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**A QUIET REVOLUTION:  
STRATEGIES FOR THE EMPOWERMENT  
AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL  
WOMEN IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Development Studies at Massey University.

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**1995**

# Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to locate effective strategies to promote women's development in Third World countries. It is argued that many past development efforts aimed at women have failed to significantly improve their lives because while they may have alleviated women's burdens, they have not attempted to challenge the existing structures in society which have accorded women secondary status. Unequal power relations, rather than a lack of resources, explain why women have not benefited from development to the same extent as men thus women need greater access to power. An approach which focuses on empowering women to help them to challenge the *status quo* was, therefore, established as providing a good model for development agencies to follow.

Fieldwork in the Solomon Islands revealed that many development agencies and planners adopted a conservative, home economics approach to women's development which focused largely on women's roles as wives and mothers. Many other concerns facing women, including their rights to land, access to safe contraception and literacy were largely ignored. It became apparent that many development agencies had a poor conception of gender needs and interests and how they could be addressed largely because they had failed to consult their supposed beneficiaries. Analysis confirmed that there was a strong relationship between the amount of input rural women had into a development initiative and the likelihood that they would be empowered by it.

Despite the narrow approach adopted by many agencies attempting to assist rural women, however, a movement for change did emerge. Women's organisations played a key role in this movement, providing women with a space in which to define and pursue their future priorities, and building collective solidarity so that women would have the confidence to confront forces which were obstructing their progress. These groups, and agencies supporting their work, were not afraid to address the causes of women's subordination although subtle strategies, rather than outright confrontation, proved to be most effective in catalysing changes in women's lives.

# Acknowledgements

*Sincere thanks are expressed firstly, to my two supervisors, Brian Ponter and Croz Walsh, who consistently challenged my assumptions, stretched the boundaries of my knowledge and provided friendly guidance throughout the production of this thesis.*

*I also acknowledge the assistance and friendship extended to me by many individuals in the Solomon Islands, and several people in Fiji too, who offered me their time, wisdom, insights and overwhelming hospitality. To you all I am very grateful. I hope that I have drawn your ideas together accurately and that the information you shared with me will assist others who wish to find effective ways of facilitating women's development and empowerment.*

*Thanks for practical assistance go to the Ministry of External Relations and Trade, who helped with funding and to Karen Puklowski, who assisted in the production of Figures Two and Nine.*

*Lastly, and with great warmth, thank you to my family and friends who have always supported and had faith in me, especially my parents who encouraged me to take advantage of study opportunities which were never open to them, and Henry, who has been a great sounding board.*

*Special thanks and love go to Craig, whose constant interest, affection and sense of humour have helped me throughout.*





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# Glossary

ACFOA	Austrialian Council for Overseas Aid
ACM	Advisory Council to Management
ACW	Area Council of Women
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AIDAB	Australian Development Assitance Bureau
AIDS	Acquired Immune Defficiency Syndrome
APCWD	Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development
APDC	Asian and Pacific Development Centre
BDD	Business Development Division
CBD	Community Based Distributor
CBSI	Central Bank of the Solomon Islands
CETC	Community Education and Training Centre (Suva)
CNWC	Catholic National Women's Council
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
DCA	Danchurch Aid
DIVIT	District Village Training Centre
DMI	Daughters of Mary Immaculate
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EEC	European Economic Community
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
FSP	Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific
GAD	Gender and Development
GNP	Gross National Product
HMA	Honiara Municipal Authority
ICPE	International Centre for Public Enterprises in Developing Countries
IDS	Institute of Development Studies (Sussex)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
IPS	Institute of Pacific Studies (Suva)
ISS	Institute of Social Studies (the Hague)
IUCD	Inter uterine contraceptive device
MAL	Ministry of Agriculture and Lands (Solomon Islands)
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MCPI	Ministry of Commerce and Primary Industry (Solomon Islands)
MEHRD	Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development
MERT	Ministry of External Relations and Trade (New Zealand)
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (New Zealand) <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MFAT replaced MERT in 1993.

MFEP	Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (Solomon Islands)
MFO	Moving Forward Organization
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs (Solomon Islands)
MHMS	Ministry of Health and Medical Services (Solomon Islands)
MP	Member of Parliament
MTM	Mobile Team Member
NCW	National Council of Women
n.d.	no date
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIO	national information officer
NNS	National Nutrition Survey
NSS	National Secondary School
NZ\$	New Zealand dollars
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PAWORNET	Pacific Women's Information/Communication Network
PBU	Provincial Development Unit (Solomon Islands)
PCW	Provincial Council of Women
PIANGO	Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PSS	Provincial Secondary School
PWRB	Pacific Women's Resource Bureau
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
RTC	Rural Training Centre
SBD\$	Solomon Islands dollars <sup>2</sup>
SCFA	Save the Children Fund, Australia
SDA	Seventh Day Adventists
SEWA	South Employed Women's Association (Ahmedabad)
SICA	Solomon Islands Christian Association
SICHE	Solomon Islands College of Higher Education
SIDT	Solomon Islands Development Trust
SIPPA	Solomon Islands Planned Parenthood Association
SPC	South Pacific Commission
SRA	Social Relations Analysis
SSEC	South Seas Evangelical Church
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
TRF	Triple Roles Framework
UCWF	United Church Women's Fellowship
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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<sup>2</sup> SBD\$1 = NZ\$0.64 (1992)

UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Women's Fund
USP	University of the South Pacific
VNCW	Vanuatu National Council of Women
VSA	Volunteer Services Abroad
WAD	Women and Development
WAESP	Women's Agriculture Extension Services Programme
WDA	Women And Development Assistant (of the WDD)
WDD	Women and Development Division (of the MHMS)
WDO	Women and Development Officer (of the WDD)
WID	Women In Development
WIO	Women's Interest Office
WIP	Women's Initiative Programme
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

# CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

## *Purpose*

The overall aim of this thesis is to discuss what strategies are most effective in achieving development and empowerment for women in the Solomon Islands. In this context it examines two crucial issues: first, whether the needs and interests of women are actually being addressed by those agencies with a stated commitment to their development and second, what strategies for women's development are most effective in leading to their empowerment. It does not simply argue that women there, and elsewhere in the Third World, merely need more attention paid to them and more resources devoted to them. While this has actually happened since the early 1970s, the majority of women have experienced few benefits and for some, their situation has deteriorated. Thus the issue becomes, what strategies can best facilitate women's empowerment and development?

In preparation for this project this chapter considers the impact of development on the lives of women in the Third World: it attempts to determine where many efforts to assist them have gone wrong. It also discusses the concept of 'empowerment' and explains why this is integrally bound up with the development of disadvantaged groups, such as women. First, however, the key terms to be used in this thesis are examined and defined.

## *Definition of key terms<sup>1</sup>*

WID (women in development) has been the most common term used to refer to the field of women's development:

*Women in development (WID) is an interdisciplinary concept that emerged in the 1970s out of the United Nations Decade for Women...[it is] a term used to convey a concern for many concepts and issues related to the effect of international development on women (Browne, 1989:12,36).*

WID is accepted as meaning '...the integration of women into global processes of economic, political, and social growth and change' (Rathgeber, 1990:489). Many development agencies now have 'WID desks' or 'WID officers'.

This thesis does not support the use of the term WID, however, because it is ideologically coloured. It is closely linked to the mainstream modernisation paradigm, which

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<sup>1</sup> As Mohanty (1988) has discussed, there are many common words in the gender and development literature which are generalisations and which, therefore, can detract from the meaning and comprehension from one's writing. It is important to define these terms now.



follows the rationale that economic growth in a country will 'trickle down' to benefit all people. Proponents of WID argue that as long as special attention is paid to women, they will benefit from development too. They do not, however, attempt to address the causes of women's subordinate position in society (Rathgeber, 1990:490-91). I prefer to use the term 'GAD' (gender and development) when discussing the field of women's development because

*GAD...is not concerned with women per se but with the social construction of gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations to women and to men (Rathgeber, 1990:494).*

I have chosen to follow the convention of using the terms 'men' and 'women' in preference to 'male' and 'female' wherever possible as the latter terms refer specifically to biological differences between the sexes while I am more concerned with the socially constructed and institutionalised forms of identity attached to biological sex differences (Goetz, 1992:6). In places, however, where the use of this convention results in clumsy language, I found the need to depart from it.

The term 'Third World' is used throughout on the basis that no other terminology available is more appropriate. This, however, is done with reservation because the suggestion is that 'third' is inferior to 'first', thus the term 'Third World' can be seen to reinforce '...existing economic, cultural and ideological hierarchies' (Mohanty, 1988:83). In addition, the terms 'First World' and 'Third World' oversimplify the socio-economic circumstances of countries in both of these categories. Some women in the 'Third World' have, however, turned this term around to have a positive meaning. Sen and Grown (1987:97), for example, say that '...we use the term "Third World" as a positive self-affirmation based on our struggles against the multiple oppressions of nation, gender, class, and ethnicity'. On this basis I decided to use the term 'Third World'. 'First World' is not used, however, because of the notions of superiority it implies. While neither the term 'Western' or 'Northern' was geographically accurate as an alternative to the 'First World', I chose to use 'Western' because it has come to represent those societies exhibiting the value systems and capitalist tendencies associated with European culture.

Use of the term 'Third World women', frequently mentioned in discussions about women and development, must still be qualified, however, as it too is enmeshed with problems. 'Third World women' implies a false homogeneity (Mohanty, 1988:77), which tends to '...conceal or mystify the diverse interests and issues which concern women' (de Groot, 1991:124). While patriarchy, '...the institutionalised domination of women by men' (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:2), is recognised as a universal system under which many women suffer, women in the Third World are also differentiated by class, ethnic and religious factors, which should not be ignored. Such divisions structure the reality of life options for women in different circumstances. Rather than making statements which are

expected to apply to all women of the Third World, we need to specify how particular groups of women experience gender within local contexts (Mohanty, 1988:72).

Neither are 'men' a homogeneous category. While men share certain privileges or access to power which women of their social group may not share because of the system of patriarchy, not all men stand in the way of women's development. Not all men have interests which are diametrically opposed to those of women: '...gender relations are relations of power as well as difference, of conflict as well as cooperation' (Kabeer, 1992a:19).

When referring to the 'grassroots', I mean the local level at which people act. In urban areas this may be a shanty town while in rural areas it may be a village. 'Grassroots women', therefore, are those women who act primarily at this local level and whose priorities and needs are shaped by their experience at the grassroots. This is in contrast to women who, for example, live in the capital city, travel overseas for their education and work in national organisations. 'Grassroots women's groups', 'grassroots women's organisations' and 'grassroots movements' also have significance. They refer to bodies which emerge primarily according to, or are largely directed by, the needs and priorities of those living in local communities. This is as opposed to development projects and programmes which are imposed on grassroots people by outside agencies according to the agencies' own priorities and ideas.

At times I will refer to the 'official' planning system, by which I mean the institutions and organisations specifically established to plan for, fund or implement development programmes and projects. This includes government planning units, donor agencies and foreign non-governmental organisations<sup>2</sup>. I choose to distinguish between development efforts which are part of this official process and others, including development which arises from the activities of women's movements at grassroots level. Insufficient attention has been paid to the potential of the latter activities to bring about development and empowerment. Friedmann (1992:139-40) refers to initiatives deriving from the needs and interests of those at the grassroots as 'local action projects', which

*...typically bypass the state or exist, barely noticed, on its margins...they respond to a specific local need, their methods are experimental....But, in a mainstream perspective, they are regarded as contributing little to economic growth and capital accumulation; they do not count as 'development'.*

Though they are not conventionally considered as 'development', such initiatives will be considered here on the assumption that they could provide insights into the needs and

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<sup>2</sup> I have not included local NGOs in this category as they can often avoid having to go through their government's planning system in order to organise their programmes. While they may draw on funds from overseas donors, they can largely avoid the official planning system.

interests of women at the grassroots and provide innovative strategies for bringing about development.

I use the term 'development initiative' because it enables me to include both conventional development programmes, projects and training schemes, as well as alternative development activities, such as local action projects, in my study.

### *Development and empowerment*

While it is common practice to speak of 'development' as if it were a tangible object, in fact it is a concept, or an abstract idea, which may be variously defined. To one individual development may mean the opportunity to learn to read and write, to another, the freedom to vote in democratic elections, to another, the ability to grow sufficient food to feed his or her family. Most governments and many development agencies define development primarily in economic terms, even though pursuing economic growth may undermine social development (Momsen and Townsend, 1987:16). The World Bank, for example, funded a huge dam project in India which is to provide electricity to industry but which will displace thousands of tribal people who have for centuries relied for their livelihood on the area which is to be flooded (*New Internationalist*, 1992b:16). This is not an attempt to undermine the importance of economic development, rather, it is an attempt to question the overwhelming emphasis on goals of economic development which sometimes undermine social development.

Economic-based solutions to the problems of Third World countries are continually promoted on the assumption that poverty arises because of a lack of productivity. Some have questioned this approach, however, because it fails to acknowledge that oppression and exploitation are key factors creating poverty. An alternative approach suggests that development should be '...concerned with enabling people to take charge of their own lives' (Longwe, 1991:149). Advocates of this approach are concerned with liberating oppressed peoples.

Those who propose purely economic definitions of development fail to consider fully the meaning of development. Todaro (1989:89), in an attempt to define development, agrees with Goulet and others who argue that there are at least three core values that can be used to represent common goals sought by all individuals and societies. First, there is the need for life sustenance. Second, people need a sense of self-esteem. This esteem has diminished among many Third World peoples; they have lost '...a profound sense of their own worth' because societies which are economically and technologically more sophisticated than theirs undermine the importance of their culture and their means of

survival. Countries are labelled as 'poor' because their per capita income is lower than the United States' standard. This is simplistic as it fails to recognise the richness of nature and culture in much of the Third World, except in situations where this can be exploited. "Poverty" has been used '...to define whole peoples, not according to what they are and want to be, but according to what they lack and are expected to become' (*New Internationalist*, 1992c:8). Goulet's third core value is people's desire to be free from servitude, to be able to choose to have '...emancipation from...ignorance...misery, institutions, and dogmatic beliefs' (Todaro, 1989:90).

The above definition of development has 'empowerment' as a key component. Staudt (1990) defines empowerment as '...a process by which people acquire the ability to act in ways to control their lives'. Goulet's core values of self-esteem and freedom are essential if one is to feel empowered. For example, people dissatisfied with their present lives but who have a negative image of themselves and their abilities are unlikely to be able to define a new direction for their lives and to work for change (Boesveld, 1986:38).

Empowerment is a crucial aspect of development for women and for other groups which face structural disadvantages related to phenomena such as gender, ethnicity, class, age and religion. It can involve instructing people in how they can use their country's economic, political and bureaucratic systems to improve their lives (Roughan, 1990). Griffen (1989:118) has suggested that, for Pacific Islanders, empowerment could mean,

*...changing the unequal power relationships between men and women, governments and people, decision-makers and people, planners and people, traditional leaders and people, and gaining back power for those people in society who have less control over their lives, especially women.*

Along with the tendency to define development primarily in economic terms comes a tendency to focus solely on the physical or material aspects of development. Few people discussing constraints on women's development, for example, or areas needing improvement consider women's self-esteem and mental well-being. Thus development agencies often fail to deal with issues which may be of immense concern to women, including deteriorating gender relations within the household and the sense of helplessness women may feel in fulfilling their role of food provider in the face of depletion of the natural resource base. Self-esteem affects whether women will be willing to stand up and say, 'No' to those whose ideas about development differ from their own, whether they will consider enrolling in literacy or other educational classes and whether, in the long term, they will put themselves forward for election to decision making bodies to ensure that their voices are heard at community, regional or national level.

Several writers have suggested that an approach which looks only at physical forms of development is extremely short-sighted. Korten (1990:133), for example, notes that 'We



must transform our definition of the quality of life to place less emphasis on material consumption and give greater attention to our social, mental and spiritual development'. McMahon (1990:72) agrees, stating that 'Development should assist people to acquire attitudes of self-determination, self-reliance, dignity, achievement and maturity'. This is not to underestimate the significance of material development, however. Indeed, empowerment is integrally tied up with the access of women to material resources, as Schuler (1986:29) explains: 'When we speak of empowerment, we refer to the capacity to mobilize resources to produce beneficial social change' (Schuler, 1986:29). Enhancing women's access to resources such as education, land and tools for productive activities can support the process of empowerment.

There are certain circumstances, such as when a flood, war or corrupt political system deprives people of food or shelter, under which physical development must override the need to empower people. In the long term, however, it is only through empowering people that they will be able to change their situation so that they have more control over meeting their basic needs in the future. For example, a group of villagers whose traditional source of drinking water, a river, is continually polluted by a chemical factory upstream could be provided with a well to tap into a clean source of ground water. Alternatively, in addition to a well they could be provided with skills and knowledge, including awareness-raising about the country's legal system, assertiveness training and literacy classes, so they could confront the chemical company and alert a public solicitor and the media about the problems they face. While the first approach would assist the people to meet a basic, physical need, the second approach would cover this need as well as empowering the villagers to overcome the exploitative relationship which existed between the powerful managers of the chemical company and themselves. Empowerment is essential for any group, including women, which wishes to challenge a system, or systems, of oppression which have curtailed their life opportunities.

Next we consider how 'women' became a development issue and what effect this had on their lives.

## ***The development process and women***

### **'Women' as a development issue**

The development field became receptive to issues of women's development in the early 1970s. It became clear that 'trickle down' approaches had failed to reach the poor so policy-makers and researchers began to consider different approaches to solving the problems of Third World countries (Buvinic, 1983:23). Concurrently, escalating population growth became a big concern, leading development agencies to consider how women could

play a role in reversing this trend (Momsen and Townsend, 1987:72). Also in 1970, Ester Boserup published her book, 'Women's Role in Economic Development' which accurately described the negative effects of colonialism and the penetration of capitalism on women's rights and status. This challenged the assumption that women automatically benefit from modernisation. Boserup's book was significant in the sense that '...it suggested a powerful way to argue the case for redistributing productive resources to women, providing a political as well as an economic rationale for changing development policies' (Jaquette, 1990:54). While popularity of Boserup's book led to a concentration of resources on women-specific development projects and programmes in the early 1970s, most of this interest in women did not arise '...from any inherent feminist concern with gender-based inequities' (Beneria and Sen, 1982:159).

The beginning of the United Nations' Decade for Women in 1975 and the three major world conferences run in conjunction with it also resulted in more resources being secured for women's development. The decade influenced the direction that planning of development initiatives was to take (Swantz, 1992:106), with many development agencies beginning to share a common framework with the aim of integrating women into the development process and improving the status of women. The decade legitimised women's concerns in the eyes of governments (Tinker, 1990:31) but perhaps its greatest achievement was the promotion of women's organisations. Although women's organisations had a long history, the number and variety of women's organisations worldwide which emerged during the decade was unprecedented (Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:81): '...a critical mass of women...[became] a powerful, revolutionary social force' (Fraser, 1987:213). Further,

*The psychological dimensions of this mobilisation process should not be underestimated: the Decade provided the opportunity for women to recognise that a women's agenda is legitimate and feasible....The Decade...empowered individually and collectively in a manner unparalleled in history (Tinker and Jaquette, 1987:426).*

The results of the Decade were not all encouraging, however. Despite the world conferences, lobbying of governments, legislative and policy mandates '...barely a dent was made in the redistribution of resources and value from men to women...little progress has been made in dismantling institutionalised male privilege' (Staudt, 1990:3).

