

Church Women's Groups and the Empowerment of Women in Solomon Islands

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the Pacific, church women's groups play an important social and spiritual role in the lives of many indigenous women. However, these groups rarely attract the interest of development practitioners or theorists concerned with the empowerment of women, largely because of their outwardly conservative stance. Preoccupied with sewing classes, pastoral care, and social work, church women's groups appear to epitomize a welfare approach to women's development. Yet, while welfare concerns remain central to the activities of many such groups, by drawing on case studies from Solomon Islands in the period leading up to the onset of political crisis in 1999, this article demonstrates that a welfare approach does not preclude women's groups from engaging in strategic activities for the empowerment of women. Such activities include support for logging protests, workshops to affirm the importance of women's roles and develop their confidence, and opportunities for them to travel and expand their knowledge basis. Furthermore, the process of coming together to engage in welfare activities which many women enjoy greatly can provide opportunities for confidence-building, income generation, and networking.

INTRODUCTION

It would be easy for an outsider searching for examples of innovative feminist development initiatives to dismiss the significance of church women's groups, particularly if the groups' activities focus on spiritual growth, sewing, and social work. This is exactly the focus adopted by many church women's organizations in Solomon Islands and elsewhere in Melanesia and yet they have considerable cultural and practical potential for empowering women. In the highly dispersed rural villages of the Solomons, such groupings offer opportunities for networking, solidarity building, and non-formal education (Scheyvens 1993, 1995b).¹ In addition, several more dynamic church women's organizations have broadened their approach in recent years in an attempt to address the structural disadvantage of Solomon Islands women. This paper provides examples of innovative development strategies initiated by three such organizations during the early 1990s.² I argue that with a slight change of tack other church women's groups could play an equally effective role in actively transforming women's lives.

WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

It is impossible to comment on the contemporary position of women in Solomon Islands society without first reflecting on their indigenous activities and status. Past representations of Melanesian women which portrayed them as appendages of men, or invisible, or only

visible as wives and mothers were seriously distorted. Patterns of gender relations varied greatly across the region but, while women's domains were mostly separate from those of men, women were often regarded as equivalent in intrinsic worth and experienced their domains as a source of security, solidarity, and dignity. Men typically held a monopoly on access to public stages but women had their own spheres of influence and control. For example, women were generally aware that their bodies were a source of power essential to the reproduction and social well-being of society (Strathern 1981:187; O'Brien 1984:53-4; Tiffany 1987:338-9; Keesing 1987). Accordingly, Weiner invited scholars to reconsider old theories of male superiority in Melanesia: 'Whether women are publicly valued or privately secluded, whether they control politics, a range of economic commodities, or merely magic spells, they function within that society, not as objects but as individuals with some measure of control' (1976:228).

The establishment of a British Protectorate over the Solomon Islands in 1893 had a multiple impact, both positive and negative, on women's and men's lives and on gender relations, as it did elsewhere in Melanesia (Bennett 1987; Douglas 1999). In terms of benefits, colonial pacification, Christianization, and the monetization of the economy gave women the benefits of living in a society where warfare and violence were not so well tolerated as well as expanded educational and economic opportunities, access to new means of health care, and opportunities to come together in women's groups and develop leadership skills. The cessation of blood-feuding, for example, allowed women to work in safety and travel more freely (Keesing 1985:55). Access to education gave at least some women and girls 'the English-speaking voice to which colonial society (and increasingly their educated menfolk) would listen, [and] it offered them different perspectives on the world' (Bulbeck 1992:228).

Negative impacts of colonization included the fact that outsiders belittled or attempted to outlaw customs or rituals in which women's power was affirmed. Furthermore, through their heavy involvement in agricultural work, women came to be labelled as 'beasts of burden' by Europeans even though gardening was an important source of status and self-esteem for women. Accordingly, the early missionaries' horror at women's heavy workloads led them to design educational programs aimed at confining women to the domestic sphere, as if their involvement in productive activities were demeaning (Ryan 1975:8,19; Bennett 1987:12-13; Jolly and MacIntyre 1989:14; Jolly 1991:35). Thus, education for girls typically involved a combination of domestic skills, literacy, and religious instruction (Schoeffel 1986:42): 'They were taught how to bake cakes and make European handicrafts, embroidery and crochet, while men were given formal schooling, training in cash crops and provided with jobs in the formal sector' (Goodwillie and Kroon 1986:i). Eventually subsistence agriculture became undervalued as a cash-based economy emerged. Furthermore, the churches preached in favour of the nuclear family unit under men's authority, thereby undermining women's control of the indigenous household domain (Dureau 1993:20). By largely limiting access to new technologies, training in technical skills, and an academic education to men, the colonial government and the missions bestowed on men the means to gain status in the modern sector of the economy.³ In contrast, women were largely left to continue their customary practices as well as assist men with newly-planted cash crops, though they usually had little control over the money derived from such activities.

As a result, with independence in 1978 men had more opportunities to access new forms of power, such as white collar employment and cash, while women were left feeling that they had little of value to contribute (Scheyvens 1995a: Chapter 5). In her poem 'Mi Mere', Jully Sipolo (now Makini) pointed out that for many rural women in Solomon Islands, life in their postcolonial, independent country offers few new opportunities:

I am a woman, born in the village
Destined to spend my life

in a never ending vicious circle
Gardening, child-bearing, house-keeping
Seen and not heard (1986:8).

In the postcolonial period, women's sense of inadequacy has been reinforced by development agencies which fail to consult them when planning community projects and by clan members who overlook women's ideas and custodial rights when making decisions about the use of communal resources. In both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, many women have been dismayed when forest and marine resources are signed over to logging and fishing companies without any consultation with them. It is as if women's opinions are no longer of value. This is a phenomenon which has affected women in all South Pacific states:

Women are experiencing a decline in status and power as dependency on the cash economy and imported political and social systems becomes more entrenched ... Pacific women often held a prestigious place in traditional society; they were economically active as producers, manufacturers, market managers and healers. Now women are increasingly marginalised. They are the least educated or consulted in the community (Australian Council for Overseas Aid 1986:iv).

