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# Growing Down Like a Banana: Solomon Islands Village Women Changing Gender Norms

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*This article presents Solomon Islands village women's opinions about gender norms. It explores their perceptions of their ability to be involved in leadership roles and decision-making, and their analysis of how they conceive of their abilities changing. It attempts to unravel the 'push-pull' experience for Solomon Islands rural women—a push towards modernity equated with gender equity and development, and the pull of traditional gender roles for women embedded in notions of what it means to be a good Solomon Islander woman. It concludes that women's empowerment must be viewed as a journey that encompasses women's strategic and practical interests relating to agency in a variety of locations. This article contributes to understanding some aspects to women's empowerment and how international NGOs and other development entities may have a role in creating space for women's self-reflection, public commentary and visibility in secular social space.*

**Keywords:** Gender; Solomon Islands; Women's Empowerment; Agency; Development; Pacific Islands

## Introduction

We women have one kind of development that doesn't come up. It's like you look at those bananas growing there. They grow, we wait for those bananas to grow, but they grow down, they don't grow up. Same as us women here in the Solomons today. Education is good, some women get educated; us women at grassroots level, we have the level we can do. We should stand up and be leaders of the community. We should be at the provincial and national level but we shut up, we box up, because of our [low level of] education. And men say we belong in the kitchen. Because of our *kastom* woman cannot go front and top, we make women go down; so that's what I think makes women not come up. (Katarina, Kolombangara Island)

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This article explores women's perceptions of their ability to be involved in leadership roles and decision-making, and their analysis of how they conceive of their abilities changing. These insights are derived from Focus Discussion Groups (FDGs) conducted in nine villages on Kolombangara Island, Solomon Islands. The women's testimony emerged in response to questions about the possibility of women taking positions of authority traditionally and currently dominated by men; specifically, women as village leaders and chiefs or as members of parliament. The women reveal a perspective of empowerment which sometimes hinges on the idea that women can fill these roles with male permission. Thus, in this article I contribute to debates about the usefulness and possible parameters of the concept of women's empowerment, particularly the idea of what I call 'permitted empowerment' and how such a notion may or may not underwrite greater gender equity in Solomon Islands.

Gender roles and the gendered division of labour continue to be sharply demarcated in Solomon Islands. Solomon Islands is a patriarchal society—men have greater access to important resources as well as greater institutional access to power and privilege. Women do not have the same opportunities to engage in work that draws the highest incomes, for example, in forestry, in mining or in business generally. Women's subordinate position in Solomon Islands is partly blamed on the lack of women in leadership, governance and business (Gay 2009, 182–183). With women accounting for only two per cent of those in national parliament, Solomon Islands rates 137 out of 140 countries for the lowest percentage of women in parliament worldwide (IPU 2015).

The ideology of women's place being in the domestic space and men's being in the public, remains strongly resonant in Solomon Islands. The narratives in this article present women's perceptions of the balance of gendered power in the village realm. The concept of the 'home' and the 'house' recur in women's testimony here. When people refer to the home and house in village contexts they refer to physical as well as conceptual space. Physically 'the house' refers to the buildings that comprise living, sleeping and cooking areas, which may encompass several separate buildings and surrounding outdoor space. It also includes physical areas connected with women's labour: the women's washing area at the river; intertidal zones where women may collect food; and gardens and parts of the forest women may access for food or other materials. So women's place as in the house refers to a specific gendered division of labour which describes physically where women's activities take place relating to food, feeding and care of others—children, husbands, the sick and infirm.

Hviding (1996, 169) describes this as an opposition between the wild and the domesticated. Speaking of maritime practice in Marovo lagoon, Solomon Islands, Hviding characterises men's work and sphere of activity as 'highly mobile and free-ranging' and spatially open. By contrast women's work and areas are characterised as damp and dark, intertidal zones, the mangrove and other areas close to the land. He designates as women's areas the 'lower zones'—the garden and the village—and as men's areas the 'upper zones'—the open sea and the wild bush (157). Such geospatial designations avoid discussions of power dynamics. That is, the ascription of different value and

status to areas and their gendered associations and thus fails to recognise that such positioning always remains relative.

