



**Development  
Studies  
Network**

# Development Bulletin

*No. 51 March 2000*

## **Gender and governance**

### ◆ **Features**

*Gender and governance in international law; criminal law and gender in Pacific Island jurisdictions; gender and reform in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands; training women for elections in Vietnam; gender and economic governance; transformative politics in Asia-Pacific*

### ◆ **Gender and governance in Melanesia**

*Christian women's groups in Solomon Islands; Kastom in Vanuatu; literacy programmes for women in Vanuatu; Christianity and women in Bougainville*

### ◆ **Viewpoint**

*ICPD goals and thresholds in the Pacific; the Gender Empowerment Measure and West Java; gender and ethnicity in Nepal; gender equality in organisations*

### ◆ **From the field**

*Gender and livelihood in an upland community forestry project; working conditions of garment workers in Bangladesh*

### ◆ **ACFOA Briefing**

# The Catholic women's group, Auki, Malaita: A catalyst for change

*Josephine Barnes, Catholic Women's Program, Auki, Malaita, Solomon Islands*

## From colony to nation: Changing contexts of aid

In 1964 I went as a volunteer to teach at the isolated Catholic mission station of Rokera in Malaita, in the then British Protectorate, now independent nation of Solomon Islands. In those days, staff had to speak English to the students and had minimal involvement with local people. As a woman I could not move about alone and was mainly confined to the mission stations. After three years I went back to Australia to train as a nurse, intending to return to the Solomons. I could not then see any value in teaching, as most subjects seemed far removed from the reality of people's lives. It was probably my youth that blinded me to the benefits of education, since pupils from this school later obtained responsible jobs. Nursing, on the other hand, showed immediate results. In 1986, after cyclone Namu, I returned to do relief work in Avu Avu on the weather (east) coast of Guadalcanal. Many changes had occurred. I was greeted warmly and each day the women would talk or 'story' with me about their concerns for their children and their own health. The time seemed ripe for health education. In 1996 Patricia Wale, the coordinator of the Catholic Women's Program in Auki diocese, Malaita, invited me back to work as an adult educator.

## Kastom in Malaita

To understand the lives of rural women on Malaita, one needs to go back at least a century. I am not an expert on *kastom* ('custom') but have gained a general idea from the women with whom I work and during my long association with Solomon Islanders. Customs vary between places and islands. The traditional lifestyle was still practised in parts of Malaita in 1964, and is in isolated places to this day. Malaita is a patrilineal society: descent and inheritance ideally follow the male line and men live and cooperate with their patrilineal kinsmen. Settlements were laid out as follows. The priest, the medium of communication with the ancestral spirits whose support was essential to survival, lived removed from the people. He passed information to the men and boys through selected men. Below them lived the women, girls and young children. The women cooked for the men, but husbands did not share houses with their wives and female children. They visited their wives, while couples also met in the gardens. Women usually gave birth alone, in the bush or in a birth hut. Menstruating women could not go to the gardens but lived in the menstrual hut, *bisi*, a place of

rest and socialisation. Traditionally, men walked with their hands free to protect women going to and from the gardens. Women carried all the produce and firewood on their backs. Young girls minded the young children in the villages. The women did all the cooking, cleaning, child care, planting and harvesting. The men cleared the ground for gardens, built the houses and planned village life. They were/are the politicians. Infringements of custom could mean severe punishment: if compensation was not paid in pigs or, in some areas, shell money, death might be the penalty.

## Modernity, Christianity and gender relations

With the coming of Europeans in the late nineteenth century, new needs demanded cash: men cut copra for sale or signed as indentured labourers for plantations in Queensland and Fiji. Since custom prohibited sexual relations with breastfeeding women, young fathers happily left their families to work overseas. About a century ago, Catholic and other missionaries began to preach their faith and set up schools and hospitals. Many people moved from their villages to the security of the mission stations, which offered medicines and a firm but loving God who seemed more powerful than the jealous, punitive ancestors. The mission God could also punish in the next life, but that was not immediate. Missionaries preached equality in the sight of God, so that women could now enter the church, the sacred place, and participate in prayer.