### **State of the world's women in the 1990s**

While more resources have been allocated to women since the 1970s, it is questionable whether this has improved the status and living conditions of the majority of women. The general literature indicates that women's position relative to men's has improved only slightly (Anderson, 1990; Evans, 1990). Despite several decades of

concerted feminist writing and action, women still face many disadvantages in the world, and in some cases, this disadvantage has increased:

*Today women are still poorer, have less access to or control over resources, and enjoy less political power than their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. This continuing and basic inequality depletes the world economically and morally (Anderson, 1990:3).*

In formal political spheres women are still poorly represented, for example. In 1990 there were only three countries in the world with women holding over twenty percent of ministerial level positions in government and only six of the 159 United Nations member states were headed by a woman. In the domain of employment, for doing the same work as men, women worldwide are paid on average thirty to forty percent less. Further, women in Africa and Asia spend up to thirteen hours a week more than men working. Women still hold less than twenty percent of managerial and administration jobs across the globe (*New Internationalist*, 1992a:18-19). While literacy programmes have been eagerly adopted, the number of illiterate women in the world has risen from 543 million in 1970 to 597 million in 1985. Male illiteracy rose by only 4 million in this same period. Furthermore, in a world facing massive resource depletion and a growing population, it is often women whose burdens are increased because it is they who must search for hours for fuelwood, or walk several kilometres to find a clean source of water, or who must plant their crops on increasingly infertile soil (Boesveld, 1986:3). Women's access to various services, particularly medical care, credit and education, is also much more limited than it is for men (Evans, 1990:32)

There are a number of reasons why, despite increasing attention paid to them since the 1970s, the situation of many women has not improved. This will be elaborated upon below.

## **Reasons behind the lack of effectiveness of past development efforts directed at women**

### ***Women as objects of policy attention***

The way in which writers have brought attention to the situation of Third World women has influenced common perceptions of these women and, consequently, how their concerns were addressed by early development initiatives. Women and their activities were frequently ignored by foreign researchers and often misrepresented in the literature by writers suggesting that women were very dependent on men (McCormack, 1989:19). Even feminist researchers from the west have tended to undermine the significance of Third World women's lives, suggesting that their lives are not as meaningful as those of liberated Western women. As Mohanty (1988:80) indicates,

*...third-world women are defined as...religious (read 'not progressive'), family-oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward').*

It is apparent that researchers have steered clear of topics which may invite potential conflict, such as those related to the subordination of women. Avoidance of 'sensitive' topics is common among major national and international development agencies, which have financed much research on women's development:

*One says that for the sake of "objectivity" or "neutrality" it is better not to interfere with matters that are part of another person's culture. In saying this, one has actually adopted not the stance of scientific objectivity, but a stance that is very much ideologically coloured. One has chosen for maintaining the status quo (Schrijvers, 1985:82 quoted in Boesveld, 1986:40).*

It is of great concern that these inaccurate portrayals of women's lives have influenced policy-making on development (de Groot, 1991:114).

#### ***Failure to recognise women's multiple roles***

While a concerted effort has been made by development agencies worldwide to address issues of specific concern to women, many efforts have been unsuccessful because women's multiple roles are not considered. Throughout the world the work women and men do is subject to the gender roles accorded to them. While their responsibilities may differ among societies, what is common throughout low income households in the Third World is that women have multiple roles to perform<sup>3</sup>:

*The essence of women's distinctiveness lies in the multiplicity of their roles....Most women, in addition to being heavily involved in economic production, take prime responsibility as home managers, child-bearers and carers of children and the elderly...(Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989:3).*

Men, too, may have multiple roles<sup>4</sup> but generally they focus on being producers (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989:3).

Moser (1989) referred to women's multiple roles as a triple burden of work, including productive, reproductive and community management responsibilities. Reproductive roles include both biological reproduction and social reproduction, the care and maintenance of one's family. Community management roles carried out by women include, for example, women in a slum area organising a water supply or village women preparing feasts for

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<sup>3</sup> Multiple roles characterise the lives of women of all but the elite classes in most Third World societies.

<sup>4</sup> They may assist with reproductive activities such as child care or have full responsibility for a task such as cooking. Men may also take on responsibilities in the wider community but while women provide items of collective consumption, men's community management roles focus around organising at the formal, political level (Moser, 1992:89). For this work men receive greater rewards, '...either directly through paid remuneration, or indirectly through status and political power' (Moser, 1991:159) than women do.



traditional ceremonies. In women's community management roles, through the networks of social relationships they establish, '...women contribute to the nature, viability and cohesiveness of the community' (Stewart, 1992:24). It is generally agreed that productive roles involve work for money, for example, working in a factory or selling vegetables at the market but I argue that they also include some forms of subsistence work. For example, women involved in subsistence agriculture directly produce goods and although no income is earned, this work can be seen as 'productive' because it directly offsets the need to buy such goods.

While reproductive and community management roles use up women's time and energy, often only paid productive work is recognised as being 'work':

*...the tendency to value only productive work, because of its exchange value, with reproductive and community managing work seen as 'natural' and non-productive, and therefore not valued, has serious consequences for women. It means that the majority if not all, the work that they do...fails to be recognised as work either by men in the community or by those planners whose job it is to assess different needs within low-income communities (Moser, 1992:89).*

This is a problem as some development programmes take no note of women's many prior obligations. They create new roles for women without reducing their old tasks, thus adding to their burdens (Whitehead and Bloom, 1992:55):

*Any such compartmentalised approach holds with it the danger of inadvertently worsening women's position by ignoring the fact that women's lives are characterised by a combination of various roles (Baud et al., 1992:87-88).*

Schoeffel, referring to the situation in Western Samoa, does not see any inherent problem in women and men having separate roles or there being a gender division of labour, rather, the problem is that, '...asymmetrical values are accorded, which rate the contribution of men more highly than that of women...' (quoted by Hetler and Khoo, 1987:218). This was a phenomenon common in traditional societies and in many cases it has been exacerbated by colonisation and subsequent development.

While women's aspirations have been heightened due to social change and education, men, citing tradition, commonly try to block women's progress when they endeavour to take on roles in which they can exert power or in which they receive a good reward for their labours (Gabriel, 1991:72). In cases where women have been allowed to pursue new aspirations, this typically means that new roles have been added to the old, rather than replacing them. Schoeffel and Kikau (1980:25) emphasise a point first made by Shirely Weitz, that is, that in every society where there has been an attempt to equalise men's and women's roles, women have taken on additional roles which were formerly held by men, while retaining their traditional roles. Men, however, have made little effort to

share women's traditional roles and, in addition, women continue to earn less than men for doing essentially the same tasks.

### *Narrow focus on women as wives and mothers*

Women are often targeted only in terms of their reproductive roles, as mothers and wives, rather than looking at how women could develop as individuals by providing them, for example, with education and training in non-traditional skills:

*...women are not regarded as having needs in their own right....Either they are assumed to be citizens with the same needs and interest as male citizens, and/or they are perceived as having special needs and interests as wives and, in particular, as mothers (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:149).*

Projects associated with the health, nutrition and population sectors, all linked to women's reproductive roles, are still seen as 'naturally' associated with women when there is no logical reason why women should have to continue to accept full responsibility for these concerns. Furthermore, while such projects do have the potential to benefit women, women are typically not consulted about the design of the project nor its implementation or evaluation. Thus while the general issues these projects deal with are of concern to women, the projects themselves are not necessarily structured so as to benefit the most disadvantaged women (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:150).

### *Gender roles and relations*

In the past, many policy-makers and development practitioners have misinterpreted women's needs and interests because they failed to acknowledge that unequal power relations between men and women frame women's disadvantage. Some have the impression that if women of the Third World deserve special attention, it follows that they must be victims, or helpless: 'The case that women need special consideration...is viewed as an expression of sympathy towards the physically and mentally weaker group' (Rahman, 1985:299).

Gender relations refer to the '...systematic differences in the positioning of women and men', in relation to processes of production, consumption and distribution (Kabeer, 1992a:17). Many development initiatives directed at women are not beneficial as far as women are concerned because they fail to consider the implications of gender relations on the successful implementation of the initiative. Development initiatives often ignore gender differences or make incorrect assumptions about the gendered division of labour (Institute of Development Studies, 1991:189).

General development policies and programmes affect women and men differently because their lives are structured in fundamentally different ways (Institute of Development

Studies, 1991:189). Thus an agency which provides a village with the resources to establish a poultry farm may think that their project will benefit the whole community by providing them with a source of income from the eggs produced. In reality, women could be given the responsibility for raising and maintaining the chickens while men control how project finances are managed and spent. Such a project could make women's lives harder without giving them any tangible rewards.

Gender relations involve relations of power with gender-based hierarchies being evident at all levels of society, from households to communities to the national economy. These power relations constrain women's access to key resources, including credit, training and land, as well as limiting women's access to markets for their goods and their control over the income they earn (Kihoro, 1992:20-21). Thus women have not been able to benefit from development to the same extent that men have (Moghadam, 1990:51).

### **Signs of hope**

Despite the disadvantages facing women who could potentially benefit from the development system, there are signs of hope. One sign is that groups of women in communities throughout the Third World are starting to work together to initiate development projects or programmes on their own terms, sometimes drawing on resources from outside agencies and sometimes utilising local resources. Such initiatives have huge potential to benefit women because they draw directly on women's knowledge and skills and they are based on women's own priorities. This is quite different from projects for women initiated within the male-dominated, top-down, bureaucratic development process. As Kikau (1986:37) notes, '...the urge to do something for women, by women themselves...' is very encouraging indeed.

Research on such movements for change among women is now appearing in the literature (Shiva, 1988; Sen and Grown, 1987). It may be that women's ideas and innovations will be able to be fed back into the formal development process to show how more equitable development initiatives can be brought about resulting in the empowerment of disadvantaged peoples, including women:

*The contributions of women to development have become increasingly recognised, resulting in progress in many countries toward relieving restrictions on female participation in political and economic activities (Korten, 1990:27-28).*

A number of Third World women are also making an important contribution to the development of new theories of development by publicising their views on a more just world order. For example, in 1987, Sen and Grown's book 'Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives' was published. It has been described as '...the most ambitious attempt so far at a theory of women and development' (McFarland,

1988:299). The book was prepared on behalf of an organisation of women activists, researchers and policy-makers from the Third World, calling themselves DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). DAWN was concerned with shaping a vision of society '...free of all forms of oppression by gender, class, race, and nation' (DAWN, 1986:15).

In addition to the growing contributions by Third World women to the debate over the most appropriate approach to take to development, a notable change in the field of women's development has been the recognition, by a number of academics, policy-makers and practitioners, that there is a need to focus on gender and development, rather than women and development.

### **The need to focus on gender relations and to address causes of women's subordination**

More development theorists and policy-makers are starting to reject the notion that with general economic growth in a country, women's situation will improve:

*Until quite recently, it was generally believed that economic growth and development was a sufficient condition for an improvement in women's social position. Such an approach...denies the unequal power relationships which exist between people of different castes, races and classes and between men and women (Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers, 1984:107).*

It seems apparent that if one wishes to understand women's disadvantaged position in any society, a study of gender relations is necessary.

Rather than looking specifically at women as a category, gender relations are now the focus of much academic research (Baud et al., 1992:85, Rogers, 1983). The term 'gender' has become popular because it introduces a relational notion into one's analysis, rather than focusing on women as if they existed in a vacuum. One cannot hope to fully understand men or women by studying them as separate entities, rather, they are partly defined by the relations they have with each other (Scott, 1991:14). Thus, 'women's issues' cannot '...be tackled in isolation from women's relation to men' (Elson, 1991:1). Before anyone can understand why women have been disadvantaged in the development process they must discover how gender relations work. This makes studies of women and development, which fail to consider the 'relational dimensions of...[women's] disprivilege', seem rather superficial (Goetz, 1992:6). Many practitioners still assume, however, that simply adding the category of 'women' to existing development policy and programmes will improve women's position.

Rather than focusing our attention on the biological differences between men and women, a gendered perspective focuses on the '...social assessment and valuation of those



differences' (Jaquette, 1982:277), on the '...social usage and social meaning' which biological differences have had ascribed to them (Whatmore, 1988):

*"Gender" refers to the socially constructed and institutionalised forms of identity which are attached to biological sex differences, and "gendering" is the process producing these forms, through the granting or withholding of significant social, political and economic resources and values (Goetz, 1992:6).*

While the separation between the biological and the socially constructed dimensions is established clearly here, 'gender' as an analytical category is the subject of concerted debate. The acceptance of the use of the term 'gender' in preference to 'sex' in studies regarding women's oppression has been criticised since the early 1980s when a debate over the usefulness of the sex/gender distinction emerged among feminists (Edwards, 1989). A major concern is that the use of the term 'gender' may divert attention from the harsh reality that women are oppressed. As a term 'gender' does not specify women as the aggrieved party (Scott, 1991). It is therefore suggested that 'gender' may be a compromise to gain acceptance of studies about women among those who are uncomfortable with feminist politics. For example, '...substituting the word "gender" for "women" can...be a useful strategy for persuading the reluctant to give some attention to feminist research' (Magarey, 1989:iii). My preference, however, is to keep 'gender' in this dialogue because it refers specifically to women's relations with men and this power relation has considerably influenced women's life options.

By studying gender relations we acknowledge that it is not only women who are constrained by systems of domination:

*...the stress on gender is a reminder that men are as much constrained by as implicated in systems of domination, and that attempts to redress gender inequities must directly involve men...(Goetz, 1992:6).*

There are two points here. Firstly, too many development initiatives focus on assisting women to improve their situation without considering whether men support, or at least accept, them. Development initiatives can easily be sabotaged by husbands, fathers or brothers who are suspicious or envious of what women are doing. In some cases men may prevent women from being involved in an initiative while in other cases, they may take over a project which looks like it could provide economic gains. Secondly, men can be constrained by systems of domination too because, in addition to gender, other factors also structure the lives of women and men. While men may be the dominant gender they can still face disadvantages because of the class, ethnic group, age group, nationality, or religion which they belong to. These social relations thus signify systems of power:

*...gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. Gender is not the only field, but it seems to have been a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power... (Scott, 1991:27-28).*

As gender is socially constituted, rather than biologically determined, the meaning of gender can vary from society to society (Elson, 1991:1). Still, however,

*...no society has so constituted gender as to produce male subordination...all over the world, women's work tends to be defined as of less value than men's and women tend to have far less access to all forms of social, economic and political power (Momsen and Townsend, 1987:28).*

Just as gender signifies power relations between individuals, societies demonstrate gendering too:

*[Gender] refers to a structural relationship between the sexes which is linked to the state, the economy, and to other macro- and micro-processes and institutions. This relationship is asymmetrical; it is inscribed in law and finds expression in political processes and in economic structures....(Moghadam, 1990:8).*

Thus states and their institutions can be gendered, as can grassroots non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For example, Goetz (1992:11-12) studied a rural-based NGO in Bangladesh which used innovative organisational forms. She found, however, that despite the grassroots-focused arrangements of this NGO and the fact that there were many women working for it, it did not reflect feminist attitudes. Rather, the NGO

*...reinforce[d]...gender divisions by restricting women staff to work on women's programmes which offer few opportunities for management roles, and by channelling them into gender-typed training - a process of gendered ghettoization and stigmatization (Goetz, 1992:12).*

Any development agency, therefore, even one with empowerment-oriented programmes, can enforce gender subordination.

It is apparent that a greater focus on gender and gender relations is needed if we wish to find explanations for women's subordinate position in society and thus ascertain viable strategies for improving women's situation and broadening their life options.

## ***Structure of the study***

The chapters to follow each make a unique contribution to the aim of this thesis, that is, to ascertain what strategies are most effective in achieving development and empowerment for women in the Solomon Islands.

Chapters Two and Three deal specifically with theory. As a means of analysing development initiatives, Chapter Two discusses firstly, the concepts of gender needs and interests and whether it is sufficient for agencies to focus on meeting women's practical, everyday needs. Secondly, this chapter considers Moser's (1989) model of five major policy approaches to women's development, questioning what effects each approach is likely to have on women's lives. Unless we understand the, perhaps latent, rationale behind

development initiatives devised with the stated intention of benefiting women, we will not be able to understand why so many of these initiatives have negative, or negligible, effects on women's lives, or how to change them. The explicit or implicit assumptions a development organisation makes about women and development strongly influences the specific outcomes in their strategies for women's development and the projects or programmes so devised. This is a fundamental issue. Chapter Three searches for specific strategies to empower women. It asks, for example, whether it is possible to cooperate with the state and with men in positions of responsibility to empower women, or whether working through women's organisations is the only option. Examples are provided of various initiatives by Third World women who have been empowered and have set their own agendas for development.

Chapter Four describes the research methods and techniques used and explains why these were favoured over others. It also seeks to explain how the chosen methods may have effected my results, what problems were experienced and how these were resolved.

Chapters Five to Seven look specifically at women's situation in the Solomon Islands. Chapter Five draws mainly on secondary sources of data to establish the nature of women's pre-colonial existence, as well as how women's and men's positions have changed with colonisation and subsequent independence. The argument is that women's workloads have increased while their status has been undermined. This process of disempowerment has influenced relations among women as well as women's relations with men. Chapters Six and Seven provide alternative ways of considering the effectiveness of strategies adopted by development agencies. Chapter Six involves an in-depth analysis of how development agencies and organisations have chosen to define gender needs and interests in relation to their initiatives in the sectors of health, agriculture, politics, the law, education, family planning and employment. Implicit in this analysis is a consideration of whether or not development agencies are actually facilitating women's empowerment. Chapter Seven then considers 12 case studies of development initiatives directed at women, analysing the planning approach adopted in each case and taking special note of initiatives arising out of the energies of grassroots women. Each initiative is examined according to whose interests were being promoted and whether it was likely to enhance gender equity.

To conclude, Chapter Eight summarises the findings herein and makes recommendations about what development agencies can do to promote women's development and empowerment in the Solomon Islands more effectively. The lessons learned may well be applicable to other Third World countries in which a narrow perspective on women's development still restricts efforts to enhance their lives.

## *Summary*

This chapter has outlined many of the problems still facing women in the Third World despite two decades of research and practice focusing on women's development. The suggestion has been that women's situation has improved little largely because development agencies and governments have been unwilling to address the causes of women's subordination, including the oppressive system of patriarchy. They have looked at women as if they existed in a vacuum, failing to consider how power relations structure the lives of women and men. Thus they have a poor conception of the problems to be overcome before development initiatives can be effective.

Patriarchy combines, in different social contexts, with systems such as capitalism, to structure the reality of life opportunities for particular groups of women. Inappropriate development initiatives have too often been devised because the effects of these systems on women's lives has not been considered. Such initiatives often add to women's burdens, reinforce their responsibility for domestic roles or give more power to men in their communities. Until systems of oppression are addressed directly, there is unlikely to be a redistribution of resources or a dismantling of male privilege.

It has also been suggested that the overwhelming emphasis on material development has distracted development agencies from recognising that non-tangible benefits of development, such as a heightened sense of self-esteem and dignity, deserve attention as well. It has been argued that, if disadvantaged groups, including women, are to have a greater say in the direction that development takes in their communities in the future, empowerment is essential. When women are empowered their self-esteem is enhanced and they can gain greater control over their social, economic and political lives (McKee, 1989).

Development planners and agencies have also failed to recognise the potential of alternative forms of development, such as the activities of grassroots women's movements. One of the most positive signs of hope for future development for women is the growth in the number and variety of women's organisations worldwide and the increasing number of Third World women, both writers and activists, who are adding their opinions to the debate on finding the most appropriate strategies for development. These issues will be explored in greater detail in the next two chapters.





## CHAPTER TWO: Approaches to and theories of development for women

### *Relevance of theory*

This chapter aims to show why development agencies and policy makers working within the official planning process often do not work in women's best interests. Development initiatives are situated within specific theoretical and political frameworks (Rathgeber, 1990:489). There is a particular theory or rationale, often not stated, behind every approach adopted by a development agency which will partly determine the focus of its programmes, the concerns of women which it will attempt to meet and those it will ignore.

As this thesis aims to discover good strategies for women's development and empowerment in the Solomon Islands, it is necessary to analyse the effectiveness of various development initiatives directed at women and to understand the theoretical approaches upon which they rest. Swantz (1992:118) argues that one cannot expect to understand clearly what a project or programme will accomplish '...without an open recognition of the normally hidden interests of the "donors" and without an analysis of the theoretical basis on which the aid agencies build their work'. In order to provide criteria by which development initiatives for women in the Solomon Islands can be assessed in the chapters to follow, this chapter outlines a widely recognised model, devised by Moser (1989), which distinguishes five major policy approaches to promoting women's development. This includes discussion of whether each approach aims to meet only women's immediate or short term needs or whether they are interested in long term strategies to transform the structures which oppress women.