This is apparent in McDougall's (2014) recognition of the 'domestication' of village politics which occurred as political power zones moved outward with transnational capital flows and globalised development projects. In her research into women in leadership positions on Ranongga Island, also in the Western Province of Solomon Islands, McDougall (2014) found that women were increasingly able to take up positions of public authority in the village. It was her conclusion, however, that this was possible partly because a 'feminisation' of these roles had occurred. In essence, the boundaries of the 'domestic' had expanded to include village roles 'emasculated' in the 'trans-local world' where major political decisions are often made outside the village. She describes the village in Solomon Islands in the modern era as a 'fundamentally domestic sort of realm' (222).

Women characterise themselves in the discussions presented here as 'in the home' (down and hidden) while men are 'up and out'. When women speak about gender norms changing in the village they declare their need for openness, for not being hidden, for not being silent, for not being constrained—for coming up and out.

### **Context of the Study**

This research took place on Kolombangara Island in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. Kolombangara is an extinct volcano boasting rich soils, abundant rainfall and fast-growing forests (Whitmore 1989). The population of Kolombangara is approximately 6000 people. The overall land tenure situation on the island is unique in Solomon Islands. Considering the island mostly unpopulated, and therefore free of ownership claims, two thirds of the island was declared wasteland and alienated by the British Protectorate in the early 1900s (Riogano 1979, 245; Bennett 1987, 127–138).<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing approximately 390 square km of land on Kolombangara are under a Fixed Term Estate. This area was leased in 1989 for a seventy-five-year period to Kolombangara Forest Products Limited (KFPL), which operates a forestry plantation.<sup>2</sup> KFPL employs approximately 120 permanent staff and up to 600 contractors drawn from many parts of the Solomons. Only two of the full-time staff are women; they do administrative work in KFPL offices in Rinngi town (personal communication, Mayson Nesah, KFPL personnel manager, May 23, 2014).

The remaining one third of the island is either under customary land tenure or is registered land. A patchwork of logging operations by large-scale foreign logging companies continues to occur in these areas at the time of writing. Deals between customary or registered land owners and foreign logging companies are often contentious and cause community divisions and hostilities. Many of these disputes result in lengthy court cases, a situation common for the past few decades throughout areas in Solomon Islands engaging in large-scale logging projects with foreign-owned companies (for some examples see Frazer 1997; Bennett 2000; Hviding & Bayliss-Smith 2000; Kabutaulaka 2000, 2006; Wairiu 2007).

Villages and settlements are located around the entire coastal lowlands perimeter of Kolombangara Island, including on land in the alienated area. Complex, and sometimes conflictual, negotiations have taken place over land use in this area, as villagers attempt to find farming land and income to meet their needs and also in some cases assert customary land tenure rights (Vigulu 2011). In recent court cases landowners have challenged the boundaries of the KFPL lease. Such struggles are ongoing and often involve issues of trespass which may result in legal action.<sup>3</sup>

One third of the island remains under customary land tenure where land ownership is reckoned matrilineally. Customary land tenure divisions are determined by cognatic descent group categories, glossed as ‘tribes’ in Pijin and *bubutu* in the vernacular, Nduke.<sup>4</sup> These *bubutu* align to genealogies of founders said to have emerged out of different passes in the crater of the volcano, who subsequently settled on the mountain flanks (Scales 2003, 106). During the early colonial period, settlements, sometimes Christian mission-based, were established on the coastline. These villages stayed roughly coterminous with descent categories and subsequently often aligned with one Christian denomination. There is a Kolombangara Island Council of Chiefs supposedly representative of the *bubutu*.<sup>5</sup> The Council was inactive at the time of research and had been so for some years. There were no women on the Council.

Kolombangara Island has the largest dedicated land conservation area in Solomon Islands. In June 2011, a conservation area of 200 square km on land above 400 metres elevation was officially declared. It was established by the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity and Conservation Association (KIBCA) in partnership with the different landowning groups (customary and registered landowners) and KFPL. KIBCA is an indigenous organisation formed in 2008 to ‘protect Kolombangara Island’s rich marine and forest biodiversity and to educate, promote and encourage sustainable management of natural resources through viable economic and social ventures for our communities’ (KIBCA 2016).<sup>6</sup> KIBCA explains its genesis from a greater understanding of the ‘scientific significance’ of the forests of Kolombangara, particularly, an awareness of high plant and animal biodiversity, including several endemic bird and frog species (KIBCA 2016). There are no full-time female staff within KIBCA.

