Women and development—highlights of the last 25 years and opportunities for the next 25 years

Angela Mandie-Filer
PhD Scholar, National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University

Before I begin on the topic of women and development in Papua New Guinea, I acknowledge the spiritual presence of the following women who have left us in the last 25 years, with whom I have shared experiences of enhancing women’s participation, including my own: Rose Tokiel (pioneer and first President of the PNG National Council of Women), Margaret Nakikus (first National Director, National Planning Office), Roslyn Anakapu (first National Director, Legal Training Institute), Maria Doiwa (Solicitor, Public Solicitor’s Office), Justina Levale, (Staff Development Officer, University of Papua New Guinea), Bospidick Pilakos-Meli (University of Papua New Guinea classmate, soccer star, Assistant Director, Tourism Promotion Authority).

My inclusion and participation in development was initiated before Papua and New Guinea became independent and acquired the status of a nation state. Like many other girls of my generation, the opportunity to be part of the new nation’s development was more the consequence of individual efforts rather than the result of systemic and systematic planning and inclusion of women and girls within government institutions and institutional frameworks and instrumentalities. Most of these individuals were men with vision—far beyond their time—of the role of women in Papua New Guinea’s aspiration as a newly independent country.

Women were not in a position to help others and themselves to be part of the development process. The efforts of the men who acted on behalf of those of us who were unable to make choices and create our own opportunities, ought to be acknowledged. I therefore acknowledge the following men whose actions have created opportunities that have enabled women, like myself, to be part of a development process that could quite easily have bypassed us.

I acknowledge my late father’s decision to send his girls to school when all other fathers were sending boys. I also want to acknowledge the late Archbishop Leo Arkfeld (SVD) and the many priests for complementing my father’s decision and transporting me back and forth between boarding school in Torembi and home every two years. I also acknowledge the efforts of the late Dr Gabriel Gris and the late Dr Elton Brash (former Vice Chancellors of the
University of Papua New Guinea) for making this institution of higher learning a friendlier place for the very few girls who made it there during my time.

Initially I had reservations about accepting the responsibility of commenting on this subject. I wondered if I, along with the gender concerns of Papua New Guinea’s development agenda, were being piggybacked as part of other more important development concerns and objectives, or whether I was being used as a token representative of gender concerns and women’s participation in the last 25 years. On the other hand I was challenged by the way this opportunity was presented to me. It was synonymous with the way most opportunities for me to be included in Papua New Guinea’s development came about. My opportunity to participate was not planned, neither were the opportunities I took in the past. It has not always been easy to face the challenge and make the most of those opportunities. I have learnt over the years though that one must be prepared to make sacrifices in order to make these chances and opportunities a reality.

On this note, I should mention that even the opportunity to undertake my current doctoral studies at the Australian National University was not a consequence of deliberate planning by the state and its institutional custodians. Looking back, it is frightening to contemplate what the situation and living circumstances would have been for me had my opportunity to be included in Papua New Guinea’s development relied on the efforts of the state’s systemic and systematic planning. This is despite the fact that the development process in Papua New Guinea is quite overloaded with plans and planners. In fact some critics may even go as far as saying that Papua New Guinea’s development suffers from over-planning. Out of the opportunities provided for my female colleagues and myself to pursue doctoral studies, mine was perhaps the least planned and facilitated by the state.

Where does one start the discussion on the topic of ‘Women and development in Papua New Guinea in the last 25 years? There are many issues that are not only important but need urgent attention since we have already utilised 25 years with little to show by way of improvements in the lives of women and other disadvantaged groups within that time.\(^1\) I wanted to present this paper in a way that would be different to the way others have been pursuing the topic. I was looking for things to say that would freshen up the topic and reintroduce its significance in Papua New Guinea. On the other hand, if what I was going to say was unlikely to lead to anything positive as far as PNG women were concerned, it was better not to say anything. The fact that I could not communicate with my colleagues back home about the topic made the task of deciding where to start and finish more of a challenge than I had expected. I was worried that I would be saying things that implicated their endorsement without prior consultation and approval.

In general, stakeholders have thus far allowed their sentiments and particular passions within aspects of women and development (WAD); gender and development (GAD); women in development (WID); and even women, environment and development (WEAD) to direct and dictate their focus, discussions and research activities. What this has meant so far is that stakeholders do not acknowledge gains made in aspects outside of their own passions and academic and research sentiments and interests.\(^2\) I did not want to be caught doing this.

In reading what has been written and discussed by researchers, academics and other intellectuals on this topic to date in relation to the contributions of the state, there is nothing new to discuss. However, the resourcefulness and resilience of the women and what they have managed to achieve is not documented and celebrated enough.
Women and development—a personal reflection

The story of women and development in Papua New Guinea as it applies to me has three phases: pre-independence, at independence and post-independence. My story started back in 1964, when at the age of six or seven years old my father chose to send me to a boarding school many, many, many miles from home because everyone else was sending their children to school. When I reached school age there were no schools closer than a 45 minute plane ride away. For this reason and others, most of the children that were being sent to school were boys. The ratio would have been about one girl to every twenty boys. What happened between 1964 and 1975 was critical in setting the foundation of where I am today. However, I shall leave that part of my story for now. Another opportunity may come along at another place and time for it to be told.

At independence, exactly 25 years ago in 1975, I was in my last year of schooling in an all-girl’s high school called Mercy College Yarapos. Up until then, I was educated following the church’s ideology. In an all-girls educational environment, the only times we were reminded of the existence of the opposite gender was when we had inter-school debates and when the boys attending the two all-boys high schools, also run by the Catholic church on Kariru Island, came over on exchange visits. We were always reminded by the nuns, and at times threatened with expulsion from school, if we got too close to the boys. Even 25 years later, I can still hear the nuns saying, ‘Boys are dangerous, if you mess with them, you will get into serious trouble’.

Back then, it was a serious offence to have a boyfriend (lover) but we could have boys as friends and brothers. The nuns read all letters sent by males even when our boyfriends used our surnames as theirs. The nuns could not be fooled. They knew very well that most of our fathers could not write. Besides, our fathers could not all be posting our letters in Wewak when they were meant to be in villages scattered all around both East and West Sepik and other Provinces, as we had girls from the Highlands and Islands Provinces attending the school as well.