Faulty or impractical theory may explain why the interests of Third World women, who are supposed to benefit from specific development efforts, are being ignored or even undermined:

*Women are demanding an equal voice in redefining development priorities for our societies. All too often, development agencies- many times working under the misleading label of 'Women in Development' - make exploitative appeals to women's needs to solicit funds for the perpetuation of unjust and unequal economic and social arrangements (Molyneux, 1992:254).*

This raises important questions concerning how, why and by whom women's interests and needs are being defined.

## *Defining women's needs and interests*

An integral part of ascertaining effective strategies for women's development and empowerment is to consider how development agencies and governments choose to define the needs and interests of women. There are specific reasons why certain issues become development issues while others are left untouched. The particular ideological and political background against which some issues are cast as social problems while others are ignored needs to be considered. This can help to clarify whose priorities are represented in development initiatives: those of the local people, elites, the government, aid givers, international agencies, development banks, NGOs or others (Taylor, 1992:23).

As mentioned in Chapter One, GAD issues have received a great deal of attention in development circles since the mid-1970s with specific resources being committed to them. One should not assume, however, that interest in women is derived from an inherent concern with gender-based inequities. In reality there is often a very narrow focus on women's efficiency as food producers, nutritionists, home-makers and childbearers (Beneria and Sen, 1982:159). Beneria and Sen (1982:152), for example, argue that much of the interest in Third World women is merely a way in which they can be co-opted into population control programmes, encouraged to increase food production and provide other basic needs. In the Pacific only certain issues enter the GAD agenda:

*In the Pacific "women's interests" are seen as centring around health, family planning, nutrition, gardening and child care.... Yet, while such knowledge does contribute to the overall health and development of the broader community it does not give Pacific women the skills to understand or influence the social, economic or political systems under which they live (Keating and Melville, 1986:74).*

So, what are 'women's issues'? Everett (et al., 1989:180), cites housing, food, health and childcare as examples of 'female issues'. One must be careful with the use of terms like 'female issues' or 'women's issues' because to some these terms read as 'female responsibilities' or 'women's responsibilities', thus implying that men should not take on these roles. In fact '...all issues affecting human life are "women's issues" ' (Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:72). Such issues affect the prospects for growth and social development of entire nations (Heyzer, 1985:xii), a fact which development planners must realise:

*Many social scientists unfamiliar with gender analysis assume that "women's issues" are of concern to women only, and that these issues may be marginalized from "larger" considerations about political and economic processes (Moghadam, 1990:8).*

In the past there has been a large gap in women's perceptions of their own needs and interests, and in how donors have defined these. Thus the 'politics of need interpretation' has become a highly contentious issue in debates on development (Price, 1992). It is asserted that our focus should be '...as much on need interpretation as on need satisfaction' (Fraser, 1989:158).

It is important to consider who interprets whose needs and what interests might inform their interpretation (Fraser, 1989:164). Certainly the opinions of those working on the staff of development agencies (typically well educated, middle class people) may work to the disadvantage of other groups in society whose interests they are supposed to be meeting. Thus, for example,

*Acts of violence against women have drawn so much attention and have emerged as rallying points for women's groups, rather than the day to day oppression of millions of women in their homes and workplaces (Sharma, 1991:160).*

Price (1992:50) notes an alarming swing back to a reliance on 'experts' for their interpretations, an approach which '...renders individuals passive and obscures the fact that the interpretation of needs is not self-evident but a highly political issue'. The 'expert' often sees women largely as welfare clients or beneficiaries, thus reducing women's control over their own situation and their power to influence change (Price, 1992:51). Welbourn (1992), when studying Bangladesh, questioned the common assumption that welfare needs are of primary concern to women. She found, in fact, that health and medical issues were not as important to Bangladeshi women as economic security, business opportunities and concern over the deterioration of the resource base of the country.

Although the opinions of donors, development workers and 'experts', such as policy planners, are drawn into question here, one cannot assume that the 'beneficiaries' always know what is in their best interests either. It would be naive to think that by sending a development worker into a village to ask women what they want and what their problems were that one would get an accurate picture of women's interests and needs. Firstly, women's lives typically centre around caring for their families. As they are '...residing intimately with the dominant group' (Staudt, 1981:358), that is, men, they have difficulty with '...forming well-defined notions of what they want; women submerge their own interests beneath those of men and children' (Elson, 1991:4-5). Men's interests often cut across, or compete with, those of women so that it is difficult for women to act on gender-based concerns (Charlton, 1984:211). Secondly, women are not incorruptible: '...their choices may be as easily subject to political manipulation as the development worker's' (Porter et al., 1991:208). Thirdly, one should not underestimate the psychological pressures faced by many Third World women who are involved on a daily basis with strenuous physical labour as well as having primary responsibility for many aspects of their family's maintenance; they may simply not have time to reflect on their situation (Rathgeber, 1990:499). Further, women are just as likely as men '...to subscribe to prevailing ideas about gender inequality as either divinely ordained, biologically given or economically rational' (Kabeer, 1992a:34). Lastly, women's knowledge is likely to be incomplete as they commonly think in terms of the definition of women's development that the colonists defined for them and which many development agencies reinforced; that is, home economics projects. When asked what

their needs or concerns are, it is not surprising that women give answers which they think development agencies wish to hear. They often have little idea of other options available to them which could be more conducive to their advancement:

*Resignation in the face of a lack of alternatives is often the best way to survive...[however] given the opportunity and the support, and ways of working which respect culture and women's pace, women readily question the reasons that their lives are as they are and, far from being content, seek out ways of challenging and changing their situation (Cleves-Mosse, 1993:170); ...women can and want to be responsible for determining the nature of 'Women's Development' in their own backyard (Price, 1992:57).*

There seems to be a dilemma. Those who would benefit most from change in their communities are least likely to have the time, opportunities and means to be able to identify and act upon their interests. What is essential is that awareness raising takes place amongst women before they can be expected to identify their needs and interests. This awareness raising could be part of a women's group workshop; it could come from women watching a theatre group perform skits in their village about the effects of development on their country; or it could come from attending literacy classes. Women should know that development for them does not have to be confined to sewing, cooking or health projects. Rather, there are choices and opportunities open to them to take control of their lives, gain skills, earn money, enter politics and so forth.

Price (1992:51) suggests that women must experience a change of consciousness before they are ready to identify their own needs and only then can they prepare to organise around issues which are important to them and begin a struggle for change. In other words, empowerment must occur *before* women can genuinely look at their lives and decide how their situation could be changed for the better. If this does not occur it is likely that development workers will continue to assume that villagers have been consulted when really the development workers have '...only scratched the surface of people's needs' (Welbourn, 1992:15). As far as consultations with 'the locals' over proposed development initiatives go, it is commonly the opinions of the most vocal and politically active which get heard. They may or may not represent the interests of the majority (Brett, 1991:6).

As discussed in Chapter One, women are not a homogeneous group. Beneria and Sen (1982:157) argue that we need to examine the interactions of gender relations and class formation (and, I would add, ethnic divisions) if we are to understand how we can best improve the conditions under which Third World women live. However, it is extremely difficult to separate the oppressions related to patriarchy, capitalism, nationalism and other political systems: '...in reality, they are inextricably interlinked' (Bandarage, 1984:506). Class and ethnic interests will sometimes override those associated with gender. For example, rich and poor women experience gender in different ways and although both groups may be afraid to be alone in the streets at night, it is more in poor women's interests



that there should be a good public transport system as they are unlikely to have their own vehicle (Elson, 1991:2): 'The existence of a complex range of overlapping, conflicting and interacting identities has clearly produced an equally complex range of needs and problems for women' (de Groot, 1991:122).

Molyneux (1985:232) argues that if we recognise differences among women at the start of our analysis we are more likely to emerge with a viable theory of gender interests<sup>1</sup>. Development agencies must be willing to confront the various forms of subordination which are tied up with gender subordination: 'The other inequalities women experience condition the concrete meaning of gender' (Young, 1990:94). At the same time as recognising class and ethnic divisions amongst women, we must realise that gender interests are significant in their own right and should not be '...overshadowed by broader allegiances and subsumed in other interests' (Heyzer, 1985:xiii).

Class and ethnicity aside, the lack of consensus over what 'women's interests' may be is due largely to the fact that '...there is no theoretically adequate and universally applicable causal explanation of women's subordination from which a general account of women's interests can be derived' (Molyneux, 1985:231). A theory of women's interests is difficult to discern when there are many factors accounting for women's oppression and they vary considerably from society to society. At the same time, gender as a power relation has disadvantaged women worldwide:

*...social arrangements and cultural rules...provide men of a given social group, with greater capacity than women from that group, to mobilize a variety of cultural rules and material resources in pursuit of their own interests (Kabeer, 1992a:34).*

Can we assume that women can develop a 'transclass unity' (or a 'trans-ethnic' unity) based on certain common interests defined by their gender (Molyneux, 1985:231)? At least some writers agree that an idea of common gender interests can be found in the fact that women are almost universally responsible for biological and social reproduction, a fact which sets them apart from men. Although men cannot bear children, they certainly can be involved in social reproduction, in feeding, cleaning and caring for a family but in most societies this 'domestic' work has been handed over to women, leaving men free '...to pursue activities outside of the home which are more conducive to self-development' (Clarke, 1986:112). The very existence of women's organisations testifies to the fact that women have collective concerns. One can examine the activities of women's organisations representing particular social groups of women in order to gauge how these women view their collective concerns (Clarke, 1986:114).

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<sup>1</sup> Jolly refers to this recognition of ethnic and class differences between women at the starting point of any feminist analysis as, 'The politics of difference' (1991b:1).

We cannot ignore that there are many poor men in the world as well as poor women and that men face oppression under various systems of power too, but although both men and women have to endure systems of class and ethnic stratification, only women suffer under the gender division of labour (Clarke, 1986:148). Although the exact forms of patriarchy vary among societies, patriarchy is certainly a source of women's subordination in all societies (Tinker, 1990:49): '...the ideology of patriarchy operates within and across classes to oppress women' (Rathgeber, 1990:494).

While different writers argue for the primacy of either class or patriarchy as subordinating women in different circumstances it is clear that by looking at the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity in given societies, as well as considering factors such as age, nationality and religion where relevant, we can identify a major source of subordination for women and go on to analyse the needs and interests of women in a particular social group.

Staudt (1981:372) also has some suggestions as to how the interests of women may be constituted. She identifies women's interests as focusing on the following issues: health care needs related to women's reproductive roles and responsibility for children's health; their lack of access to agricultural and vocational training and support services; their lack of access to education compared to men, and stereotyping in schools which results in women having a narrower range of occupational choices than men; the imbalance which sees women having most responsibility for domestic work and receiving little compensation for it, leading to women having limited options outside the home; physical abuse towards women in the home legitimised by authorities unwilling to intervene in 'private' matters; and women's lack of representation in politics and the bureaucracy. These issues are concerns for women in most societies and thus back up the statement that women, despite ethnic and class divisions, do have shared interests deriving from their subordinate relationship to men:

*...women do share interests that transcend class lines (and color lines) around which they can organise and which can inform the agenda of women's organizations. These include the gender-based division of labor, patriarchal authority, personal aspirations, and the need for self-respect (Young, 1990:84).*

This section has shown that it is rarely the interests of the supposed beneficiaries of development that shape development initiatives. These people must be conscientised and made aware of their interests and options if they are to have any hope of determining the direction that future development initiatives will take. It is also apparent that women do not all share the same interest because there are a number of other social cleavages in addition to gender which may shape the lives of particular groups of women. Women share some interests because their lives are structured by patriarchal relations but class and ethnicity likewise impinge on women's lives to varying degrees.

While I have used the terms 'women's interests' and 'women's needs' in the discussion so far as this is the terminology which the writers I have referred to chose to use, the terms 'gender interests' and 'gender needs' will be used from now on because, as discussed previously, women do not exist in a vacuum, their relations with men are crucial to our understanding of women's development.

Although it is difficult to arrive at a tidy interpretation of gender needs and interests which applies to different societies, there are frameworks which can help us analyse them. Two different frameworks, one developed by Caroline Moser and another by Naila Kabeer, both building upon ideas originally proposed by Maxine Molyneux, are considered next. Both recognise that gender is structured by social forces and both offer guidelines regarding transformatory strategies for women's development (Kabeer, 1992a:37). Kabeer's framework, however, will be argued as being more appropriate for my analysis.

### *Frameworks which analyse gender needs and interests*

#### *Molyneux's ideas*

The basis for frameworks which analyse gender needs and interests was set by Molyneux (1985), who focused attention on the issues around which women organise. She discussed how gender interests had been deliberately marginalised in the struggles surrounding the Nicaraguan revolution. By interests she was referring not to individual tastes and preferences but to interests which arise '...out of the structural patterning of individual life chances by virtue of...[women] belonging to particular social groups' (Kabeer, 1992a:30). Molyneux stressed that, as factors such as class and ethnicity vary in different contexts, gender interests can only be understood in specific societal contexts.

Molyneux went on to discern a difference between practical and strategic gender interests<sup>2</sup>. Practical interests emerge from women's everyday roles and work in society, as a response to immediately perceived needs such as the need for shelter, clothing and food. As such, they are derived inductively. Strategic interests, by comparison, arise out of women's desire to emerge from their subordinate position to men and to formulate '...an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements' (Molyneux, 1985:232-3). The realisation of strategic interests is a deductive process and therefore they may not be immediately obvious to women living under systems of male dominance. The existence of a set of interests different to those of men does not guarantee women's awareness of these interests. Strategic gender interests may only become apparent as women begin to struggle collectively against some of the forces holding them back. Strategic interests could include

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction is very useful for analytical and project planning purposes, as will be discussed below, although in practice practical and strategic gender interests sometimes overlap.



attaining political equality, abolishing the gendered division of labour, securing women's rights to traditionally-held land, protection against male violence and having the burden of domestic labour alleviated (Molyneux, 1985:233).

Development agencies which limit their work to meeting practical gender interests may alleviate women's burdens by assisting them in meeting basic needs but they fail to challenge prevalent forms of gender subordination. A project aiming to teach women dressmaking skills could address the practical gender interest women have to earn income. However, a project focusing on teaching women masonry skills could meet the need for women to earn an income as well as challenging existing occupational segregation, thus addressing a strategic gender interest (Moser, 1989:1804). This example also shows that there is not always a clear distinction between meeting practical and strategic gender interests. Indeed, members of a women's group may pool their resources to sew school uniforms, which they cannot afford to buy, for their children. During their sewing sessions, however, they may discuss the lack of amenities in their community and this may encourage them to nominate several of their members to stand for election to their local council. The process of coming together to sew school uniforms may thus result in a strategic gender interest, that of women becoming politicised and gaining positions of political power in the community, being addressed.

### *Moser's framework*

Moser has devised a very popular framework from Molyneux's ideas which has been called the 'Triple Roles Framework' (TRF). Moser adapted Molyneux's ideas so they would be more readily applicable to the planning process, thereby developing the concept of practical and strategic gender needs, which are directly related to women's triple roles. Moser changed the meaning of Molyneux's 'gender interests' into 'prioritized concerns', using language more acceptable to planners and policy makers. In this way Moser was able to move on to define needs, as the 'means by which concerns are satisfied' (Moser, 1989:1819). For example, if safety in the streets at night is seen as being a gender interest, the gender need arising from this could be adequate street lighting, self-defence classes for women or after hours public transport. Moser chose to concentrate on how planners can meet gender needs.

Moser's framework has been widely discussed and generally supported in the GAD literature but more recently it has come under fire from Kabeer (1992a). Kabeer claims that, by referring only to the bureaucratic planning process when discussing women's needs, Moser inadvertently casts aside other goals which women may have which will not surface from a top-down planning structure, particularly goals relating to the empowerment of women:

*...if women's self-empowerment is seen as a key route to gender equity, an important first step is the efficient provision of space, resources and time which will allow women to articulate their own interests rather than having them anticipated and met on their behalf (Kabeer, 1992a:38).*

In the switch from interests to needs, Moser is no longer interested in Molyneux's idea of defining concerns which arise out of the structural patterning of life choices. Moser focuses on what we need to satisfy choices rather than '...expanding control [that local people have] over the interpretation of need and conditions of choice' (Kabeer, 1992a:35). The perspective of planners rather than those on whom the outcomes of development initiatives will impact is central: 'The language of need is thus associated with a top-down planning approach which constructs...women as clients of bureaucratic provisioning...' (Kabeer, 1992a:31).

#### *Kabeer's framework*

Kabeer provides us with a second framework on gender needs and interests using social relations analysis (SRA). Under SRA women and men are seen as having different strategic interests because the social relations of production, distribution and consumption are organised in ways which affect women and men differently; men thus have a greater capacity than women '...to mobilise a variety of cultural rules and material resources in pursuit of their own interests' (Kabeer, 1992a:33-34).

While Kabeer and Moser both treat women's inequality as a product of socio-structural inequalities, there are some fundamental differences in their analyses. Moser does not problematise the planning process itself. She fails to consider the fact that in the planning process the people who are most affected are not the ones making the decisions (Kabeer, 1992a:30). She does not explain how male-dominated, top-down development institutions can address women's strategic gender needs without any significant transformation first occurring in the rules and practices of these institutions (Kabeer, 1992a:35). Planners in development institutions have actively exacerbated gender inequality through programmes they have implemented in the past. Moser,

*...does not challenge institutions to reflect on the class and gender interests which may shape their own practices and which may seriously curtail their ability to translate the "prioritized concerns" of women from low-income households into a set of means for addressing them (Kabeer, 1992a:32-33).*

Under SRA, although it is recognised that the planning process can achieve certain goals, it is not considered that more enlightened planning is sufficient for strategic gender interests to be brought to the fore. Kabeer (1992a:37) pays more attention to the views of men and women not involved in the planning process but who are most effected by decisions made within bureaucratic planning institutions. Kabeer (1992a:31) also retains Molyneux's concept of gender interests because rather than reducing women to

beneficiaries of the planning process, this '...positions them as social actors, disempowered, but not powerless...'.

An issue which has arisen with both Moser's and Kabeer's work is how to accord priority to practical versus strategic gender needs and interests. Moser notes that in practice planners concentrate on meeting practical gender needs as women are typically not in a position to articulate their strategic gender interests to them. Further, to address strategic gender interests would be to challenge existing institutions in society and this may include planning structures as well. The planners' approach, focusing on practical needs, is likely to reinforce the gendered division of labour because practical gender needs typically refer to the domestic arena (Moser, 1989:1803-4):

*...the vast majority of policies, programs and projects directed at women world-wide are concerned with women within their engendered position in the sexual division of labor, as wives and mothers, and are intended to meet their practical gender needs (Moser, 1989:1804).*

In this way planners are propping up the present system (Cleves-Mosse, 1993:166).

Antrobus (1991:312) suggests that women need to be empowered before they can effectively work towards meeting practical gender needs otherwise the development initiatives they are involved with may be vulnerable to exploitation. For example, in the past when planners actually attempted to go beyond meeting practical needs associated with women's domestic roles by, for example, addressing education and employment issues, their initiatives were commonly undermined when resources became scarce because women lacked the power to protect them

While Moser argues that a focus on practical gender needs makes it less likely that women will recognise and act upon their strategic gender interests others say that this view is overly pessimistic and that, in the long term '...women, by having a number of practical problems solved, may then proceed to think about more radical and strategic needs' (Baud et al., 1992:89). By decreasing women's burden of work planners can provide women with more time to participate in women's meetings or just to reflect upon their situation, perhaps giving them the chance to network with other women, be conscientized and identify strategic gender interests of women in their social group. When women organise around practical gender needs they can create '...a forum for articulation and struggle around strategic gender interests as well' (Everett, 1989:175). Although meeting practical gender needs alone will not challenge the present, unjust organisation of society, by having their burdens lightened and by the process of coming together to meet practical gender needs, strategic interests may become more apparent to women.

Overall it seems best if development agencies always attempt to address strategic gender interests, whether this is done alongside programmes which meet practical gender needs or on its own. Because of the over-emphasis on meeting practical needs in the past, the importance of addressing strategic gender interests deserves to be stressed by both planners and development agencies. Any agency wishing to promote long term change involving the overturning of structures which have disadvantaged women needs to deal explicitly with strategic gender interests.