Participants in this research came from nine villages spanning the different land tenures: customary land; registered land; residing on alienated land under lease to KFPL; and also from the KFPL company town of Poitete. The villages were geographically located in the south, south west, north west and north east of the island. Seven villages in which the FDGs were conducted were predominantly Seventh-day Adventist (SDA). One village was exclusively Christian Fellowship Church.<sup>7</sup> The FDG conducted in the KFPL company town of Poitete took place with Seventh-day Adventist women only and was conducted in the SDA church, although there are several different denomination churches there.

While SDA was the main Christian denomination on Kolombangara Island this emphasis in my research is also because the women in my main village of residence were mostly SDA. Their connections and relationships with women in other villages guided and facilitated my research conduct in these other villages. McDougall (2014,

212–213) describes Seventh-day Adventists on Ranongga as having a strong ‘cult of womanhood’. This was also my experience on Kolombangara Island. The SDA women’s church groups, (known as Dorcas, after a female historical figure in the Old Testament ‘who was always doing good and helping the poor’ (The Holy Bible, Acts 9.36)), formed a strong component of the SDA church in all the villages I visited. They also networked island-wide at a large event locally known as ‘Federation’, attended country-wide gatherings in Honiara, as well as conducting Sabbath services in other villages nearby as part of the outreach work promoted by the Pacific branch of the global SDA church. By comparison the men’s church group (Adventist Men) did not undertake any such activities as a group. This paper does not address the issue of women’s leadership in the Church. Briefly, women in the SDA church cannot be pastors. There are strong women leaders in the SDA church but they are *women’s* leaders. All top authorities, including God, are male. There is no emphasis on Mary, as the Mother of God, as a role model or object of worship, as described by others in other denominations, particularly Catholics in Bougainville (Hermkens 2011, 2012). SDA teachings on gender relations emphasise women’s role as help mate to her husband—this opinion was expressed to me many times by village women.

The vernacular language of the whole island of Kolombangara is Nduke. FDGs were conducted in Solomon Islands Pijin, spoken fluently by all participants and myself, with some turn to the vernacular in some villages when women were discussing issues among themselves or when my research assistants provided clarification on some points of discussion.

### **Women in Leadership in Solomon Islands**

A lack of women in formal leadership positions in Solomon Islands is sometimes explained as being due to the erosion of women’s traditional leadership roles by the forces of patriarchal Christianity and modern political-economic systems, for example:

While women in the Solomon Islands traditionally played a significant role in decision-making forums, including in land and resource management in matrilineal land systems, these roles were eroded over the years with the introduction of patriarchal religious, legal, economic and political systems. As a result, women’s voices and contributions are absent today in the national political sphere. (Braun 2012, 7)

Alternately, these same ‘traditional’ norms are blamed:

Gender inequalities in Solomon Islands are rooted in tradition and culture, maintained through everyday relations between men and women at the household level. For instance one of the primary reasons for women’s lack of participation in mainstream politics is the view of decision-making as a male arena. (Gay 2009, 183)

Some analysts seek to reconcile this paradox by arguing that traditionally women were rarely public political leaders but in matrilineal societies may have had ‘behind the scenes’ influence whereby their male kin or husbands acted as spokespeople representing their interests (Maetala 2008). ‘Behind the scenes influence’, however, is not the same thing as equal rights and participation in decision-making.

Maetala (2010, 2) claims that women in Solomon Islands are caught in a ‘push-pull’—a push towards modernisation while still being pulled to fulfil their traditional roles closely linked to their identity as ‘good Melanesian women’. Thus women’s disempowered position in modern-day Solomon Islands may be seen as a result of traditional gender norms combined with the effects of a patriarchal colonisation process, which includes the influence of Christian doctrine.<sup>8</sup> The combined effect of these influences has marginalised women’s public presence, access to education, jobs and physical mobility (McDougall 2014). This position exists in concert with the development of the modern political-economic system tightly imbricated with a ‘big man’ style of patronage business in the logging and mining industries, and in national politics, from which women have been almost entirely excluded (Porter & Allen 2015).

Solomon Islands women’s public political action in the modern era has been firmly grounded in images of maternalism and tradition (Liloqula & Pollard 2000; Pollard 2003; Monson 2013) embedded in ‘ideal moral expressions’ of good Christian women (Eriksen & MacCarthy 2016, 138). Many scholars rightly argue that women’s church organisations have been an integral part of women’s independence, support and strength in the Pacific; they have provided opportunities for training, leadership, networking and activity in the public sphere, what Dickson-Waiko (2003) calls the ‘missing rib’ of Pacific Indigenous feminism. However, Christian imaginings of gendered roles may also limit the parameters of possible change.

