

Would the Hand that Rocks the Cradle Dare to Rock the Boat?

Feminism in the Solomon Islands

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ABSTRACT

In the Solomon Islands it has been assumed that the educated, urban-based minority of women will push for change for women. In fact, these women's voices have been quietened and it is to rural areas that we must turn if we wish to witness a movement for change amongst women. There is a new form of feminism stirring in the villages.

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INTRODUCTION: WOMEN IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Women in the Solomon Islands are a disadvantaged group. Traditionally, 'Although a women's economic worth was recognised in the marriage transaction, her social status relative to a man's was low' (Bennett, 1987, 12). This situation has been compounded through the introduction of the cash economy and a system of colonisation whereby new technologies and opportunities for formal education were offered almost exclusively to men. With new skills men were able to pursue the rewards of the cash economy while women were expected to take on an increasingly heavy burden of work in the village. In addition to childcare and general domestic roles, women are responsible for food production, they assist with cash cropping and are increasingly under pressure to earn money. Many feel that bearing numerous children and working hard is simply their fate.

In the early 1990s the Solomon Islands economy was in poor shape and the debt burden was increasing. The government decided to cooperate with efforts by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to devise a structural adjustment programme to try to rectify this situation (Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, 1991, 4). Harsh economic decisions have since been made including reductions in spending in the health and education sectors. Overseas examples show that this is a common trend in structural adjustment programmes. They also reveal that it is women who bear much of the burden of a country's increased efficiency (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989; Elson, 1991). By following such a programme which jeopardises social development aims the Solomon Islands government has indicated its lack of commitment to women's development.

It is apparent that any opportunities for women to play a more powerful role in their country's development in the future will have to come from women themselves. The problem here is that rural women's initiative has been somewhat stifled because most development endeavours have been imposed from above and they focus overwhelmingly on home economics-style projects. Home economics skills may assist women in coping with the status quo but they fail to inspire women to initiate change themselves.

The task of leading a movement for change, of pushing to improve women's position in society, has been left up to the young, educated women in the capital, Honiara. These women, a number of whom were involved with the National Council of Women (NCW), spoke out and lobbied for changes in the 1980s, getting sensitive issues such as domestic violence onto the development agenda and encouraging women to become involved in politics. However, NCW leaders came under attack from politicians, church leaders and others who felt they were promoting the breakdown of families and by introducing foreign feminist ideas. Criticism of the NCW also came from rural women who felt that the NCW had made limited effort to reach out to rural areas. Rural women said the NCW had concentrated on top-down, legislative change and on assisting women at national level to gain positions of power, rather than grassroots consciousness-raising. Added to such criticisms were accusations of financial mismanagement which led to the NCW being twice suspended by the government, in 1987 and again in 1991.

The voices of members of the NCW that once proudly spoke out for change have quietened noticeably in the 1990s. There is a general reluctance on the part of educated women, including members of the NCW, to adopt an outwardly feminist stance due to the fear of a backlash from men. Their commitment to change has been compromised. They are now urging women to be patient and to work alongside men, rather than challenging them. It is claimed that women who 'rock the boat' are not widely respected by either men or women. So far the NCW has been unable to cooperate with the state to secure resources and space without compromising its feminist agenda.

Does this mean, then, that nothing has been happening to bring about change for women? Not necessarily. If it is a movement for change amongst women which we wish to see, it is to the rural villages, the home of 85 percent of the population, that we must turn.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE VILLAGES?

The general introduction revealed that most rural women in the Solomon Islands lead physically demanding lives. Many rural women are too preoccupied with daily survival to think about how their situation could be changed for the better. While urban-based, educated women have run national women's organisations and travelled to meetings around the globe, rural women with little formal education have stood back, scared to take a step into their changing society to see what new possibilities are open to them. The following comment comes from women living on the island of Savo, only thirty kilometres by sea from Honiara: '...how can we get involved [in development] when we are so ignorant and still in the dark of what is going on around us?' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988, 115).

