

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

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Today in Papua New Guinea, as in many other developing countries, women are faced with many problems arising from their rapidly changing lifestyle. Traditionally in most societies the women looked after the families' welfare and the gardens and livestock, while men were responsible for protection, hunting and fishing, and the heavier work in the gardens and settlements. With the advent of a cash economy and improved communications and facilities, major changes have occurred in women's role and position in society and they have been confronted by a multitude of new problems. Although the impact of change varies from area to area, it is important to consider the problems arising from this change, especially in rural areas where 90% of the women in Papua New Guinea still live.

In the stories of the two women which follow, the impact of development on village life can be seen.

Sipota

"It's nearly dawn now so I must soon wake Piagon and the children for their roast taro. There's not really enough for all the little ones, but if I give them my share they shouldn't feel hungry before evening. I must go to the garden today and harvest some kaukau or else I'll have to ask Piagon for some of the coffee money to buy rice from the trade store. Ay! When Piagon and I married, just after the Church was built in our village, everyone said how lucky he was to have such a fine, hardworking wife, because I had the best garden in the village. Now we often have to buy food because I'm too busy to take proper care of the garden and there's only Imio to help me because the other children are in school. I used to spend many days in my garden but now there are many meetings and village activities and I have to help with the coffee garden, so my food garden is not very good. It is not only that I have little time for the garden, but each harvest is poorer than the last because the garden is old and Piagon has no time to clear new ground for me. Besides, there is little land now for new gardens because there are so many families in the village and much of the best land is used for coffee. Ay! The times have changed since the white men came with their money, coffee, schools and roads, and I feel very dissatisfied. Oh, I'm glad the white men came with their medicines and schools to help the children, and their new types of houses and tools which make the work so much easier; but my position was much more respected when I could provide for my own family. I often feel that I am only an unpaid labourer in the coffee garden and Piagon is my supervisor. Not that he is a bad man. He doesn't beat me except when he's been to town to sell the coffee and has been spending the money on beer. Sometimes he comes home with empty pockets because he met a lot of friends and they all had some

beer and then began to gamble. Ay! How hard it is to have to depend on him for the money for the children's school fees and clothes, to say nothing of food! When I took little John to the clinic yesterday the sister asked me what I fed him. She said that he was sick because he didn't have enough meat or fish or eggs to eat, but even when I buy a tin of fish there is not enough for everyone, and only the leftovers remain for the younger children and me. When I was at the Women's Club meeting last week we were talking about this problem. Helen was telling us that the women in Auna village have formed a co-operative. At first they joined together to help one another in the garden, and then they bought tools with the money they earned. Now they are saving to buy a truck and they've even started their own coffee gardens! Ay! It would be good to join a group like that and be independent. And Manuga was saying that the women in Buka marched to the store wearing beer bottle chains and asked that the hours when liquor can be sold be reduced - the big men agreed! Maybe if we did that as well there would be more money for the things we need and Piagon wouldn't get drunk so often. Apparently in the towns even the women drink and gamble! Haven't they enough to do looking after their families? Haven't they enough problems without creating more? Maybe I'm lucky to have my garden and my own home and plenty of friends here - maybe we have a better chance to regain respect and independence in the village."

These problems are increasingly typical of village life in Papua New Guinea today. The situation becomes even more complex when the factor of urban migration is also taken into consideration. For example, the population of Port Moresby has increased by 18 000 this year and this has an impact not only on the city itself and its people, but also on the rural areas and particularly on the women left behind.

Hebou

"For the first year after Lele went to Moresby looking for a job, I was able to look after the family with what I could produce in my garden and the income from selling the cocoa. I had enough to pay the school fees and buy clothes for the children as well. There was enough food from the gardens to keep our stomachs filled, and we were happy, although I missed having Lele around to do the heavy work and help me to take care of the children and our older relatives.

But things did not stay that way for long. Soon I had trouble making ends meet, and could only just afford to pay the school fees for my second daughter when she won a place in a High School in Port Moresby. The trouble was that the income from the cocoa gardens kept on dropping as the trees were attacked by more and more insects, and without Lele here I did not know how to deal with this new problem. The didiman rarely visited the village, and even then he always worked with the men. I was too shy to ask him for advice.

The food gardens are also suffering from Lele's absence and they don't produce as much as previously. Now I have no surplus to sell

at the market. I couldn't plant any new gardens because with Lele away there is no-one to clear the bush. I'm glad that I learned to make baskets in the Women's Club because now I can use the money I earn by selling these to pay the fees for Apluta and Hane at the Community School. The younger children will have to wait until next year - maybe then I will be able to afford to pay their school fees. I haven't heard from Lele for 2 months now. He didn't have a job last time he wrote, so he couldn't send me any money. I hope my daughter is still looking after him, though it must be difficult for her with her own family to feed. Now Apau tells me he wants to go to Port Moresby as well. He thinks he'll find a job, but I've heard that many school leavers cannot find work, and often get into trouble with the gangs of rascals. Since I can't persuade him to stay, I hope that he will help me repair the house before he leaves - I can't do it by myself because the work is too hard for me. If only there were some young men in the village, but they all want to go to town because it's more exciting. I don't know how women alone can carry on looking after the children and all the old people, the gardens and cocoa, and the village itself - there's such a lot to do

CONCLUSION

The women in Papua New Guinea today, and in many other developing countries, are confronted with a vast range of problems, the most important being that although their workload and responsibilities may have increased with the onset of the Western economy, this has not improved their position at all! If anything, they have lost some of their independence and gained a new set of problems that they have not the necessary skills and knowledge to cope with. In spite of the Government's recognition of the need for a "rapid increase in the active and equal participation of women in all forms of economic and social activity", most achievements in this field have been made by the women themselves. Village women's clubs and co-operatives, and national women's groups are struggling now to achieve this equal participation, and as they become more active and vocal it is to be hoped that more attention will be given to the problems of women.