Similarly, uneven alignments and paradoxes exist between idealised gender roles in the Pacific and the demands of ‘development’ and ‘modernity’. A statement from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youths, Children and Family Affairs (2014) exemplifies some of the resulting epistemological fallout.<sup>9</sup> The last two paragraphs of the statement, entitled ‘Challenges to Gender’, read:

Modernisation has caused a major upheaval in men’s traditional roles. Warfare is gone. An increased dependence on store-bought food items reduces the importance of fishing and farming. Education is generally geared towards the modern, cash-oriented, urban society, rather than to communal livelihoods and village societies. Too, education has begun to treat men and women as equal. These, combined with more available transport, mean that it is common for young men, who traditionally would have been fishing, gardening or cutting copra, to be seen loitering in towns and market places with little to do. Many young men no longer enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that they are making a real contribution to their family and community. This lack manifests itself to some extent in increasing rates of delinquency, alcohol abuse and juvenile delinquency. Meanwhile, women continue to be occupied with much the same domestic chores they have always performed.

Women and men are now competing as well as complementing. There are new roles available to men in the ‘modern’ world. Indeed, there are a variety of salaried jobs as well as new political positions that offer money and influence. NGOs, including churches, and even athletic associations provide new avenues of status. All these are also attractive alternatives to the traditional roles that men have lost with the beginnings of modern society. But therein lies the problem. Men see women scrambling for many of the same positions and intruding in a domain that they regard as

theirs. Women work in government agencies, they drive cars, they play netball and volleyball, and they even occasionally run for elected political office. Hence, women are often (wrongly) perceived as competitors more than as partners. This does not appear, however, to affect rates of marriage. (Ministry of Women, Youths, Children & Family Affairs 2014)

This statement seems caught in the ‘traditional culture’ versus ‘modernisation’ arguments described above, which it fails to resolve. While this treatise acknowledges men’s movement away from traditional roles and to some extent women’s further narrowed sphere of activity to traditional areas, it concludes that modernisation has upset gender roles with women ‘(wrongly) perceived’ as ‘competitors more than partners’. In particular, male identities are challenged by equality in education and modernisation generally which has manifested in ‘delinquency and alcohol abuse’. It then struggles with how gender roles in heteronormative families (rates of marriage are unaffected) can be reconfigured in a way that maintains social harmony (‘complementary’ rather than ‘competitive’) while preserving cultural integrity.

The confusion apparent in the ‘Challenges to Gender’ statement shows an attempt to consider the intersection of gender with other axes of power, and also touches upon the issue of ‘troubled masculinities’ (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012). The statement fails to gain resolution though because it avoids discussing power, the gain of it and the loss of it, instead constructing a neutral quantity called gender relations. Whether intentional or not, the phrasing of this statement removes male agency—modernity is something being done to men. Movement occurs in only one direction; while women are claimed to be moving into men’s sphere of activity while simultaneously having their roles further narrowed to ‘domestic chores’ the statement does not suggest that men are moving into female-dominated areas. Others have linked gender-based violence in the Pacific to a male sense of ‘diminished power in the world at large’ (Jolly 2012, 11) for which women’s autonomy provides a focus. Furthermore, as Macintyre (2008, 180) suggests for Papua New Guinea, ‘delinquency’ may be part of a modern masculine identity such that ‘aggressive masculine behaviour is implicitly valued as both an expression of engagement with modernity and as an ideal of charismatic self-assertion that is transgressive, audacious and risky’.

Modernity is thus presented as the force which demands gender equality in tension with remaining culturally Melanesian (or Solomon Islander) men and women. Such framing posits ‘gender’ as an externally imposed development policy which may be seen by some men and women as ‘antithetical to domestic political life’ (Corbett & Liki 2015, 324). It produces a duality for women who are promoted as good leaders on the basis of appeal to both external notions of gender equity, which are simultaneously posited as at odds with, but sometimes based on, existing cultural ideals of womanly qualities (340).

McDougall (2014, 199–200) also points out these contradictions, noting the collusion of colonialism and Christianity in constructing women’s place within and subordinate to men in the nuclear family. This construction operates alongside an instrumentalisation, in the neoliberal age, of ‘customary authority’ which stands in



opposition to women's rights as human rights. This article explores Solomon Islands village women's opinions about changing gender roles in an attempt to further untangle some of these contradictions.

