

Coffee is Men's Business (Part 2)

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Ever since its introduction to the Papua New Guinea Highlands during the colonial period, coffee has been seen as 'men's business' (see Eves and Titus 2017). This In Brief examines the attempts of some communities to make the smallholder coffee industry more equitable to women. We draw on research done among coffee smallholders in the Eastern Highlands Province in 2015.¹

As we argued in Part 1, men's control over coffee production and the income from it is not only a relic of colonial agricultural extension practices but also a consequence of a patrilineal land tenure system that renders women landless and puts the most important asset for coffee production — land — under men's control. In other words, that men hold primary rights over land is a major impediment to women controlling coffee smallholdings and securing the economic benefits of production. As one key informant explained of land tenure: 'Our custom is that women do not have power or authority over land'.² Because coffee is planted on the man's land and he is considered its owner, he invariably takes responsibility for its sale and the use of the proceeds, often spending it on himself rather than investing it in the household.

Marriage does confer some land use rights to a woman over her husband's land. Generally, these are secondary use rights that do not allow the planting of permanent cash crops such as coffee, but do afford the opportunity to plant annual crops, such as vegetables. Women usually have the use of any money earned from these, though this is generally significantly less than coffee money. Indeed, during the fieldwork, men sometimes referred to coffee income as 'heavy money', meaning that coffee produces substantial sums of money compared to the insignificant amounts other cash crops, such as vegetables, bring in.

In recognition of the unfairness involved, some men and women in the communities we visited saw a need to challenge the current gender order and to adopt more gender-equitable customs about the key resource of land. At one research site,

in Goroka District, men were cognisant of 'gender equity' and some efforts were being made to address women's exclusion from land ownership, and thus from coffee income. This site has a cooperative, Sukapas, which was specifically set up to address the income inequality ensuing from coffee production. The charismatic leader, Junet, who was at the forefront of establishing the cooperative, was exposed to ideas about gender equality when working with Kafe Women, a Goroka-based non-government organisation. She told how women do much of the work in coffee gardens and deplored the fact that men 'stood up at the scale and took the money'. In her view, this should be reversed, so that women, who do the work and also look after the house, receive the coffee income. One of the initiatives the cooperative has proposed is equal distribution of the coffee trees and gardens between husband and wife. As Junet explained:

Men and women must work coffee together. We're changing things around. We established Sukapas cooperative for this reason because there was a recognition that women were doing a lot of the work for coffee. They were saying that coffee is for men or something similar. So with Sukapas we say that 10 trees are for the man and 10 trees are for the woman. If you have 4000 trees, you must divide it so 2000 goes to the woman and 2000 the man. The husband and wife must have equal distribution of coffee trees among them.

One man we interviewed said that he has two coffee gardens — one of which is under his wife's control, while the other is under his control. Both work in each other's coffee garden, and when the coffee is sold, they combine the income and decide together how it will be spent. This man had heard of 'gender equity' and remarked that some men today recognise that women have the same rights as men and that men are starting to respect women and women are respecting men.

This man acknowledged that the culture is changing, saying that women's work can be done by men and men's work done by women. As he commented:

Yes, men 'boss' women, that's correct, but now we are increasing our knowledge and understanding about this. In Tok Pisin they refer to it as gender equity and we are now recognising that women have the same rights as men. So today we respect women and women respect us. Before, women were considered beneath men, but now we recognise new ways of thinking and our attitudes are changing. Gender equity means that men respect women and we work together.

Other men also spoke of sharing their coffee gardens with their wives in an effort to create more equity when it comes to land. Such examples show that change in gender relations is actually possible. In a country where the picture of gender relations is often bleak, this is encouraging. However, there are limitations to such 'sharing', particularly if the marriage is unstable, since it is unlikely the sharing would continue if the marriage were to collapse. Indeed, some women interviewed during the research recognised this. For example, one woman (in this case from Unggai-Bena District) pointed out the difficulties of women being alienated from land, saying that if women had land it would give them security in the event of divorce. As she said,

It would be good if women had their own land, so if their husbands decide to divorce them, they at least would have a piece of land to settle on with their children.

This is also the reason why so many women persevere with violent relationships. While a woman may return to her place of birth to reside, with her father giving her use rights to land, she is not necessarily assured of access following his death, since his land passes to his male children, her brothers.

While initiatives that encourage men to share their land with their wives are welcome, the broader issue of women's more enduring access to land needs to be addressed. Indeed, access to, and control over, resources such as land is often considered a key indicator of women's economic empowerment, since it allows women to increase their assets and attain a degree of financial autonomy and independence.

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Endnotes

1. The research was undertaken in three districts: Goroka District, Unggai-Bena District, and Okapa District (two sites). The research used mixed methods, including a quantitative survey of households (total 143), qualitative interviews with women and men (total 64), and key informant interviews (total 36).
2. Interviews were conducted in Tok Pisin; English translations are by Richard Eves.

References

- Eves, R. and A. Titus 2017. Coffee is Men's Business (Part 1). *SSGM In Brief 2017/11*. Canberra: ANU.