APPROACHES TO WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

Given this failure to address the widely declining social status of women after the winning of independence, it is apparent that strategies which specifically target women are needed if they are to share in the benefits of development. It is important, however, to acknowledge different approaches when seeking to evaluate the efficacy of development initiatives for women.⁴ Caroline Moser (1989) provided a much-cited overview of five different policy approaches to women's development: welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency, and empowerment. Contrasting the welfare and empowerment approaches is useful in analyzing development initiatives for women in the Solomon Islands. What is important to note, however, is that Moser's framework was developed with relevance to the policy approaches of outside agencies, such as donors and non-government organizations (NGO), which implement discrete, well-defined development projects and programs. It may therefore be less useful with respect to the more ad hoc, informal grassroots efforts for change evident in the work of church women's groups which have typically been overlooked in analyses of 'development' in the island state. The discussion below includes a critical appraisal of the relevance of the welfare-empowerment dichotomy to making sense of the work of church women's groups.

Welfare approach

In the tradition of the missionaries who first established women's groups in Melanesia, most church women's organizations adopt a welfare approach directed at women's roles as wives and mothers. As Moser (1989) noted, the welfare approach poses women as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents of change. Common programs under this approach include cooking and nutrition, sewing and handicrafts, and maternal-child health. While there is a need and strong local demand for such programs, an overall concentration on them precludes attention to many other issues of concern to women.

A fundamental deficiency of the welfare approach is that it does not attempt to overcome women's subordinate social position. Its home economics-style projects are politically and culturally safe: they do not challenge men's realms of power but they do make women's living conditions more comfortable. Some argue that this is quite acceptable and that as long as women continue to ask for sewing and cooking classes they should not have West-

ern feminist ideologies and strategies forced upon them. However, I contend that many Solomon Islands women do see themselves as oppressed in certain respects and want to overcome that oppression. While they may not use Western academic language to name their subordination, nonetheless, by identifying concerns such as their lack of control over communally-held land, their safety in their own homes, and the lack of women to represent their views in political spheres,⁵ women are identifying gender inequities as key areas of concern for them. These are concerns that the welfare approach has no interest in addressing.

Empowerment approach

By contrast, an empowerment approach to women's development is directly concerned with challenging the *status quo* with the aim of working towards more equitable societies (Moser 1989:1814-17). Empowerment is a crucial aspect of development for marginalized people, including women, who wish to overturn systems of oppression (Friedmann 1992). It can be particularly significant for women with a poor sense of self-worth (Rowlands 1997).

The empowerment approach emerged mainly from the writings of 'Third World' feminists and from the grassroots organizational experience of non-'Western' women (Sen and Grown 1987). Such women, having been subject to successive unsuccessful development initiatives in their countries for many years, insist that:

It is not a matter of a few initiatives to 'improve the position of women' while leaving power, authority and status firmly in the control of men. It is a matter, as with all oppressed groups, of empowering them to take control of their own lives, economically and culturally (Barnett 1988:164).

Women need to be empowered with skills, knowledge, and confidence to determine the development path they wish to follow and to challenge the entrenched structures which hamper them. Thus, the empowerment approach does not just demand more resources for women: it seeks to transform relationships between men and women and among classes and races so that they are no longer characterized by oppression (Sen and Grown 1987). Proponents of an empowerment approach pose women as disempowered social actors rather than beneficiaries to be planned for.

Alternative strategies, focusing on empowerment, can aim to do several things: to enhance women's life choices; to achieve certain long term changes including a transformation of the subordinate relationship of women to men; to activate a change of consciousness among women; and to increase women's influence over decision-making processes in all social contexts (Anderson and Baud 1987:30; Longwe 1991).

THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Many writers have noted the contribution that strong grassroots women's organizations can make to the empowerment of women.⁶ Through encouraging collective action, women's organizations help women to identify their concerns and work to achieve more power. They also provide women with opportunities for attaining leadership and management skills and for developing networks. Many women benefit from such organizations because they contribute to a broadening of their awareness and an increase in confidence: 'By solving problems, gaining experience, and working together, women will become aware of their own subordinate position in society and more capable of changing it' (Himmelstrand 1990:112).

In Melanesia, however, there are mixed feelings as to whether it is better for women to work in separate organizations or together with men. Some argue that women become 'isolated' in separate organizations, a point supported by those Solomon Islands women who suggest that groups and meetings should include both sexes because of the holistic nature of

Melanesian society (Bronwen Douglas, pers. comm.). It is certainly important to recognize that men need not be cast as the opposition and that they can be valuable allies. As Kabeer (1992:19) explained, men's interests will not necessarily be diametrically opposed to those of women: 'gender relations are relations of power as well as difference, of conflict as well as cooperation'. The alternative view was taken by Loutfi (1987:112), however, who asserted that in all societies in which patriarchal structures prevail, women and men need to be separated otherwise women will find it difficult to develop the confidence and experience to strive for a more equitable society. Supporting this argument, separate groups for women are seen as providing a mechanism to enable women to build bases of power from which to challenge spheres of male domination. In addition to teaching women skills and involving them in the administration of the organization, which builds their confidence and contributes to psychological empowerment,⁷ women's groups can contribute to social or political empowerment by providing a safe environment in which women can articulate their concerns, develop solutions to their collective problems, and explore their potential. It should not, however, be assumed that women's organizations are necessarily avenues for women's empowerment (Sen and Grown 1987:89-96). Such organizations are not automatic vehicles for women's emancipation and nor are they 'magically democratic, egalitarian, or nonhierarchical' (Staudt 1990:311). Some are undoubtedly elitist or committed to reinforcing the status quo while others are wholly welfare-oriented.

Recent examples have nonetheless shown that women's organizations can concurrently meet the short term needs of members while contributing to their long term empowerment (see Women's Feature Service 1993; Rowlands 1997). It has been suggested, furthermore, that grassroots women's groups may have more potential for transforming oppressive structures than the many 'women's projects' initiated for, instead of by, women around the world. Kabeer asserted that women will have to work for change themselves, given the failure of the top-down, male-dominated planning process to address women's needs in many situations (1992:36). Schuster agreed that 'women will not be "given" their freedom to participate in wider social interests.... They will not be "given" equality with men. They will have to claim it' (1982:534).

Accordingly, the questions considered in the remainder of this paper are whether and in what ways church women's groups are assisting Solomon Islands women to work for change and to realize the claim to gender equity to which they are entitled by virtue of both national constitution and some interpretations of the Christian scripture to which most Solomon Islanders fervently adhere.