### **Village Women's Opinions on Changing Gender Norms**

The data presented here were generated through visits to nine villages on Kolombangara Island during the period the author was resident in one of the villages in 2013. In total, 153 women attended the FDGs in groups of between eight and twenty-one participants. The women ranged in age from eighteen to eighty years old, with most participants between the ages of twenty and fifty years old. On average participants had three to five children. Almost even numbers of participants were native to the village of the FDG as had married into the village of the FDG from other islands. A smaller number of participants had married into the FDG village from another village on Kolombangara Island.

Two questions about women in leadership were asked in each FDG:

- (1) Should women be in the national parliament in Solomon Islands?
- (2) Can a woman be the village chief, organiser or chair(wo)man?

The women were asked to think about the reality of these positions for women today and in their village; not a wish for the future, or what they had heard about happening elsewhere.

Village women used directional markers to characterise gender relations. They described themselves as 'down' and men as 'up', women as 'below' and men 'on top'. These words are the same in Pijin and English. Overall the women agreed that it would be a good thing for women to be in parliament or in positions of community leadership in Solomon Islands but that gender norms prevented this from happening. There were four related dimensions to how women described their 'down' position: first, as 'down' because of tradition and *kastom* that keep women in the home; second, as 'down' because men put and kept them down; third, as staying 'down' because women put and keep each other down; and finally, that women's position as 'down' in relation to men was a matter of 'respect'.

In the first instance, 'down' is used to describe women's position as a result of *kastom* and tradition; women's place is in the home and the home is associated with low political influence and status:

Men look down on us women. Sometimes they say women are not enough for this position [of leadership] because they are busy in the house and cooking and don't like women to go around too much.

It would be good for women to be in parliament because when I look at male MPs [Members of Parliament] I see that they don't listen to what women want, they don't look at the level of women. Women start down and go up, but men start high so men can't look at the level of women, men just look over the level of woman.

The language of respect was often used to explain why women were ‘down’:

First our custom of respect is that we push men to be the leader or organiser inside the village. It’s respect, so the man must go, he is the head so we must put him on top. But women should be there too because men always look down on women. The women are good at organising but women are frightened to talk that’s why men always hold this work. So we women we need to come up a little bit.

Women’s position as in-laws married into a village (residing virilocally) was also seen as a *kastom* reason, a facet of showing respect, which kept women ‘down’. One woman said:

On the side of custom men don’t like to put a woman on top. Also in-laws—*roroto* [Nduke, people married into the village]—cannot be chairwoman or talk too much. Every time we have a meeting they always like to put a man on top, they don’t like to put a woman on top. The majority of us women here are married in to here so our *kastom* is that we cannot talk too much, we must be behind, down a little bit. For example, I was chosen to be a representative for [an NGO] but the others weren’t happy because I’m married into here, so others didn’t like it. This *kastom* puts down women who are married into the village. The rule doesn’t apply evenly to men and women. Men who are married in can still go inside [be leaders or representatives].

Women attributed their down position as due to men putting them down or ‘looking over’ (the top) of women. For example:

I think we are better this time [nowadays] but it’s *kastom* so I think they don’t like to choose us women to chair the community. Even in the network [for marketing] women can take leadership positions but when it comes time to make a decision the men take over and don’t listen to us women.

Women also commented on how women put and keep themselves and each other down:

Our Melanesian *kastom* makes respect too strong so that girls must stay at home and this is what causes women to keep themselves down.

Women also don’t support each other—that’s too common with we women, that’s why we don’t come up good, that’s what keeps us down. And women can lie to each other too. If one woman says I will stand up for provincial government [elections] the other women say yes, yes, good; but then when they stand up the other women don’t vote for them, they don’t support them. They just vote for the man. When any woman wants to stand up we don’t help them stand up either.

While ideas of gender equity and fairness of gender equality have entered village lexicon, women’s imaginings of the possibility of having political power are limited by a self-assessment of their position in society vis-à-vis the authority of men and clearly also by men’s imaginings of women having (any) political power (see Strachan et al. 2010, 69). Aside from the obvious need for men’s thinking and social gender norms to change, women were conscious that they needed to improve their own opinion of themselves and their abilities if they were to take positions of authority.

*Exposure: Women Coming 'Out' and 'Up'*

Responses to a question about how the position of women had changed in the village over the last twenty to thirty years consistently related to how women had 'come out' now through their *thinking*. One woman said:

Before women would be hidden so their thinking couldn't 'come out' [develop]. They just stayed at home so they didn't have any good ideas or know how to think, but now women have been exposed to all kinds of programs and have been given small leadership work, so now they are brave and can hold positions [of leadership].