During those years, a lot of the girls, myself included, did not pay much attention to the nuns’ warnings against the opposite gender. This was perhaps with good reason, because even now, I still believe that it’s not men that are the problem, but circumstances within the modern development environment that is the problem. I argue that men have become casualties of a society that is experiencing a very rapid transition. Men have not seen their lack of ability to adapt to and cope with a transitional society as a problem they have to overcome. Rather, it appears that they have chosen the situation as a condition they have to live with. Given that women are their closest partners, the men perceive women as the cause of their problems and the discomfort they experience. By co-existing with men, women are also ready-made targets for men’s anger and frustration.

Looking back, the best way to describe my journey through education until 1976 would be one in which we were being put through a pipe deliberately designed and tailored to cater for us, our circumstances and needs in general, and education-wise in particular. A lot of girls were educated, some of whom were involved in planning, formulating, and implementing development policies when Papua New Guinea gained its independence in 1975. Many can still be found as nurses and teachers in health and education—two sectors characterised by service with a smile, for a smile. Other incentives, remuneration and rewards are hard to come by in these sectors.

While discussing the services women provide, I should mention that most women workers I have worked with (public servants mainly) have been more committed to the development issues within the policy sectors
they work with, than their male colleagues. Women make up a very small number of those people who move between policy sectors seeking better and bigger remunerations. The reasons for this scenario are many, however, the ones that often come up in discussions with colleagues and through my own research in, and on, higher education and gender seem to suggest the following:

- Women are generally more attracted to the issue rather than the remuneration and privileges provided in articulating and facilitating the issue. The incentive and reward system in modern Papua New Guinea, however, rewards those who use the issue to obtain personal wealth and privilege, thus encouraging mobility between sectors. Not too many of the few qualified women want to be involved in this scenario if they can avoid it and if they can be contributing in other ways.

- Being practical people, once given the opportunity to be ‘up there’ and making the most of what they can do, most women only seek another opportunity if the possibility of making a tangible difference is practical and real.

- When the opportunity is there for women to move into a custodian role to the issue in question, often those moving on have already depleted the resources and the issues no longer have public enthusiasm and support. Support from the state and its development donor partners at this stage is usually also minimal.

- Women are often held more accountable for inaction than men and often in circumstances in which they have little or no control over what has happened or is happening.

- Using the carrot and stick synergy, women receive less carrot for a job well done and more stick for a job not so well done than our male colleagues in similar circumstances.

At the village and community level, women are making a lot of sacrifices in order to help themselves and others. Hopkos for example, states:

The area association executives have worked so hard since our District Council of Women was formalised. All of them have made big sacrifices to serve their fellow women on a voluntary basis, since no office-holder, including myself, is paid. We do it for the sake of women and human development, even though at times it is an annoyance to our husbands, because as wives and mothers we sometimes neglect our husbands and children, especially when we are away for one to two weeks working on awareness or occasionally attending East Sepik Council of Women training programs (1998:24).

Women may be better rewarded for their contribution if the incentive systems in Papua New Guinea that reward those who take more for themselves from the state, rather than those who use the resources of the state to facilitate others’ participation, is changed. I believe women will be recognised more if the reward and incentive system of the public service, for example, were based on rewarding those who can facilitate and give rather than those who only take from the state and move on.

Critics of segregated single-gender schools may argue that such a tailor-made education process presented problems later in life where girls as women have difficulty fitting back into their mixed gender community and society. The reality is that girls face similar difficulties in their communities and societies regardless of the type of schooling they received and the ideology within which they have been educated. Unfortunately, this will remain the case unless the ways and means of conducting life and living in these communities and societies are gender balanced and less hostile towards the women.

From my perspective at least, I argue that the alternative system of education to the one girls in my generation went through, which the government has adopted, modified and
reformed, presents a lot more obstacles and has indeed made the means of being educated less user-friendly for girls. I also argue that the gender-biased and tailor-made educational environment, although it may appear conservative by today’s standard, was a very conducive one for girls in terms of general development, leadership and educational attainment.

The unfriendliness of the education system adopted by Papua New Guinea at Independence to the participation of girls, is perhaps not surprising given the logic and motive of educating girls under the colonial power, from which the new nation-state adopted most of its educational and other development institutions and structural frameworks. In education for example, the colonial power was pursuing education for girls for quite a different reason. As Harper highlights

The colonial power found that to meet the goals of development, man-power [sic] requirements could not be met by men alone, and that men were more useful if they were married to educated women. It thus, served their interest to educate a selection of girls, to train them for jobs and professions with little wastage as possible, and to conserve this investment by encouraging them to marry late, to control child-birth, and to remain in the workforce after the birth of children (1974b:210, cited by Johnson 1985:127).

The institutional and structural framework Papua New Guinea adopted at Independence and subsequent reforms and modifications made to these to facilitate educational opportunities, have created a lot of casualties within the education system. Women make up a great number of these casualties. The casualties of the system have, in turn, become a problem for the system. For example, a girl who was pushed out of the system is unlikely as a mother to encourage her children, particularly her daughter(s), to go through this system.

No amount of public awareness programs by the Education Department to educate communities about the value of schooling will alter the domestic choices parents make at the family level. Mothers are significant contributors in these choices and decision-making at the family level. At present parents are choosing not to send children to school for fear of them becoming casualties of the system. In the 1960s and 1970s our parents sent us to school without the encouragement of expensive awareness campaigns. In those days they were no visible signs of casualties resulting from the education system and educational experiences were generally rewarding and positive ones.

Given that education for girls in the colonial era was encouraged because ‘men were more useful if they were married to educated women’ (Harper 1974b), women have done well by utilising their educational achievements to play roles and perform tasks beyond initial intentions and expectations. The fact that girls and women were qualified and available to participate actively in shaping and facilitating Papua New Guinea’s new role and status as an independent state, was remarkable given the colonial institutional and ideological agenda and logic behind their education.

The church is to be congratulated for its efforts in educating girls in their own rights. By providing educational opportunities for girls, they not only produced some of the best mothers and citizens but also assisted in ensuring that the human resources found in women were qualified and available to be utilised by the state at independence.