TRADITIONAL CHURCH WOMEN'S GROUPS AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

The activities of early church women's groups in the Melanesian islands were based on the bourgeois European ideal of the housewife (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1988; Jolly 1991:27-32), with classes, for example, on the now infamous topics of embroidering pillowcases and baking drop scones (Lee 1985).⁸ This home economics legacy, a characteristic of the welfare approach, is often still central in the professed goals and the activities and initiatives of Melanesian women's groups (Pacific Women's Resource Bureau 1997). In Auki, the main town in Malaita, for example, an elite woman organizing a women's week for members of church women's groups in 1991 wanted to include sessions on flower arranging and setting a table for a dinner party.

In Solomon Islands there are five major churches which each have an extensive network of women's groups.⁹ Thus women's groups exist, either in practice or in limbo, in most villages in Solomon Islands. Their typical format consists of weekly meetings following Western meeting protocol and including songs, prayers, and other activities such as weaving, sewing, games, or community service. A number of groups has income-generating pro-

jects involving market gardening, sewing, or poultry raising and many have a bank account. Most of the women I spoke to in 1992, however, were crying out for ideas or activities which could enliven their groups: 'This group is sort of blind ... it needs help', said one woman about a group in a remote area of Guadalcanal. As urban women leaders from neighbouring Vanuatu have argued, an **exclusive** focus on domestic topics 'fails to equip a woman to play a more dynamic role in the development process' (Women of Vanuatu 1983:3).

Although the welfare approach adopted by most such groups does not directly challenge the generally subordinate status of Melanesian women, church women's groups are nonetheless of key significance for women in postcolonial Melanesian countries. In practice, they constitute the only organizations with effective networks which reach down to and make links between village women. Many other agencies, though they may have direct access to overseas funds and technical support for their programs, do not touch the lives of the majority of women. Many women claim that, while politicians make promises, while national women's organizations send representatives to hold workshops for them every few years, and while NGOs occasionally visit, it is the churches that are always there for them (National Women's Policy Review Committee n.d.:45, 132). Strong similarities have been noted in the importance of the churches in Papua New Guinea:

The churches have made substantial inroads into remote rural areas providing health, education (including non-formal education), social and spiritual services. For large numbers of Papua New Guineans mission stations, basic services and small development programs have been the only consistent source of communication with the outside world (Cox 1994:365).

Despite often limited resources and narrow perspectives of what development can mean for women, church women's groups give women an opportunity most would other-



Plate 1: Seventh-day Adventist women's group marching at a women's gathering in north-east Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 1992.

Photograph: R. Scheyvens

wise lack: a socially-sanctioned release from their daily obligations. It is difficult for men to prevent women from attending groups associated with the churches as they are strongly respected in Solomon Islands. At the very least, attending church groups allows women to share their ideas and opinions. Such participation can build individual confidence and enhance solidarity among women. Through this, women can learn not merely to accept but to make choices and to initiate action (Ryan 1975:79-80). In addition, church groups often give village women hitherto unavailable opportunities to travel to workshops or to bigger meetings where they can network with other women's groups from outside their immediate area (see Plate 1). Women's mobility and their introduction to outside ideas have consequently been enhanced by involvement in church groups, particularly in the post-colonial period.

Church women's groups also offer women a highly-valued opportunity to participate in ritual. While reading out prayers during a church service may look like a limited engagement in Christian ritual, it is more responsibility than women exercised in indigenous ancestor worship:

only men had offered sacrifices or participated in religious feasting and dancing, but among Christians things were done differently ... women not only took part in the religious ceremonies but also found new opportunities for social activity, for status advancement and for the exercise of influence through membership of organisations such as the Mothers' Union (Foanaota 1989:71).

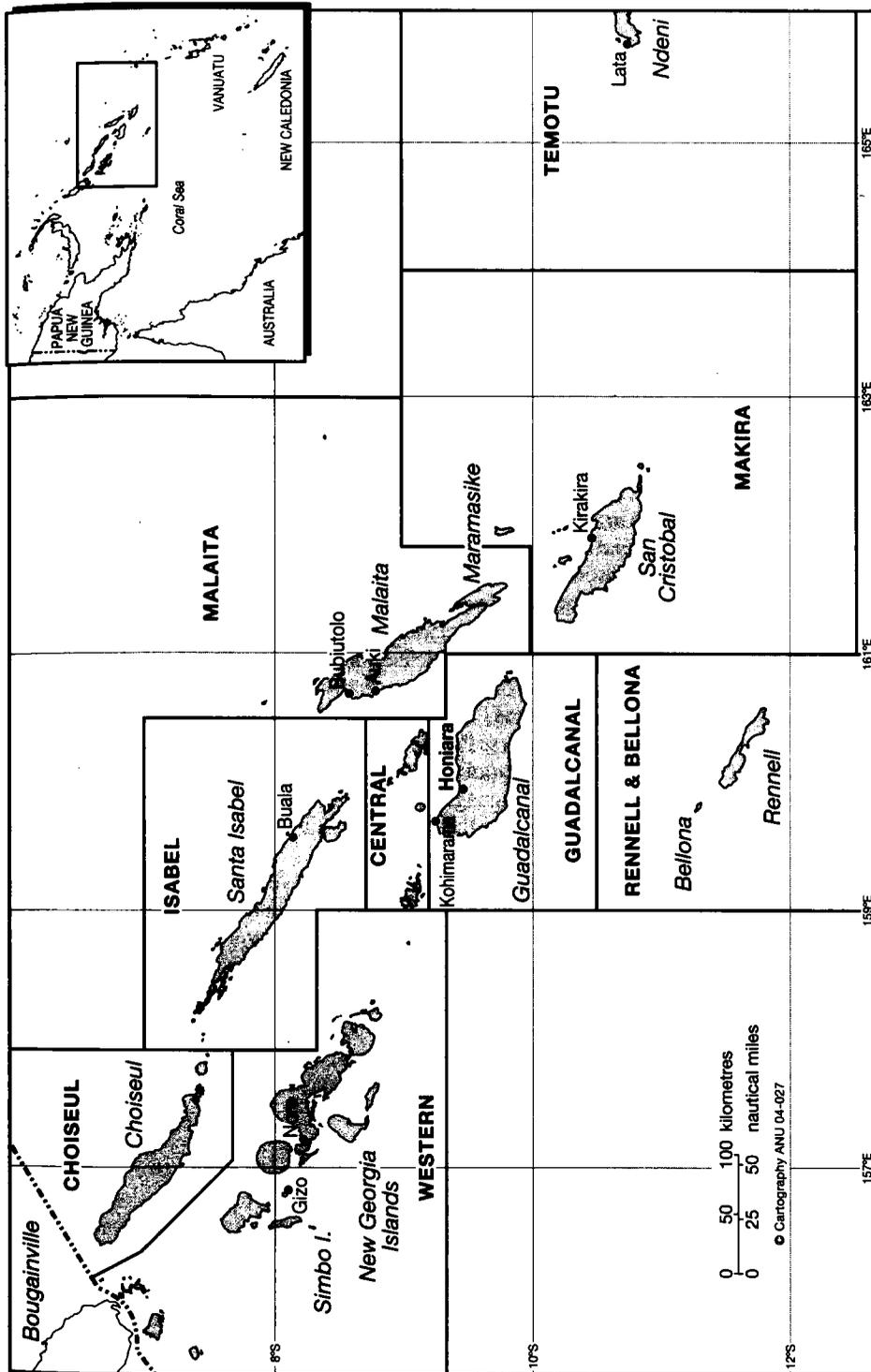
Some women have had the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes beyond the household through gaining election to their women's group executive. Such experience has helped women to take on community leadership roles, a major achievement as men have generally resisted the decolonization of women with respect to the arena of leadership responsibilities. Thus, as Staudt argued, having separate women's groups 'permits the development of organizational capacity, skills and resources for leverage in mainstream interaction' (1981:371). Accordingly, while some may question the activities of church women's groups founded on a welfare approach to women's development, it would be difficult to deny their significance in providing women with a space away from their everyday activities and in encouraging networking and solidarity-building among women.

