

## **Passenger-women: changing gender relations in the Tari Basin**

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### **SUMMARY**

Papua New Guinea is in the early stages of an HIV/AIDS epidemic. It is important to understand how the sexual behaviour of Huli men and women will influence the form of the epidemic in the Tari area. High numbers of single and married men migrating out of the Tari area in search of employment, returning with sexually transmitted infections, are one cause for concern. Another is the emergence of a form of prostitution in the Tari area. This paper describes an unusual aspect of female sexual behaviour at Tari in which some women become sexually promiscuous, behaving in a manner that could be labelled prostitution. This behaviour scandalizes their families and results in a debasing of their value as brides. However, the women involved do not see their actions as being part of any form of sex work. Rather, they participate in this behaviour because they are frustrated and angry. The women feel their male kin have not fulfilled customary obligations to them as women; often the women have been raped and their assailants neither apprehended nor punished. As a result the women have come to believe that the meaning and function of bridewealth marriage has changed such that women are like commodities to be bought and sold. They see their behaviour as a form of revenge on their families and on a culture that seemingly no longer values them as persons.

### **Introduction**

It is estimated that there are currently about 36 million people in the world living with HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome), and an estimated 19 million people have died of HIV/AIDS (1). Moreover, the disease has created millions of orphans; there has been a reversal in child survival rates; and in some areas of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, there is now a shortage of qualified workers for industry, banking and management positions. Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of the United Nations AIDS Agency (UNAIDS), has asserted that HIV/AIDS constitutes the biggest threat to the global education agenda because so many primary and secondary school teachers have been lost to the disease. Questions that face Papua New Guinea (PNG) are whether HIV/AIDS will have a similar impact on the health, economy and social well-being of its citizens, and which health and social policies will best facilitate HIV/AIDS prevention.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNAIDS, there were 1741 confirmed cases of HIV/AIDS in PNG (1). While this number may seem small compared to other world areas, there is reason to worry that HIV prevalence in PNG will be high since rates for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are high in some parts of the country. Prevalence rates for STIs as high as 58% have been observed among rural men and women – the most common being trichomoniasis (46%) and chlamydia infection (26%) (2-5). The number of cases of syphilis and gonorrhoea reported by Tari hospital increased dramatically from 428 in 1987 to 1085 in 1995. High rates of STIs are good indicators that HIV will be a problem in a given population, in part because they are important co-factors in HIV transmission (6).

While the cultures and history of PNG differ from those of African and Asian countries, PNG does share with those world areas some structural features that have put citizens there at high risk (7). For example, like many parts

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of Africa, PNG has high rates of male migration to mining sites, urban areas and other sites of employment. In the colonial history of PNG, Southern Highlands Province was deliberately cultivated as a source of labour for coffee and copra plantations located in other provinces; therefore, the Tari Basin area has a long history of male absence from the community (8,9). This pattern of labour facilitates STI transmission because men may be more likely to seek out extramarital sexual and emotional relationships if they are separated from their spouses and communities for long periods of time (10,11). Moreover, if men do contract an STI, they are likely to transmit it to their wives during those periods when they are able to return home (12).

Another feature of the social landscape that Papua New Guinea shares with other places where people are vulnerable to HIV is the emergence of prostitution – or sex work, as it is now usually called in social science and public health literature – as an economic niche for some women. The remainder of this article examines the lives of women in the Tari area who behave like sex workers and are often called *pasindia meri* (passenger-women). My aim is to show that in the Tari Basin the emergence of rural passenger-women appears to be the result of a different dynamic than that documented elsewhere. At Tari, the decision by some women to engage in *pasindia meri* behaviour is not due to greed or moral deficiencies on the part of the women – dominant stereotypes about passenger-women – but from frustration and anger about the perception held by many women that kin – particularly male kin – no longer fulfil their customary obligations to women, and the belief that the meaning and function of bridewealth marriage has changed such that women have become commodities to be bought and sold by their families (13). These concerns are possibly shared by many women in the contemporary context, but in the case of passenger-women there are often violent ‘trigger events’ that motivate them to respond to these concerns by engaging in what could be called ‘revenge promiscuity’. Therefore, a focus on passenger-women requires a focus on the ways in which Papua New Guinea’s changing economy is having an impact on the nature of gender relations.