The teachers and nurses facilitating the delivery of vital social services in education and health in the most remote and isolated rural areas without very much remuneration were and continue to be women. Without the missionary zeal of these women the situation for the state in terms of fulfilling its obligation to deliver basic services to these remote and isolated rural areas, where 80 per cent of the
population reside, would be worse than it currently is. Papua New Guinea’s social indicators may also have been worse, although it is hard to imagine that the situation could be worse than it already is.

Institutional and ideological control have presented the greatest number of obstacles preventing many women from fully utilising their talent. My case was no different. The two institutional contexts I have had to deal with are the higher education sub-sector and the public service and aid agencies. The most flexible of the two from my experience in enabling women to play a greater role is that of the higher education sector. A factor I found to be common among senior custodians—both male and female—of government institutions and development instrumentality—both domestic and international—is their lack of appreciation of gender and the subsequent incompetence in interpreting and using these institutions and development instrumentalities in a creative way to facilitate women’s participation. Personally, I have been on the receiving end of this unfortunate scenario many times. When I took a week off from my normal job to co-ordinate and facilitate an international workshop in cooperation with the Association of Commonwealth Universities on Women Managers in Higher Education, my boss informed me that I was deemed to be out of my office and not at work. I was therefore not to be paid during that week. On another occasion, when I accepted a request for my services as a technical adviser to the women’s delegation to Beijing, I returned to find that my boss had issued an instruction to deduct my salary for the time I was in Beijing. She thought, or was advised by her senior advisers, that I had gone to Beijing for personal reasons.

The reaction to the Beijing trip was what I had to live with whenever other sectors solicited my services as gender adviser to their policy activities. This is despite the fact that higher education is inter-sectoral, and that those responsible for developing and facilitating its progress ought to be inter-sectoral in their approach. Sadly also, all this was also happening at a time when all Departmental Heads were supposed to have been pursuing a gender-inclusive development of their respective sector policies and facilitating other departmental heads pursue the same in their various sectors as stipulated by the National Women’s Policy (NWP).

The National Women’s Policy clearly stated that women from all sectors would be called upon to serve the Inter-Agency Women’s Advisory Committee (IADWAC) from time to time and departmental heads were obliged to release them from their normal duties to attend to this task. As it was many departmental heads did not understand or appreciate that they were responsible for the implementation of the Women’s Policy, and had to at least accommodate, if not facilitate, some of its provisions within their own sector’s policy initiatives.

National Woman's Policy

This Silver Jubilee Seminar presents an opportunity for a review of the implementation of the National Woman’s Policy (NWP). As the primary owner of this policy the government has the primary responsibility for the policy, its implementation and status. Papua New Guinea has to change from formulating policies for donors to resource and implement. It has to take the responsibility for facilitating the realisation of its development philosophies because others have their own to pursue. Donors are also more and more concerned about the domestic policy implication of the aid they render.

It has been my experience and the experiences of many of my female colleagues that whenever we turn a corner toward advancement, there is always a question-mark asking whether we should be there or
not. I believe that by saying yes to some of these questions, I have contributed to removing a few question marks so that when other women turn the same corner I have turned, they will not be questioned. Whenever I undertake to remove an obstacle that appears to prevent me from participating because I am a woman, I do so with the added incentive that the next women should not have to face the same obstacles. I don’t accept that answering a question on whether her presence and willingness to participate and be part of what is going on ought to be a pre-condition for a woman’s opportunity to participate. In a quiet way I am confident that over the years I have managed to achieve ground in this respect.

However, I should acknowledge that removing established institutional, attitudinal and ideological question marks within state institutions whose main purpose is to control and punish, is not easy and one needs to know what the institutions are and what is expected of them. One needs to also believe that it is one’s right to be there and be part of what the state is about and be prepared to question any exclusion or implications of it. For one who regularly examines state rules and regulations in order to assess their user-friendliness towards women, I am glad penalties for questioning unjust state laws and procedures have changed over the years.4

A story of women and development

Like my story, the story of other women and development also started many years before independence. Again I shall not dwell on the pre-independence—Papua and New Guinea—era too much because each of the women I met and was inspired by have their own story which is best told by them. I shall tell parts of their stories that have crossed paths with mine. Much of this would have happened during the post-independence—Papua New Guinea—phase of my involvement with women and development. Many of the partnerships between the women currently active in enhancing the participation of women were established at the universities when we were students.

In many ways I have been lucky to be in the right place at the right time to meet women who have inspired me. In 1975, for example, the Catholic Church was conducting a self-study. I was selected to represent the youth from East Sepik to attend the self-study meeting in Goroka. There I met another young person, Meg Taylor, who was representing the tertiary students at the self-study retreat. Being the only two lay females there we were allocated a room to share. She impressed me when she told me that she was at the University of Papua New Guinea studying law. I decided then that I was going to go to the university the following year. Many years later, she and I again shared a room in Beijing and shared the responsibility of providing technical advice to the PNG delegation to the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women.

In 1976 when I arrived at the University of Papua New Guinea to resume my tertiary education, I immediately became aware of the imbalance of numbers between men and women. Looking for other women for company I met up with a group of women who called themselves the Waigani Voluntary Women’s Group (WVWG). The group raised money to buy seeds to provide to mentally ill patients and women prisoners. Sometimes we brought posters, books and other things for the children’s ward in Port Moresby. Most of these women were in their final years of studies. At one of the group’s meetings one of them told us that we had to raise some money so that two of us could attend the first National Convention of the PNG National Council of Women (NCW) in Rabaul.

We managed to raise enough money by selling tinned fish and onion sandwiches at the market, the football field and by going
around the dormitories. Much to my surprise, I was one of those chosen to attend this first National Convention. The other person was Felicia Dobanaba. Interestingly, fifteen years later I was fortunate again to meet Felicia when she headed the PNG delegation to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing and I was one of the three technical advisers to the delegation.

The Rabaul conference was a real eye-opener for me as far as women’s gatherings were concerned. Most of the women at the first national convention were leaders in their own right and the expectations they placed on themselves and other women were very high. When the first president, the late Rose Tokiel, spoke about the situation of women and what women must do ‘to do our bit in looking after our country’ there was not a woman in the convention without tears in her eyes.