There are signs of change occurring in rural areas, however, thanks to a new breed of development initiatives focused at grassroots level which have broken the home economics project mould. These initiatives may not yet be

widespread but they are significant in that they result in the empowerment of women, giving them more control over their lives and over the direction which development is taking in their country. These can be seen as subtle forms of feminism emerging in the villages. Yet for many years such indigenous women's struggles were not widely recognised by Western feminists as effective feminist action (Bulbeck, 1988). Kathy Ferguson forces us to rethink our definition of what constitutes a feminist consciousness rather than ignoring changes initiated by women in isolated, rural areas. She notes several cases of women working together at grassroots level which are, '...successful in the sense that they involve local groups of women or indigenous women's organizations who are improving their conditions of life on their own terms' (Ferguson, 1990, 300).

While the grassroots initiatives which I shall discuss may not seem particularly innovative or revolutionary they embody considerable implications for change in rural communities. My suggestion is that such initiatives are contributing more to a transformation of gender relations in the Solomon Islands than are attempts by the educated minority of women in Honiara to improve women's situation, despite the fact that these women have been looked upon for so long as the agents of change for women. These initiatives have a transformative perspective because they attempt to inspire women to work for change on their own terms, to challenge tradition, the government or men where necessary and to overturn oppressive gender relations in homes and communities.

CASE STUDIES

The Munda YWCA

A YWCA centre was established at the mission station of Munda in 1990. Staff and volunteers have effectively revitalised women's development options in the area, teaching women skills and raising their awareness in such a way as to catalyse some significant changes in women's lives.

Those who run the centre are mainly women with a limited amount of formal schooling. By taking on leadership, administrative, fund-raising and decision-making roles at the centre, women are learning to work collectively to achieve their objectives. One woman, who had a few years previously cried out of shyness when asked to stand and say a prayer in front of her women's group, was in 1992 a key member of the centre's management committee and regularly required to deliver speeches to inspire other women.

Through developing women's confidence and skills, the Munda YWCA has made significant steps to empower women. It also challenges men and the community at large to respect women and their abilities. It challenges the tradition that men have control over their wives' bodies by providing self defence classes, which some participants walk over one hour each way to attend. These classes have put participants in a better position to deal with domestic

violence. Workshops on budgeting have given women the confidence and knowledge to take more control over their family's finances. The centre has also stretched the boundaries of people's perceptions of appropriate roles for women by encouraging local women to be involved in politics. Likewise, local women have had the opportunity to learn new skills, from honey production to managing a small business, which may help them to earn an income. A seminar on labour laws was also organised for women working at a nearby tuna cannery who had been largely unaware of their rights regarding working conditions. As one woman said after the workshop. 'Before I was working in the dark. Now I am in the light' (YWCA Munda Centre, 1992, 2). For many, attending YWCA courses has given them an unprecedented opportunity to increase their knowledge and already this is helping some women to gain more control over their own lives.

The Solomon Islands Development Trust

The Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) is a non-governmental organization concerned with building the awareness of villagers through development education, as opposed to initiating projects (Roughan, 1990, 98). They send mobile teams and a theatre group out to villages across the country to raise issues such as resource ownership, rapid population growth, and water and sanitation facilities. SIDT's village workshops show people how they can make a difference to the development process through their actions, especially through the wise use of local resources (SIDT Summary Report, 1990, 2).

Women are particularly supportive of SIDT's sustainable development messages, perhaps because resource depletion adds to their already heavy workloads by pushing their gardens further away from the village and because loggers often pollute rivers and fell trees near their gardens (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988). By encouraging women to speak out about their concerns over the degradation of the environment, SIDT has led to women challenging men who wish to sign land away to logging or mining companies. Women have also been inspired to lobby politicians and church leaders for greater protection of the country's natural resource base (Pamela Abana, Mother's Union, 1992, personal communication). These are significant steps for women when in most Solomon Islands societies women are supposed to be silent at public meetings and leave decision-making to the men.