## Methods

It is important in anthropological research to obtain information not only about the main question of interest – in this case, passenger-women – but also about the larger social and cultural context of people’s beliefs and practices. Therefore my research – conducted at Tari over a two-year period in 1995-1997 – used a wide range of methods: participant observation in three different households, surveys concerning household structure and composition; economic ‘diaries’ maintained by women about their daily monetary intake and expenditure; transcription and analysis of village court cases concerning allegedly illegal sexual behaviour; and an analysis of hospital sexually transmitted disease (STD) and injury records. These methods all provided information about how and why gender relations were changing in the Tari Basin. The primary method used to obtain information about the passenger-women themselves was semi-structured life history interviews with 50 women who varied in age, degree of education, amount of time spent outside the Tari Basin and marital history. Of these 50 women 15 self-identified as passenger-women, meaning that when they were asked whether they considered themselves to be passenger-women, they answered “yes”. Women were all asked the same questions about childhood experiences, formal education, adherence to customary taboos, and marital and reproductive history, but they were allowed to expand and elaborate their answers where they felt appropriate. Interviews lasted from one to three hours, and most of these interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

## Passenger-women life histories

It is difficult to find an English word that encompasses exactly what is meant by the term ‘passenger-woman’, and it is important to keep in mind that the tok pisin (Melanesian Pidgin) term *pasindia meri* may have somewhat different meanings in different areas of Papua New Guinea. Because they have multiple, serial sexual partners, do not form lasting relationships with these partners, and often exchange sex for money, passenger-women would in many places be considered as sex workers (14). However, many self-identified passenger-women in the Tari Basin do not

depend on the money they take in exchange for sex, and many of them continue to engage in more traditional female activities such as tending gardens and raising pigs, if not their own, then those of their female kin. Perhaps most importantly, many Huli women who self-identify as passenger-women say that they were not motivated to become passenger-women out of economic desire or necessity, but rather out of anger with kin, most often husbands and/or brothers. Two case-studies below illustrate this point. The names used in these case studies are pseudonyms.

### Case Study 1: Ogai

Ogai had two children and had suffered through a difficult marriage for a number of years before she began to *pasindia raun* (literally, passenger around, which, for women, has connotations of sexual promiscuity). Her husband worked at a gold mine not far from the Tari Basin, but he rarely gave her money, he rarely came home, and she knew that he had sex with other women. However, she put up with this situation, and it was only after she was raped – and her husband and her brothers refused to do anything about it – that she abandoned her husband and their children and started having sex for money; in other words she stopped behaving like a wife and mother.

When she told her brothers about the rape, they responded that she was a married woman, her husband had paid bridewealth for her and it was therefore her husband's responsibility to take the culprit to court and demand compensation. Her husband, however, refused to leave work and come home, and when he finally did come home, he asserted that since there were no witnesses to the assault, it wasn't worth the trouble of a village court case. When I interviewed her she said that she was so angry that she considered committing suicide, but instead began having promiscuous sex. She began by sneaking off to the local 'bush discos' (rural, late-night dance parties) where she would dance with a number of men, then have sex with one of them in the undergrowth for a few dollars. Later she joined a group of women who also self-identified as passenger-women. The leader of the group arranged for a certain number of women to go to a designated clan's men's house after dark when the men's wives and children were asleep. The women

would have sex with the men and leave before daybreak. As Ogai explained:

We would go sleep in the men's house. The house in the middle is the men's house. All the houses around it belong to a man's relatives and his wives. So they would go talk with their wives and relatives while we snuck into the men's house. He would sit there and talk with his wife, so she would think that he was going alone back to the men's house, and then he would come back and we would have sex. When it was time to leave, we would leave, before it was light, before anyone was awake. So we would hide and do it. In the men's house they would divvy us up. Like if there were two men living there, then I would go and bring a girlfriend of mine for the other man...and if there were seven or eight men, six, five, like that, I would bring lots of women. I would bring women for each of the men.

### Case Study 2: Megeme

Megeme asserted that she decided to become a passenger-woman after she was raped for the second time. Her relatives threatened war if the assailant's family did not give them 15 pigs, but what Megeme then perceived as support and solidarity she later interpreted as greed on the part of her family. After the court case, although she often met her aunts and uncles, individuals who had received some of the compensation money and pigs, they never bought her soap or cigarettes, and when she asked them to pay her school fees, they refused. As she pronounced bitterly, "The first time a man raped me I supplied 15 pigs for my father's family, and the second time a man raped me I supplied 15 pigs for my mother's family, but my relatives never give me anything". It was at this point that she started to *pasindia raun*. She did not need the money; rather, she wanted to punish her family by depriving them of her bridewealth, and the way to deprive them of bridewealth was to decrease the possibility that a man would want to marry her, by ruining her own reputation through engaging in the exchange of sex for money. Like Ogai, she began by sneaking off to the local 'bush discos'. Later she ran away with a PMV driver. After that relationship ended, she engaged in a series of sexual relationships – some long in duration and some quite brief. As

she explained to me, the fact that she felt that her relatives had profited from her two court cases and then did little to support her made her feel that, "They treat me *olsem maket* (like a commodity)". "*Olsem, mi fri. Laik bilong mi,*" she said. "Therefore, I'm free. My choice".