One of the things the president said, and which still rings in my ears, was her plea to those of us there to serve others less fortunate than us. Her message went something like ‘Those of us here are very lucky. There are many women who could not be with us. Please, when you help other women don’t ask for payment. They do not have the money to pay you.’

The biggest highlight for PNG women in the last 25 years was their participation at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing. Over 100 women attended, about 60 for the non-government organisations (NGO) conference and about 40 for the government conference. There were more women from Papua New Guinea in Beijing than from Australia, Britain or New Zealand. Even I was surprised to learn that these women from remote villages and small out-stations had been preparing for this conference since the Nairobi Conference in 1985, and that they had paid their own expenses. PNG women certainly stole the show in Beijing. They took the decision to go to Beijing when they protested against men representing them at the previous meeting in Nairobi. They also voted with their feet and showed that they are involved in promoting women, their roles and place in the various communities of the world.

One of the things to come out of Beijing was that the perceived partnership between our advisers in the G7 group and us in the G77 group was really tested. Before I present the highlights of what women have achieved I think that I should discuss a little of what transpired in Beijing, which I believe has implications for the partnership between PNG women and their international and external colleagues and partners in women and development.

The PNG delegation was particularly concerned with the lack of support our friends from Australia were providing when it counted at the international level. One colleague summed up the PNG delegation’s frustration and disappointment after one of the many main group sessions thus:

Friend, it was shocking how these Australian women could not even remember that we had discussed all of what is in the National and Pacific Platforms with them prior to coming here to Beijing. I can only assume that they did not want to be seen by the rest of the G7s as backward because they are supporting and pushing the third-world line. But you see, even if this was the case they could at least have informed the other G7s of the context, like the social, economic and cultural environment in which we articulated our priorities and platforms of actions. I could not believe it, they were behaving like they had not met us before and that what we were saying was not what they had heard and been part of before.

You know what? We’ll see them back in Papua New Guinea when they come for one of their fact-finding missions. We will tell them that the facts are looking at you in the face, they are the same as you saw and heard about before and during Beijing. We want the
money to do something to change the facts. If you do not want to give us the money and wish to use the money collecting more facts, we are sorry, don’t waste our time (personal post main group session notes Beijing, 12 September 1995).

Sadly, the magnitude of my friend and colleague’s sentiments was far greater than I had anticipated at the time and that this view may be more widespread among women. It all came to the fore in 1997 when I tried to solicit my colleagues’ participation on behalf of an Australian consultancy company to facilitate a World Bank-sponsored report ‘Papua New Guinea: Country Gender Profile’. The response from the women there was one of ‘sorry, not interested’; ‘it’s a waste of time’; ‘tell them to go and read what we have already told them’. To date I am not sure what happened with this project.

It seems to me that PNG women, particularly those making decisions at the national level, do not trust either the government or its donor partners to be genuine partners capable of facilitating their participation in development in a way they themselves define and perceive to be the most appropriate. It appears as though the relationship between PNG women and their external partners, particularly their Australian counterparts have drifted. If what I sense is the scenario, this relationship between linkers and adopters of aid-funded gender inclusive innovations, need to be rebuilt in order for the PNG-Australian aid relationship to be more gender inclusive in a more practical and tangible way rather than being just a paper-dominated one, which seems to be the case at present.

Not many in Papua New Guinea or Australia are willing to admit that the partnership and working relationship between PNG women and their donor-sponsored partners is not as smooth as it has previously been and may have even soured. From what I have heard, the reality is that the relationship has changed, and this may already be affecting women as beneficiaries of aid. A more serious concern is that in this environment donors may be communicating not with those who know the issues affecting women. Consequently, this may lead to gender-focused initiatives missing their real targets—the women who need assistance the most. The enormous amount of aid resources being earmarked for the benefit of gender equity and women’s participation in Papua New Guinea will make very little difference to the past and present situation if the PNG women do not participate as partners to facilitate its delivery.

This also has implications of accountability on the part of the donor-recipient partnership and the aspect of this partnership which is the unforgotten level of accountability that is owed to the groups and communities ‘targeted’ for the assistance. As Broughton (1996:3) correctly observes in the context of complex emergencies, ‘feedback from the people most directly concerned is generally missing, depriving us of the ultimate reality check.’

**Highlights of women's participation**

Some of the highlights of events where I think women have made it happen may help substantiate my earlier claim that what started in 1976 has not only continued, but has grown in magnitude and prominence. These events include:

- the staging of the very first convention of the National Council of Women in 1976
- establishment of the National Council of Women in 1979, which evolved into a nationwide network of four regional, 20 provincial and many district councils of women, many more local area councils of women and many more village-based women’s clubs
- changes to the maternity leave and baby-feeding provision for working mothers in the early 1980s
the formulation and ratification of the National Women’s Policy by the NEC in 1987

the protest by women in 1985 against their representation by men at the Nairobi United Nations Decade Conference on Women which led to the change of government

the participation of women in the 1985 Waigani Seminar in examining the relationship between rhetoric and reality in the implementation of the seventh point of the Eight Point Development which called for equal participation of women

the formation of the Inter-Departmental Women’s Advisory Committee (IADWAC)

the participation of PNG women in representing themselves at the Pre-Beijing conference in Rio

the formulation of the NGO and Government Platforms of Actions for Women and Development in Papua New Guinea

the participation of PNG women in articulating and formulating the Pacific Platform of Action for Women and Development in the Pacific

participation at the 1995—Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. With a full delegation including technical advisers appointed by the Prime Minister, Sir Julius. The delegation was accorded ministerial status for the first time even though there was no female minister at the time. In Beijing, Papua New Guinea chaired the Asia Pacific group, represented the Asia Pacific group on the Extended Bureau and acted as the special friend of the chair of G77 held by Philippines


increased number of women with doctoral degrees such as Dr Anne Dickson-Waiko; Dr Naomi Tulaha; Dr Cecilia Nembou; Dr Orovu Sapoe; Dr Juliane Kaman; Dr Angeline Brown—a remarkable achievement given that all of these were achieved overseas because of lack of opportunities in the country

in 1999 women formed a formal group to comment on National Budgets

establishment of the Women’s Division in 1982—now located under the Department of Home Affairs and Youth—as a national focal point

establishment of the National Women’s Development Program in 1984 which helped the nationwide mobilisation of women and paved the way for the National Women’s Policy which was endorsed by the National Executive Council (NEC) in 1990 and was launched in 1991, and spells out the government’s responsibility in women’s issues and calls for an Inter-Departmental Women’s Advisory Committee (IADWAC)

nationwide program and research on domestic violence by the Law Reform Commission in the latter half of the 1980s

the Women’s Division Five Year Management Plan in 1995 to better respond to women’s needs

Beyond Beijing: recently, the government-NGO partnership promoting women’s advancement has been one of the agenda which has been embodied in such initiatives as the Post-Beijing Declaration for Action on the Development of Women (November 1995) and the dialogue in the 12th National Convention of the National Council of Women (June 1996).