While it is crucial that strategic gender interests are discussed amongst women and addressed, this is not likely to occur without conflict. Strategic gender interests, apart from being a challenge to the women willing to raise these issues, are also likely to challenge the beliefs and ideals of their families, friends and wider society because:

*...when social movements succeed in politicizing previously depoliticized needs, they...have to contest powerful organized interests bent on shaping hegemonic need interrelations to their own ends (Fraser, 1989:175).*

### **Summary of frameworks for analysing gender needs and interests**

Despite differences in Molyneux's, Moser's and Kabeer's analyses, they have developed an important distinction between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests which can help policy makers, researchers and grassroots activists better understand how to facilitate women's development and empowerment. Although most development initiatives concentrate on meeting practical gender needs, Molyneux and Kabeer have shown that it is also essential that strategic gender interests, which arise out of the structural patterning of life chances, are addressed if long term development goals focusing on overcoming women's subordinate position are to be achieved.

Kabeer has stressed that a framework such as Moser's, which relies heavily on the planning process and its ability to anticipate men's and women's needs, is incomplete. Rather than assuming that top-down, male-dominated institutions can interpret interests and needs and work effectively towards meeting these, Kabeer suggests that those people who are targeted by development planners should have some control over need interpretation. The SRA framework emphasises the need to collaborate with people not involved in the planning process. The 'beneficiary mentality' posits women and men of the Third World as people waiting for handouts. Kabeer, alternatively, sees them as disempowered social actors. Time and space are needed, however, if women are to come to conclusions about their own needs and interests and to articulate these to others.

It is appropriate to retain both interests and needs in our dialogue. While practical gender *needs* can be met by top-down planning, planners should look beyond addressing practical needs associated with women's domestic roles. On the other hand, planning

structures which are hierarchical and male-dominated will struggle to address goals concerning strategic gender *interests* (Kabeer, 1992a:34-35). It is at this point that grassroots movements of women and women's organisations may be more effective. Even Kabeer (1992a:35), however, does not reject the significant role which the planning process can play in that, by meeting certain practical gender needs, policy makers can provide the infrastructure for women's self-empowerment. Further, by being made aware of men's gender interests, planners can gain a better understanding of why so many women's projects in the past have 'misbehaved' and been taken over or undermined by men (Buvinic, 1986). Kabeer has made us realise that we must always consider the 'institutional cultures' of those organisations or planning bureaucracies claiming to support women and development but she does not reject the usefulness of such institutions outright.

Kabeer, Molyneux and Moser have heightened awareness of gender needs and interests and the importance of addressing them. Next, we discuss theories which attempt to explain why women have been disadvantaged in society, how development has effected women and what can be done to alleviate the problems of women in the Third World.

### *The relevance of feminist and mainstream development theories*

In the past, mainstream development and feminist theories have provided frameworks with which to analyse development policy and initiatives which focused upon women. I have chosen not to delve in detail into the complexities of these theories, however, as more recently a specific brand of GAD theory, which partly draws on these earlier sets of theories but develops ideas of its own, has arisen.

GAD theory is partly built upon, and partly challenges, feminism and mainstream development theory. For example, it draws attention to the origins of these theories:

*The universal validity of both gender-neutral development theory and of feminist concepts derived from white, Western middle-class women's experience is being questioned (Momsen, 1991:3).*

Critics of mainstream development theories include Momsen and Townsend (1987:16), who argue that the two key development paradigms '...fail to take into account the needs, perceptions and strengths of women' (Momsen and Townsend, 1987:16). Hill (1987:342) believes that mainstream theories have largely ignored gender differentials in relation to development. This does not make the theories neutral, however, because they '...make implicit assumptions about gender even though they may have no explicit reference to it' (Elson, 1991:199):



*Since in nearly every society, class or socio-economic category women are at a relative disadvantage to men when it comes to income, assets, education, information and political influence, sexually "neutral" development policies typically have the effect...of marginalising them (Loutfi, 1987:112).*

Simply tagging 'women' on as an appendage to these theories would not be appropriate either as this does not necessarily give recognition to women's interests and potential. Without a built in gender analysis any theory cannot hope to explain adequately the social processes it addresses, and therefore it cannot provide a sufficient basis for development policy (Elson, 1991:199).

Feminism, of course, implicitly recognises the importance of gender relations. It embraces various theories of women's subordination and therefore, it has relevance to this thesis. Most supporters of feminism agree that it is not acceptable to simply acknowledge women's lack of power, rather, this should be challenged (Jayawardena, 1986:1; Whatmore, 1988:241). Thus, feminism can provide

*...a comprehensive perspective on societal development and human emancipation...[It is] a perspective which aims at a fundamental transformation of society not only in the direction of non-oppressive and non-exploitative relationships between men and women, but also among classes, races and nations (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:155).*

While some ideas from feminist theory have been incorporated into GAD theory, especially into the equity and empowerment policy approaches to be discussed below, I have chosen not to deal with feminist theories in detail here. My main reason for making this decision is that feminist theories, which were largely devised by Western women, have struggled to gain acceptance by many Third World women. While the general philosophy of feminism which recognises '...the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills, and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege' (Lather, 1988:571), is directly relevant to their struggles, many women in the Third World feel that the strategies espoused by Western feminists for overcoming women's subordinate position are not suitable for their situation. There seems to have been an arrogant presumption on the part of certain Western feminists that what was appropriate for them was right for women in the Third World too (Bulbeck, 1988:2). Many Third World feminists say they should be left to name their own problems rather than being subjected to the views of Western feminists (Bulbeck, 1993:8)<sup>3</sup>.

There have been huge chasms to bridge in the thinking of Western and Third World women<sup>4</sup>. Two major criticisms from Third World women are as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> The problem with such criticisms is that Third World feminists from whom they derive are not representative of the majority of women in their countries. Rather, they are usually middle-class and Western-educated.

<sup>4</sup> That is, in addition to the wide divergences *within* Western and Third World thinking on feminism.

*First, third world women accuse first world women of ethnocentrism, of uneducated horror at traditional practices such as infibulation or veiling. Secondly, third world women argue that first world women participate in the rewards of imperialism so their interests must be different (Bulbeck, 1988:94).*

This suggests that there are some interests which the majority of Third World and Western women do not share. For example, Third World women are generally not so concerned with Western women's emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. Economic and political liberation, however, receive more emphasis amongst Third World feminists than sexual liberation. Also '[not] all Third World women share the denigrating radical views on motherhood and domesticity, often too readily transcribed from Western literature by some members of the bourgeoisie' (Afshar, 1991:3). Many Western feminists see the family as a primary site of gender subordination, which, to some Third World women, seems to undermine the importance they place on kinship and community. Further, many women in the Third World have been carrying out productive roles away from the home for many years so do not relate to Western women's pressing need to get out of the home and into the paid workforce (Jolly, 1991b:5)<sup>5</sup>.

Many Third World women have, therefore, been reluctant to call themselves feminists<sup>6</sup>. This has not, however, deterred them from acting as feminists:

*It may be an emotive word in Africa [and other parts of the world] but feminism is not a new or foreign concept to us...in so far as they are involved in the struggle for women's rights, African women are feminists (Kihoro, 1992:21).*

Jayawardena (1986:10) also notes that feminism cannot be dismissed as a foreign ideology as women were fighting for emancipation in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: '...feminism...has no particular ethnic identity' (Jayawardena, 1986:preface).

What is crucial is that we realise that there will be diverse interpretations of an alternative vision of gender equality to suit women's situation in different parts of the world (Clarke, 1986:150). The emancipatory tradition associated with feminism is important to women worldwide. For feminism to be accepted by women of the Third World, therefore, '...it must prove itself compatible with their values and beneficial to their economic and social wellbeing as they choose to define it' (Goodman, 1985:6).

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<sup>5</sup> Because of such criticisms, Western feminists '...have been forced to recognise their own specificity and acknowledge that feminism is [or, has been until recently] primarily a product of white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual women' (Johnson, 1991:19).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to having divergent interests from those of Western women, many Third World women fear the label 'feminist' because it can result in a backlash from men in their own countries who feel threatened by the prospect of women achieving greater status and rights. As Baird points out, women '...are only at the beginning of the road to equality - and getting laws in place is just a first step. Yet a backlash is already in full swing. The strategies vary, but the message to women is the same: "That's enough. You have gone too far. We need to go back to something solid, safe, traditional. With us men calling the shots"' (1992:5).

Instead of working within the bounds of a particular feminist theory, a number of Third World women writers have chosen to work on developing an alternative vision of the way society should be run, as opposed to the way it is organised at present, in line with what they perceive as the available resources and the needs of their own countries. They would rather do this than use imported theories designed within Western countries to explain Western women's situation. In this way a number of Third World women have contributed significantly to the development of GAD theory.

### ***GAD theory and approaches***

So far Chapter Two has shown how vital it is that a definition of gender needs and interests comes from below, from those who should be benefiting from development, but that women at this level are often unaware of all of their options and not necessarily able to recognise what is in their interests. This chapter has also argued that we need theory to explain why certain approaches to women's development in the Third World have been successful while others have not. I have stated, however, that mainstream theories of development and feminism are not entirely appropriate to this study.

GAD is one of several divergent branches of development theory and practice to emerge since the 1970s in direct response to the inadequacies of mainstream development theories. While GAD theory can claim ardent supporters, many of them activists or development workers at grassroots level, none of the major donors, unilateral agencies or international banks has wholeheartedly accepted it. This may be because proponents of certain approaches to GAD espouse radical ideas about transferring power to the supposed beneficiaries of development, of challenging both local interests and state power (MacKenzie, 1992:29).

Much of the GAD literature has either a practical focus on immediate solutions to problems women face in the development process or it is policy-oriented (Jaquette, 1982:267). This applied approach has meant that GAD theory is still evolving. While it does not appear in any complete form yet, one very useful way in which GAD theory can be discussed is to examine the various policy approaches to women's development.

### **Policy approaches to GAD**

In order to determine the rationale upon which different agencies decide to allocate resources to women we need to explore the major theoretical and policy approaches to GAD



which have emerged<sup>7</sup>. It is now recognised that despite the proliferation of writing on GAD in the last twenty years, there has been a certain bias in the theoretical stance upon which programmes have been based. Thus,

*...since most studies of women in development have been undertaken for development agencies, their conclusions have been directed at influencing program directions or policy decisions rather than at questioning the values and goals of the process or challenging the theoretical underpinnings of economic development in general or of the contracting agency in particular (Tinker, 1990:5).*

Many governments, national and international agencies have accepted the need to focus on women separately from men in the development process but 'To some extent...this is a reflection of political expediency and should not be interpreted as a sign of fundamental commitment to the improvement of the situation of women' (Rathgeber, 1990:495).

Below, the discussion on predominant policy approaches to GAD will consider the rationale upon which development agencies base their actions. As alluded to previously, development agencies focus largely on meeting practical gender needs while they choose to ignore strategic gender interests. That is, they are willing to deal with the symptoms, but not the causes, of women's subordinate position in society. If gender inequalities are not challenged 'development' for women will be limited to easing their day-to-day burdens.

### **Critical versus equilibrium paradigms**

Policy approaches to GAD, which have directed the emphasis of development initiatives aimed at women, have gone through several major shifts since the early 1970s. There are two major paradigms which can help us to analyse the shifts in GAD approaches right through to the 1990s: the dominant (or equilibrium) paradigm and the alternative (or critical) paradigm<sup>8</sup>. They differ in their assumptions about the nature of society and the nature of social science (Maguire, 1984:19).

Under the equilibrium paradigm it is assumed that the existing system operates in people's best interests and that it need not be questioned (Maguire, 1984:20). Thus policy approaches under the equilibrium paradigm result, whether intentionally or not, in enforcing existing gender relations rather than transforming them. It is deemed inevitable that some inequality will exist in society as a system of unequal rewards is regarded as necessary to

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<sup>7</sup> The five approaches to be discussed are not entirely conceptually distinct; they can help us understand the direction GAD initiatives have taken but many GAD initiatives could not be put squarely within a single approach or theoretical framework.

<sup>8</sup> McFarland (1988) discerns a similar division in theoretical approaches to GAD. She discusses a 'liberal orientation' under which the integration of women into the development process was advocated, and a 'political economy of women approach' (also referred to by several authors as the analysis of gender and class) which questions the development process and sees a need for transformation of society.

motivate people. In this way, blame is implicitly heaped on Third World countries as if colonialism and the capitalist world system are in no way responsible for the problems of the Third World. Policy approaches to GAD which come under the equilibrium paradigm acknowledge obstacles to women's development including traditions, attitudes and prejudices but they do not ask why women face these obstacles to a greater extent than men. They do not ask the fundamental question: 'Why and how have gender differences been translated into and maintained as gender inequities?' (Maguire, 1984:24). Further, advocates of such approaches fail to question

*...the fundamental inequities of an international system that perpetuates the dependency of the South on the North [or] the social construction of gender that has relegated women to the domestic realm in both North and South (Rathgeber, 1990:496).*

In practice, development initiatives have failed to make substantial improvements in women's lives because of '...a pervasive unwillingness to ground women's projects and programs within a theoretical framework which identifies the causes and nature of women's subordination' (Rogers, 1983:26).<sup>9</sup> In other words, in the past most development agencies and donors adopted an approach within the equilibrium paradigm. Different social groups, including men in positions of power, are reluctant to support development initiatives which question their position and privileges. Approaches to GAD taken by the stalwarts of the development industry fail to challenge gender inequality either. Governments, development banks and large development agencies fear challenges to the *status quo* and thus they predominantly reflect the equilibrium view. Another reason why development agencies and governments hesitate when the issue of addressing the causes of women's subordination arises is that they do not wish to be seen to be tampering with gender systems, lest they be criticised for unnecessary interference in the 'culture' of the recipient country. However '..."culture" is not an immutable entity, but takes various forms that are strongly linked to the interests of groups of people' (Boesveld, 1986:41)<sup>10</sup>.

Under the equilibrium paradigm change is planned only for the purpose of improved efficiency and it should be gradual, rather than aiming for transformation. Due to the wide acceptance of this rationale 'Even the most sympathetic thinking on women's position still focuses on remedial action...' (Heyzer, 1985:xiv). Development initiatives fixed in the equilibrium paradigm can at best only superficially administer to women through the development process because they are not committed to addressing the root causes of women's oppression.

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<sup>9</sup> The causes of women's subordination is a big issue which the bounds of my thesis does not allow me to explore in detail; my priority is to establish the framework within which development initiatives for women have been occurring rather than to engage in a lengthy debate on feminist theory which could justify a thesis of its own.

<sup>10</sup> Mbere (1989:55) also argues that donor organisations should not be too concerned about accusations of cultural imperialism because 'Culture is not static but dynamic and susceptible to change'.

The critical paradigm, by comparison, sees society as being in conflict rather than equilibrium, due to class, ethnic and gender struggles. Theories within the critical paradigm seek to explain how domination and oppression are structurally maintained, with an overall goal of transformation of the present system. Research attempts '...to examine how social and economic inequities are produced, maintained and legitimized' (Maguire, 1984:21). Transformation is seen as the only answer if power over social, political and economic resources is to be distributed fairly. Whereas 'efficiency' is the catch phrase of the equilibrium paradigm, 'social justice' is the catch phrase of the critical paradigm.

It has been suggested that a number of women benefit from the *status quo* and would not want this to change. On these grounds some writers have criticised development initiatives which incite women to question the way they live and challenge them to make changes. Mies (1991:141) highlights the fact that class differences between women mean that some women can gain by cooperating with the dominant system: '...women are not only victims of capitalist patriarchy, they are also, in varying degrees and qualitatively different forms, accomplices and collaborators of this system'. While it is true that certain women, mainly elites, benefit from the dominant capitalist, patriarchal system, this is not true of the majority of women, especially of those who suffer economically. As Cleves-Mosse points out, when these disadvantaged women are given the chance, they do seek change:

*...given the opportunity and support, and ways of working which respect culture and women's pace, women readily question the reasons that their lives are as they are and, far from being content, seek out ways of challenging and changing this situation (1993:170).*

The equilibrium paradigm does not question the development process itself. Instead, research efforts focus on making the present system more effective by asking questions such as 'were programme goals met?', rather than, for example, 'was the programme effective in enabling the people to have more control over their lives?'. Thus under the equilibrium paradigm, a poorly-conceived project which nevertheless achieves its aims is regarded as being a success.

Each paradigm perceives different problems, supports fundamentally different explanations of these problems and different visions about what future society we should be working towards (Maguire, 1984:21). Thus the various approaches to women's development which come under the equilibrium and critical paradigms differ according to their explanation of the origins and nature of women's oppression and in the strategies for change which they advocate. Moser (1989) has devised a well-recognised means of distinguishing these approaches, identifying five major policy approaches to women's development. The welfare, anti-poverty and efficiency approaches can be interpreted as supporting the views of the equilibrium paradigm, while the equity and empowerment approaches are firmly

based within the critical paradigm. Distinguishing the differences in these policy approaches is important because

*...the ideological and material factors which contribute to women's poverty and to the devaluation of their productive and reproductive contributions may actually be reproduced by the way women are made objects of policy attention, the way their interests are (or are not) institutionalised (Goetz, 1992:8, my emphasis).*

Each approach is likely to result in different consequences for women, whether this be small improvements in women's material well-being or a transformation of society:

*Because gender is so integral a part of social life, all policy is filtered through a gender lens; some policies serve to perpetuate gender inequality, and others tacitly or unintentionally serve to "decompose" or break down gender inequality (Moghadam, 1990:28).*

The discussion of policy approaches which follows is not set out in chronological order as they emerged in overlapping phases, with each approach still claiming various degrees of support in the 1990s. Those which reflect the equilibrium view will be discussed first.

## ***Policy approaches within the equilibrium paradigm***

### **The welfare approach**

The welfare approach was adopted by many development agencies early in the 1970s when attention was first paid to the disadvantages women had faced in the development process. It remains very popular in the 1990s. Deriving from modernisation theory, it tries to deal with the symptoms of underdevelopment without questioning the system under which this is occurring. This occurs despite the fact that '...the structural mechanisms that accommodate the whole process of modernisation in itself, perpetuate the institutionalisation of women's subordination' (Kikau, 1986:36-37).

Typical programmes promoted under the welfare approach focus on traditional gender role ideologies, including health, crafts, home management and childcare (Miralo, n.d.:3). Maternal child health programmes are particularly popular, although they tend to be preoccupied with child health (Tinker, 1990:36, Himmelstrand, 1990:106): '...such programs simply reinforce the stereotypes of weak and dependant women and their children' (Tinker, 1990:37). While providing assistance for women mainly in relation to their reproductive roles, development agencies have allowed men to acquire disproportionate access to and control over information, resources and development opportunities related to productive roles (Staudt, 1982:264-6). For example, while informal education in domestic-related topics has been promoted, women have missed out on opportunities in formal education dealing with modern technology (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:150). Boserup claims that



typical home economics programmes purposely reduce the number of women competing with men in the modern sector (Rogers, 1980:95).

Other criticisms have also been made. Rogers (1980) is particularly critical of home management or domestic science programmes. She argues that women have certain Western standards of cleanliness and of appropriate roles for women thrust upon them. Home economics, she says,

*...uses the pretension of science (or economics...) to impose new standards of housework on the poor benighted savages....There is a strong prejudice about what women's work is, and if the reality does not fit that preconceived pattern then a strong element of moral disapproval is introduced (1980:85,86).*

Rogers claims that the 'new' home economics, incorporating appropriate technology, social survey techniques and so on, is still housework-based and shows the same pretensions of assuming to know what is best for all women. Carr (1984:5), meanwhile, an advocate of appropriate technology, argues that handicraft projects promoted under the welfare approach are based on the '...mistaken belief that rural women are underemployed and just waiting for someone to teach them how to make pretty but useless items to occupy their time, and bring in a bit of pocket money as well'.

