

## **LIFELONG LEARNING: AN ACHIEVABLE GOAL OR AN UNREALISTIC AMBITION? A CROSS-CULTURAL, FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Lifelong learning discourses are continually explored and contested. In this paper, the author focuses on Papua New Guinean women's access to, and participation in, education, in the context of turbulent economic and social times within the developing nation. Taking a cross-cultural, feminist perspective, the author questions whether lifelong learning is an achievable goal or an unrealistic ambition.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines women's access and participation in education and lifelong learning in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Informed by feminist and cross-cultural concerns, the author describes the changing social context for PNG women; where they increasingly need to negotiate their ties to indigenous values with Western worldviews, particularly when engaging in international educational experiences in Australia. The author discusses whether lifelong learning is an achievable goal or an unrealistic ambition, particularly for women from developing countries.

### **PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A SOCIAL SNAPSHOT**

Papua New Guinea is a largely rural, subsistence-based, developing nation, and Australia's closest neighbour. With a population of approximately 5.2 million people (National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea, 2004), it is also a richly diverse country geographically, culturally, biologically, and linguistically. Its modern history included governance by a number of countries – including Australia, from whom it gained independence in 1975. In more recent times, the country has had to wrestle with growing economic, social, and health challenges – partly due to cultural and socioeconomic differences between the 20 provinces making up the nation – as well as a range of other factors including civil war and numerous catastrophic natural disasters.

According to data from the Human Development Index 2005 Report (United Nations Development Programme, 2005), Papua New Guinea currently ranks 137 out of 177 countries. The report states that the human development index (HDI) concentrates on three measurable dimensions of human development:

living a long and healthy life, having a decent standard of living, and being educated. Unfortunately each of these development dimensions has been problematic for the country and has affected PNG women's participation in education and lifelong learning.

### **Not living a long and healthy life**

The World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific (2005) tells us that the health status of Papua New Guineans is the lowest in the Pacific region, with malaria, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and diarrhoeal diseases common causes of death. Furthermore, maternal and child morbidity are high, with maternal mortality rates in the year 2000 being 330 per 100, 000 live births. The average life expectancy is only 53 years of age.

By far one of the biggest health challenges facing Papua New Guinea, however, is the HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) epidemic declared in 2003. Statistics show that HIV prevalence among women attending antenatal clinics in 2003 was between 0.9% and 3% (World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2005).

Women's health is also adversely affected by domestic and other violence (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; U.S. Department of State, 2006; MacIntyre, n.d.; World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2001; Yawa, 2002). Nevertheless, it is with great caution that such information is put forth in this paper. On the one hand, it is an area of great concern, particularly from a feminist standpoint and, on the other (possibly contradictory) hand, it is a controversial area for "others" to speak about. The author of this paper occupies an "unusual" space, however, in that she has been married within the culture, and has ongoing ties with

PNG women through her children, friendships, current research with PNG women, and involvement with PNG community groups. Moreover, she agrees with Martha MacIntyre that,

Given the wariness that many western feminists now feel about 'speaking for others', especially women in former colonies, there is a reluctance to write about those aspects of Melanesian culture that oppress women. The assumption may well be that to present women as discriminated against, or disadvantaged in contemporary life, is to detract from their obvious strengths, adaptability and endurance. Or in terms of feminist argument, a stress on their sufferings and structural disadvantages can be interpreted as a denial of their agency. But a retreat into discreet silence or a respectful emphasis on informal powers carries the danger that Melanesian women's problems and appeals for support will not reach people outside the region. (MacIntyre, 2000, p.158)

Also verifying the precarious situation for women is Papua New Guinea's performance in the gender-related development index (GDI), where it is the worst performing country in East Asia and the Pacific – ranking 103<sup>rd</sup> out of the 140 countries measured. Introduced in 1995, this "measures achievements in the same dimensions using the same indicators as the HDI but captures inequalities in achievement between women and men. It is simply the HDI adjusted downward for gender inequality" (United Nations Development Programme, 2005).

### Standard of living

The United Nations puts the standard of living in Papua New Guinea as 78<sup>th</sup> out of 81 countries in terms of the East Asian and Pacific region – that 78<sup>th</sup> being also out of 103 developing countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). The country's economic situation is well documented in development literature. However, as with other statistics in this paper, these assessments must be considered with caution in light of the inherent difficulties in capturing accurate data in developing countries and the fact that a very high proportion of Papua New Guineans are subsistent within their local environments and still widely utilise non-cash-based, traditional, economic practices such as bartering and other exchanges such as shell money. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, in terms of global economics and local production and income, PNG is experiencing economic difficulties – as are many other nations.

As a result, poverty is a very real problem to many Papua New Guineans, and this has been attributed to factors such as the young age of the population (Australian Agency for International Development, 2003), and large disparities in socio-economic conditions between rural and non-rural areas (World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2001) – with one report stating that 94% of the poor in Papua New Guinea lived in rural areas (Baxter, 2001, p.10).

### WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The social context thus far mentioned has had a major impact on participation in formal education in Papua New Guinea, which currently ranks 158<sup>th</sup> out of the 177 countries measured by the United Nations (UN), with 41% being the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrolment ratio (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). A large proportion of people never attend school. Data from within the country also shows that the higher the level of education, the bigger the discrepancy between men's and women's participation, such as the 4.8% of women holding university qualifications as compared to men's 11.1%. Literacy rates (albeit measured in terms of Western notions of literacy) vary, but PNG's National Statistical Office refers to the country's 2000 census data to state that 50.5% of women between 15-24 years of age – compared with 55.5% of males – are literate (National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea, 2004). Lower literacy rates are, unfortunately, typical of female literacy rates around the world (Stromquist, 2006). All of this data indicates that, in terms of access to formal education, the United Nations Millenium Development Goals 2 and 3 – of Universal Primary Education, Gender Equality, and Women's Empowerment – still seem some way from being achieved in Papua New Guinea (United Nations Statistics Division, 2006).

Statistics alone, however, only tell part of the story. A more holistic picture could be provided from qualitative research but to date such research into women's participation in formal education in Papua New Guinea has been limited. For example, in 1998 Sister Theresa Flaherty published the results of her research in *The Women's Voice in Education: Identity and Participation in a Changing Papua New Guinea* (Flaherty, 1998); and in 1996, Helen Geissinger wrote about her studies in her dissertation entitled *Women's access to education at the*

*universities of Papua New Guinea* (Geissinger, 1996). Both studies advocate policy change to further support equitable gender access to education. Geissinger also discusses the economic and social barriers to female access, participation, and retention in Papua New Guinean education systems – at both policy and “grassroots” levels and concluded that women make “more” out of their education than boys, by contributing more positively to their families and communities.

### **Women’s contribution in PNG and the role of formal and non-formal learning**

Non-formal learning plays an integral role in many females’ lives in Papua New Guinea. Non-formal learning can include – but is not limited to – agricultural techniques, weaving materials for market or for shelter, and traditional or “bush” medicine. Such activities could be said to reflect the early, guiding philosophies behind lifelong learning – which were about the individual being educated for his or her personal development as much as for work and development as human capital. The four pillars (learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be) proposed by the Delors Commission were intended to be applicable across nations, in different and evolving social, economic, and technological contexts (UNESCO, as cited in Kendall, 2005, p. 290), and the examples given also reflect these goals.

Avoseh (2001) reminds us, however, that lifelong learning and active citizenship, rather than being new terminology in the West, was traditional African practice – that one learnt for life through traditional customs, and that learning and citizenship were intertwined in religious and spiritual dimensions that guided life and one’s contribution to the “nation”, even if that nation was a community (Avoseh, 2001). The same could be said to apply to PNG. The lifelong learning activities of PNG women such as those described above enable them to make huge, sometimes unrecognised, contributions to community development and the development of social and human capital – particularly through their family responsibilities and social ties. In a largely self-subsistent economy such as PNG, these contributions cannot begin to be measured nor valued:

Narrow (western) views tend to equate work with paid employment in a market economy, but this renders invisible the non-market

production carried mostly by women, that sustains majority peoples at the most basic level of their everyday needs for food, shelter and care. This includes subsistence production as well as unpaid domestic work. (Reymer, 1999, n.p.)

Reymer also says that there needs to be a revaluing of traditional, subsistence economies that have “successfully sustained their peoples for thousands of years, but are under threat because of systematic marginalisation by the market economy. Non-formal education has a vital role to play in redressing this imbalance” (Reymer, 1999, n.p.). As demonstrated earlier, where participation in formal education systems for women in PNG is limited, it would appear that non-formal education or lifelong learning opportunities are particularly significant for sustaining the substantially significant subsistence part of PNG’s economy.

### **Lifelong learning for women from a developing country in a neo-liberal context**

Schugernsky (2003) sums up neo-liberal approaches to lifelong learning as follows:

The neoliberal approach to learning societies is expressed in a discourse that privileges individual over collective learning, that conceptualizes education as commodities, and that pays little attention to issues of economic, political and social democracy. It is a discourse that makes debatable assumptions in the areas of production, consumption, and civic participation. (Schugurensky, 2003, n.p.)

This view of lifelong learning is the antithesis of indigenous frameworks in developing countries where collectivist ideologies dominate. Furthermore, Preston (1999) and others tell us to be wary of lifelong learning in this “new” context as it can be a “mechanism of social control mediated by the market” (p. 562). Crowther (2004) adds that lifelong learning discourse can disguise the reality that education, and access to education, is largely influenced by issues of class, gender, and race, and that,

Markets do not simply empower the learner as ‘consumer’. This view assumes markets are free, neutral and passive; the reality is they are structured by powerful interests, serve to reinforce them and are active in this process of construction. Rather than minimizing social controls the market achieves the same but in a different way. (p. 129)

From a postcolonial perspective, one could even argue that lifelong learning in this context is a new form of colonisation. As such, one of the

challenges it poses for women from a developing country such as PNG is how to negotiate their traditional values with the dominant market forces that typically espouse Western world views – particularly when they engage in international education settings.