While highlighting the achievements of women in Papua New Guinea, I do not wish to condone the unpleasant situation within which these achievements have been made. This should not, however be taken to mean that women must continue to accept the hostile environment within which they must operate if they want to be part of the development process in Papua New Guinea.
Improving women's participation

Domestically, Papua New Guinea’s Eight Point Development Plan formulated at self government, its Constitution and subsequent national goals and directive principles formulated at Independence all stipulate very clearly the various development frameworks intended to facilitate women’s participation in contributing to and benefiting from its development. The seventh point of the Eight Point Improvement Plan (1972), calls for ‘a rapid increase in the equal and active participation of women in all forms of economic and social activity’. The National Goals and Directive Principles (1975) provision two and the National Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea (1975) sub-section 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7 also stipulate Equality and Participation stating

We declare our second goal to be for all citizen to have an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from the development of our country and equal participation by women citizens in all political, economic, social and religious activities (2.5); call for the maximisation of the number of citizens participating in every aspect of development (2.6) and; active steps to be taken to facilitate the organisation and legal recognition of all groups engaging in development activities (2.7).

Most significantly, Papua New Guinea declared that its fifth goal is to achieve development primarily through the use of Papua New Guinean forms of social, political and economic organisation. Accordingly provision 5.1 calls for a fundamental reorientation of our attitudes and the institutions of government, commerce, education and religion towards Papua New Guinean forms of participation, consultation, and consensus, and a continuous renewal of the responsiveness of these institutions to the needs and attitudes of the people.

Internationally, along with other nation states of the world Papua New Guinea has also signed numerous declarations and conventions intended to ensure the equal and meaningful participation of women. For example, it rectified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in August 1995 ahead of may of its neighbour countries in the region and elsewhere and most recently the Beijing declaration.

By signing the Beijing declaration Papua New Guinea, along with other countries, agreed to abide by the declaration which states in part

We the governments, participating in the Fourth World Conference on Women recognise that the status of women have advanced in some respects in the past decade, but that progress has been uneven; inequalities between women and men have persisted and major obstacles remain, with serious consequences for the well-being of all people (paragraph 5/38)…We are convinced that women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace (paragraph 13/38).

Papua New Guinea, like many other states, has institutional and structural frameworks in place and solicits a lot of support from its development partners through multilateral and bilateral aid to facilitate the participation of women in its development process. So what is the problem? A simple answer would be that although the government has made a gesture towards women, there are still powerful ideological, attitudinal and institutional obstacles that prevent both the state and women from utilising these institutions and development frameworks for the benefit of women. Their international partners appear to have failed to assist and it seems as though
the local environment has hindered their contributions as well. This is what we have been hearing in the last 25 years.

Before discussing the possibilities and opportunities for the next 25 years and beyond, I need to highlight some of the obstacles that have limited women’s participation. Women encounter different obstacles depending on their life situations, so I shall therefore focus on the obstacles encountered by those sharing similar working and living conditions to mine. Many of the obstacles to women’s participation in development have been highlighted by others, as a survey of the literature by Dickson-Waiko (1998) reveals. For example, Avalos states that

PNG approach to women in development has been welfare, rather than equality oriented and in the light of gender differentials in health, education, employment and decision-making, calls for renewed commitment from intellectuals, senior public servants and politicians to remove injustices and provide women with the support ‘owed to them’ (1995:81).

Beilin (1982), emphasises the diversity of PNG women while noting that, ‘development is directed at village men, leaving women with the work of subsistence with little help from men’ and that ‘women’s duties and roles are considered to be entrenched by institutions and practices associated with modernisation.’ On the other hand, the United Nations Development Programme describes national government structures and mechanisms for women in development, and finds a lack of recognition and awareness of women’s contribution to development and the technical expertise that women can provide.

I believe, as Beal (1989:235) points out, ‘the real potential for promoting women’s empowerment and advancing gender equity lies in its practice. The commitment to building partnerships needs to be extended to gender equitable partnerships which imply developing skills and new forms of practice among all parties to accommodate the participation of poor women, and recognising that accountability is a two-way street’.

The biggest problem the state and its partners face is the lack of a link between information on the real concerns of women and initiatives earmarked to assist women. First, ‘current’ information on initiatives aimed at assisting women and enhancing their opportunities and possibilities is mostly outdated. Papua New Guinean women, particularly those 25 years old and under, need to be provided with the opportunity to have their say in what the state has done in facilitating their participation. In particular, they need to be provided with the opportunity to assess the NWP and its implementation, keeping in mind that very few of them may have had the opportunity to do so thus far.

Second, without an up-to-date baseline data on women’s participation in the labour market and employment for example, any initiative to address women’s concerns in these areas may be based on guess work and face the danger of addressing the most obvious problem and concerns rather than the most-needed ones.

Another aspect that presents difficulties for the state and its partners in enhancing women’s participation, is the number and nature of domestic and international institutional and structural development frameworks available to facilitate women’s participation. The various pushes and pulls resulting from these frameworks and the inability of the state to choose the most appropriate strategies within these various frameworks often results in misdirected efforts. For example, having agreed to abide by so many international conventions and domestic development policy frameworks, Papua New Guinea faces the problem of not knowing which to start with or focus on.