CHURCH WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND TRANSFORMATORY ACTIVITIES IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

By the early 1990s, some church women's organizations in Solomon Islands had widened their focus and, while offering women all the advantages previously discussed, also gave them the opportunity to gain greater faith in their own abilities, broaden their opportunities, and act on issues of concern to them: in other words, these organizations were promoting initiatives that directly empower women. Before the recent political crisis, there were significant indications that, with the help of women's groups espousing such an enhanced agenda, women were gaining increased control over their own lives and working together to effect change. The following examples demonstrate that being based in patriarchal, hierarchical societies did not prevent some church women's organizations from working for future, transformative change. Towns and villages discussed in the examples are located on Map 2.

Catholic women's groups in Malaita

The Catholic Church in the Solomons is divided into three dioceses one of which is Auki diocese, centred on Malaita, a province mainly comprising strongly patrilineal societies.



Map 2: Solomon Islands

Women here seem to face great struggles to gain status and share in development opportunities (MacBride-Stewart 1996:44).

In 1990 the Auki Diocesan Team was established in response to requests from Catholic women in surrounding villages for assistance to form women's groups. Two indigenous religious sisters and an expatriate woman were the first members of the Team but by 1992 it was largely run by several local women. From the outset, the Team had the official endorsement of the Bishop of Malaita, an expatriate who had lived in Malaita for over thirty years and was known for speaking out publicly on issues of women's rights and status. His support lent the Team a great deal of credibility that was especially important in the early stages when the members needed to gain and build up the trust of villagers.

The Team began by visiting women in villages alongside the Langa Langa Lagoon to see what they wanted from their women's groups. Most said that as this was the first time anyone had done something just for women, they were keen to learn whatever they could. At first sewing classes and cooking demonstrations were provided but before long the Team found, by drawing women into discussions about their lives, that there were more fundamental changes towards which women wanted to work. Such changes involved husbands and wives working together and sharing together, and building sisterhood through their women's groups (Sheila MacBride-Stewart, Facilitator, Auki Diocesan Team, pers. comm., 1992).

The Team's first effort at networking was the organization of a gathering of 129 women's representatives from every parish in Auki diocese for a ten-day meeting at a centre in Buma. This required many women to travel large distances by land or sea. For many, it was the first time any women from their village had been allowed to go to a distant place without their husbands. Many were afraid because they had to mix with women from different tribal and language groups. They were pleased to discover, however, that the women facilitating the various learning sessions were basically women like themselves from the villages, mothers and wives, not young, highly-educated women dressed in fancy clothes. For example, one of the Team members, Patricia Wale (Pati), had seven children. Another, Mary Taikui, had limited primary school education but had attended several agriculture courses and spoke six of the local languages plus Pijin and English. Some of the participants at Buma said that they liked having these women as leaders because they were tired of listening to men telling them what to do.

The meeting at Buma turned out to be a watershed event for participants. Although they had come to learn about community work, women's leadership and women's role in development, the first few days were spent talking about their experiences as women. While they spoke of hardship and frustration and many tears were shed, the participants moved on to discuss their roles in society and the importance of what they contributed. They began to acknowledge that they were not useless. These discussions had 'for the first time given to the women a sense of their worth ... [which] has stressed their dignity and value to the family and the community' (Catholic Church, Diocese of Malaita n.d.). Women at this gathering were also given ideas to take back to their villages with the aim of establishing women's groups there.

The Team followed the Buma gathering with an extensive program which saw them travel to organize workshops for women in every parish in Malaita, often in remote areas where there had never before been a course offered especially for women. The Team's approach meant that within three years the number of active Catholic women's groups in Auki diocese rose from seven to just over one hundred. Rather than focusing on material development, the Team decided to try to build up Malaitan women's sense of dignity and self-esteem so they would have the confidence to speak out and make changes in their lives. This is in contrast to attempts to secure sewing machines or funds for a poultry project – the 'material' development which characterizes women's group activities across the country. Comments arising from these first workshops reflected the joy women felt at this new

opportunity to come together and learn, as well as a certain degree of nervousness about the challenges ahead of them:

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

the workshop is opening our eyes to see our role as women....

Speaking out and standing up was tambu ['taboo, prohibited'] before ... [but] now we have taken the yokes from our necks and we do speak out (Catholic Church, Diocese of Malaita n.d.).

