



Book review

Women and education in Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific
Eileen Wormald and Anne Crossley (eds), University of Papua New Guinea Press,
Waigani, 1988, 272 pp, ISBN 9980 84 023 4.

THE book under review consists of the edited transcripts of papers presented at a seminar conducted by the Education Faculty at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1987. The papers range across a number of sub-themes in education, the treatment and role of women and social issues in the development of Pacific societies. The contributors include educational bureaucrats, academics and specialists in gender analysis; the papers consist of research reports, detailed assessments of specific educational programs, broad statements of policy goals, impressionistic accounts of initiatives in women's education and contributions by women's rights activists.

Despite the title of the volume, some of the papers are not narrowly concerned with education—for example, Christine Bradley of the Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission discusses the role which ignorance of legal rights plays in women's poor access to education in that country; Josefa Sobski and Margaret Valadian of Australia report on the place which education has played in the broader feminist agenda in Australia, drawing out possible lessons for Pacific societies; several of the contributors from Papua New Guinea give brief impressionistic accounts of the impact of education on women in specific locations in Papua New Guinea—Huli in the Southern Highlands and immigrant women (i.e. from other parts of Papua New Guinea) in the oil palm settlements of West New Britain.

The book is mainly about Papua New Guinea. Other countries are given little emphasis. Louise Aitsi-McMahon of the South Pacific Commission, in a very impressionistic piece, does little more than re-state the issues—women are discriminated against in most South Pacific countries and this discrimination spills over into their educational possibilities and needs.

Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop of the University of the South Pacific campus in Western Samoa

paints an enthusiastic picture of women's education in that country. Despite a lag in women entering the paid workforce, she reports that by 1981,

A higher proportion of girls than boys attended secondary schools and an equal proportion of men and women had tertiary education (p.218).

She also provides information based on her research suggesting that women were aspiring to careers in a way which was not statistically different from the career choices of a control sample of similarly aged male students and held similar attitudes to job satisfaction. This is surprising in a society she otherwise describes as male chauvinist—especially in its system of government! She does not try to explain what she observes but perhaps the answer lies in a combination of factors including the very high levels of general education in Western Samoa ('71 per cent of those over 15 years have received a secondary education'—p.218) and that the majority of people have been literate for over three generations.

In Papua New Guinea, the situation is much more depressing. Papers by Pani Tawaiyole (as sole author) and jointly with Sheldon Weeks, both of the Educational Research Unit of the University of Papua New Guinea, and by Penny Warner-Smith of the Hunter Valley Research Foundation of Australia, give statistical profiles of female education in Papua New Guinea.

Tawaiyole and Weeks show that, while female enrolments in both primary and secondary schooling are rising, they are still distressingly low. However, drop-out rates are greater for boys than for girls. As the authors indicate, the achievement of gender equity at the primary level seems to be within reach, but universal primary education still seems a distant goal.

The picture at high schools is more depressing, with low and falling enrolment levels in provincial high schools. Male

participation rates showed no growth in the decade from 1978 to 1988 and female rates grew by less than 3 per cent. Although the share of females in high school enrolments is growing, this is mainly because the number of boys is declining (because of a stable participation rate applied to a rapidly growing cohort of boys stemming from the country's high rate of population growth). This point is not made by Tawaiyole and Weeks, presumably because the paper is an input to a conference on women's education, but it forebodes ill for both Papua New Guinea and for women in that country. The Western Samoan experience reported earlier suggests that women do best educationally in an environment generally favourable to education. This is borne out by other speakers from Papua New Guinea who emphasize the role which educated parents play in encouraging daughters to enrol and to achieve.

Tawaiyole and Weeks go on to document retention rates by gender, pointing out that mainly because of social influences, girls do marginally worse in the later primary years, adversely affecting their likelihood for selection for high school entrance. This tendency is greater in those geographical areas of severe discrimination against women, in particular the Highlands provinces and West New Britain. Later sections of their paper discuss the social restraints to female education and in conclusion they propose an element of affirmative action in student selection. One criticism of this paper is that the authors' use of statistics is sometimes confusing and ambiguous, and requires careful reading (see, for example, pp 26–27 and Tables 2, 3 and 4 where the accompanying prose appear to be in conflict with the table statistics).

Penny Warner-Smith provides some useful insights into the experience of females in tertiary education, based on questionnaires she administered during her time at Goroka Teachers' College, the training centre for teachers in National High Schools in Papua New Guinea. She documents the pressures experienced by females from the predatory behaviour of drunken and aggressive male students, although as she says, these pressures are not perceived to be as great at Goroka as at Papua New Guinea's two universities. As well as being an ever present

cause of concern to female students, these pressures are also a cause (possibly a rationalization) for parents being unwilling to permit daughters to undertake tertiary studies. They certainly inhibit female academic performance.

Like a number of other writers, she confirms the tendency for females to be channelled into conventional women's pursuits, for example, teaching. Her studies show that at admission, the females at Goroka were, on average, better qualified than the males but had either not been accepted at, or possibly had not aspired to attending university.

Perhaps surprisingly in a book about female education, she joins with a number of other contributors in arguing that a major factor in the success of female students is a supportive group of male colleagues. Sister Teresa Flaherty, also from Goroka, continues this theme as a result of a series of questionnaires on gender issues which she distributed to a mixed group of her students at the college. Perhaps this stress on the need for male understanding and support is greater in a society where women are not only discriminated against in social attitudes but are also subject to constant physical threats from male colleagues.

Papua New Guinean educational institutions seem to be a mirror of Papua New Guinea society in regard to the treatment of women within them. Intimidation of women within the education system is unlikely to disappear without a general improvement in social attitudes. Perhaps this is the stage on which the major feminist battles should be fought in Papua New Guinea.

Appraising the narrower issue of women's education seems pointless except in the context of confronting one of Papua New Guinea's major policy dilemmas—declining educational standards and the 'plateauing' of educational opportunities for all Papua New Guineans (to use Tawaiyole and Weeks' term) and the consistently high drop-out rates from students lucky enough to have entered the system. Concern with increasing the proportion of females within a stagnant system simply diverts attention from a much wider crisis in Papua New Guinea education.

Brian Brogan