Many people have less attachment to internationally agreed frameworks, especially
ones that portray little practical sense and are full of semantics and acronyms. Melanesian women in general and Papua New Guinean women in particular are not familiar with the word ‘gender’, for example, and it is not a concept they readily use. Their concern, as pointed out by Douglas (1998:1), is ‘particular and local’ rather than universal theory.9

In terms of policy and institutional frameworks, the logical starting point for the next 25 years is the NWP. The Policy calls for mainstreaming development planning for women in all sectors of government. The National Planning Office and the Gender and Development Unit of the Department of Finance and Planning, and the Women’s Division of the Department of Home Affairs and Youth must immediately start coordinating and monitoring sectoral responses towards the Country Platform for Action that was prepared to show the world what Papua New Guinea was going to undertake to advance women’s position in development. This Platform for Action, followed by the Post Beijing Declaration, have direct links to what the state intended to achieve for women by formulating and endorsing the NWP.

Although the NWP has been criticised by some outside experts as being élitist, those of us involved in formulating this policy and its implementation strategy (PNG men and women) deliberately articulated it to be what it is. At the time, it was decided that the policy must aim to achieve the most ambitious outcome and that a radical implementation strategy was required. We decided after long deliberations and discussions that it was not shameful to have a policy that aimed to make women élites. It was better for us to have many women in the élite group than not.

The policy also stipulated the establishment of an Inter-Agency Women’s Advisory Committee (IAWAC) whose role would be to ensure that all departments facilitated the inclusion of women in their respective policies. This would mean that there is an individual who is accountable to the Committee on behalf of his or her department. Given that government policies at least in theory, are budget strategies, the NWP could also be used to solicit financial and other resources for development initiatives being proposed by the government and its partners for women.

Its success, however, depends on all stakeholders recognising the importance of this policy and understanding what is expected of them and what they expect the policy to do in their respective development policy sectors. Effective partnership relations, integration and collaboration must exist between all agencies, both government and non-government, to ensure there is no duplication and to rationalise our limited resources available in the country (O’Collins 1985, 1993). To assist in this process the Inter-Agency Women’s Advisory Committee will need to be reactivated to monitor the implementation of the Platform of Action and the Post Beijing Declaration.

One of the reasons presented for the lack of government action towards women’s advancement is that women are considered politically insignificant. I would argue that women are not only politically significant, but can organise political pressure quite quickly. There are very few women in politics however, and women may be seen as politically under-represented and insignificant (Rooney 1985; O’Collins 1985). Despite this, women in Papua New Guinea have already indicated that they can be a formidable political force. In 1985 for example, women were instrumental in forcing the then Somare-led government out of office over the Nairobi affair and later were active participants in removing the Chan-led government over the Sandline affair.

Women have an amazing talent to mobilise other women to action. One such occasion was when women organised to meet the men who represented us in Nairobi at the airport when they returned. If ever there
was a statement that would challenge women to act as one, this was it. At the time I was in the first stages of a Masters Degree at Macquarie University in Sydney. One of my colleagues called me and said to me …it’s on mate, all the women are going to be at the airport to meet the men who went to represent us in Nairobi. We heard from some of our friends from America at the conference that the men were asked, ‘Is your country filled with men and dogs, so you decided to send men rather than dogs?’ This is totally degrading and really insulting to all the women here. The women are furious, all our senior women have said that we might get rid of the government. You have to come up mate.

On the day, the number of women at the airport who later proceeded to the National Parliament was huge. The number has only been matched again by the number that came out in support of the removal of the Chan-led government over the Sandline affair in 1997. It is apparent that women can exert significant political pressure if and when necessary.

Poverty and violence against women

Another development issue that is linked—often too strongly—to the roles and status of women is poverty. Poverty is clearly not a priority as far as PNG women are concerned, otherwise this would have appeared as the first priority area in the National Platform of Action rather than appearing as a last priority. I remember that we were advised to include it because it was the focus of the United Nations at the conference in Beijing.

Contrary to the popular assumption that poverty is PNG women’s biggest problem, the biggest problem in the context of enhancing the participation of women in development is the appalling level and nature of violence that surrounds them. Real opportunities for women to participate will only become available if their uncles, fathers, sons, brothers and husbands accept that their violent behaviour is inhibiting women—including their mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives—from fully participating in development in both local and national levels of government and arenas of civil society. If this situation is not changed Papua New Guinea will not only suffer political, social and cultural setbacks but economic ones as well.

For example, the market will want to utilise skilled women rather than unskilled men in terms of human capital utilisation (McDonald 2000). Skilled women may not be willing to risk further violence and hostility in order to participate in the workforce. Papua New Guinea needs to act now in order to ensure that all its skilled human capital including that of its female population, is both available and accessible. This will not be possible in a violent and hostile environment, particularly one that causes the non-participation of its female workforce.

Since becoming a member of the world of nation states, Papua New Guinea’s development has been influenced by domestic as well as internationally determined development priorities, ideologies, and even institutional and structural frameworks. As a result the national, regional and global frameworks have affected PNG women’s participation in development as well. Often without prioritising its strategies, Papua New Guinea has attempted to pursue activities following domestic and international frameworks have not always been compatible with each other. External protagonists to women’s participation have tended to guide activities to comply with international perceptions rather than
allowing local and contextual concerns to dictate their contributions. Like so many other externally initiated development activities, those directed at enhancing women’s participation have all but disappeared, particularly in instances where there is no locally based core group to push the continuity of externally initiated efforts. Often too, the introduced ideas are too complex and beyond the capabilities of local partners to articulate and/or pursue.

Over the years senior PNG women have guided proceedings, including the choice not to accept donor assistance if the assistance diverted efforts away from what really needed to be done. Conflicts between international and domestic priorities have also resulted in inaction in areas urgently needing attention.

The non-participation of women should not be taken to mean that the opportunity is not there. In some cases senior women have made the deliberate decision not to be involved in activities that they perceived to be non-rewarding. In aid matters, for example, senior women may decide not to be too involved because past efforts have not been rewarding and in some instances conflicting views about gender and women’s roles and status have resulted in more confusion rather than in clarifying and improving the situation.

The involvement of PNG women in promoting international agendas and partnerships with donor-sponsored external colleagues and organisations, has also led to weakening the partnership we had with our male colleagues, and in some instances, has caused our male colleagues to withdraw their support. Since external partners were energetic in pursuing the cause of women the government’s role also decreased, allowing PNG women and their external colleagues to do what the state ought to have been doing. When donor priorities shifted and gender was no longer their focus of attention, the government has been unable to fill the gap.