Practical skills associated with health, literacy, and agriculture received prominence later in the program after concerns about women's self-esteem had been addressed. Participants felt that these topics were presented in a way they could easily understand with one saying in her evaluation: 'Every topic easily fits grassroots level'. Women started to realize that they did not have to resign themselves to their present situation. Armed with this knowledge, village groups went on to produce their own agendas for action. For some, the first priority was to build a women's club house, for others, to establish *supsup* gardens,¹⁰ while several saw literacy as of prime importance. For example, in Bubuitolo, a woman with standard seven education started to run literacy classes three mornings a week for thirty women in her village (see Plate 2): 'Without doubt there is a hunger from the women to learn to read and write' (Catholic Church, Diocese of Malaita n.d.).

In other villages around Malaita, women started to open themselves to new opportunities and to speak out in public. In one village two women gained election to the school committee and in another two women were elected to the parish council. Such achievements were unprecedented in these areas and their implications for Malaitan women should not be underestimated. Team members were encouraged to note that women were often the driving force behind planning activities in their village. They no longer sat quietly at the back of community meetings as they were not so afraid to speak out for what they believed to be right. Improved self-esteem also inspired women to take up training opportunities. When a



Plate 2: Women and children stand proudly in front of the building constructed for literacy classes, Bubuitolo, north Malaita, Solomon Islands, 1992.

Photograph: R Scheyvens.

literacy trainer from Honiara held a workshop for representatives of women's groups who had worked with the Team, she was amazed by how keen they were to learn. She remarked that it was as though someone had proved to the women that they had something worthwhile to offer. This made them stand out from other groups she had trained (Lesley Moseley, pers. comm., 1992).

Furthermore, the Team tried to address the problem of lack of support from husbands by devoting one day of village workshops to awareness-raising for men, thereby demonstrating a realization that women's programs do not occur in a vacuum and that women across Malaita want to have men's support. Eventually the women's groups began to get formal recognition from men. In some villages which hosted workshops, for example, local men played pan pipes to welcome women from other areas into their community. This was a sign of the status such women's events were now accorded. In one tragic incident, a woman was struck by lightning and killed as she travelled home from a women's workshop. This threatened the cohesiveness of her group and women's freedom to travel away from home as death from such a cause was traditionally seen as a sign of the woman's having committed some great sin, such as adultery. Her husband stood up at the funeral, however, and urged the women to continue with the good work they were doing, stressing that they must not stop because of the death of his wife. Another woman from a group in Marasike, south Malaita, an area in which hereditary systems of leadership prevail, 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 by reviving traditions of assisting the old and the sick (Sheila MacBride-Stewart, pers. comm., 1993). In such circumstances, although community work has increased women's workloads, it has also opened up unprecedented opportunities for them to earn respect from those with authority and power. Consequently, avenues to male-dominated decision-making systems are slowly opening up to women.

Other men came to support the work of the Team because they saw the benefit to their families of their wives' new skills, such as literacy or making *supsup* gardens. While the direct objectives of the Team were not to teach women to provide tastier meals for their husbands or to help their children with school work, these indirect consequences meant that the Team faced little resistance, despite the fact that their work was transforming the lives of many women. Women were being empowered right under men's noses but in such a way that they did not have to face widespread opposition.

The work of the Auki Diocesan Team was based on a program devised by and for grassroots women and it had widespread effects. Perhaps the biggest transformation was that newly-empowered women started to question the *status quo* and subsequently went on to challenge social values which had prevented their realizing their potential. Women challenged *kastom*, 'custom' or 'tradition' in Pijin,¹¹ by travelling away from home without their husbands and transcended gender norms by taking on community leadership positions. Women gained access to domains of power previously dominated by men, such as school councils and even a Council of Chiefs. The general status of women increased as some took on new positions. The rationale of the Auki Diocesan Team was that without a sense of self-esteem and dignity women cannot hope to see themselves as significant contributors to their country's development. There is nothing radical in this prescription but it had a major impact on the lives of thousands of women across Malaita Province. They were empowered.¹²

The Mothers' Union

The Mothers' Union is the women's organization of the Anglican Church of Melanesia and is part of a world-wide charitable society. It was established in the Solomons in 1924 but until the 1970s all activities were church-oriented and in line with the welfare approach,

focusing, as the name suggests, on the role of mothers in providing for their families. Superficially, the Mothers' Union in Solomon Islands still seems a very conservative organization to liberal, secular outsiders. Its professed aims and objectives stress spiritual development and maintenance of Christian family life and promote the maternal role of women. It is therefore not surprising that village women's groups have concentrated largely on home economics activities, especially given the strong local demand. The Mothers' Union would not formally associate with the Solomon Islands National Council of Women in the 1980s because it did not want to be publicly involved with an organization regarded widely and negatively as feminist and political.¹³

Gradually, however, there has been a move away from this conservative stance as women running the Mothers' Union at the national level have taken a fairly liberal interpretation of their objectives: 'Now we realize we have to stretch our awareness', said a provincial secretary in the organization (Pamela Abana, pers. comm., 1992). This shift in attitude was evident in the 1970s with the introduction of health and sanitation projects, in the early 1980s with the start of village kindergartens run by local women, and in the late 1980s with the initiation of literacy programs.

By the early 1990s, the major concern of the Mothers' Union was non-formal education. It is, for example, now one of the major organizations concerned with literacy training in Solomon Islands. A pilot literacy program was initiated in the capital, Honiara, in 1989 and later expanded to Auki, Kohimarama, Buala, Lata and Kira Kira, spanning five provinces. Funds were provided for teachers to travel more and additional learning materials were purchased. The Mothers' Union has targeted women in such programs in an attempt to bridge the gap which sees 27% of male Solomon Islanders literate in English and only 17% of females (Solomon Islands National Literacy Committee 1992). Women are less able than men to gain an education or paid employment and less able to communicate at an official level, where writing is usually required. Literacy classes have thus expanded many women's options. By inviting women to bring their children to classes, the Mothers' Union has actively supported women's reproductive roles and kept faith with its core commitment to maternal values.

