman's most pressing educational need. Yet as Elizabeth, the teacher and BPW member who is supporting Anna said: '[BPW] can assist with things like that...especially if we are not helping them with their fees or whatever, we can assist them in that area'. The club takes a lateral approach in other ways, including organising buses to transport young women to its meetings, providing soap, toiletries and sanitary items and running breakfast programs in schools because many girls were coming to school with 'empty tummys'. Indirectly, each of these responses contributes to the likelihood that individual young women will continue to attend school.

The organisation is also seen as having 'safe hands', because the money that comes in is carefully monitored and used for scholarships and because those involved keep reliable records of all transactions and recipients. As Valentina Kaman said, BPW 'is run by accountants so it's got a very high standard of reporting and accountability'. Currently the entire process is managed by volunteers, but BPW leaders are considering seeking funds to staff a small office in order to manage the increasing demand for and management of scholarships. Previously, the club leadership turned down a grant from the European Union to the value of PNG Kina 250,000 that would have enabled such a 'shopfront' on the basis that they did not have enough people to manage the amount of money that was being offered. They did so because they have always used all of the money raised to support scholarships and related activities, rather than on 'sustaining themselves' (Bona). This thoughtful decision making has enabled BPW to avoid some of the problems associated with external grants as identified by Solomon Islands leader, Alice Pollard (2003:57), who writes of the risks of financial dependence and 'the time constraints of fixed-term funding'.

Monthly meetings and additional activities

In addition to raising funds for its scholarships program, BPW holds monthly meetings to which all members and subscribers on the mailing list are invited. While club membership officially stands at about 70 paying members, these meetings are attended by up to 300 girls and women of diverse ages, educational levels and careers. Nelson says that meetings provide important opportunities for networking and informal mentoring.

When you attend a monthly meeting, you meet other women and make those connections and they can also assist in terms of mentoring or being role models and that's easier once you've met them to be able to ask them questions or get a contact with them. The sort of environment that we try to foster is one that can also lead to other interaction outside of that monthly meeting.

According to Nelson, these interactions lead to employment opportunities because employers are aware of the club's work and give preference to BPW members when hiring. This was supported by Diane Kala, a one-time

recipient, now a member: '[BPW] can use their networks to get you on board to actually do something with your qualification'. The meetings also offer attendees exposure to a range of people and views of the world. Bona sees this as a significant benefit in an environment in which 'most individuals live in a reasonably cocooned world'.

BPW also organises a speaker for each of its monthly meetings. In 2015, speakers included Dame Carol Kidu, Lady Veronica Somare (wife of former Prime Minister Michael Somare) and various Papua New Guinean women who are leaders in their fields within corporate, government and non-government sectors.

Despite the rapid expansion of business and professional opportunities in Port Moresby, there exists very little in terms of training to prepare women to take their place in this competitive environment. BPW supports its members and affiliates by providing skills training, including building confidence for a job interview and public speaking. BPW has also offered courses on CV writing and interview preparation, encouraging reticent girls and women to participate in role plays. According to Bona, these courses help to 'address the huge gap between kids who are in year 12 and...what's needed for the work force'.

Turning recipients into 'professional women'

BPW encourages and expects 'recipients' to join the club, come to meetings and participate in the ongoing project of fundraising. This process effectively transforms 'recipients' into 'Business and Professional Women', remarkable in the context of a society, increasingly stratified in terms of class.

BPW's inclusiveness is appreciated by members, with many commenting that there were few if any other contexts in which women and girls of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds and ages came together in such a mixed and welcoming environment. For example, Brenda who has been a member since 2010, says the sense of equality and respect between women was 'different' from anything else she had experienced in PNG. She joined because the club 'attracted me in the way they...dealt with the women... especially women who were really, like unfortunate who were especially at the grass roots level'. Since joining, Brenda has also introduced her four daughters to the club. The mutual respect between women was also commented on by Dame Carol, who said 'the women that are of lesser education, other women there are supportive of them. They would not see them as lesser'.

It is important to note the significance of this in light of the fact that class is an increasingly significant aspect structuring life in PNG, as elsewhere in Melanesia (see Barbara et al. 2015). Women of various backgrounds are acutely aware of distinctions between those who have obtained markers of success, including educational qualifications and formal employment, and those who have not. The success of BPW is its ability to minimise or even transcend these differences by virtue of its emphasis on including women of diverse backgrounds. While BPW's focus on 'helping others' is recognisable and thus comfortable for women who are part

of church fellowships, the club's inclusion of dynamic educated women with aspirations to build successful careers, lead organisations and even go into politics, ensures it appeals to the increasing number of Papua New Guinean women whose modernity is reflected in their willingness to approach corporate organisations for sponsorship, as opposed to taking part in more traditionally 'feminine' fundraising activities. Reconciling class differences through a developmental project (see Cox 2011), BPW enables those involved to see and climb a 'ladder of success'.