Christian villagers were no longer separated by gender but grouped into family villages. These days young boys often still live separately from the family, but fathers are members and heads of households. Yet custom still rules the division of labour and the women's workload has increased – men insist it is customary for them to carry nothing, but women no longer get a break from the gardens each month in the *bisi*. Modern tools mean larger gardens, marketing means potential sale of surplus production, and women are urged to work harder to produce more. School fees are a tremendous burden, especially on women. Infant mortality has declined, though it is still among the highest in the Pacific Islands. (In 1997 the official infant mortality rate for Malaita was 14.7 deaths per 1,000 births, but the Medical Director of Malaita places the figure nearer 30 per 1,000.) Yet more children survive, families are bigger and the population is increasing rapidly – half are under 15. Arable land is harder to find and located further from the villages, which further increases the routine workload of women.

Family planning, including the 'natural' methods permitted by the Catholic Church, is not well accepted by Malaitans. Medical personnel and educators advocate population control but seem not to understand the people's need for a strong line to provide for the elderly in the absence of social security. Men expect many children in return for paying bride price. Wives agree and are proud when the arrival of their first child demonstrates their fertility. At a 1998 workshop, women and men alike rejected sterilisation: even women with many children did not want to lose the chance for more, while men were appalled by the thought of vasectomy. Most people have lost siblings or children and know that children still die from diarrhoea, malaria, pneumonia, measles and other diseases. My neighbour, one of nine children, had lost a 6-year-old sister and a 5-year-old brother. Most women have similar stories.

Despite the desire for children, there is general concern at the rise in school fees, the number of aimless young people and social problems. Men, in particular, often drink to excess, physically abuse women and children, and get involved in gambling and scam financial schemes. They seem lost, exercising power over women in ridiculous ways: at a church blessing ceremony in one village, the chiefs imposed compensation of S1\$250 on any woman who entered wearing shorts or with their hair in a pineapple topknot. Men feel they are losing control over their wives and teenage children, who leave for the capital, Honiara, to go to school or to work for 'Master Liu' ('do nothing').

Sexually transmitted diseases are increasing. Employed men often have sex with teenage girls seeking financial gain. Parents, intimidated because their children have more formal education, are loath to tell them the facts of life. In a group of 61 18–21-year-olds attending a young women's leadership programme in May 1998, only four had received any information about menstruation. Solomon Islanders seem far more aware of changes to their bodies than their European counterparts but most lack knowledge as to why such changes occur. Because these subjects are taboo, a series of lessons to women and girls was called 'I am a miracle', and began: 'God made us and it was good.' Phrased in this way, reproductive health, anatomy and physiology could be taught and were eagerly learned.

I became aware of the need to frame these topics in Christian terms during that leadership programme. I could not get across the concept of friendship with boys as getting to know them and looking for shared interests and values: in Malaitan custom, sex was the only conceivable relationship between unrelated males and females, and it is very difficult for girls to refuse to have sex. I tried to explain that women have the right just to say 'No' to unwelcome invitations. Role-plays led by the girls had them saying: 'I will not go with you because I am made in God's image and likeness'; 'God made me to be good'; and so on. God thus legitimised their right to say 'No', and without that excuse they felt powerless. The churches, so important to Solomon Islanders, need to work with young people to develop guidelines to help them handle the new familiarity between the sexes.

But the churches are struggling. In the past they ran schools and hospitals and had a great deal of influence over the lives of the people. Aid poured in through the overseas church organisations. With independence in 1978, most schools and hospitals were handed over to the government. Collections for missions fell overseas as congregations declined in the mainstream churches. Aid organisations began to channel income-generating projects through the churches, but such projects often have little relevance to the churches as such, while administration and maintenance of existing structures are unfunded. Foreign aid agencies have their own criteria to meet, but their knowledge of local issues and customs is often not great.

## **Empowering village women**

This was the environment in which the Catholic Women's Program was set up in Auki diocese in 1990, with two local nuns and an expatriate woman as early facilitators. Initially, the group held consultative meetings to assess the needs of village people and discovered that women wanted to share their problems. In the security of their peers, they felt free to acknowledge their difficult lot and cried as they told stories of hardship and helplessness. The measure of a workshop's success was inclusion in the leader's report of the phrase, 'the women cried'. The leaders believed they had struck an empathetic chord. Since normally a woman cannot leave her house without her husband's permission, 'Husbands' Awareness Programs' had to be held to persuade them to allow their wives to attend women's meetings.