The Auki Diocesan Team

Malaita province, renowned for its strong patrilineal traditions, is the site of an interesting initiative by a small group of women working under the Catholic church. The Auki Diocesan Team, as they are known, travel extensively often visiting women in remote areas where there has never before been a course organised especially for women. The Team has also invited women to attend workshops which take them away from their families for a week at a time. In such circumstances husbands have to take on duties such as

child care, meal preparation and gardening, tasks unfamiliar to many of them. With the church giving its backing women do not feel so afraid to challenge their husbands, and custom, in this way.

Development of women's self-esteem and dignity in conjunction with physical development is a key component of the Team's approach. By drawing women into discussions about the role of women the Team has seen many women overcome their sense of uselessness, as comments from women attending their workshops indicate:

Speaking out and standing up was tambu [forbidden] before...now we have taken the yokes from our necks and we do speak out.

This is the first time that women in our parish came together to learn from each other and *share their feelings*

Discussions have, '...for the first time given to the women a sense of their worth...this has stressed their dignity and value to the family and the community' (Auki Diocesan Team, 1992). Practical workshops were also organised covering topics such as agriculture, nutrition, literacy and health education.

The Team's focus on empowerment has led to changes in many women's lives and some women are putting themselves forward in unprecedented ways. In the village of Bubuitolo a woman with Standard seven education is now running literacy classes three mornings a week for thirty local women. In two other villages there are now two women on the school committee and on the Parish Council. In South Malaita, an area in which hereditary systems of leadership prevail, a woman was asked to join the local Council of Chiefs because the men in the area were so impressed with the work women were doing for their communities (Sheila MacBride-Stewart, 1993, personal communication). The implications for women in Malaitan society of having representatives on decision making bodies in their community should not be underestimated.

The Team's rationale has been that without a sense of self-worth women cannot hope to see themselves as being able to contribute substantially to their country's development. There is nothing radical in this prescription but it has had a major impact on the lives of thousands of women across Malaita province. They have been empowered.

CONCLUSION

The top-down change espoused by the NCW in the 1980s is not sufficient to change basic attitudes and structures in society which accord women secondary status. A bottom-up form of development is, however, emerging. Not all the women in all the villages of the Solomon Islands are resigned to 'accepting their fate'. Women are enhancing their life options by enrolling themselves in literacy and small business classes. They are developing new skills in public speaking and administration. They are gaining knowledge about topics such as labour laws, so as to protect their rights. Some women now have the confidence to put

themselves forward for election to community organisations or to involve themselves in local politics.

It is clear from the above examples that it is not necessary to have radical organisations to inspire change. Neither the Auki Diocesan Team, Munda YWCA, nor SIDT are explicitly based on a recognition of gender subordination but because they implicitly raise issues related to gender subordination, issues such as women's role as leaders in the community, women's employment rights and the role of women in politics, they are certainly responsible for facilitating the growth of a feminist consciousness in the villages. What is crucial is that we realise that there will be diverse interpretations of an alternative vision for gender equality to suit women's situation in different parts of the world (Clarke, 1986, 150).

Elite women in the Solomon Islands may be reluctant to rock the boat because they are too concerned about their individual integration into 'modern' society but their rural sisters are proving themselves willing to stand up and make changes in their lives, even when this means opposing some of the major forces at work in their society. Women have challenged men as never before, pushing for their right to leave the family in their husband's care for a week so they can attend workshops and standing against men on the issue of allowing foreign companies access to their land. Rural women may provide the hand that rocks the cradle - as well as the hand which tills the soil and prepares the feast and harvests the crops and cares for the extended family, but they may also provide the hand which is raised proudly to say 'yes' to further education for themselves, 'yes' to taking on leadership roles in the wider community, 'yes' to influencing the future direction of change and 'no' to husbands who try to beat them, 'no' to logging companies which come to destroy their land and 'no' to anyone who tries to undermine their dignity and the importance of their contribution to society.

NOTE

1. I am aware that the dichotomy being presented here, of 'young, educated women in the capital' as opposed to 'rural women', is simplistic. There are other divisions, including class and ethnicity, which also separate groups of women and yet often women overcome these barriers in an effort to work together on issues of mutual concern. Regretfully, I have had to brush over the complexity of this matter in this article because of space constraints.

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