### Commentary

Ogai's and Megeme's narratives are typical of Huli women who self-identify as passenger-women. Although passenger-women eventually come to expect payment in exchange for sex, their initial motivations have more to do with anger, and a desire to punish kin, than with economic need or desire. When passenger-women run away from their husbands or families, they refuse to do the work of production and reproduction: they refuse to marry, or they abandon their gardens, pigs and children, and thereby refuse to do the material labour of producing both the next generation of persons and the next generation of pigs, both necessary for the continuity of the clan. Ogai and Megeme, as well as other passenger-women from my interview sample, felt betrayed by their husbands and brothers. According to Ogai, and to many passenger-women, the decision to act as a passenger-woman is precipitated by a trigger event – most often rape, violence to female kin, or abandonment and the subsequent failure of a woman's male kin to pursue proper justice.

Both Ogai's and Megeme's case studies involve incidents of rape. This theme is not incidental. My interview material suggests that women who later self-identified as passenger-women had more experiences of rape than women who did not become passenger-women. However, since this study did not involve a statistical analysis of precursors to becoming a passenger-woman, I cannot be certain that passenger-women have experienced more sexual violence than other women and that these experiences have had a causal effect on their decisions to become passenger-women. Nevertheless, their narratives suggest that what inspires the anger that motivates them to become passenger-women is the failure of kin to pursue adequate justice in cases of rape and/or the belief that relatives are more interested in monetary compensation than in achieving justice for female victims.

Kin, many passenger-women said, "are just greedy for bridewealth". Relatives are eager, the women suggested, to accept bridewealth cash and pigs, but will not provide economic or moral support during a time of crisis. Women feel that in this context they are treated '*olsem maket*' (like a commodity). Many Huli women argued to me that women were once the valued item for whom the family gave bridewealth; now cash is the valued item for which the family gives women. Male kin in particular, no longer fulfil traditional obligations to their sisters and wives.

One concern I have is that with recent economic changes in Papua New Guinea, more women may feel compelled to exchange sex for money because of economic need. This is a pattern seen in many parts of the world that have experienced economic crisis.

### Discussion

It is not possible to generalize from the Tari Basin case to other areas of Papua New Guinea, where women who are labelled, or who self-identify, as passenger-women may have other life history experiences and other motivations (15). Nevertheless, these case studies from the Tari Basin do raise a number of issues that are relevant to other areas of Papua New Guinea. First, many communities in Papua New Guinea experience male absence from the community as men seek wage labour for long periods of time. It is difficult for absent men to perform their customary roles, such as pursuing appropriate justice when a woman is injured by another party. Moreover, most employers do not offer family housing to men, making it more likely that men will seek extramarital partners. Conversely, women may be more likely also to seek out extramarital partners if they feel they have been physically or morally abandoned by their husbands, or if they feel husbands are not adequately providing for wives and children left at home.

Second, it is likely that the meanings and functions of bridewealth have changed. While many people still consider bridewealth to be an expression of a woman's worth to her family, many women feel increasingly ambivalent about bridewealth and other compensations for female sexuality, such as monetary



compensation to the families of women who have been raped. Women express concern that **bridewealth**, a gift to a woman's family that demonstrates her value, is now more like **brideprice**, a payment that buys the services of a woman (16). Women similarly express concern that because people in rural areas do not have adequate access to wage labour, they are more likely to use bridewealth payments as a means to obtain lump sums of cash. In other words, in the past women were the desired items for which people gave pigs and money, but now money is the desired item for which people give women. As a consequence of these two dynamics – male absence for wage labour and the partial commoditization of bridewealth – women assert that they can no longer depend on kin to fulfil their customary obligations to them or to provide needed support. As Ogai herself put it:

These days, when women are young their relatives look after them, give them money and soap and all sorts of things...but once you are married, our husbands are supposed to take care of us. Once they have paid brideprice, our relatives will say, "They gave it already. You are already married". So your relatives won't take care of you anymore.

What are the implications of this analysis? First, there needs to be more support for labour policies that will enable men to bring their families to their places of work. While this may not be possible in all cases, perhaps wealthier businesses – mining operations in particular – should be required to provide housing for families, not just for single men. Second, in addition or as an alternative to these changes, stronger laws that compel the maintenance of wives and children when men are absent for long periods may need to be considered. Third, since many men are absent from their home communities for long periods of time and may be tempted to engage in extramarital relationships, greater support for work-site education about the use and importance of condoms should be considered. And finally, while the meanings and functions of bridewealth in contemporary Papua New Guinea have been debated in the past, perhaps we need to renew this debate in an attempt to ensure that bridewealth does, in fact, express the value of, and support for, wives.

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