Besides launching into non-formal education programs, the Mothers' Union has shown more concern for political issues, particularly logging. For years, forests in Solomon Islands have been logged at well beyond sustainable rates, threatening the imminent exhaustion of timber as a commercial resource (Frazer 1997). Though official policy now demands sustainable exploitation of forests, the goal will be difficult to achieve given the economy's heavy reliance on timber exports which in 1993 accounted for nearly 60% of total merchandise exported (Duncan 1994:6). In November 1991, concern about the non-sustainability of logging practices and the lack of consultation with women when logging agreements are signed led the Mothers' Union to organize a meeting of the Isabel community in Honiara. The goal was to raise awareness and issues of concern regarding the Axion logging company which was establishing itself in the island of Isabel. This well-organized meeting included the member of parliament for East Isabel, a representative of the chiefs, and a Church representative as well as almost a hundred members of the Isabel community in Honiara. Members of the Mothers' Union suggested alternatives to allowing foreign companies to log their forests, followed by a strong recommendation on behalf of the women of Isabel and the Mothers' Union that large scale mining and logging development be discouraged:

We are greatly disappointed with the way the current logging issue has been handled. We feel we have been disgraced and betrayed of our birth rights by our leaders in selling our motherland to be raped and molested by foreigners while we ... watch with no power to defend her (Anglican Church of Melanesia Mothers' Union n.d.: Appendix I).

The efforts of the Mothers' Union to prevent the destruction of resources on Isabel were not limited to this meeting. Previously its representatives had raised their concerns at a Diocesan Council and gained the Church's support to write an open letter to Members of Parliament, the Premier of Isabel Province, and other prominent leaders in Isabel. The Mothers' Union also held meetings for its members to which officers from the Environmental Section and Forestry Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources were invited. They discussed and answered questions about environmental degradation and legal aspects of the access to customary land by logging companies. An awareness program was planned for 1992 which would bring together 600 women from around the Anglican diocese of Isabel to discuss the importance of their roles as the foundation of the family, to consider prospects for the future, and to highlight key issues with respect to logging.¹⁴ Such initiatives by the Mothers' Union were part of the general ground-swell of public opinion that helped to challenge the government's pro-logging stance.

In a further instance of social activism, the Mothers' Union also tackled the sensitive matter of domestic violence at a time when other organizations were not willing to do so. Domestic violence is evidently widespread in Solomon Islands but is of particular concern in urban areas where the ready availability of alcohol may act as a trigger, where customary relationships are in flux, and where women often do not have nearby kin to come to their assistance and impose *kastom* sanctions on offending men. In 1985 *Nius Blong Mere*, the newsletter of the Solomon Islands National Council of Women, devoted an issue to the theme of 'Wife beating' and printed a series of statements 'Heard around Honiara' concerning domestic violence:

'She wanted to do Custom dancing, so he beat her up. She won't be dancing';
'I don't think that I have worked with any woman who hasn't come into work with a black eye at sometime';
'He threw me around like a bag of copra';
'He thought that she was talking about him with the other women, so he beat her up' (Solomon Islands National Council of Women 1985:7).

Leaders also now speak out against domestic violence but men and women in most of the diverse ethnic groups in Solomon Islands still appear to 'share the view and recognise the right of husbands to impose violence on wives as a means of chastising them' (Lateef 1990:15).

In 1992 the Mothers' Union began a fundraising campaign to construct a three-storey building intended, among other purposes, to provide a refuge for women and children suffering abuse within the home. The building, the Saint Agnes Training Centre, was planned to include a ground floor complex of classrooms and training facilities for literacy and other work, cheap transit accommodation for trainers and trainees on the floor above, and a third floor of family units intended specifically for women and children fleeing abusive relationships and with nowhere else to turn.¹⁵ The Mothers' Union purposely did not publicize the intended use of the top floor units because they did not want to attract negative publicity. Any organization which in the past had considered providing a similar refuge for women had been condemned for supposedly helping to break up families.¹⁶ There has thus been a gradual but significant shift in the direction and strategies of the women's wing of the largest church in Solomon Islands. While Mothers' Union groups in the villages remain true to the organization's professed aims and objectives, mostly centring their activities on home economics issues based in women's maternal roles, the Honiara-based leadership of the Mothers' Union has steadily broadened the organization's overall emphasis.¹⁷ They have chosen to support strategic activities, such as organizing logging protests and non-formal education sessions, which provide opportunities for both urban-based and grassroots women to be politicized and empowered.

The United Church Women's Fellowship

Ten percent of Solomon Islanders, largely concentrated in Western and Choiseul Provinces, belong to the United (formerly Methodist) Church. The United Church Women's Fellowship (UCWF) is a large department of the Church embracing hundreds of women's groups (see also McDougall and Dickson-Waiko, this issue). Each group is supposed to be guided by a 'Four-Square Programme', altering their activities each week around the themes of devotion, education (such as weaving mats, sewing, and craftwork), service (visiting and helping the sick and the elderly), and recreation (games, *kastom* dancing, and 'bring and buy' fundraising stalls). These official activities are clearly set within the welfare approach to women's development.¹⁸

It is more in the areas of networking and information-sharing than specific programs that the UCWF has shifted to a more proactive stance. One way in which leaders have sought to develop cohesion among UCWF members is by means of a UCWF uniform – dresses of a purple colour which members are very proud to own and wear – as well as a flag and a promise memorized by all the different groups (Ryan 1975:63). A more significant strategy to promote cohesion is networking. From the movement's beginnings as small groups of women meeting together with early female missionaries for prayer and to learn to sew, UCWF leaders developed an elaborate structure binding women scattered across Western Province and Choiseul into a single, cohesive organization. In 1992 this internal network consisted of individual groups, then 'sections' comprising a number of groups, 'circuits' embracing several sections, and finally the Solomon Islands 'region', made up of eleven circuits in total. The structure provides UCWF members with many opportunities to come together to meet and share with women from further afield than their own village. A typical pattern is for local groups to meet once a week, join once a month in meeting other groups within a section, and combine once a year with all women's groups belonging to a circuit, which are invited to come together for a period of prayer and fellowship at a 'rally'.

Rallies offer several hundred women at a time the rare opportunity to leave behind their family and community responsibilities for a week and to express solidarity with women from different tribal and language areas. They have time to discuss problems, ideas, and solutions to common pressures. For example, when the Marovo circuit met in 1991, the aim was to raise educational awareness on the exploitation of the environment and pollution of rivers, air, land, and sea. Women presented dramas relating to these themes which prompted discussions on their shared concern about the preservation of reefs in the Marovo lagoon.