The formation of partnership with external colleagues in order to utilise donor resources has also resulted in PNG women being left with the responsibility of accounting for the financial resources made available when the international focus was on women. PNG women are consistently asked to show results for the enormous amount of resources that were utilised to facilitate their inclusion and participation.

While accepting that women like all other citizens must account for the portion of public resources used by them in Papua New Guinea, the scale of demand and pressure for accountability is tilted more towards women than men. Factors that burden women further in terms of fully accounting for what is perceived to have been used by women are:

- they are held accountable for international resources that external colleagues had more distributive choice and control over, particularly in terms of who used the resources and what they did with it
- international colleagues (advisers and linkers of aid-funded resources) have provided an additional burden of accountability on top of the call that PNG women have been receiving from politicians and bureaucrats to account for what the government has been giving through the National Council of Women
- all women are made to account for the actions of individual women or a small group of women, particularly when they are seen as, or perceived to be, trouble-shooters. Often this has resulted in no funding for what is considered to be ‘women’s’ current concerns
- younger women who were not part of the decision-making which took place between PNG women and their external colleagues will now have to account for past resource use before they can receive what they require for current activities.

The second-last point above is of particular concern because women, and
concerns raised by women, are often confused in public debates particularly in debates that are initiated and led by women. This often results in a situation where an individual woman and/or a group of women become the issue rather than the actual development issue.

Like the incentive and rewards system in modern Papua New Guinea that disadvantages women, the accountability and transparency requirements also works against women. The blame for misuse and non-accountability of resources, particularly financial resources, is shifted from those who misuse and waste it the most—the state and the mostly male custodians of its institutions—to women. Women, who for the most part only hear of the resource allocation, see less of it and participate even less in deciding on its distribution and how it is utilised for their benefits, are given the heavier burden of accountability.

Participation in the workforce

Women, along with other disadvantaged, mostly rural dwellers, have become the main casualties of the institutional and structural arrangements the state adopted at independence and what it does with it now. Those who have become casualties of the government structures and institutions cause Papua New Guinea its greatest governance problems. For example, the rural-urban drift; the low literacy rate among women and rural dwellers; the high infant and maternal mortality rates; the low attendance and retention rate in education; the low life expectancy and those pushed out from the education and employment system.

One of the challenges facing Papua New Guinea in the next 25 years is to decrease the number of non-participants in the workforce and to include those currently excluded from the development process in the forthcoming years. Papua New Guinea will go a long way in reducing its governance problems if the governing is conducted in a way that reduces, if not totally eliminates, the creation of casualties.

Women and gender issues have gained visibility in international development projects since the 1970s, yet data from a USAID study of 532 evaluation reports indicate they have not been very successful in researching women. The involvement of women as designers, beneficiaries, and implementers is all very low. The framework for improving the performance of gender-inclusive policies in developing countries must include

- client and stakeholder participation in the design and implementation of policies and programs
- strong leadership to act as a voice for the interests of women
- clear statements of the strategic goals to be pursued
- an appropriate implementing agency
- improved organisational capacity, particularly the mobilisation of stakeholders
- streamlined relations between donors and recipients
- performance indicators of evaluating the effectiveness of programs.

Using the above framework, factors in the implementation process and organisational context can be identified that offer opportunities for managers in Papua New Guinea to improve the implementation of gender policies as well.

This may seem a contradiction in terms, but I believe that a gender checklist and treating gender as an issue requiring special attention should cease, at least in the Papua New Guinean case. This will remove the undue pressure currently being placed on those involved so that they focus on what is achievable. Too often, gender is an afterthought. I believe that the exclusion of gender, unless appropriate, from development programs and projects will entice people to action if it is important. Currently, the lack
of action meaningfully addressing gender issues is being glossed over by token statements and half-hearted statements regarding the inclusion of women in aid projects. Sadly, gender has fallen victim to obfuscation, like many other development assistance agendas, including institutional strengthening and development capacity building.

Few women in Papua New Guinea along with 80 per cent of the rest of the population, especially the rural dwellers, would even blink if foreign aid, particularly bilateral or tied-aid, ceased to exist. Either a reduction in aid or not having aid, particularly tied-aid, may force Papua New Guinea to refocus and attempt to do what it can within its resources and do it well.

For example, the few women in the agriculture and fisheries sectors are overloaded. There are too many things to do to accommodate and facilitate innovations and initiatives and the women are quite overwhelmed. This does not mean that they lack the capacity professionally, rather logistic responsibilities occupy their time, making it difficult for them to fulfil their professional responsibilities and expectations.

Over the years I have seen a lot of development initiatives dropped when there is a shift in donor aid policy. This has happened with higher education development in Papua New Guinea for example, when donor focus in education shifted from higher education to basic and general education. I have also seen it happen with initiatives aimed at assisting women and addressing gender concerns. Papua New Guinea must seriously plan how it can stay on course with its development agenda and be prepared to fill the vacuum left by aid, if and when donor priorities shift and Papua New Guinea is not ready to shift its priority as well.

As far as development assistance from donors to Papua New Guinean women are concerned, it is timely now to shift from the accepted understanding of women's lack of participation—that women do not participate because of ignorance and lack of opportunity. Women cannot benefit from an opportunity if they choose not to be involved in either creating the opportunity or, if they perceive the opportunities created by others on their behalf as a burden. They certainly cannot be expected to fully participate in development that is being pursued in an environment that is violent and hostile.

At this stage, the initial responsibility for creating possibilities and opportunities for women's participation rests with the government of Papua New Guinea, its institutions and instrumentalities. At the individual and community level men and women also have the responsibility to create practical and meaningful possibilities and opportunities for themselves and for others near and around them. Women must utilise opportunities as they arise, even though personal sacrifices may still be taxing.

Papua New Guineans have been involved in a lot of soul searching leading up to the 25th anniversary of Independence through development dialogue, forum and seminars. At each meeting session, the emphasis has been to go 'back to basics' and to do the things we can do well. Stakeholders interested in enhancing the role of women in development in Papua New Guinea may achieve more by following this advice.