Although some of the general issues that welfare programmes deal with are important, the delivery of their programmes is biased and perpetuates existing inequalities in society:

*Clearly such policies do nothing to eliminate gender hierarchy, transform rigid sex roles, improve women's social positions, or bring about qualitative and meaningful social change. Where policies reinforce women's reproductive and domestic roles...[they] must be vigorously challenged (Moghadam, 1990:38).*

The argument is not that health, craft and nutrition knowledge is irrelevant to development efforts, rather, that there is a problem with how such knowledge is passed on and, in particular, the overwhelming focus of these programmes on women. The situation would be more equitable if they were directed equally at men, encouraging them to take on or extend caring and nurturing roles. Meanwhile, women should have the opportunity to pursue a broader range of development options than the welfare approach allows.

The welfare approach posits women as passive recipients of development assistance rather than active agents of change (Brydon and Chant, 1989). Rather than giving women skills to pursue their own interests, as 'beneficiaries' women are discouraged from designing their own solutions to their problems (Moser, 1992:113). Proponents of the welfare approach encourage dependence rather than self-reliance (Carr, 1984:135):

*...by the end of the '70s women had become visible to policy-makers - but as recipients of welfare benefits rather than as producers and agents of development (Elson, 1991:12).*

Despite such criticisms, donors and development agencies still keenly support welfare programmes. A key factor which ensures its continuing popularity is the fact that projects deriving from this approach are politically safe (Buvinic, 1983:25). For example, because welfare projects operate in a gender-segregated environment '...there is no competition with men for the goods or services offered' (Buvinic, 1986:660). Welfare projects do not stir up dissension. Further, it is technically simple to concentrate on gender-segregated skills such as cooking and sewing (Buvinic, 1983:25). Development agencies have also found that welfare concerns appeal to the public's emotions making it easier to solicit funds:

*...the need to offer help to poor women is so overwhelming, and the vision of women as mothers so basic, that welfare programs continue to be the predominant type of programming (Tinker, 1990:37-39).*

These factors have contributed to the popularity of the welfare approach with government agencies involved in social work, traditional NGOs, church groups and some women's organisations (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1992:8; Papanek, 1981:217).

While many of the above agencies may be acting with the best intentions for assisting women, by taking this approach they are clearly perpetuating inequalities in society. Jaquette (1990:62-3) lashes out against the welfare approach and the notion of 'good intentions':

*Meeting the needs of the "truly disadvantaged" is much less costly to the "haves" than income redistribution would be...welfare supports the moral as well as the material position of the wealthy because it compensates for the failures of the market system instead of attacking it, reinforcing the view that those who are on top deserve to be there.*

Jaquette (1990:64) stresses the need for recognition of the difference between an approach which sets out to arouse a sense of injustice and one which merely arouses compassion, which she argues is what the welfare approach does. Her view is that '...helping the needy does not empower the poor'.

Despite its fundamental limitations and weaknesses, as the first comprehensive GAD policy approach to become popular the welfare approach has set a simple and politically safe agenda which development agencies find it difficult not to follow.

## The anti-poverty approach

The anti-poverty approach reflected the shift in donor thinking of the early to mid-1970s away from economic growth and towards redistribution and meeting basic human needs. It explicitly recognises that inequality exists between men and women, which the welfare approach does not, but it equates this with poverty rather than with women's subordination (Moser, 1989:1811-1812). Because poverty is seen as the cause of inequality, the anti-poverty approach supports solutions involving increased access of low income women to employment, income-generating opportunities and productive resources. Women's poverty, rather than women's status, takes priority. Advocates of the anti-poverty approach use time use surveys and other quantitative techniques to convince planners and economic theorists that women need special attention paid to them (Buvinic, 1983:16,23).

While the anti-poverty approach focuses on helping women to carry out their productive roles more effectively or to get better rewards for their productive work, it fails to consider how women's reproductive roles effect their ability to participate in projects and to fulfil productive roles: 'Unless an income-generating project also alleviates the burden of women's domestic labour and childcare...it may also fail to meet the practical gender need to earn an income' (Moser, 1989:1813). Often poor women do not have the time or energy to put into income-generating project. Further, because of gender subordination, women may have no control over the family budget, thereby undermining the assumption that they will be able to save money to invest in an anti-poverty project. They may also be denied the freedom of movement necessary to participate in such projects (Cleves-Mosse, 1993:156-7).

In a number of ways, proponents of anti-poverty programmes have effectively enforced gender subordination. For example, they actively try to limit any changes in the balance of power within households by concentrating on traditional, gender-segregated areas of women's work, rather than increasing women's options, and by targeting women-headed households (Moser, 1989:1812). Income-generation does not mean training women in carpentry and establishing a cooperative workshop for them, it means, most often, initiating projects focusing on domestic skills such as handicraft manufacture. In Kabeer's opinion, the anti-poverty approach, like the welfare approach, keeps women away from mainstream development efforts which typically have more resources to draw upon:

*Women continued to be segregated in small-scale, 'unimaginative, unprofitable and often exploitative' income-generating projects...while men were incorporated into mainstream employment policies (Kabeer, 1992b:4).*

The anti-poverty approach has not gained strong support because in the past its projects typically suffered from poor design, neither guaranteeing access to raw materials or

secure markets, and because women heavily involved in reproductive roles did not have the time to participate in them. Its popularity has been subsumed by the efficiency approach, which became the dominant policy approach espoused during the United Nations' Decade for Women (1976-1985). The lesson to be learned here is that:

*Short-term, ameliorative approaches to improve women's employment opportunities are ineffective unless they are combined with long-term strategies to reestablish people's - especially women's - control over the economic decisions that shape their lives (Sen and Grown, 1987:82).*

### **The efficiency (or integration) approach**

"The integration of women in the development process as equal partners with men", the phrase which inspired the efficiency approach to GAD, was first written into a United Nations policy document in 1975 (Hill, 1993:28). The rise of the efficiency approach coincided with economic uncertainties and recessions around the world which had led agencies like the World Bank to cast aside basic needs approaches to development and instead to support policies of structural adjustment (Sen and Grown, 1987:17). They were dissatisfied that past efforts to allocate resources for development had yielded poor results (Cleves-Mosse, 1993:159). Proponents of the efficiency approach thought that integrating women more fully into the dominant system, under which many men had benefited, was the answer to increased efficiency. No questions were asked, however, about whether the male-dominated character of this system would be of advantage to women.

For women, efforts of development agencies to make the development process more efficient meant that they were regarded as a resource to be utilised rather than being seen as external to productive processes (Bulbeck, 1988:104). Sanday, in a UNDP-sponsored training module for Pacific Island planners, appears to see women primarily as economic assets:

*The key issue...is ultimately an economic one: misunderstanding of gender differences leads to inadequate planning and designing of projects, resulting in diminished returns on investment (Sanday; Pacific Mainstreaming Project Training Module, 1992:unpublished.) .*

As Sundaram and Leng (1985:2-3) sum up, in the efficiency approach 'The overriding concern...is how best to utilize women to meet the ends of development, rather than improving the conditions of the women themselves'. While it may seem positive that the efficiency approach poses women as agents of development, it only does this so that women's labour can '...substitute for expenditure on health, education, and social services' (Elson, 1991:12)<sup>11</sup>. For example, under the efficiency approach 'environment' has been

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<sup>11</sup> There seems to be a trend of combining the efficiency and welfare approaches with development projects calling for '...an intensification and elaboration of their [women's] mothering and nurturing roles...' (Moghadam, 1990:37). This may be best demonstrated by the way in which women have been perceived under structural adjustment



added to the long list of women's caring roles. Women, therefore, are targeted by social forestry projects as a source of cheap labour (Leach, 1991:19).

The premise of efficiency is especially attractive to government policy makers but there can be problems if the approach is adopted blindly:

*Much the easiest way to persuade policy-makers to consider gender-based planning and programming is to present women as an overlooked and underutilised resource which can be mobilised to make implementation of existing policy easier....However, the problem for all but small numbers of well-off women, is not that they are an underutilised resource but that they are an overutilised resource (Elson, 1991:202)<sup>12</sup>.*

Clearly women already make a significant, but often unrecognised, contribution to development; they are already integrated into the development process but on inequitable terms (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:159). They have already been largely integrated into the development process '...but at the bottom of an inherently hierarchical and contradictory structure of production and accumulation' (Beneria and Sen, 1982:161). As Longwe (1991:150) succinctly reminds us 'Women's development is not primarily about enabling women to be more productive, more efficient, or to use their labour more effectively'.

While aiming to increase women's economic productivity little attention is paid to relieving women of their mothering and nurturing roles, just as with the anti-poverty approach (Finau, 1993:24). Neither does the efficiency approach make any attempt to integrate men into women's spheres of work, like family care and domestic chores (Maguire, 1984:48). So, while efficiency encourages women to perform existing tasks more efficiently thus enabling them to take on additional work, men are not expected to change at all. We must ask '...who will control or benefit from women's increased productivity?' (Maguire, 1984:52).

The efficiency approach also assumes that the predominant development models are favourable to women so there is no need to consider women's priorities and ideas separately (Anderson and Baud, 1987:22). Advocates of this approach have argued that separate projects for women or women's components in larger programmes have marginalised women (Anderson, 1990:31-32), thus providing a convenient excuse for them

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programmes. As cuts in government spending on health and education are promoted 'Women's unpaid labour is assumed to be unproblematically available and infinitely elastic, capable of stretching to cover shortfalls in other resources needed for survival during adjustment' (Elson, 1992:7). With less money being put into the social and health sectors, the government is effectively increasing women's workload around the home as they are expected to provide basic health care in addition to their other roles.

<sup>12</sup> For example, women in Papua New Guinea have been 'left behind' in development efforts specifically because they are overworked due to their central role in production (Lee, 1985:233). It is ironic then that one of the guiding principles in the women's policy of Papua New Guinea, drafted in 1992, reads: 'Productive action: women to be recognised and valued as potential resources which need to be harnessed, utilised...' (*Development Bulletin*, 1993:68).

to halt special funding for women's development and instead to 'mainstream'<sup>13</sup> women's concerns into general development programmes. These general development programmes continue to be as gender-biased as in the past, however, with little attention paid to women's special needs. 'Integration' may be a means of reducing overall commitment to special activities for women and ultimately undercutting the building of women's bases of power (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1987).

A further problem with the efficiency approach is that it fails to question the actual concept of development. Staudt (1989:85) invites us to consider the meaning of integration for women: '...what voice will women have in this process and will it be on their terms? Otherwise, "capture" becomes the more appropriate term'. The efficiency approach sometimes includes raising women's status as a goal but fails to argue how this can be done without addressing power inequalities. Integration is not concerned with concurrent analysis into power relations in society and the gendered way in which society is ordered:

*... "real and full" participation of women requires a transformation of the existing patriarchal nature of society and it is at this point that the integration strategy demonstrates its fallacy, it is just adding women to the existing structures and institutions rather than pursuing their transformation (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1987:32).*

Basically we must consider whether a partial adjustment of society's structures is sufficient to ensure women's liberation or whether a radical transformation is required (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:159-160).

It is clear why efficiency is an attractive approach to government planners and development agencies wanting 'value for money' but it is equally clear that the efficiency approach, like the welfare and anti-poverty approaches within the equilibrium paradigm, does not see social justice as the main priority. Awareness of the efficiency approach should at least heighten our understanding of the motives behind the actions of some development agencies, donors and governments. For example, programmes in the name of the efficiency approach have focused on improving women's education but not for the sake of women's well-being, rather, to make them more productive workers (Bulbeck, 1988:103). Likewise, the World Bank's encouragement of education for girls is based on the rationale that it will contribute to a lower birth rate and therefore to growth of the economy.

The most economically efficient way of 'using' women in the development process may not be the best way, as Jain (1990), suggests. Movements of Third World women like the Self Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad have shown that:

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<sup>13</sup> Mainstreaming has been seen as a huge step forward in development thinking by many agencies, winning the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United Nations Women's Fund (UNIFEM).

*...the largest and most dramatic use of women's energy has been to resist and therefore there is a case for not integrating them into development but for reordering development so that it may be acceptable to women (Jain, 1990:1455).*

We are reminded that 'To cooperate with being integrated into the present international order is to destroy all hope for a different future' (Boulding, 1981:18).

### ***Policy approaches within the critical paradigm***

The approaches discussed which fall under the equilibrium paradigm assume that contemporary society can work in women's best interests but they fail to give women '...choice or voice in defining the kinds of societies they want' (Maguire, 1984:2). From the perspective of the critical paradigm, however, the greatest flaw of the approaches already discussed is that they have '...ignored the dynamics of differential power and privilege between men and women'; they treat women as if they exist within a unisex vacuum (Maguire, 1984:25). Thus ameliorative projects are established, while 'There is little concern, at the official level, with the subordination of women or with the impact of class processes on this subordination' (Beneria and Sen, 1982:158). The above approaches are indicative of the perception of women's development held by the major players in the development industry including Third World governments, donors, development banks and major development agencies.

The equity and empowerment approaches, to be discussed next, are the only GAD approaches to date to challenge the existing organisation of society. They support the view that,

*Development is...concerned with enabling people to take charge of their own lives, and to escape from the poverty which arises not from lack of productivity but rather from oppression and exploitation (Longwe, 1991:149).*

### **The equity approach**

The equity approach arose from the work of liberal feminists in the United States in recognition of Third World women's lack of access to education, health services, political power and various public resources. The aim was to achieve equal rights through positive discrimination and top-down legislative change. Liberal feminists detailed legal and administrative changes necessary to overcome women's marginalisation in the development process (Jaquette, 1982:271). Women were seen as active participants in the development process with, in particular, their productive roles being stressed (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1992:8; Staudt, 1986:325).

The equity approach was based on four main premises: first, that women have productive roles; second, Western measures of economic activity fail to acknowledge the

value of unpaid work; third, because motherhood is glorified in Western societies, a psychological barrier to paid work for women is erected; and fourth, the income gap between men's and women's work has widened because women have been relegated to the traditional sector (Buvinic, 1983:14-15). Proponents of this approach thus wanted to see women's present work valued and broader work opportunities available to them in the future.

A major strategy of the equity approach was to fight for equal rights for women. Some have argued, however, that this is not always appropriate or effective; for example, what good is equal pay legislation to women concentrated in the informal sector? Equal pay and opportunity laws do not, of themselves, free women from the double burden of work under which they do the majority of unpaid work in the home and which prevents them from competing in the workforce on equal terms with men (Elson, 1991:42).

An approach which emphasises equal rights for women needs to consider the full range of options women have open to them. It must

*...be supplemented by an emphasis on socially conferred capabilities - what are women in practice able to do? Are they able to be well-nourished; to enjoy good healthy and long lives; to read and write; to participate freely in the public sphere; to have some time to themselves; to enjoy dignity and self-esteem? How does women's enjoyment of these capabilities compare with that of men? (Elson, 1991:5).*

While focusing on public policy and legislative change, the equity approach fails to challenge the basic social relations of gender. Top-down government legislation cannot succeed on its own without sustained mobilisation and consciousness-raising by, for example, women's organisations. Another dilemma of the equity approach is that it assumes development helps all men when in fact men are effected differently by development efforts according to their class, ethnicity and other social cleavages. This begs the question, with what group of men do women desire to be equal? (Maguire, 1984:2). Further, there has been criticism of the assumption that men are the norm, an untouched model which women should aspire to if they seek equality (Johnson, 1990:18):

*Many are beginning to wonder whether, by asking for equal rights with men as if they were men, women are denying their own values and priorities associated with caring, and whether, by using men as their measure, women will not always be second class (Tinker, 1990:52).*

While the equity approach does challenge the gendered organisation of society by critiquing legal systems, it fails to provide a coherent critique of modernisation or capitalism. It argues for a redistribution of power within the present system, without considering whether other systems could be more equitable. It is ethnocentric in its assumption that all societies must follow similar development paths to those pursued in the West (Staudt, 1986:326).



The equity approach has gained limited support. Discussions during the United Nations' Decade for Women revealed resentment by Third World women towards the form of Western feminism being thrust upon them so the equity approach lost much support at that time. Further, the qualitative techniques used by supporters of this approach to rationalise the need for women to have equal rights were never as convincing to planners as the 'hard data' and scientific methods which the anti-poverty and efficiency approaches used to support their cause (Buvinic, 1983:23). A reason why many development agencies claimed they could not support the equity approach was that, in promoting equal rights for women, it disrupted the culture of Third World countries. Significantly, this line of argument rarely arose during the design phase of the many large hydro-dams and roading systems built in Third World countries, though one could imagine the drastic effects such developments would have on the socio-cultural fabric of a community (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1992:8-9).

The fight for equal rights characteristic of the equity approach swiftly lost ground to the efficiency approach, discussed above. As Jaquette (1990:60) has suggested: 'Americans favor equality only when it does not conflict with another criterion of justice - namely, merit - and they define merit narrowly as efficiency'. Concepts of women and development were quickly incorporated into documents of various United Nations agencies as soon as they were articulated in economic rather than equality terms (Tinker, 1990:31).

In response to the top-down, Western-feminist emphasis of the equity approach and the inadequacies of other GAD approaches, a number of Third World women started to devise their own development agendas with empowerment of women as a key factor.

### **The empowerment approach<sup>14</sup>**

Although both approaches derive from the critical paradigm, the empowerment approach is distinct from the equity approach in that,

*...the goal is not to improve women's status, a nebulous quality with often unmeasurable, not-agreed-upon indicators which use "man" as the norm. An alternative goal is to increase women's dignity and power...the goal is...empowering women through redistribution of power (Maguire, 1984:2).*

'Empowerment' has been popularised in development dialogue since the mid-1980s when the global economic crisis stimulated interest in alternative approaches to development which were focused at grassroots level. It has emerged mainly from the writings of Third World feminists and from the grassroots organisational experience of Third World women (Sen and Grown, 1987). These women, having been subject to various

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<sup>14</sup> The empowerment approach embraces the concept of empowerment, discussed in Chapter One.

unsuccessful GAD initiatives in their countries for many years, are determined to get across that:

*It is not a matter of a few initiatives to "improve the position of women" while leaving power, authority and status firmly in the control of men. It is a matter, as with all oppressed groups, of empowering them to take control of their own lives, economically and culturally (Barnett, 1988:164).*

Their ideas have since been supported by Western academics and development practitioners who have contributed to the growth of the empowerment approach.

This approach, which is still emerging, is unique in the views it presents of development for women. It suggests that women will only gain more power if their activities challenge existing power relations (Feldman, 1984:84). The power which is sought, however, is not that which encourages domination of others: '...we, as women, are not seeking power in the traditional sense of a capacity to dominate, rather, we are seeking power as the opposite: a transforming, liberating capacity...' (Rosero, 1991:61). There is an urgent need for a change from the way Third World women have been perceived and treated by development processes in the past. Women have even been accused of standing in the way of development:

*Within the discourse of development, women are a problem: they cling to obsolete farming methods; they fail to cooperate with project administrators; they have too many children. Women's knowledge and women's lives are thus delegitimated, and women's voices are silenced (Ferguson, 1990:296).*

Empowerment questions mainstream approaches to women's development rather than trying to push women into the mainstream of Western-designed development (Moser, 1989:1815). Rather than seeing women as passive beneficiaries of the development process, they are posited as agents of change. Programmes initiated under the empowerment approach actively seek to harness women's knowledge and listen to their voices, not in order to help the development process but for women's own sakes, so their priorities become the priorities of the development industry. It recognises that collective action by women is a major way of enabling women to gain a stronger political voice (Rathgeber, 1990:493-95).