The Catholic Women's Program is overseen by a central diocesan team based in Auki, the provincial centre of Malaita. With leadership of the programme shifting to local women, Patricia Wale became coordinator of a team of three Malaitans. There are nine parishes covering limited accessible areas. Parish coordinators lead zone leaders belonging to villages within their zones. The women's groups obviously met a felt need, as they grew far more quickly than envisaged. There are now 135 groups, with about 2,000 women involved. The other two Catholic dioceses in the Solomons have followed suit.

Initially, the teaching was participatory, with sharing of stories, role-plays, dramas, singing, practical demonstrations of gardening skills, sewing, and so on. Such activities empowered women, who learned to speak up for themselves. But when topics on the role of women were introduced, leaders could no longer simply share with their listeners the pain of their lot in life but required training in the concepts to be imparted. Accordingly, leaders' training workshops were held. So-called 'Empowerment Topics' – 'The Role of Women', 'The Ministry of Women', 'Basic Christian Communities' – helped remind women of their importance in the very fabric of their society. Topics on health, hygiene and child development were introduced because the Medical Director of Malaita believed the leaders of the Women's Program to be the best means yet tried to impart health knowledge at the grassroots. Members of other churches could

attend workshops and in some cases the 'hidden' or heathen people came, to learn how to prevent their children from dying of diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria.

A booklet was produced from *Facts for life*, a UNICEF/WHO publication. The leaders requested charts to assist in their presentations. The charts were written in English by expatriates. Yet about 85 per cent of Malaita women are illiterate and few speak English. The spoken word is the normal medium for transferring information and even knowledge of Pidgin is confined to areas close to roads and towns. Participatory methods were being overshadowed by print, again disempowering women who said they were 'Rubbish women' because they could not read or write. Pictorial charts to match the health booklet have since been produced for all groups. Drawing and mapping are part of the workshops and are enjoyed by the women. The method is again participatory, with women doing most of the teaching to each other. In 1998 the main leaders were the zone leaders, rather than those centrally located. They receive training and return to the local villages to follow the same methods, teaching in local languages rather than in English or Pidgin. In recent consultations, women expressed a need for further education in social issues. If teaching aids can be developed to enable them to teach each other, the groups will surge ahead. Women are overjoyed when they realise they do not need to be literate to take an active part. Most photographs taken now show women laughing.

Family planning is presented as the 'Strong Line Plan', with 'natural' methods demonstrated in pictorial form. Husbands have been very interested in the workshops on women's and men's anatomy, the miracle of life, and natural family planning. They demanded to be part of a recent workshop, but women

will not talk about these matters in front of men, and men completely dominate a group if they join it. So the men had separate sessions. Women want the men to attend: although women are articulate in their own groups, they still seem unable individually to communicate their feelings and wishes to their husbands but believe they can do so collectively. There is a growing emphasis in the Catholic Church on groups such as a 'Family Life Program' and 'Marriage Encounter', which are useful to the literate and are helping to change family relationships, but the women's groups provide the best chance to make a difference to the lives of village women.

Recently, the young women leaders told me they could not lead. It is difficult for a Malaitan woman to be a leader, as she is not supposed to put herself out in front of others. I turned to their faith for strength. Christ brought the light of knowledge into the world, and they too can carry his light. If you put a cover over a candle, it will go out. So, they must take off the shield or cover they are hiding under and carry the light of knowledge to others. They took home a candle to light during their talks to remind them of this and give them courage. Thus, Christian ideals and symbols can be used to override customs that would otherwise constrain women.

To be empowered, women need to want to leave the harsh, but secure, domain of customary constraints and move along the hard, uncertain road to change. This means applying the skills they have learned to family life. It means standing up for what they believe in a society where they have never had a public voice. Empowerment is about finding the strength to bring about change. If laughter is a gauge of success, then the Catholic Women's Program of Auki diocese has so far been a resounding success.