Politics and cooperation with other women's groups

While BPW does not represent itself as 'political', it pursues what Bona calls 'small p politics', actively creating positive social change through its long-term commitment to educating women and girls. Moreover, as a result of its strong positive reputation, BPW is regularly asked to work with other women's coalitions and to participate in high-level discussions about promoting gender equity in PNG. The club is a member of the Coalition for Change and works with those involved to facilitate their representatives to speak at schools and universities. BPW also cooperates with the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry to support women to develop their own businesses and Nelson is a board member of the Business Coalition for Women. Kaman said that, because of the esteem with which BPW is held, 'when [Nelson] takes a position on an issue or gives an idea, it's very influential'. This was supported by Bona who indicated that BPW is invited to participate when there are high profile visits to PNG, including in 'various committees and round tables...everything from when Julia Bishop came to Hillary Clinton because BPW is recognised as being an organisation that has its finger on a need in the community'.

Such cooperation and activism were features of BPW activities in the 1980s and 1990s. As Baing noted, BPW worked with *Susu Mamas* to 'get legislation for women who were working to have time to breast feed their babies' and Kidu says 'they [BPW] wrote a letter of support...on the affirmative action to create the reserved seats for women in PNG'. Yet according to Baing and Kidu, the club was never dominated by the jealousies and rivalries that emerge when political ambition is involved. Kidu said 'none of the women involved in BPW had any political agenda. They were not trying to get themselves noted in that sort of way'. Perhaps paradoxically and certainly powerfully, BPW has nevertheless become a respected voice in public discussion of gender equity in PNG, while NCW, notorious for 'political scheming' and internal power struggles is, as Nelson politely expressed it, not 'as robust as it should be'. It seems apt here to quote Diane, a one time recipient and current BPW member, who said: 'if women are educated they're going to be agents of change because they know what's right and what's wrong'.

Conclusion

BPW is creating social change in ways that simultaneously are culturally appropriate and counter-cultural. The group's

focus on assisting others mirrors the practice and ethos of church groups, thus providing PNG women with a comfortable entry point into the club (Douglas 2003; Dickson-Waiko 2003; McLeod 2015). As well, BPW's inclusion of girls and women of diverse ethnic, educational and socio-economic backgrounds goes against a tendency in PNG to elide the role of class in assessing the personal 'success' of others (Gewertz and Errington 1999). Exemplifying this in their analysis of Sepik Women in Trade (SWIT), Gewertz and Errington (1999:57) argue that middle class women transformed grass roots women 'from the less fortunate into those responsible for their own failures'. In contrast to SWIT, BPW members view those within their orbit, whether they are employed, professional women or scholarship 'recipients', as products of a context in which some are afforded more opportunities than others. As such, BPW's perspective reflects the approach advocated by Hudson et al. (2016:1) who argue that 'everyday political analysis' involves understanding people as operating within a context, rather than as 'being poor because they make bad decisions'.

The case of BPW demonstrates the role that educated elites play in disseminating new ideals and practices—BPW women are not only business leaders but central players in the evolution of the modern social imaginary (Taylor 2004; Cox and Macintyre 2014). Moreover, my analysis of BPW provides evidence that being middle class in PNG does not necessarily involve shoring up individual privilege at the expense of the 'grass roots', as Gerwertz and Errington argued was the case almost 20 years ago. Indeed, BPW's ready inclusion of diverse women and girls as participants and members constitutes an encouraging example of women coming together across differences to create lasting positive change. While BPW's focus on education ensures it does not become side tracked by the myriad issues confronting women in PNG, it has nevertheless come to have an influential voice on these issues because of its local relevance and the sensitivity and cooperation of the coalition as a whole.

Note

- ¹ In September 2015, I travelled to Port Moresby to conduct interviews with BPW members and affiliates, including those on the club's executive board. To gain insight into the effects of the BPW scholarships, I interviewed previous and current scholarship recipients, as well as teachers who provide a crucial link between BPW and the young women who require financial assistance to continue their education. In total I interviewed 16 women and conducted one discussion group with young women. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from this research.

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