Proponents of the empowerment approach do not merely deal with the symptoms of underdevelopment; they are willing to examine underlying causes and so to question the system under which development occurs. They suggest that we take account of the gender-based hierarchies within households, communities and states because such power relationships restrict women's access to resources and can undermine their sense of self-esteem. Thus empowerment entails a challenge to existing structures of society, which is bound to make governments and donors alike nervous. It is not simply a larger piece of the cake that is demanded but '...a fundamental transformation of society not only in the

direction of non-oppressive and non-exploitative relationships between men and women; but also among classes, races and nations' (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:155). For example, Afshar's ideas are in line with the empowerment approach:

*...women's position is structured by a double set of determinants arising from relations of gender and relations derived from the economic organization of society...it is necessary to understand the dynamics of capitalism and imperialism to grasp the complexities of the structures that shape the subordination of women (Afshar, 1991:1).*

It is one thing to acknowledge the power inequities which exist in society and quite another to implement plans for redistribution of that power. Of every project or development initiative we should be able to ask: 'What are the implications for redistribution of power?' (Maguire, 1984:33). It is no wonder that the empowerment approach makes those with a lot of power, both individuals, such as elites, and institutions, such as governments, quite nervous. This approach

*...leads, inevitably, to a fundamental reexamination of social structures and institutions and, ultimately, to the loss of power of entrenched elites, which will effect some women as well as men.... [thus] it demands a degree of commitment to structural change and power shifts that is unlikely to be found either in national or in international agencies (Rathgeber, 1990:495).*

The empowerment approach emphasises the redistribution and decentralisation of power (Momsen and Townsend, 1987:17) but this may suggest that women have no power at present:

*When A considers it essential for B to be empowered, A assumes not only that B has no power - or does not have the right kind of power - but also that A has the secret formula of a power to which B has to be initiated (Rahnema, 1992:123).*

Most writers supporting the empowerment approach do not suggest that women have no power but realise that women's traditional power has diminished in many societies (Swantz 1985). To imply that women have no power is to disvalue '...the traditional and venerable forms of power' in cases where this does exist but to romanticise traditional knowledge systems of women may also be wrong because they can be carriers of questionable values and biases (Rahnema, 1992:122-3). Throughout the world women still hold some measure of power, however, although this varies according to,

*...the gender system of their culture, the status of the class, caste, race, or religious sect to which they belong, the state laws under which they live, the economic and political position their nation holds in the international structure of power, and their personal attributes and life histories' (Leacock, 1986b:107).*

Even though all women hold some measure of power, empowerment is necessary because for women it specifically means '...consciousness of female subordination and collective solidarity to achieve the solutions implied by the causes attributed to subordination' (Staudt, 1987:156). Women need to be empowered in terms of their self-



reliance and internal strength so they can influence social processes that affect their lives and to determine directions of change (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1992:12). When women feel that they are valuable members of a community carrying out important roles they gain confidence, which may have been lost due to colonial devaluation of traditional activities, and they can begin to set their own agendas for development. Empowerment for women includes control over their own bodies, their labour and forces affecting their lives. Women can have more control over the forces affecting their lives by being politicised: 'That all women, particularly the poorest, should be politicised has become an accepted feminist position' (Afshar, 1991:347).

The empowerment approach does not suggest that all men are advantaged by existing social structures nor that all women are disadvantaged by these social structures. By recognising that other social cleavages, such as class and ethnicity, also frame people's lives the empowerment approach forces us to realise that if power is redistributed away from the elite classes, some women will lose out as well. In the same way, proponents of the empowerment approach do not discard the contributions of men who have a concern for social justice issues.

The empowerment approach also involves a non-tangible dimension which acknowledges that people are moved by something other than economic or material interests (Rahnema, 1992:130). Development planners, by contrast, rarely consider immaterial concerns, such as improving interpersonal relations between men and women or building self-esteem, to be within their domain. Yet these concerns significantly effect women's potential to take up development opportunities. Many women are impeded from recognising the development options open to them, for example, because of heavy workloads which leave them feeling demoralised;

*Tiredness and frustration at not being able to "realize their dreams", isolation, and their limited ability to participate and gain recognition in the public domain...[produces] frustration and demotivation (Lopez, 1991:116).*

Lopez (1991:116), notes that women struggling to initiate development projects in the Third World often see failure as being personal, blaming their lack of education and skills, because they are largely unaware of the wider structural forces impacting upon their lives. When women have the opportunity to discuss just how hard their workloads are, how low their pay is, their low sense of esteem, and so forth, they may be able to identify the barriers to development for themselves, an important first step before organising themselves to act collectively and overcome these barriers. Supporters of the empowerment approach actively promote the role of women's organisations in enabling women to act upon their collective concerns.

The empowerment approach focuses upon building up women's sense of dignity and self-reliance as these are key tools necessary for oppressed individuals to start to work together to take control of their own lives as well as striving for a redistribution of power in society: 'The self-realization process signifies ability to resist, combat and refuse the dominant values both of men and the bourgeois society' (Rosero, 1991:73). Yet we must be aware that, by instilling in women the confidence to try to change their situation, the empowerment approach purposely stirs up antagonisms in homes and communities (Whitehead and Bloom, 1992:55)<sup>15</sup>. Support structures, such as strong women's groups, must be available for women in such circumstances.

The empowerment approach has not been widely supported by development agencies in practice because it challenges the very nature of social organization. It is viewed with suspicion by many aid agencies and Third World governments because it runs in contradiction to the predominant, ingrained theories of the past which see economic growth as paramount (Cleves-Mosse, 1993:161) and because many such institutions feel threatened at the prospect of a redistribution of power. Third World governments, for example, may actively resist the politicising of women's issues. In Indonesia '...there is a national consensus to keep the women's question out of the sphere of political controversy, projecting it as a purely social issue of long term changes in attitudes' (Papanek, 1983:68).

The empowerment approach tends to be supported by small, independent bodies or individual practitioners working from a feminist perspective, rather than large, hierarchical organisations like the World Bank. At the same time the language of empowerment has become popular and even the World Bank has incorporated the word 'empowerment' in its documents. The irony is that the empowerment approach challenges, and would probably wish to topple, the very cornerstones and principles upon which the Bank's operations stand. The World Bank talks of local empowerment as if it would not have consequences for those with power at the level of the state (MacKenzie, 1992:28).

To summarise, there are several factors which make the empowerment approach unique and worthy of further attention. Power is defined as that which can transform, rather than that which is used to dominate others. It identifies a major cause of women's subordination, that is, the gender-based hierarchies existing at every level of society, from the household to the state, while acknowledging that oppressive relations between classes and ethnic groups need to be overcome at the same time as exploitative relations between men and women are being tackled. The empowerment approach is the only policy approach to women's development identified by Moser which incorporates the perspectives

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor (1992:232) explains how men took over women's beer brewing and the profits of this in an African village when women started to challenge male hegemony.

of Third World women. Further, it views personal growth of the oppressed, leading on to collective action to overcome the causes of that oppression, as a vital component of development.

## *Analysis*

Moser's categorisation of five policy approaches to GAD has been useful in helping to discern the consequences that different policy approaches have for development in practice. Proponents of the approaches mentioned may be able to agree on a development issue of universal importance but the ways they decide to deal with the issue would be completely different. So, for example, an agency using the welfare approach may promote family planning for the purpose of birth spacing, so that each child has the mother's full attention and an adequate supply of milk for its first year or two of life. An agency adopting the efficiency approach may try to distribute contraceptives to as many people as possible on the grounds that, with less children to look after, women will have more time and energy to put into their productive roles. An agency promoting women's empowerment, however, may make family planning services, supported by well-informed educators, available to women in order to promote women's freedom of choice and enhance their well-being. Women would be informed of a full range of options and told of potential side effects.

The policy approaches to women's development also varied in the extent to which they were willing to address gender needs and interests. The three approaches which came under the equilibrium paradigm, in which it was assumed that the existing system operated in women's best interests, were only concerned with practical gender needs. Advocates of the welfare approach attempted to help women with their reproductive roles largely through the provision of food, maternal-child health programmes and training in household management. Those espousing the anti-poverty approach helped women to earn an income, thereby focusing on women's productive roles. Meanwhile supporters of the efficiency approach focused on integrating women into mainstream development, encouraging planners to consider how they could utilise women's abilities further. As long as the project goals were met, it was assumed that the project was good. Issues such as whether the project gave women more control over their lives were simply not considered. None of these approaches attempted to address strategic gender interests by analysing power relations in society and how these impacted on women's lives.

Only the equity and empowerment approaches were concerned with strategic gender interests. Both sought to explain how domination and oppression are structurally maintained, recognising that class, ethnic and gender struggles were often necessary to transform society. Advocates of the equity approach used the top-down planning system to work for equal rights for women and equal access to resources, while those supporting the

empowerment approach encouraged bottom-up mobilisation and growth of women's organisations through which women could collectively work for a more just distribution of power in society (Moser, 1989:1808).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, meeting practical gender needs alone is not sufficient for a transformation of oppressive structures in society to occur but this is not to say that projects and programmes devised under the welfare, anti-poverty or efficiency approaches are of no use. If such projects and programmes solve some of women's basic problems this may provide a base of support from which women can go on to consider their strategic interests (Moser, 1989:1816). Empowerment is a process and as such any project, even though it may be poorly conceived, may contribute to women's empowerment by mobilising women, introducing new ideas to them, building confidence and increasing their skills, even if these are focused only on domestic tasks. Projects can give participants '...a new sense of confidence and hope for changing their situations' (Sen and Grown, 1987:44). The empowerment approach, however, provides the most comprehensive explanatory work on women's disadvantaged position and thus has the most hope of providing strategies which will overcome women's disadvantage rather than just alleviating their daily burdens.

Although the empowerment approach is gaining strength, efficiency and welfare approaches are still predominant in practice. It is apparent that donors and development practitioners are reluctant to support initiatives which promote women's empowerment because they challenge the *status quo*, under which the institutions of the development industry have thrived. The consequent focus of donors and practitioners on remedial strategies has serious implications for the potential effectiveness of development efforts to transform women's lives:

*Short term, ameliorative approaches to improving women's life circumstances are ineffective unless combined with long term strategies to establish women's control over the decisions that shape their lives (Sen and Grown, 1987).*

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Two has demystified the field of gender and development showing that, despite the wide variety of projects and programmes focusing on women's development, there are several major approaches to the subject which can help to explain the rationale behind these programmes and projects and even their likely outcomes. The theoretical approach used by NGOs, governments, donors or international agencies, whether implicitly or explicitly, determines the way they define women's problems and needs, their vision of a better future for women, the strategies they evolve for solving the problems or meeting the needs and, irretrievably, the final outcome of the projects or programmes they devise.



Also discussed was the issue of how Third World women's needs and interests are defined. Typically planners, policy-makers and development agencies define needs and interests on behalf of their intended beneficiaries, a top-down, non-participative process. While in general planners may be able to meet women's day-to-day practical needs through this process, they cannot hope to accurately perceive what women's individual and collective interests are. The planning process, therefore, fails in its ability to identify strategic gender interests, which arise out of the structural patterning of life opportunities for women. Women themselves may find it difficult to identify these interests unless they are first empowered to understand the dominant development system and the structures which accord them secondary status in society. It is only by addressing strategic interests and challenging oppressive structures which are the cause of women's subordination, that development agencies will be able to contribute to a more equitable structuring of society in which women's long term development is secure. More than any of the other approaches discussed the empowerment approach is moving towards a theory of explanation which considers how the differential power and privilege held by men and women, as well as class and ethnic divisions, '...recreate and reinforce women's subordination' (Clarke, 1986:109).

We cannot assume that the various institutions involved with development have women's best interests at heart when they plan GAD projects and programmes. Frequently, they have hidden agendas. It is not sufficient, therefore, to hope for more enlightened planning to bring about positive change for women, which is what Moser encourages us to do. Top-down strategies relying on the state are unlikely to challenge women's subordinate position and to lead to long-term empowerment of women. Kabeer (1992a:31) urges us to consider the perspectives of those on whom the outcomes of development initiatives will impact, of men and women outside the development process, not just those of planners who see women '...as clients of bureaucratic provisioning...'. The empowerment approach posits women as disempowered social actors with the potential to take control of their lives and initiate change on their own terms. Their opinions should be harnessed:

*The best way to overcome the gap between those who fund and plan for development and those who are subject to development programmes is to empower people at grassroots level so that they have the confidence, skills and access to resources to be able to define their own development agenda and work towards meeting their goals.*

Women from throughout the world, including the Third World, are currently working on new models and strategies for development which are in line with the empowerment approach. This may provide inspiration for a revised planning process.

The planning process has been the subject of our attention in this chapter. Moser (1989), with her concern for gender planning, concentrates discussion on projects because these are the main avenue through which development is planned. She fails to

problematised the planning process, however, and to identify it as a site of gender politics (Kabeer, 1992a). She also diverts our attention from the fact that many forms of development can occur outside the planned, project mode. Chapter Three, by focusing specifically on strategies for empowerment, will encourage us to look more widely when considering how to facilitate women's development, especially noting how women's organisations (whether or not they are implementing projects) can contribute to women's development and empowerment. The grassroots level growth of women's organisations may have more potential to transform oppressive structures which subordinate women than a few thousand nominal 'women's projects' around the world. Increasingly it has been argued that women's organisations provide the best opportunity for women to be able to create their own vision of what development should involve and to work towards achieving this vision:

*According to Sen and Grown we need to crystallize our consciousness and ethics into a vision of the kind of society we want; we then need strategies that will lead us from here to there; and finally we need to spell out methods through which the empowerment of individual women and their organizations takes place...(Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:10).*

Chapter Two has considered theories and approaches to GAD and how gender needs and interests may be interpreted. Chapter Three will look specifically at empowering strategies, keeping in mind that the implementation of these strategies is not always smooth because states, development agencies and women's organisations may be bearers of gendered power.



# CHAPTER THREE: Strategies for the empowerment of women

## *Introduction*

Chapter Two discussed five major policy approaches to women's development. Is it sufficient, however, to limit our discussion of women's development to 'policy approaches', or do we need to look further? If Kabeer (1992a) is correct, we cannot rely on the planning process to work in women's interests, rather, women will have to work for change themselves:

*...women will not be 'given' their freedom to participate in wider social interests.... They will not be 'given' equality with men. They will have to claim it (Schuster, 1982:534).*

The question asked in this chapter is how can women go about claiming that freedom and ultimately, empowering themselves and how can development agencies and women's organisations facilitate the process of development and empowerment for women? Questions which arose at a 1992 Crisis Centre Workshop for the Pacific demonstrate that empowerment is not a straightforward strategy to implement. Women asked, for example, how they could be empowered when they were not an homogeneous group and how behavioural changes in men could be brought about (*Development Bulletin*, 1993:68).

It has been acknowledged within the GAD field that in the past two decades there has been too much emphasis on problem analysis and not enough on working out effective strategies whereby women and men can live together, neither exploited nor oppressed (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:9). Those who did look for strategies have either had a narrow welfare focus on devising '...how they can deliver a package of ready-made "improvements" wrapped up as a women's programme' (Elson and Pearson, 1981:166) or, they have adopted the efficiency approach, popularised by the United Nations' Decade for Women, which aimed to use women more efficiently in the development process. So far,

*Few strategies...have been developed that question or attempt to influence in a profound fashion the social relations of gender or that create conditions for more fundamental structural societal change (Rathgeber, 1990:497).*

Moving on from 'safe' development initiatives to ones which challenge the *status quo* is the task of the 1990s for academics, development agencies, governments and activists committed to women's development and empowerment. As Chapter Two explained, empowering strategies, implicitly, are those which attempt to address strategic gender interests, '...which arise from the analysis of women's subordination to men'. They

go beyond meeting practical gender needs, such as food and shelter, which emerge from '...the concrete conditions women experience' (Moser, 1991:160) <sup>1</sup>. Most development agencies choose to focus on practical gender needs but in doing so, they can only hope to have a limited impact on women's lives as they do not challenge women's subordination.

It is not always easy to address strategic gender interests, however, because besides challenging powerful institutions which thrive under the *status quo*, development agencies must be willing to ensure that the women participating in these initiatives are prepared for a potential backlash from those in their own communities. This backlash may come from their husbands, chiefs, elders or leaders who are opposed to changes in women's roles and status. As Young (1979:30) stresses,

*In many cases attempts to produce progressive legislation are opposed on the grounds that any change in traditional family structures (and male authority within the family) is at the root of social problems. Women are thus pressurised to conform, both by psychology and by directly repressive means.*

Thus, women involved in initiatives which challenge the *status quo* need support, perhaps from strong women's organisations. The planning process can only do so much for women because it structures women as powerless beneficiaries of its programmes and because institutions working within the planning process tend to be male-dominated and have top-down structures which do not reach women at grassroots level.

In order to implement empowerment-oriented development it will be necessary to avoid strategies imposed from above and instead to gain the support of women and men throughout society who are aware of the need to challenge prejudices which have become firmly entrenched (Beneria and Sen, 1982:173). Opportunities will be needed for women '...to challenge oppressive structures and situations simultaneously at different levels' (Moser, 1989:1815), meaning that there will be no single or simple strategy that leads to women's empowerment. Rather, we must acknowledge the credibility of a diverse range of alternative visions for empowering women. Just as women are divided by class, ethnicity, age and religion, they will have different interests and different visions of a desirable future.

Although the significance of the empowerment approach for women's development was spelt out in Chapter Two, it remains to be seen exactly how this approach may be implemented in practice. Can women best achieve their aims through separate initiatives and organisations or should women try to secure resources from the state? Is a radical

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter Two revealed that women may be empowered even through the welfare, anti-poverty and efficiency approaches because these other approaches still result in bringing women together, an empowering process, and because they sometimes ease women's daily burdens, thus giving women the opportunity to focus on their strategic interests rather than mere survival. In this section, however, I am more concerned with development initiatives which directly aim to empower women.

transformation of society and overturning of the state needed or can women work simultaneously within and against the societies in which they live (Elson, 1991:193)? These are some of the major issues dealt with in this chapter. Further, examples are provided from women's organisations worldwide to show what strategies have been used to bring about women's empowerment.

## ***Women's organisations***

### **The role of women's organisations**

In recent years it has been suggested that the key route to women's empowerment could be through strong, grassroots women's organisations (Maguire, 1984:60; Small, 1987:47). For example, Loutfi (1980), feels that women's organisations '...promote solidarity which helps women face the ridicule, abuse, obstruction, reprisals, or indifference of men who control support services'. Others emphasise that through encouraging collective action, women's organisations help women to identify their concerns and work for more power:

*Feminist theorists have identified collective action as a primary step for women in achieving personal power and status in the public domain (Bruce, 1989:987).*

*"Women cannot adapt themselves to their history unless they begin to collectivize their experiences, which will help them to overcome the structural isolation they suffer and to understand the social causes of their individual suffering" (Maria Mies, quoted in Schuler, 1986).*

Women's organisations also provide women with opportunities for attaining leadership and management skills and for developing networks (Hoskins, n.d.:3). Some women gain technical and managerial skills from such involvement but a greater proportion benefit from a broadening of their awareness and an increase in confidence (Yudelman, 1987a:111):

*By solving problems, gaining experience, and working together, women will become aware of their own subordinate position in society and more capable of changing it (Himmelstrand, 1990:112).*

In India, the existence of a wide variety of women's organisations at urban and rural levels has:

*...increased opportunities for women to act politically by carving out organizational spaces and developing local women leaders. These organizational spaces have enabled women to articulate their grievances, evolve their own solutions, and sustain their participation (Everett, 1989:171)*

One cannot debate the effectiveness of women's organisations without considering whether segregated organisations can work to women's benefit. Rogers' (1980) seminal work argued that gender-specific programmes led to women's marginalisation, with segregation representing subordinate status. Others arguing against separate women's

organisations or projects state that separate is not equal (Young, 1990:79). Buvinic (1986:662), for example, cites many weaknesses facing women's organisations include limited resources and expertise, limited access to the formal network of donors and other aid givers, their location on the fringes of development establishments and their institutional powerlessness. What Buvinic does not say, however, is that most of these weaknesses are not inherent. If women's organisations could somehow secure the needed resources, have access to technical expertise and gain more autonomy, they would have every chance of success and be able to take steps to avoid being marginalised from mainstream development.