As Walters (1999) says in reference to South Africa,

Lifelong learning for active citizenship is therefore both about pedagogy and politics which requires local and global cooperative actions of solidarity to build alternatives which emphasise human values rather than human capital. It seems that the emancipatory potential of lifelong learning will only be fully realised through collective struggles across national and regional boundaries, where some of the benefits of globalization, like the new communications technologies, can be used to forge new visions of a world which are both “utopic and viable”. (p. 586)

This surely indicates a need for engagement between the learners and the “providers” within a community (be that a family, village, clan, region, or nation) about the type of lifelong learning they want to be part of.

There is a saying that women are the keepers of culture – that their sphere of influence in family and community life is enormous. As such, they are effectively living and breathing lifelong learning in a way that pervades not just their individual lives but also the lives of those around them – the traditional way that Avoseh (2001) talks about. To avoid the loss of indigenous knowledge and frameworks, it seems essential that we understand and value women’s role in lifelong learning.

### **Lifelong learning – an achievable goal or an unrealistic ambition for women from a developing country?**

Without doubt, there are many obstacles facing women from countries such as PNG accessing and participating in formal and non-formal education and lifelong learning. These obstacles can be attributed to the social and economic health of the nation, as well as to gender and related issues. Rao and Robinson-Pant (2006) tell us, “Third world feminists have long held that gender identities are embedded within other identities of class, race, ethnicity, age, language, caste and religion and that the experience of gender varies with one’s other social identities” (p. 220). This author’s firsthand experience in PNG certainly found this to be true. As mentioned earlier, PNG is an extremely diverse

country, and a woman’s life experience in a matriarchal-based society, for example, can vary greatly from that of her counterpart living in a patriarchal-based society. Age also affords PNG men and women with a certain level of respect and status. The Non-Formal Education Sub-Sector Report of 1991 (as cited in Reymer, 1999) adds,

Women participants at the 1985 Non-Formal Education Conference in Goroka identified a long list of factors affecting women’s position in society, including “polygamy, gambling, alcohol, mismanagement of family finances, inadequate water, food and fuel supplies, marketing problems, marital breakdown, increasing violence and sexual crimes, desertion, lack of awareness and access to family planning, urbanisation, limited work opportunities outside the home, and low status and subsistence work overloads in rural areas”. (p. 16)

Similar problems have been identified worldwide. Gouthro (2005), for example, argues that while the majority of domestic (largely unpaid) labour rests upon women, their participation in lifelong learning often not only depends on economics, but also on support from women’s families to participate in such activities. Alternatively, women undertake the activities and work doubly hard so as to not disrupt family life and/or obligations.

Finally, this author believes that not only is lifelong learning achievable, it is also desirable. Even from a critical feminist stance – that of recognising this paper’s focus on gender equity and education from a “privileged” white position – I agree with Dame Carol Kidu (a prominent PNG female politician) that, at the very least,

Women need access to information. It is the only way that we can reverse these worrying statistics [referring to UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) statistics of the mid-1990s showing PNG women’s life expectancy had decreased in the previous decade while poverty had increased]. World history has shown that the best way to improve quality of life is through education. Literacy teachers and extension workers must become partners in teaching functional knowledge and skills to empower women to have greater control of their own lives and the welfare of their families. (Kidu, 1997, p. 4)

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has provided an overview of one person’s perspective on the issue of lifelong learning in the context of Papua New Guinea. While there is no doubt that PNG faces

enormous challenges in reaching the Millenium Development Goals for women in education, and in improving women's health and wellbeing, it is this author's view that lifelong learning encompassing formal and non-formal structures is both an achievable goal *and* a realistic ambition. Individual women in PNG continue to lead the way for others. Recently, the University of Wollongong celebrated the graduation of Dr Lalen Simeon – the first woman from New Ireland Province in PNG to graduate with a doctorate. As a mother of two daughters, and a senior lecturer in a co-educational learning institute, Lalen's personal capacity *and* her human capital capacity for influencing others at community, regional, and national levels becomes more possible. Women's central role in citizenship activities such as the peace process in war-torn Bougainville (Hakena, 2002; United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2004), and their enormous contribution to the subsistence economy, also demonstrate the "application" of women's lifelong learning for the benefit of others. In Flaherty's (1998) research, a teacher from Milne Bay Province is quoted as saying,

It was OK for women to speak in ordinary conversations, but not if there was a group of men. Women can speak out at a meeting, but are usually quieter. You had the feeling that men had the 'voice' and would speak up more and would be listened to more. We all had ideas, but men the voice to talk . (p.18)

It is time to listen to the women so we can begin to understand what lifelong learning goals they might have for themselves as citizens of such a beautiful country, and what we can do to help realise those goals for all citizens, women and men alike.

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