Some older women expressed their feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty about these changes to women's position. One older woman, while lamenting the erosion of the concept of respect, which she saw as the social glue of community life and right relations, also described these changes as bringing more power and freedom for women. Crucially, she concluded that because women 'go out' now they can *think*:

Before it was different because women couldn't come out, they just stayed at home. But now, you look, women are the first ones to arrive at any program. Women now, they don't have respect, those are the changes we see. They [women] go around anyhow so it's hard for them to take responsibility, to take leadership. It's hard, but it's good too, because women go out and get exposed [to life] so now they can think.

This woman's comments speak to the tension between women's attempts to navigate the pathways defined for 'good' moral women while taking on roles outside those defined by *kastom*, which dictates, among other things, that women must stay silent and hidden. Another older woman said:

Before we women were of one mind [knew and followed set *kastom* rules and prescribed gender roles]. Everything was good. Before we didn't go around [outside the house, village, family area]. We stopped quiet [at home or in our work]. But [nowadays] young women aren't the same. Before the old women were level headed, they did not attend workshops [run by external organisations]. This time women attend workshops. The women have started to come up. Women are coordinators of some programs, women at the grassroots village level. Before it wasn't like that. World [international] programs come too. Before we didn't have anything like that here.

This woman acknowledges the shifting landscape of gender norms and how this feels for her like shaky ground. She says before when everyone knew their place 'everything was good' and the 'old women were level headed'. Yet, she uses the directional markers to indicate improvement, 'the women have started to come up'.

*The Role of Development Organisations in Women's Empowerment*

Many women expressed the idea that NGO—and other development and conservation entities'—activity had contributed to changing the position of women in the villages. In one village where the women had attended many different NGO activities and programs the women said:

Others can talk out now too. We are happy because lots of NGOs have come here and they have helped us women. We are able to go to the meeting and participate with them while before we were frightened and we would say, 'What should we tell them?' We were too frightened to go close up to these NGO people but now we have changed, we come and greet them. Before we were frightened, we would hide and shut the door. This change came because workshop after workshop from lots of different organisations came, some for just us women and some for everyone. So we came to the workshops and we have changed. We have started to open up. We are slow, but maybe one day we will be the chairman.

When Live and Learn [international NGO] came here with their 'Gender Balance' workshop we wanted to do it. Some men said, 'leave that gender balance' [don't participate], but we want everyone to be equal. Nowadays we women can talk at the meetings. We are changing now. Before when men talked at the meeting we just waited to say yes, but now we are tired of saying yes and sick of hearing lies. So now we women, we say, 'no more', we say, 'you must not put us women down anymore'. We must fight for women's rights as well.

These responses indicate that the operation of development and conservation entities have 'normalised' the lexicon of women's rights and human rights (McDougall 2014, 203). Rather than interpret this as development NGOs 'educating' women about what they need in order to be 'liberated' women, I see these responses and women's engagement with this discourse as a result of the creation of space, ideological as well as physical, for women to engage in discussion, much like the 'consciousness raising' feminist groups in the 1970s (Brownmiller 1999; see also Cornwall 2014).

In many of the FDGs it was common for women to comment that I was the first [White]<sup>10</sup> person to come to their village especially to talk with them and hear their views:

We say thank you that you come. Thank you that you come down to our level. Many times when [aid] donors come to the village they never look at the women. They don't even look at us at all, nothing. So we say thank you to you too much now. You write a book and send it back to us and then when the donors come they will know who we are. You are the first one that has come here to find out what is the situation of us women here. We say thank you very much to you.

It is interesting to note the woman's use of language here. The word 'donor' was rendered as 'donor' in Pijin. The woman uses the word 'donor' to describe any foreigners coming into the village. During this research I had explained that I was not a foreign aid project or bringing any kind of program, but only a student. Foreigners are routinely perceived as donors; as conduits for funds or resources (Foale 2001; Hviding 2003; Macintyre & Foale 2004; Foale 2013, 21). Additionally, implied in the women's request that I write a book about the women so that when donors come they 'will know who we are', is an understanding of the power of discourse and the production of knowledge as a political process.

In the context of the unequal power dynamics implicit in the development enterprise generally and between villagers and development organisations, telling the right story is a means of accessing power and resources. This power dynamic was made explicit for

Corbett and Liki (2015, 340) in their research with women politicians across the Pacific in which they found that women politicians would not be publicly critical about donors' gender initiatives because 'development is big business in the Pacific'.