Although the weaknesses mentioned above do plague many women's organisations, it is apparent from the discussion on the efficiency approach, in Chapter Two, that full-scale integration '...with women's interests either subsumed under men's or assumed to be the same as men's' (Young, 1990:79), is not the answer either. Women throughout the Caribbean, for example, are concerned that integration could lead to:

*...loss of independence, diversion of funds for women's projects for other purposes, refusal to provide credit and technical assistance to women for other than traditional projects, inequality of relationships between male and female staff members, and lack of opportunity for professional advancement. Integration can...block a more just sharing of resources (Yudelman, 1987a:106).*

Loutfi (1987:112) asserts that in societies where patriarchal structures prevail, women and men need to be separated otherwise women will find it difficult to develop confidence and experience to strive for a more equitable society. Certainly for groups of women who feel vulnerable, for example, those with little power within the household, separate organisational spaces are vital for them to '...have any chance in their struggle against the hierarchical structures of caste, class, gender, and state' (Everett, 1989:1). Yudelman found that at grassroots level women in Latin America and the Caribbean were very keen that separate groups be maintained, for reasons that are perhaps universal. Basically, they wanted to manage their own groups and projects, in contrast to state projects which were controlled by men, and they wanted to earn and control their own income and through this, gain respect (Yudelman, 1987a:104). Separate organisations also allow women to gain access to productive resources without competition from men (Buvinic, 1986:662)<sup>2</sup>. Mixed organisations would not be acceptable to many women on grounds that they feel they would not be able to set priorities, control resources effectively influence policy directions (Heyzer, 1987). They would also lose '...independent control of specific arenas [which has been]...the basis for the power of women's organizations...' (Small, 1987:44). Knowing this it is difficult to support Dickerson-Putnam's

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<sup>2</sup> Separate women's organisations do not, however, preclude competition from men for resources. Once resources are secured women may face pressure from men to share them with the broader community or men compete for control of the project for which the resources were intended



(1987:206-7) view that gender-segregated organisations are part of a transitional, post-colonial stage in Papua New Guinea and her suggestion that they will not be needed in the long term. As long as gender-based hierarchies remain in place at every level of society there will be a need for women-only organisations:

*It might be argued that sex-based organization reflects rather than challenges existing distinctions and thus perpetuates sex disparities. Yet without organizational experience, women may not develop skills or have their needs taken as a priority...separation permits the development of organizational capacity, skills, and resources for leverage in mainstream interaction (Staudt, 1981:370-1).*

This is not to suggest that women's organisations should not seek the cooperation of men; as long as the organisations maintain autonomy, such cooperation may be to their benefit (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:166). There are many different organisations and individuals who can be infused with a feminist vision and with whom women's organisations can productively cooperate.

### **The potential of women's organisations to direct change**

Along with the confidence placed in separate women's organisations goes the assertion that, through organisation-building, Third World women will be able to direct change (Charlton, 1984:209):

*...a necessary step towards building a future based on feminist principles is a strategy that aims at achieving a certain relative autonomy for women. Autonomous organizations provide bases of growing insight and practical experience from which it will be necessary to build alliances, to gain power and find leverage points to bring pressure to bear for transformation (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:166).*

We are warned, however, that the mere existence of independent women's organisations is not sufficient, '...to bring about deep structural transformation in society' (Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:82). Much depends on the type of women's organisation one is dealing with:

*...to what extent they have a transformative perspective that includes the empowerment of women; and to what extent they are concerned more with enabling women to cope with the status quo and to perform their traditional roles better (Elson, 1991:192-193).*

Certainly not all women's organisations are empowerment-oriented. They are not automatic vehicles for women's emancipation (Sen and Grown, 1987:93). There are those that are elitist, committed to reinforcing the *status quo*, or welfare-oriented. Thus although women's organisations can be an important avenue for women's empowerment they should not be romanticised (Elson, 1991:193); they '...are not magically democratic, egalitarian, or nonhierarchical' (Staudt, 1990:311). There are a number of ways in which welfare-oriented and elitist women's organisations may stand in the way of women's development.

Sen and Grown (1987:90) cite traditional, service-oriented women's organisations as having two major weaknesses. Firstly, they tend to treat lower class women in patronising ways, even though these may be the women whom the organisation was set up to help. Secondly, they fail to understand what gender subordination really is and how it is tied up with social and economic oppression. Such welfare-oriented women's organisations may organise to satisfy community needs by providing items of communal consumption, such as a water pump. In effect, this task is '...an extension of their domestic role implicitly accepting the sexual division of labour and the subordination of women' (Elson, 1991:194). Meanwhile men are free to take up positions of power in and beyond the community level. Karl (1986:8) insists that unless traditional welfare organisations are revitalised they will need to be replaced by more dynamic women's organisations.

Women's organisations may show themselves to be elitist or exclusive in several ways. They may place conditions upon membership. For example, a small enterprise development group may exclude women with no spare cash. Younger women are sometimes not made welcome in groups dominated by older women (Wamalwa, 1991:188). There may be requirements that all office bearers in an organisation are literate and numerate, when in fact it is only necessary for the secretary and treasurer to have such skills. Often only the wives of community or church leaders are considered worthy of positions of authority within an organisation. In such ways '...even women's organizations reflect the prevailing power hierarchy' (Boesveld, 1986:37).

Examples from Asia, Africa and the Pacific show how women's organisations may reinforce the *status quo*. In the Philippines, Gomez (1986:34) tells us,

*...women's organizations have taken the pattern of clearly auxiliary organizations to enhance the status quo: posing as moral guardians of society...drumming up support for the causes of the ruling elite...and reinforcing the role of women as wife, homemaker and auxiliary to men.*

In Malaysia, the women's wing of the UMNO political party provides electoral support for the party as well as providing classes in sewing, cooking and religious education. While women take care of the household, men are left to dominate public affairs and leadership. This reinforces women's domesticity '...by extending the domestic realm into the political domain' (Heyzer, 1987:137). In Zambia, the Women's League, which is the only officially sanctioned representative of women's affairs, is involved in fostering the acceptance of women's moral subordination and economic disadvantage. The ruling party supports the Women's League devotedly as long as it does not infringe on the party's interests. The League thus focuses on issues such as the supposed immorality of women in the urban context, which is presented as hampering economic development and on criticising contraception and abortion (Geisler, 1987). The Goroka Women's Investment Corporation in Highland Papua New Guinea was an initiative sponsored by government to promote business opportunities



for women. It has, however, increased social stratification as it only reaches a small number of women who have sufficient capital to join. Even the types of businesses sponsored are 'acceptably feminine', so men are not alarmed by possible competition (Sexton, 1983).

It is apparent now that women's organisations cannot be unquestionably accepted as working in women's best interests. At the same time, evidence of elitist, traditional or welfare organisations enforcing existing power hierarchies should not negate the potential that women's organisations have. Even traditional, welfare-oriented women's organisations have something positive to offer. Women themselves often cite benefits from participation in women's groups which result from the process of organisation, rather than any specific group aims. Cleves-Mosse (1993:161), asserts that this is because the process of working towards a certain development goal raises women's consciousness. Women involved in loan clubs in Indonesia, for example, reported that the most important outcomes for them were not the loans they secured but their increased confidence, new skills and the respect with which their husbands and communities now treated them (United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 1988).

Longwe's (1991:54) assertion that gender-stereotyped women's club projects necessarily subtract from women's development is unnecessarily restrictive. While acknowledging that women's limited 'spare time' is too often invested in learning 'homecraft' skills which may be of little use and give women a narrow perception of development options available to them, any activity which brings women together to learn from each other at least contributes to networking among them. Networking has been recognised as, '...a new and very powerful way for women to work together to explore their problems and also, more importantly, their potential' (Wallace, 1991:189). In Nicaragua there are women's 'soyerias' groups which provide children with one glass of soya milk twice a week. This has been interpreted as an extension of women's traditional roles. The women themselves, however, relish the opportunity the groups give them to meet outside their homes to talk and exchange ideas. In this way women have begun to discuss issues related to their subordinate status, for example, a rape in their community, and what they can do to overcome this threat (Aleman, 1991:95).

Complex relations often exist within women's organisations because of the opposing interests of women of different classes: 'We cannot assume that any organization of women *per se* represents the needs of all women' (Beneria and Sen, 1982:163). Women's groups do not, however, have to be exclusive to certain classes or ethnic groups. Examples from India in particular have shown the achievements of organisations in addressing the joint problems of gender and class when poor women are recruited into organisations set up by those from the middle classes (Beneria and Sen, 1982:164). The Self-Employed Women's

Association and Working Women's Forum of India, Flora Tristan from Peru and Sistren Theatre Collective from Jamaica all represent unprecedented cooperation between poor working class women and educated middle-class women in these societies. The middle class women can offer resources such as their leadership capabilities (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:156-157), and also provide representatives to lobby government officials and to get access to government resources (Everett, 1989:161-69). The strengths of the different classes of women have combined and together they can explore '...a great variety of promising ideas about a feminist future' (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:162). For women's organisations to be truly effective '...women will have to build alliances across class and racial lines' (Maguire, 1984:57). Working through such divisions can be a point of strength and empowerment for those involved in women's organisations.

When identifying the types of women's organisations which can best facilitate women's empowerment, we should not by-pass informal organisational forms. These organisations represent a coherent response by groups of women to their particular economic, social or political situation (Hirschmann, 1991:1688). It is not necessary that women's organisations have a formal structure with conventional meeting patterns and procedures to be an effective agent for change. Hirschmann considers it essential that informal women's organisations, even those which base their activities around the domestic scene, should be considered a form of political organisation for women through which women have fashioned a space for themselves (Hirschmann, 1991): 'These are clearly feminist expressions without a feminist discourse - or feminist expressions which the feminist...movement has not included in its discourse. Why?' (Social Studies and Publications Centre of Peru, 1986:103). At formal, national levels women's participation is low and hindered by male attitudes and gender-biased structures so it may actually be better to start political participation at local, informal levels where much can be achieved in a less threatening way and without encountering too much resistance (Hirschmann, 1991:1684-5):

*...the very smallness of projects has enabled women to understand how to cope with local power structures, how to articulate demands, and how to use organizational strength to counter gender biases and rigidities inside the home (Sen and Grown, 1987:82).*

We should recognise that there are many ways in which a feminist consciousness may be displayed:

*A better understanding of the short- and medium-term strategies of women in different social locations could provide a corrective influence to ethnocentric or class-bound definitions of what constitutes a feminist consciousness (Kandiyoti, 1988:286).*

For example, lower class women, rather than participating in trade unions or lobbying local authorities, may have alternative modes of political participation through which they act to influence government and to promote their interests (Everett, 1989b:152). They may

embark on a protest outside the house of a local politician who has not kept his promise to provide their shanty town with clean water or they may sit in front of bulldozers which have come to raze local forests to make way for a gold mine.

March and Taquu (1986:123) argue that there are benefits inherent in informal organisations which they would lose if attempts were made to formalise them. For example, grassroots women's organisations which have arisen spontaneously across Asian nations

*...take up issues which more established organisations are reluctant or unable to tackle, either because they challenge middle class interests such as improved pay and conditions for servants and shop assistants, or because they raise matters previously thought unsuitable for public discussion, such as domestic violence and prostitution. (Blackburn, 1993:22).*

The discussion so far has shown that issues which may initially be thought of as problems with women's organisations, for example, informal structures, a welfare focus and tendencies towards exclusiveness by class or ethnicity, can be turned around and used to the organisation's benefit. During the United Nations' Decade for Women many traditional and elitist organisations '...experienced a new vitality and sensitivity to the oppression and subordination of women' (Kelkar, 1987:91). Some such women's organisations have switched their focus and taken on new directions, for example, analysing policies and lobbying for change, raising women's and men's consciousness and improving linkages between activists and researchers. Because women's organisations have the potential to be transformed from within, they have the potential to direct wider changes in society.

### **Can a women's machinery<sup>3</sup> empower women?**

The 'national machinery' for women, or 'women's machinery', are common terms used to describe the institutional establishment of women's bureaux to take official responsibility for issues of concern to women within a country. A national machinery usually consists of a government women's bureau, division or ministry, as well as a non-governmental body for women, commonly a National Council of Women (NCW). These two women's organisations are expected to have separate but complementary roles and to cooperate by sharing information, jointly organising national meetings or conferences and providing a voice for women's concerns.

Thanks to strong lobbying of governments during the United Nations' Decade for Women, when much faith was placed in the potential of governmental structures to bring about change for women, there is a national machinery in place in many Third World

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<sup>3</sup> Although women's organisations have been discussed, a separate discussion of those organisations comprising the national machinery was deemed necessary because women's machineries occupy a unique position in terms of their prominence and the enormity of what is expected of them.

countries. Almost universal faith has been placed in these institutions as facilitators of women's development but as Lewis (1990:193) notes, this expectation may be too high: 'A women's ministry has as its constituency over half the population, and a nearly limitless range of expectations regarding appropriate activities'. In practice, machineries have been poorly funded or resourced yet they have responsibility for a wide range of tasks. Further, they often have welfare mandates which explains why they tend to accomplish little. Staudt (1990:8) argues that because of their narrow approach to women's development, many machineries have legitimised women's subordination.

In addition, women's bureaux typically lack status and authority within government itself thus they have been unable to influence policy change or to act as lobby groups within the government structure (Himmelstrand, 1990:103). Governments often locate the women's division in social or welfare ministries, indicating that they see women as beneficiaries rather than active participants in development. Further, the women's division will often see itself first as a government ministry, bureau or division, and second as a women's organisation (Ferguson, 1990:295). Staudt (1990:306) is concerned that because women's units are isolated within the government bureaucracy they often lack leverage to overhaul the gender-biased government system and prompt a more equitable distribution of resources: 'They are caught on the inside, by necessity making political compromises that may compromise their ultimate mission'. Inevitably in such circumstances the needs and interests of grassroots women are not top of the list of priorities. Staff in women's machineries typically set up top-down structures and adopt a patronising attitude, assuming that they can provide a voice for rural women, rather than attempting to empower rural women so they may speak for themselves (Staudt, 1981:373).

Leaders of the non-governmental element of women's machineries, for example, the NCW, are in an ambiguous position in that they are operating both inside and outside the state apparatus. They are supposed to be providing independent representation for the women of their country when in some countries the NCW actually has to rely on the government for the majority of its funds, making the organisation vulnerable to coercion.

Despite such criticisms, Tinker and Jaquette (1987:424) suggest that,

*Even...a symbolic office represents a leap forward in many countries; the challenge is to move past tokenism so that the issues of women, and the office itself, are perceived as important to national development.*

There are certainly ways in which the hurdles facing women's machineries can be overcome. Gordon (1984:104), for example, argues that women's bureaux must focus their activities rather than attempting to take on too many tasks. This can be done in connection with other major women's organisations to ensure compatibility and avoid repetition. For example, the government arm of the women's machinery can concentrate on research and



evaluation of women's programmes while coordinating government programmes for women run by government ministries. Lewis (1990:194), sees the most important role of the non-governmental wing of a women's machinery as that of watchdog, checking that government policy and the actions of its ministries are not undermining women's interests and lobbying for change when necessary. They can also usefully contribute to planning, policy formulation and funding sectors of government (Gordon, 1984:105). In both arms of a women's machinery there should be mainly feminist staffing and accountability to outside feminist constituencies (Staudt, 1990:309).

Although women's machineries certainly have a role to play in facilitating women's development, if they have close connections with the government and if they establish hierarchical structures which fail to provide for input from women at the grassroots, it is unlikely that they will promote transformatory change.

### **Components of effective women's organisations**

There are a number of key characteristics which can help us to identify organisational forms for women. These include

*...[access to] resources (finance, knowledge, technology), skills training, and leadership formation on the one side; and democratic processes, dialogue, participation in policy and decision making, and techniques for conflict resolution on the other (Sen and Grown, 1987:89).*

A resource base enables women '...to help initiate development policies rather than just react to them' (Charlton, 1984:210). Training in both technical skills, such as literacy and social skills, such as public speaking, can develop women's confidence to pursue new opportunities. There is also a need for democratic processes to prevail in the internal dynamics of an organisation. This can include encouraging the organisation's members to identify and expand their collective interests, rather than having a leader who, without consultation, makes decisions on behalf of the group. Non-hierarchical ways of sharing responsibility within women's organisations can be devised to ensure that power is widely distributed. This may be easier in less formal organisations which have not adopted Western-style meeting practices, complete with an array of office bearers. It is also beneficial for women's organisations to develop strong networks both with other women's groups and with various grassroots organisations, building mutual respect rather than threatening the autonomy of any group (Sen and Grown, 1987:93-5).

For widespread empowerment of women to occur, more organisations which are willing to challenge male bias directly are needed (Elson, 1991:192):

*...a women's association with a feminist or a women's perspective is one which is interested in...the essence of women's oppression as women and not only with the manifestations of such oppression. It is an association that concerns itself with trying to find out what caused this oppression and how to overcome it in our world (Sr. Mary John Mananzan, quoted in Gomez, 1986:37-38).*

The oppressive structures of society which relegate people to subordinate positions because of their gender, class or ethnicity will not be transformed easily. As women's organisations struggle to overturn these structures it is vital that a broad approach to women's development is adopted. Women are not a homogeneous group so no single policy will be able to account for women's differing needs and interests: 'Because the political reality so overwhelmingly disadvantages women, no single approach by any single group can be expected to succeed' (Charlton, 1984:217). Further, it may be unwise to raise issues pertaining to women's subordinate position in society without simultaneously devising ways of meeting basic needs. Having some goals related to women's practical, immediately perceived needs, can lead women on to deal with issues related to the liberation of women from gender, class and ethnic exploitation (Beneria and Sen, 1982:165). The process of women organising around their practical needs can build up the self-esteem and collective power of participants so that they have the confidence to challenge male bias. In this way women's organisations can concurrently meet short term needs of members and contribute to their long term empowerment.

Women's organisations can also gain strength to challenge oppressive systems and structures in society by building alliances:

*...women have increasingly come to the conclusion that they have to liberate themselves. Also...they are aware that they need to enter into alliances: not because they cannot fight for themselves, but because the changes they want affect the whole fabric of society and hence involve wide-ranging power relationships (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:146).*

While women's organisations have great hope invested in them, to avoid all opportunities to build alliances is to miss opportunities to secure resources and power: '...there are...dangers in holding aloof from the policy process' (Elson, 1991:197). Likewise, if women's organisations avoid dealing with public policy issues they may contribute to their own marginalisation (Sen and Grown, 1987:93-5). When building alliances women's organisations will need to be wary, however, of having their own interests and priorities undermined. Next I consider whether it is possible to build alliances with the state and other groups without women's organisations having to compromise their ideals. The '...dual process of maintaining independent power bases and influencing mainstream institutions challenges feminists in every region' (Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:82).



## *Securing resources and power from the state*

In the search for effective strategies for women's development, much faith has been vested in states or governments<sup>4</sup> as facilitators of GAD initiatives. In Forward Looking Strategies, the final document of the United Nations' Decade for Women, many recommendations were made which required governmental implementation. This has stimulated a situation whereby '...state action continues to hold considerable allure for serving women's interests in many different societies' (Charlton et al., 1989:12).

In many circumstances, however, states have reinforced women's subordination. Either the state assumes that women share the same interests as men and therefore are not deemed to have interests of their own, or they are perceived as having special needs only in their roles as wives and mothers (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:149). Meanwhile men, who dominate the state, can direct state policies according to their own sets of interests. In the past state policies have led to,

*...a deterioration in the distribution of goods and services, environmental degradation and commercialization, the danger of extinction and diversion of resources in the nuclear arms race, and repression caused by police and military action (Everett et al., 1989:187).*

Rao suggests that if a system is discriminatory towards women, working within that system can only lead to negative results for them (Rao, 1991:127). Others argue that while women may be able to affect state policies, they will not be able to change the prevalent ideologies and attitudes in society which assign women inferior status. Law changes may guarantee women greater rights but '...still the real world would go on resisting changes' (Himmelstrand, 1990:106). Although many countries may be able to claim that they have implemented anti-discriminatory legislation, few could say that they have been so honest in their attempts '...when it comes to...inviting men and women to equally share decision-making power and economic benefits' (Himmelstrand, 1990:106). For example, the law, as defined by the state, institutionalises a male perspective when dealing with issues involving tension between women and men including sexuality, property rights and family relations (Everett et al., 1989:180):

*...governments, ruling parties and state bureaucracies shrink from any radical redefinition of women's position which would legitimate women's claims vis-à-vis men's vested interests (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:7).*

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<sup>4</sup> Lycklama à Nijeholt makes the important distinction between states and governments: 'States are products of specific historical, economic and ideological frameworks, with complex and diverse features that make generalising difficult....The state is the institutional, political organization of society. Government is the political executive of the state' (1991:4).