Rallies and circuit meetings also force communities to recognize their women's groups and the work they do. The fact that twenty women from one small village were allowed to attend a rally is testimony to the local power of UCWF groups, backed by the Church. On such occasions, husbands often have to take on duties such as child care, meal preparation, and gardening. The fact that men, women, and children in a community hosting a rally or circuit meeting are willing to work together to erect temporary houses and gather provisions for all the participants demonstrates the status of the UCWF. In a three day circuit meeting I attended in South Choiseul in 1996, men spent a good part of each day fishing for provisions for the women gathered in their village and some men also assisted with cooking and serving food to women. It is a rare sight in Solomon Islands to see women sit down to eat while men stand waving small bundles of greenery over the cooked food to keep the flies away.

Support from the United Church for women's development, endorsed by a policy of recruiting female clergy,¹⁹ has given some women the confidence to challenge husbands who try to prevent their attending meetings. For example, in Simbo in the early 1990s, the anthropologist Christine Dureau noted at least two separate occasions when, after being asked why they were not fully participating in church affairs, women stood up and publicly accused men of being lazy when it came to child care. The men reacted angrily to these

accusations. At least part of the problem was that some men regarded women's participation in UCWF groups as a leisure activity while the Church 'presents the UCWF as a Christian theatre of female enablement' (1993:26).

Participation in UCWF groups means a great deal to many women. In Simbo:

Most women wish to participate in the activities of this body [the UCWF] ... The United Church frames the greatest number of, and most significant, social happenings on the island. Within this Church, the UCWF is the women's exclusive sphere.... the UCWF plays a significant part in all community events and issues.... It facilitates contact between women across the island and on other islands, as well as being a theatre for discussion of matters of interest to women and input into public domains (Dureau 1993:26).

UCWF groups have long given women opportunities for distinction in their communities. In the 1960s Nancy Carter, the woman who initiated the strong Methodist Women's Fellowship organization which became the UCWF in 1968, said after her transfer back to New Zealand:

'What a thrill it was for me when I visited there in 1965 to be asked to dedicate the Women's Fellowship Flag at a celebration in which women were very much in the foreground and the men were merely spectators'. She recalled the days not long passed when the idea of anything solely for women was not encouraged (Ryan 1975:64).

As with the Anglican Mothers' Union, the UCWF leadership became more politicized in the late 1980s, their bargaining power aided by the cohesiveness of the organization. At a Solomon Islands Regional Conference in 1991, women expressed concern about young women working at the Noro tuna cannery, a number of whom had become pregnant or contracted venereal diseases.²⁰ They recommended that Church ministers be urged to give talks on sex education to young people in the villages. They also agreed to write letters to the Provincial Secretary of Western Province and the provincial Liquor Board to oppose the establishment of a casino in Gizo. The UCWF has also been instrumental in gaining better representation for women in the Church hierarchy. In 1989 the synod of the United Church accepted a recommendation by the UCWF that at least one quarter of the synod membership should be women.

While the UCWF advocates a welfare approach to women's development, with the 'Four Square Programme' providing the basis of group activities in the villages, its approach to networking has achieved small but significant changes for many women. The UCWF provides women with unprecedented opportunities to travel and to meet and learn from other women with whom they would normally have no contact. This broadens women's awareness and encourages a wider understanding of strategies to overcome problems common to women in their country. Networking can be a very empowering experience for women whose lives usually centre on the home and food production in their gardens. The network of UCWF groups across the western Solomons provides the main avenue for women to achieve prominence in village life (Dureau 1993:26). The recent willingness of UCWF leaders to tackle political issues also suggests that further empowering initiatives will be sponsored by them in the future.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed attempts by church women's organizations to promote women's development. A conceptual tool based on the contrast between welfare and empowerment

approaches to women's development is used to analyze various initiatives in order to ascertain the extent to which they assisted Solomon Islands women in working for change and achieving gender equity. That the welfare approach still dominates church-based programs for women in Solomon Islands is clear and undoubtedly women demand these activities and gain enjoyment and fulfilment from them. What is less apparent, however, is that such programs do offer some opportunities for women's empowerment. Whether or not the **content** of church women's group activities reflects a welfare approach to development, the **process** of women's coming together to network, share ideas, and have time out from everyday activities and responsibilities can provide a space for women to start identifying their strategic interests. Thus an analysis of church women's group activities in the Solomons shows that there is not always a strict division between welfare and empowerment approaches in practice.

While it is patently unacceptable simply to dismiss church women's groups which do not overtly challenge women's disadvantaged position in society, it cannot be assumed that welfare activities accurately reflect women's needs and interests in the Solomons just because they dominate the work of church women's groups. As Price (1992) noted in a discussion of 'the politics of need interpretation', there is a need to appreciate the particular ideological and political background against which some issues are cast as social problems while others are ignored. Thus in cases where grassroots women in church groups have seemingly named their own problems and priorities, their 'free choice' might have been significantly constrained by several factors: first, their social positioning encourages them to put the interests of men and children before their own; second, women are just as likely as men 'to subscribe to prevailing ideas about gender inequality as either divinely ordained, biologically given or economically rational' (Kabeer 1992:34); third, women may be so pre-occupied with the strenuous physical labour and psychological demands involved in providing for their families that they have neither the time nor the energy to reflect on their situation (Rathgeber 1990:499); fourth, women's knowledge of their development options is likely to be incomplete, so that they commonly think of women's development in terms defined by others, whether colonial authorities or local elites – that is, as home economics projects:

Resignation in the face of a lack of alternatives is often the best way to survive... [however,] given the opportunity and the support, and sensitive ways of working which respect culture and women's pace, women readily question the reasons that their lives are as they are and, far from being content, seek out ways of challenging and changing their situation (Mosse 1993:170).