### *Permitted Empowerment*

If you are a woman who is a good leader and has a good heart and has love, you can be leader, but it depends on men. We still have a habit, a belief that women must be down, so we always put men up. So these things mean that women cannot stand up to be the chairman. Men take control, so if men agree that women can be chairmen then women can be chairmen. (Yvonne, Kolombangara)

To temper the discomfort of oppositional conceptualisations of empowerment—one group taking power from another (women taking male positions of leadership)—women spoke of 'permitted empowerment'. Women said they could be leaders if men let them, a giving of power by men rather than a taking by women. Such discussions take place in the context of women moving into what are perceived as male domains; women moving up and out of the 'home' space into public political positions.

However, the concept of what is domestic and what is public is revealed as shifting ground, linked to conceptualisations of power and status attached to each sphere (McDougall 2014). Indeed, McDougall (2014) found on Ranongga that village politics had become a 'domestic space' and that women were occupying positions of authority that had lost much of their power in this context. Thus, feminisation of positions of authority does not alter women's subordinate position relative to men even though, on the surface, women appear to be moving into previously male realms.

Agarwal (1994, 39) defines empowerment, as 'a process that enhances the ability of disadvantaged ("powerless") individuals or groups to challenge and change (in their favour) existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions'. Mosedale (2005, 244) identifies four aspects to women's empowerment, inclusive of Agarwal's definition, with the following alteration to the second aspect: 'empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party'. According to Mosedale, 'those who would become empowered must claim it'. The woman quoted above sees men as having ultimate control over whether women would be allowed to occupy positions of authority and leadership. This idea of 'permitted' empowerment also appears in the work of Pollard (2000, 15). In describing 'a professional woman' in Solomon Islands, Mrs Susan, she says: 'Mrs Susan's professional work has removed her entirely from traditional women's roles and status ... She is not dependent on her husband when she makes decisions'. She then goes on to say:

Mrs Susan feels that her overseas education has been the prime factor in bringing about the change of her role and status in society; she also credits her husband for *permitting her to influence his decisions* on family and personal matters. (15, emphasis added)

Pollard concludes that women's 'influence has been limited by the men's right to have the final word. In modern Solomon Islands society, women remain under-empowered, owing to the general belief that they are inferior to, and should be subordinate to men' (19).

An acceptance of male authority and the perceived necessity of their blessing on women's enterprises for harmonious relations was apparent in my research project. When approaching a village to ask if women would be willing to participate in a FDG, the women in my main village of residence advised me to write a letter to the village chief (always male) or other male authority figure, sometimes the pastor or equivalent religious authority figure. Invariably, a reply did not come from this male authority figure. Instead a reply would come from a woman in the village, either a relative of someone in my main village of residence, or a woman leader of a village woman's group or church group.

The initial involvement of male leaders (even if they did not personally respond) was explained to me by the village women as a crucial step in the permission process; the FDG then went ahead with their knowledge and blessing. Moore (2008, 395) says, 'Bigmen will readily compromise and negotiate but they react poorly to public humiliation' (see also Strachan et al. 2010). Acknowledging the authority of male village leaders and recognising that they hold a position as first point of contact with outsiders allowed them to be gracious in their support of projects for women. My experience running the FDGs in a variety of villages was that any male leaders who briefly attended the groups, or conversed with me, pledged their support for 'women's empowerment' and women's concerns in their villages. Is this the same thing as women's testimony about 'permission from men' for women to lead? While I pragmatically employed this method I am inconclusive about whether such strategies undermine the concept of empowerment or are subversive acts in their own right.

## **Conclusions**

Village women's analysis of changing gender norms and the possibility of women leaders at all levels reflects their consciousness that gender is a fundamental ordering principle in their lives and that they can have a part in constituting gender relations. Women use the language of 'exposure' to talk about women coming 'up' and 'out' and changing their thinking. Village women can be positive and assertive in some ways about the need for gender equality and their desire to be more influential in important decision-making. Does their position, however, remain relatively disempowered while they still see men as having the final say in what kind of changes may be permitted and while the value attached to what is seen as 'domestic' remains subordinate to the 'public'?