The future

Higher education and research institutions can create possibilities and opportunities. At the intellectual and ideological level the Australian National University for example, is better placed than most others, through its close research connection with Papua New Guinea to create real possibilities and opportunities. One of the ways it can do this is by ensuring that its research and other academic activities on Papua New Guinea are undertaken with Papua New Guinea's priorities and interests in mind, including enhancing the inclusion and participation of women in its development objectives.
Accurate and objective communication and information sharing between Papua New Guinea and Australian research and academic institutions can lead to more possibilities and opportunities for the former.

Women in Papua New Guinea need to continue to think globally but focus on doing what we can do locally. The framework and subsequent catalyst for future opportunities and possibilities for actions towards enhancing the participation of women, I believe is outlined in the NWP and its respective implementation strategy. The National Women’s Policy is truly homemade in that it was articulated and put together through the contribution and participation of Papua New Guinean men and women.

Papua New Guinean men and boys must recognise that their violence is a problem in that it limits and block opportunities for women to participate, and they must work out a way, or be assisted to seek ways of solving this problem. If the men in Papua New Guinea do not acknowledge that their violence is a problem, unfortunately women will be forced to accept the situation and continue to operate within it and suffer as a consequence. If this is the case, we can be assured that what we are on about now—the less than full participation of women in development endeavours—will be a hot issue for another 25 years to come.

Another important and pressing challenge for the state is to make itself significant in the lives of ordinary people including women and rural dwellers. More importantly, the state must become a reality rather than remaining a distant concept. If this does not happen, the following perception of the state by women represented by Hopkos will remain and women will still not fully participate.

Although women are human in any given society, in Papua New Guinea they are generally less regarded and underestimated, which gives them few or no chances on an important participatory role in the development process. Being female in Melanesia and women in Papua New Guinea, especially in the rural remote areas, we see ourselves first, then the churches and then the nation [state]. We get less as citizens and serve more as Christians and citizen, and get served as women the least (1998:25).

Conclusion

Despite my initial misgivings, I am grateful that I was asked to participate in the Silver Jubilee Seminar and am thankful for the opportunity to do so. I was also motivated to perform this task by my belief that individual efforts are more successful in affecting change than state institutions, such as the one we are now celebrating in its 25 years of statehood.

I have focused on highlighting the achievements I am aware of and have been a part of. I believe that no real purpose is served complaining about the opportunities and the possibilities we did not utilise because if they are important and still legitimate they will surface in the next 25 years. We have another chance of pursuing them then after highlighting and celebrating what we have done thus far with the opportunities and possibilities we have been able to utilise. I have deliberately decided to first focus on documenting what my colleagues and I perceive we have achieved. Second and perhaps more importantly I have taken this opportunity to highlight the achievements so that we can celebrate. By celebrating our achievements, we can also derive energy and encouragement from them and pursue further opportunities in the next 25 years with renewed rigour.

While acknowledging and celebrating our achievements and participation I am very mindful of the fact that our mothers and grandmothers have played significant roles in facilitating their granddaughters’ and daughters’ achievements and participation. We all have special stories to tell about our
grandmothers’ and mothers’ special contributions that have assisted us all thus far. This paper is dedicated to them as well.

The Silver Jubilee of Independence presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the state and its institutions to take responsibility for the advancement of women. Papua New Guinea will need to look less at donors to assist women since their priority in aid giving has shifted to a poverty focus. If not, there is real danger that the gender–poverty nexus that has started to be visible elsewhere becoming the norm in Papua New Guinea as well. Women may become responsible for eradicating poverty rather than focusing on not becoming poor. A situation may also develop where poor women are blamed for their poverty.12

Despite my best efforts to represent a fuller picture of what has happened in women and development in Papua New Guinea in the last 25 years, a full review, similar to the one held in 1985, is needed. Clearly, women and development in the last, and next, 25 years in Papua New Guinea is a much larger subject than I can do justice to in a single contribution. The full story is yet to unfold.

Notes

1 A review of literature on gender and development in Papua New Guinea by Dr Dickson-Waiko of over 200 published and unpublished books and articles reveals this and continue to re-enforce the continuation of the worsening social, economic and political situation for women in Papua New Guinea.

2 An example, of this can be found in the statistical profile on women and men prepared for the UNDP/UNIFEM Pacific Management Project. This comprehensive set of statistics covers: labour force, migration, economic sector, social, and community development, education, health and women’s affairs. Commenting on the statistical profile, Booth (1991) concludes that data on women’s participation in economic sector are less than adequate, leading to their exclusion altogether from many studies, including agriculture, where their work is so important. For further discussion see Mandie (1985).

3 I have been a practicing Catholic for many years. All this time, I didn’t understand why the Romans chose the crucifixion as the method to punish Jesus. It was because, during that time the Romans used crucifixion to punish anyone who questioned the Roman laws and how they were enforced. Jesus was said to have questioned Roman Laws so the punishment was death by crucifixion according to the practice at the time (Sunday sermon by Reverent Father Foot (Dominican) (15/09/2000).

4 This occured at the Government Forum. The situation may have been different at the NGO Forum.

5 For many of us, the facilitation of the Beijing conference by the government marked a high sense of achievement and recognition. For me, the Beijing and Rabaul gatherings were clear examples of women thinking globally and acting locally. I was further convinced that the quest for equal participation by women would continue, although it may appear to be insignificant at times.

6 For example, higher education and gender have provided handsome remuneration in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s to many from within and outside Papua New Guinea. Unfortunately, many of these people have used the issues as stepping stones to bigger and better things. The trend has been and continues to be that those whom the state remunerates most for being custodians on its behalf of resources earmarked for facilitating and articulating the realisation of its intentions in these and other development issues, move on once the focus and resources shift.

7 My own research on capacity-building and institutional strengthening project indicates that many new initiatives are still being focused on addressing concerns that have long been dealt with and those concerned have moved on.

8 Further indication of this miss-match between international and universal concern for gender and women’s concerns in modern nation-states and local women’s perspectives of their priorities and concerns can be seen in
the National, Pacific and Global Platforms of Actions that were developed prior to, and during, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

This is one of the reasons for re-activating the IAWAC.

This practice though, is by no means unique to PNG, international parallels of this also exists. For example the debates about poverty and poor women often gets confused, thus the noticeable presence of the gender-poverty nexus in development discussion and discourses.

The initial idea that the poor were made to feel responsible for their poverty came out of a research conducted on the poor in London by Rowntree (1980).

References