In support of Mosse's comments, it is interesting to see how enthusiastically members of church women's groups in the Solomons responded when presented with initiatives which offered innovative strategies aimed at more direct means of empowerment than conventional women's group activities. Women participated enthusiastically in literacy classes and logging protests and opportunities to travel to distant places and network with other women were particularly well received. Involvement in such initiatives has often had a transformatory impact on women's lives. While the significance of isolated cases – such as when a woman has been emboldened to stand for election to a school council, or women have enrolled for literacy classes because they are allowed to bring their children along, or they have attended meetings to air their views on resource exploitation, or travelled to a distant village for a meeting – may not be immediately apparent, these are all unprecedented actions for many Solomon Islands women which indicate that such women are attempting to take control of their own lives and influence the direction of future change. The steps they have made are inspired by the work of church women's organizations working at the grassroots. Furthermore, men were often forced to reconsider their relations with and expect-

tations of women because of the actions of church women's groups. For example, the Auki Diocesan Team and UCWF women used the socially-sanctioned avenue of their church groups to encourage men to make compromises, such as allowing their wives to attend workshops, which gave women a certain degree of freedom and a little more control over their lives. Men often had to take on non-traditional roles in the absence of their wives. The UCWF also successfully lobbied for women to feature more strongly in the church hierarchy.

Practical, welfare-related skills such as sewing, which dominate the activities of many church women's groups, are important because women gain some economic benefit and often great enjoyment from them. However, an exclusive focus on such activities by church women's groups would deny that Solomons Islands women have other pressing needs and interests. Through adopting a broader approach to women's development, the church women's organizations discussed herein have taken initiatives which inspired a change of consciousness in women, reassuring them of their worth, the importance of their contributions, and what they can do to change their situation if they are unhappy with it.

Neither the Auki Diocesan Team, nor the Mothers' Union, nor the UCWF explicitly pronounced a recognition of gender subordination but because they were concerned with women's empowerment they effectively challenged structures which were oppressing women. These groups found that the use of subtle strategies, rather than outright confrontation, was often the most effective means of catalyzing changes in women's lives and their examples provide useful models for other women's groups prepared to adopt a slight reorientation in approach (Scheyvens 1998).

It is clearly possible to work through seemingly conservative institutions to empower women and this may even be desirable if one wishes to avoid stirring up widespread opposition to the programs in place. While outsiders may reject the notion of the empowering potential of church women's groups, clearly some women's organizations in Solomon Islands have implemented initiatives which could radically alter the prospects of rural women. It is therefore as important to acknowledge the credibility of a diverse range of alternative visions for empowering women as it is to recognize that there are many ways in which a feminist consciousness may be displayed (Kandiyoti 1988:286).

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NOTES

1. Around 85% of Solomon Islanders reside in rural areas. The 1986 Census observed that the average village size was only 44.3 persons (Solomon Islands Government 1986:273).
2. In 1992 I conducted fieldwork in Western Province, Guadalcanal, and Malaita for my PhD in Development Studies which examined strategies for the empowerment of women in Solomon Islands (Scheyvens 1995a). Many of the case studies examined involved the work of women's organizations and the majority of these organizations had church affiliations. I also interviewed members of church women's groups in Choiseul and Western Province in 1996 while doing research on logging and eco-timber production in the Solomons. The ethnographic present of this paper thus predates the crisis which since 1999 has triggered the virtual collapse of state political and economic systems and seriously impacted on all citizens, including women and their groups, especially in the capital, Honiara, and the most affected islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita (see McDougall and Pollard, this issue).
3. However, as Fife (1995) noted with reference to Papua New Guinea, there were men whose social power did not increase during the colonial period either.
4. I prefer the term 'development initiative' to 'development project' as the former can encompass both grass-roots strategies such as networking and meetings as well as more formally-constituted development projects.
5. These are some of the concerns noted by women consulted during the 'Provincial Tours' of 1988 which involved a group of women travelling throughout the Solomons to hear the views of other women on certain

- issues including, for example, access to and quality of health and education, the role of national women's organizations, legal rights, and political representation of women (National Women's Policy Review Committee n.d.).
6. E.g., Maguire 1984:60; Small 1987:47; Bruce 1989:987; Purushothaman and Jaeckel 2000; Staudt 1987; Schuler 1986; Walters and Manicom 1996; Yudelman 1987:111-2.
 7. See Friedmann (1992) for a full discussion of the differences between psychological, social, and political empowerment
 8. This is not however to suggest that indigenous women were opposed to such activities. Indeed, there is ample evidence that many women were excited by learning various sewing and weaving techniques, the latter often building upon their indigenous skills (Douglas 2002:4, 15-16).
 9. Membership of the five major churches in the Solomon Islands is as follows: the Church of Melanesia or Anglican Church (33.9%), the Roman Catholic Church (19.2%), the South Sea Evangelical Church (17.6%), the United Church (11%), and the Seventh Day Adventist Church (10%) (Scheyvens 1995a:24).
 10. *Supsup* gardens are fruit and vegetable gardens located near the house which can provide a ready source of nutritious foods. They complement the larger traditional bush gardens which grow mainly starch vegetables.
 11. It is important to realize that when Solomon Islanders speak of *kastom* they often refer to practices which have become entrenched since the colonial period, including Christian worship.
 12. See Barnes (2000) for a participant's update on the recent work of the Catholic Women's Program in Malaita.
 13. Bulbeck (1993) provided a useful summary of some of the reasons why women of the 'Third World' have been reluctant to associate themselves with the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism'. See also Douglas (2002:19-23) on the ambiguous attitudes to 'feminism' of women and churches in Vanuatu.
 14. Unfortunately, my efforts to keep in touch with my very helpful informants once I had returned to New Zealand were fruitless and I am thus unable to comment on whether this meeting eventuated or on its outcomes.
 15. When I was in the field in 1992, the Mothers' Union leaders could not be certain that they would be able to raise sufficient funds for the training centre to go ahead. They needed SI\$400,000 for the first two floors and had to raise half this amount before construction could commence. Once again, my efforts to continue correspondence with them on this question after completing my fieldwork were unsuccessful.
 16. Douglas (2002:22) noted similar opposition to the work of the Women's Centre in Vanuatu.
 17. McDougall (this issue) reports a parallel divergence in priorities between the urban-based national leadership of the UCWF in Solomon Islands and the membership of local fellowships in the western Solomons.
 18. See McDougall (this issue) for an ethnographic perspective on the UCWF in Ranongga Island.
 19. The United Church is regarded as the most liberal in Solomon Islands in terms of encouraging women to join the clergy.
 20. The town of Noro on New Georgia Island had around 1,000 inhabitants in 1996. The cannery draws its female work force largely from surrounding villages where opinions are divided on the cannery's presence. Some people appreciate the rare opportunity it provides for rural women to earn a wage while others are upset at what they see as the social decay that has come in its wake.

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