Can the concept of 'permitted' empowerment, articulated by the village women, meet a definition of power which includes 'control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology' (Batliwala 1994, 129). This definition recognises that

empowerment is multidimensional and includes: structural changes to power relations which enable greater resource access and control; shifts in consciousness that foster self-understanding, self-recognition and self-reflexivity, with the capacity to imagine and formulate strategies for change; and ideological impetus to remedy social injustice which involves changing power relations. If we view empowerment as a journey not a destination (Mosedale 2005; Cornwall 2014), we can argue that, 'permitted' empowerment notwithstanding, it is possible to see how village women's self-perception of the gradual movement of women 'up' and 'out' is changing gendered social norms.

Finally I ask: can we view these processes as subversive, inasmuch as they are enhancing women's ability to change existing power relationships with the collusion and 'permission' of those whose structurally located power they are challenging? Thinking in this way aligns to many current theories of agency, particularly of women in developing countries, which recognise that agency is exhibited in a variety of structural locations and not only as overt resistance (Hilsdon 2007; Bospinar 2010; Charrad 2010). Women's testimony presented in this article highlights the possible role of development entities in creating space for reflection, public commentary and women's ownership of physical and social space as a group of women. This in turn may facilitate women's agency such that women become more visible and more able to articulate their rights. Additionally, stressing these intellectual and ideological components of empowerment pushes back against neoliberal discourse which prescribes a limited and mostly instrumental role for women's empowerment as a 'development accelerator' with economic focus. The perspective of this article contributes to a move away from looking for measurable 'empowerment outcomes', to viewing empowerment as a dynamic and evolving process (Cornwall 2014, 3).

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### Notes

- [1] Under the *Queen's Regulation No. 4 of 1896* (see Ruthven 1979, 242; Bennett 1987; Foukona 2007, 65).
- [2] KFPL obtained Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification in 1998 (see [www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org)). KFPL was jointly owned by the Solomon Islands Government (40 per cent) and the Commonwealth Development Corporation (60 per cent), until April 2011, when Taiwanese company

Nien Made Enterprise bought the Commonwealth Development Corporation's 60 per cent share. Under this new management KFPL continues to advertise itself as sustainable plantation forestry, committed to retaining FSC certification (KIBCA 2011).

- [3] For example, see *KFPL v Alezama*, HC-SI CC: 329 of 2007, *KFPL v Principal Magistrate (Western)* [2013] SBHC 47; HCSI-CC No. 245 of 2012 (3 May 2013).
- [4] See Scheffler (2001, 170); Hviding (1996, 133); Hviding (1993).
- [5] The number and boundaries of descent categories are a matter of some dispute. Scales's (2003) doctoral thesis cites Hocart's 1908 genealogies of Kolombangara Island which name ten descent categories. Scales (2003, 106) describes the Kolombangara Island Council of Chiefs (KICC) recognising eighteen *bubutu*. According to my informants, when the KICC formed in the early 1980s, they agreed upon five main descent categories with corresponding estates managed by resident *bubutu*—a cognatic descent group. Disputes about the number of descent categories and estate boundaries, however, resulted in the KICC recognising twenty-three descent groups (resident *bubutu*) but only as encompassed by the five main descent categories.
- [6] More recently KIBCA has been attempting to gain Protected Area status for the conservation area above 400 metres using the *Protected Areas Act 2010* (no. 4 of 2010). KIBCA hope to use this designation to set up Solomon Islands' first National Park (KIBCA 2016). KIBCA has also taken an environmental protection role in recent logging cases both inside and outside the current conservation area. They have been successful in enforcing legal protection of the area above 400 metres and have been acknowledged in at least two cases as having a legal right (*locus standi*) as a stakeholder in environmental protection to challenge logging company activity, both above and below the 400 metre conservation area (Dyer 2016, 12–13). For example, see [2010] SBHC 54; HCSI-CC 282 of 2010 and HCSI Civil Case NO. 192 of 2012: 6.
- [7] See Hviding (2011).
- [8] Currently Solomon Islands identifies as a Christian nation with more than 90 per cent of the population professing adherence to a variety of denominations, predominantly Protestant, Anglican, Uniting Church, South Sea Evangelical Church, Seventh-day Adventist and Catholic.
- [9] The Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youths, Children and Family Affairs was established in June 2007. Prior to this 'Women's Affairs' were housed in the Women's Development Division established in the early 1960s and focused on 'domestic areas like cooking and sewing'. This focus changed with the passing of time to gender equality and women's professional and political representation (Ministry of Women, Youths, Children & Family Affairs 2014).
- [10] I use the term 'White' as this is how people referred to me.

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