

Unequal Work Burdens: Challenges to Women's Economic Empowerment in Solomon Islands

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Despite women's economic empowerment now being considered an essential component of development programming, in many parts of the world empowerment has not assured improvement in women's wellbeing. Rather, it has often brought increased costs to women (Hunt and Samman 2016:7). This In Brief reports on qualitative research in Solomon Islands, as part of the Do No Harm project.¹ The research sought to capture the experiences of women by encouraging respondents to tell stories of their life, particularly their married life, allowing rich case studies to be developed and women's voices to be heard.

While many of the women interviewed during the study were economically empowered to the extent that they had increased access to, and control over, economic resources through their own income-generating activities, this did not always translate into increased control over other areas of their lives. The intensified labour that women in paid employment in developed countries frequently endure, due to their continued responsibility for domestic labour, is often referred to as a double burden. However, in developing countries such as Solomon Islands, it is more apt to refer to it as a triple burden because many rural women not only work to earn income and do domestic labour in the home, they also carry out agricultural labour for subsistence. Further, in the urban context of Honiara, many women not only work in paid employment and do domestic labour, but they also expend labour in other activities to earn extra income.

In Solomon Islands, the women interviewed reported that their income-earning activities often led to a withdrawal of men's contributions to the household and, as is customary, men did not contribute domestic labour either (see Kabeer 2001). The imbalance in workloads was a recurring refrain from respondents in every research site, but it was especially acute in Malaita. In the past, when there was logging on Malaita, men received timber royalties and did not have to work to survive. Even though logging has now ceased and the flow of royalties has dried up, women say that men behave in the way to which

they have become accustomed and continue to avoid labour. The women spoke of men as failing in their duties, since they say the men just stay home and 'story' (talk or socialise with friends). Women in Malaita are not only engaging in activities to bring in income for the household, they say they are doing everything else as well. This is the source of much resentment in women who see themselves carrying the men as well as full responsibility for children and the household. At one site in Malaita, several women had divorced their husbands because of the inequitable workloads — one woman with five children recounted how she told her husband she did not want a sixth child and forced him to leave.

The women of Honiara also complained of the heavy burdens of work they endured. Although most of the women we interviewed there were in employment, the cost of living was so high that their wages were not sufficient to support a family, and so they had to engage in supplementary income-generating activities. These women also remain largely responsible for domestic labour and, as some women complained, they are too tired to carry out this additional burden after a day's labour. Many of the women we interviewed spoke of being physically exhausted from the burden of work they endure. One woman said that in addition to physical exhaustion, she suffered much more illness, including bouts of pneumonia because of the physical demands of her work. Another woman spoke about being ill more often because there was not enough time to rest. Life was particularly difficult if an employed woman's partner was unemployed because he was usually unwilling to take over responsibility for domestic labour.

The fact that women are generally unable to negotiate help from partners in domestic labour points to the significance of gender norms in determining who does particular forms of labour. Our research has shown that gender norms are a significant determinant of the degree to which a woman's increased earning capacity results in a more equal relationship with her partner, and particularly in the sharing of domestic labour. Gender and development scholars now recognise that norms

also play an important role in determining whether women's financial empowerment translates into other, broader forms of empowerment (Garikipati 2012:720).

Gender norms cannot be easily discarded since they are internalised throughout life as people are socialised to act in the acceptable male or female ways. Ultimately, conceptions of gender become naturalised to such an extent that they become 'common-sense' ways of behaving and seem a reasonable expectation of others' behaviour. Making change even more difficult, breaching or transgressing gender norms often elicits sanctions or retribution. In many parts of the world, a common trigger for violence against women is the transgression of gender norms and the failure to fulfill cultural expectations of womanhood (Jewkes 2002:1426). In the case of Solomon Islands, the *Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study* found that male perpetrators of violence became angry when their wives did not conform to societal gender roles, including those pertaining to domestic labour, such as not preparing food on time and not completing housework (SPC 2009:158).

All the same, gender norms are not impervious to change (Agarwal 1997:190). Reflection on the changes that have occurred in developed countries in the last 50 years alone attests to this. Further, in our Solomons research we found instances of remarkable changes in gender expectations by some more open-minded men, and some men exhibited a willingness to engage in domestic labour, such as looking after young children or cooking for their partners. There is increasing recognition that interventions to address gender inequality and inequitable gender norms need to be 'gender transformative'. Such gender transformative approaches, as a recent DFID Guidance Note says, should focus explicitly on tackling social norms around gender, power and violence, as well as broader ideas, attitudes and values around what it means to be a 'real man' or a 'real woman' (Alexander-Scott et al. 2016:10). While the examples we found of some Solomon Islands men doing the domestic work that usually falls to women were isolated rather than widespread and normative ways of behaving, they indicate, nevertheless, that change is possible.

Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. Fieldwork, including 85 in-depth interviews with women, was undertaken in 2014 in two provinces, Makira (23 women) and Malaita (40 women), and the capital, Honiara (22 women), as part of the research project Do No Harm: Understanding the Relationship between Women's Economic Empowerment and Violence against Women in Melanesia (see Eves and Crawford 2014). The research team comprised Richard Eves, Stephanie Lusby, Thomson Araia, Rose Martin, and Mary-Fay Maeni. The research is a collaboration between the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program and the International Women's Development Agency, and funded by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Pacific Women program.

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