We must, therefore, question whether states can be expected to support strategies which result in women's empowerment or which address strategic gender interests, especially when

*The realization of strategic needs (Molyneux, 1985), which go beyond those of 'coping mechanisms' or 'practical needs', reorders social relations. And these may be perceived as a threat, not only to local interests but also to state power (MacKenzie, 1992:29).*

Clearly women are not central to state power (Staudt, 1986:328,330) and thus they should be wary of building alliances with the male-dominated, hierarchical institutions of the state which reinforce gender inequities. However, the state should not be seen as monolithically and rigidly masculine. Points of access, through which resources may be secured or power exerted, can usually be found. In an ideal situation women's organisations would be able to cooperate with the state to secure space and resources while avoiding institutionalisation and compromising of their feminist agenda (Alvarez, 1990:71-72). As Alvarez suggests, '...feminists should neither dismiss the state as the ultimate mechanism of male social control nor embrace it as the ultimate vehicle for gender-based social change' (Alvarez, 1990:72).

Before women make claims upon the state, however, they need to gain vital skills and confidence to enable them '...to utilise the system (where possible) or challenge and even subvert it (where necessary) to assert rights, redress injustices, and access economic and political resources' (Schuler, 1986:1). Everett (1989b) claims that both reformist and confrontational strategies can work in women's interests as long as their organisations remain autonomous, having an independent base, while lobbying state agencies for resources and power: '...transitional empowerment strategies and ultimate transformation should not be viewed as mutually exclusive' (Staudt, 1986:327).

Women's organisations can benefit from interactions with the state in two major ways. Firstly, they can attempt to transform the state from within. For example, they can contribute to a broadening of policy agendas or, like the women's organisation Flora Tristan from Peru, they can put forward candidates for national elections in an attempt to '...use political power to help transform their society according to their feminist principles and, through campaigning, gain attention for women's problems' (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:161). The secretary-general of the Self-Employed Women's Associations (SEWA), a trade union set up to give self-employed women in Ahmedabad, India, political visibility and control of the forces affecting their lives (Bhatt, 1989), used her position as a Member of Parliament to instigate a national enquiry into the labour conditions of self-employed and informal sector women in India (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:163-4). Interventions need not be revolutionary to be beneficial to women and to lead to long term changes in attitudes. An important step

for women's organisations could be to sensitise the bureaucracy, trade unions and the media to gender concerns (Heyzer, 1987).

A second way in which women's organisations can develop fruitful relations with the state is to attempt to secure resources from within the state to support their organisation's own needs and priorities. Ferguson (1990:300) argues that there are a number of ways in which groups of women can be successful in improving their living conditions on their own terms by '...wrestling resources out of the hands of a reluctant bureaucracy'. For example, they could present a programme to their local government body in order to secure funds which states, in general terms, an intention to improve housing. Their hidden agenda, however, may be to increase women's power through their right to own land or a home (Tinker, 1990:44).

Women's organisations should also look for opportunities to build alliances with individuals in positions of power in state institutions as those who are infused with a feminist vision can become valuable allies (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:167):

*...under certain favourable political conditions, women (and men) who are part of governments and state structures and women in the women's movement can work together towards the realization of structural changes from a feminist perspective (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:163).*

One should never assume that those working within the state, or in other institutions which have questionable goals and means of achieving them, inherently share the same values and goals as the institutions they are a part of. People within governments and state structures can work from a feminist perspective to realise structural changes:

*Cooperation between different people in and outside existing power structures is an important element in strategies for women's empowerment and the realization of a feminist perspective of development (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:163-4).*

For example, planners who are willing to support long term strategies to overcome women's subordination can do so without overtly challenging the *status quo* by providing resources for organisations, such as women's groups and networks, which have transformatory potential (Kabeer, 1992a:35). This can help '...to create much-needed space to develop ideas, strategies, means and methods for a transformation of their societies in a feminist direction' (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:165).

It appears optimal for women's organisations to attempt to work both within and outside the state, rather than advocating a separatist approach. The risks of developing connections with the state '...appear less than the consequences...of not being connected with the locus of power and resources' (Small, 1987:65). They need to consider under what conditions and through which strategies they can influence and possibly transform the state,

and also how to protect themselves from being discriminated against or their interests compromised by the state (Everett et al., 1989:179,186).

### ***Empowerment at work in the Third World***

There has been a focus on women's organisations in this chapter because of the revelation that the planning process, with its top-down, male-dominated structure, does not always work in women's best interests. It is not likely that those governing the planning process will, of their own initiative, implement a redirection of policy to overcome women's disadvantages. Rather than suggesting that the planning process be rejected completely, however, more input is needed from those who are most affected by development: those at grassroots level. Their ideas and priorities could be usefully incorporated into a revised planning process (Kabeer, 1992a). At grassroots level, women's groups and local development agencies have often devised their own initiatives for development. Their programmes and activities tend to be quite different from those espoused under the popular welfare and efficiency approaches supported by planners and policy-makers. There are indications that, with the help of these groups and agencies, women are gaining increasing control over their own lives and working together to effect change. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to see what can be learned from initiatives which have empowered groups of women in the Third World.

Some initiatives have empowered women through awareness-raising. For example, Sutra, a NGO working in Himachal Pradesh, India, has helped women to understand how local political processes worked and how panchayat members often blocked their progress: 'The women's response was to develop innovative methods to make their protest and put their demands forward' (Price, 1992:54). For example, when higher caste villagers cut off a water supply to those in a lower caste area, the women blocked a road through which the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh was due to drive and would not allow him to pass until they had his written word that the water supply would be reinstated (Price, 1992:54). Other action taken by Sutra workers as their confidence grew was to oppose the opening of liquor stores in their villages and the planting of commercial trees rather than fodder species on common land:

*The actions they have undertaken have led to many changes in the women, increasing their confidence and providing the basis for a solidarity which has become more firmly established with time (Price, 1992:56).*

Other examples of innovative initiatives involve women learning to use film or drama to relay issues which are important to them. Sistren is an all-women theatre collective working in the Caribbean. It uses drama to deal with issues affecting working class women, recruiting such women to write and perform in plays which Sistren coordinates (Elson, 1991:195). By performing in front of many sectors of the community, including men



and youth, Sistren brings women's perspectives on social issues to life and is involved in conscientising audiences. One group of women living on a sugar estate were inspired to form an organisation after being involved in a Sistren drama. They then used drama to practise how they could confront the local Councillor to ask for better water access, a concern they had shared for some time. Eventually they were successful in getting his support and this further heightened women's awareness of the power of people's action and the collective power they as women could harness to challenge the male-dominated system (French, 1986). In another example the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad, mentioned above, has developed a video cooperative branch. Video SEWA, as it is called, has trained many women like Leelaben, previously an illiterate vegetable seller, to make their own educational films. As Leelaben stated: "At first...we were afraid of these machines. Now, we almost love them" (Stuart, 1991:81). Applications of their tapes have included educating women about health care, alternative technologies and how to use SEWA's savings and credit services (Stuart, 1991:80).

Women's organisations can also apply pressure to state institutions to secure resources. Vargas (1991:49) explains how the women's movement in Peru has come to question the structure of society. In one case, pressure was applied so that a local police branch would be established particularly to deal with women's claims, to be run by women police officers: '...the first day it opened its doors to the public there were almost 2,000 complaints filed by women beaten by their husbands, raped, and so forth'. Before pressure from women for this police branch government officials were not willing to acknowledge the dire need for such a service.

More subtle, but equally significant, initiatives which have brought about women's empowerment need to be considered too. Gabriela is a collective of women's organisations in the Philippines. In one project they innovatively combined a traditional chore, sewing, with potentially liberating discussions of women's rights. A nation-wide tapestry-making drive was the pretext for these discussions on legal rights which took place in schools, homes, factories and community centres (Gomez, 1986:39-40). March (1991) discusses a workshop hosted by Oxfam for pastoralist women, most of whom were illiterate, spoke only their indigenous language and had rarely, if ever, travelled beyond their home area alone. The workshop explored the meanings of traditional proverbs and songs, among other things, in order to explore women's position in pastoralist society. Proverbs included: 'The body that holds milk cannot hold intelligence' and 'Women can't make decisions in the home'. By analysing these proverbs women came to realise that they fail to get recognition for the valuable work they do in their communities and families. The workshop encouraged women to work together and build solidarity so that they could stand up against the forces which were oppressing them:

*"We go on despising ourselves and have no time to sit together and discuss these problems. We also perpetuate these myths because of conflict between women" - Pastoralist woman, (March, 1991:276).*

Leacock (1986a:262) cites an example of a traditional Australian Aboriginal women's grouping which women have revitalised in recent times as a way of '...resisting the erosion of their political base as women'. The *jilimi* is the ritual and social centre for women in a camp, an area taboo to men. In order to resist any challenges from men to their autonomy and independence, women at Warriabri have not fought to gain status in men's domains, rather, they have tried to preserve the *jilimi* which '...once assured their security and independence'.

As the focus of this thesis is on women in the Solomon Islands, it seems appropriate to consider whether there are any innovative, empowering development programmes for women being initiated in the Pacific Islands. Compared to the rest of the Third World the Pacific region has not been recognised as a hotbed of exciting movements of women working for change. Nevertheless, as Premdas indicated over a decade ago,

*The women's movement is a major catalytic force promoting fundamental change in the Pacific. While it could be argued that it is still rudimentary, the fact remains that the wheels of the movement have started to re-arrange many archaic barriers to equal opportunity....However incoherent it is, the movement disperses ideas which threaten to redesign sacred aspects of society (Premdas, 1983:226).*

Examples of this movement at work are provided below.

Cox (1988) discusses an example of networking for empowerment in East Sepik, Papua New Guinea. Exchange groups were organised whereby women leaders, who were often illiterate and had rarely been outside their own area, travelled to stay with women's groups involved in a development programme in a distant area. This encounter represented a big step forward in '...the awareness, commitment and confidence of village leaders' (Cox, 1988:9). It also made the women much more aware of global development issues and women's movements for change. In another example, one women's group made cassettes about the history and struggles of their group. As Cox (1988:12) explains, men's willingness to speak on these cassettes encouraged a change in the attitudes of men in other villages who listened to the cassettes:

*Men joined in the last part of the reading to express their support and solidarity and to describe the ways in which they had misunderstood, obstructed, and finally, aided the group...in some villages it has challenged obstructive and obstreperous men in an indirect way, confronting problems that the women cannot tackle directly.*

Even seemingly conservative women's groups can have value, as pointed out by Small (1990) in relation to MFOs (moving forward organisations) in Tonga. Through MFOs women have been generating income for village and home improvement since 1978. The



income comes from others in the community who support the members' fund-raising dances and activities. Thus MFOs provide leverage for women to extract money for household consumption from their husbands and the wider community. They indirectly empower women by providing a means for them to gain greater control over a community resource:

*The importance of the MFO in Tonga today is as a vehicle for women's control of resources in a system in which women are increasingly losing their social and economic clout (Small, 1990:279).*

In the mid-1980s the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) decided to involve grassroots women in writing a proposal to the government suggesting changes to the Family Law Bill. The VNCW organised informed discussions at all levels of society so as to develop women's awareness and knowledge of their legal rights, to encourage local participation in the legal system of Vanuatu and to address concerns some women had about the current family law (Pulea, 1986:312). This process of pursuing the opinions of a wide range of women and encouraging them to consider how the legal system in their country worked was empowering for those who participated in it.

Sexton (1989) discusses Wok Meri, a savings and banking system devised by women in Highland Papua New Guinea. Women were dissatisfied with their restricted access to and control over money so, through the Lutheran Women's Fellowship groups, they started saving the money they earned from selling vegetables and coffee. Gradually their own savings and loans system evolved. Some groups were able to accumulate large sums of money allowing individuals to make investments in village stores or trucks. Through their actions women have shown men how much money could be accumulated if they were more provident with household income rather than spending money on cards or beer. Some men publicly ridiculed the women's efforts, however, leading the women to form 'women's courts' through which they can hand out fines to men who try to undermine the importance of their work. Women have generally gained support for their work, however, showing themselves to be competent money managers, capable of planning and working together over the long term to achieve a common goal (Sexton, 1982:196):

*Wok Meri is significant because it institutionalized collective women's action and enables women to redefine property rights vis-à-vis men, and therefore to enhance their participation in the ceremonial and commercial sectors of the economy' (Sexton, 1989:152).*

The above examples are remarkable in some respects. All strive to make women more self-reliant and sufficiently confident to make their own choices and gain more '...control over the resources needed to implement those choices' (Elson, 1991:195). Although SEWA is a very large organisation which has earned itself an enviable reputation, most of the other examples discussed are more typical of small-scale development efforts or shows of solidarity by women. Some of these examples challenge oppressive tradition, like the power of higher caste people in Indian villages, while others draw on tradition to

build solidarity among women, for example, the Aboriginal *jilimi*. Groups like Sutra and the women's movement in Peru effectively challenged the state to provide resources for women in the form of a water supply and a police branch office for women. MFOs in Tonga enabled women to gain greater control over community resources and Wok Meri groups proved to highland Papua New Guinea communities that women could successfully save and invest in their own business. The Sistren theatre group and Video SEWA were examples from opposite sides of the globe showing how drama and film can be used to instil confidence in women and to encourage them to work together to effect change. Women's groups in the East Sepik gained a greater knowledge of the way women's lives were structured by networking with women from other areas. The VNCW involved village women in the law reform process. By challenging men, the state or their communities in these ways or gaining greater access to resources, women have gained greater control over their lives and shown others that they will not complacently sit back and accept the restrictions which society places upon them.

The above initiatives demonstrate women's potential for self-empowerment. These examples suggest that the welfare mould has been broken for many women as they revel in the freedom of pursuing more urgent concerns. The few examples above may not prove that this trend is universal but they certainly indicate that, through working towards visions for a better future, women are empowering themselves and initiating a process of transformation. Just because women's organisations and development agencies must work within society as it stands, no matter how patriarchal, does not mean they cannot work for future, transformative change (Barroso, 1991). In later chapters we will consider whether this process is also occurring in the Solomon Islands.

These initiatives are powerful tributes to the fact that development is much more than the top-down, project-focused system that the planning process would have us believe. Some of the organisations and development agencies discussed may have received funding from higher levels but their initiatives emerged directly from the needs or interests of grassroots women. Kabeer (1992a:36) believes that grassroots movements, which includes some women's organisations, should be given the opportunity to counter the 'top-down logic of the planning process'. There will be more discussion of this issue below in the section on visions of a future development agenda set by women.

Despite the progress many women's organisations have made, despite how impressive some individual records may be, no organisation or development agency has all the answers. For example, the renowned women's environmental organisation in Northern India, Chipko, can save trees but has not been so successful in stopping oppression and violence in the homes of its members (Sharma, 1991:166). Thus it is essential that the

development process is not stagnant. Its priorities must be modified continually according to the needs and interests of the subjects of development efforts.

So far this chapter has considered whether women's organisations, the state and women's machineries have a role to play in bringing about women's empowerment. We have also seen that empowerment is already occurring at the grassroots level in different social, economic and political situations in all corners of the globe and that this is having dramatic effects on the lives of women. Next we distinguish between different levels of empowerment to show the importance of moving beyond building the esteem of individual women and to consider whether even hierarchical national-level organisations can play a role in facilitating the process of empowerment.

### *Empowering strategies*

We are now learning more about empowering strategies, thanks largely to the writing of Third World women who realise that they need to spell out desired changes if development agencies are to see that there are viable ways of moving beyond the welfare and efficiency approaches, which are still widely adopted as official policy approaches to women's development (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:9). Alternative strategies, focusing on empowerment, deserve wider publicity. Such strategies should aim to achieve certain long term changes including a transformation of the subordinate relationship of women to men. They should also attempt to enhance women's life choices and to activate a change of consciousness among women participants (Anderson and Baud, 1987:30). As well as enhancing women's understanding of the forces affecting their lives, empowering strategies should aim to increase women's influence over decision making processes at every level of society (Longwe, 1991).

### **Levels of empowerment**

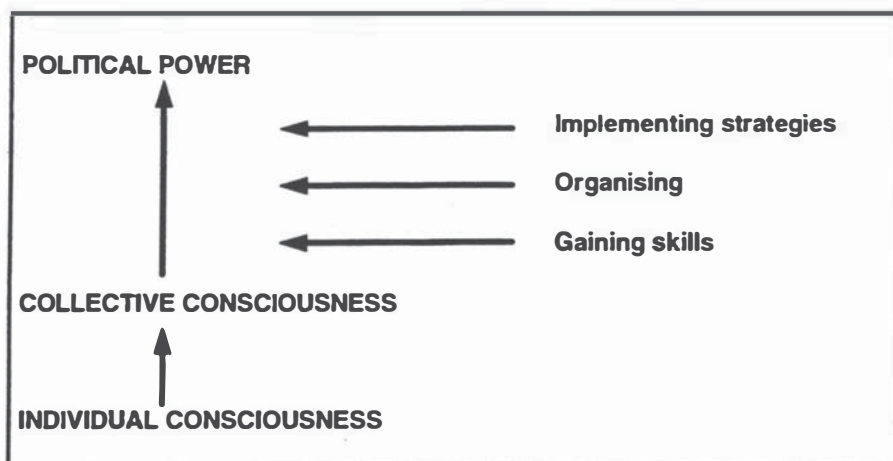
Friedmann (1992:116) recognises three forms of empowerment all of which are an important part of women's development. Psychological empowerment refers to '...a change in women's state of mind'. This may mean an increase in women's sense of dignity or knowledge about structures imposing on their lives: '...women need to be able to develop a sense of their own identity, an identity which is not submerged in their roles as wives, mothers and daughters' (Elson, 1991:192). Staudt (1987:156-7) calls this personal empowerment and says it includes increasing women's self-esteem and improving their personal communication skills, an important first step before women can go on to become politically empowered. On its own, however, personal empowerment does not result in political empowerment. For example, women's education may improve the confidence and opportunities of individual women without encouraging them to band together to pull down

barriers to the progress of women in society. Educating women can be an individualistic strategy (Beneria and Sen, 1981:298). Similarly, consciousness-raising programmes may on their own only contribute to psychological empowerment if they are not followed by collective action or networking. Thus psychological empowerment is not sufficient to encourage women to act on their concerns. If long term transformation is to come about, development efforts should not stop at this level (Sen and Grown, 1985; Staudt, 1990).

Social empowerment, by contrast, refers to the level at which women begin to mobilise around issues of concern to them including, for example, the environment or land rights. Political empowerment is another step up, involving women gaining access to social power (Friedmann, 1992:16). Social and political empowerment are the stages at which efforts to transform wider society can be most effectively developed. They may involve, for example, women working together and putting forward a collective voice to influence community decisions and mobilise vital community resources (Bruce, 1989). Networking and organisation building enhance the likelihood of these forms of empowerment occurring, thus women's organisations can play a key role in moving women beyond feeling confident in themselves to actually working for change.

Schuler (1986), with a similar model of levels of empowerment, suggests that individual consciousness leads to collective consciousness and to the inclination for women to work for change as they begin to gain skills and organise together. This can develop into political power (Figure One).

**FIGURE ONE: Building Empowerment**



Source: (Schuler, 1986:33)



## Strategies for empowerment at grassroots and national levels

To many working in the development field ideas for strategies to empower women may appear revolutionary because they do not fit neatly into the ubiquitous project mould. However,

*The truer one seeks to be to their [poor people's] perspectives, their priorities, their understanding of their own situation, the more difficult it becomes to design the kind of neat, hard-edged, time bound project so beloved of the development industry (Elliot, 1987:42-43);*

This is not to suggest that projects are inherently 'bad', rather, governments, donors and development agencies operating at the national level need to realise that projects are not always the only way or the best way to facilitate development and empowerment. Also, when they do choose to implement projects, they should consider giving women at grassroots level more control over them than they do at present. Longwe (1991:153) argues that projects initiated at national level '...are not facing up to women's need for more control over their social and economic lives'. Women do not want an insignificant project in their name tagged on to the end of a big development programme or separate 'token' projects assumed to take care of 'women's needs' and keep all women happy. A transformation of donors', governments' and development agencies' approach is needed.

Distinguishing between what strategies for empowerment can work at grassroots and national levels is an integral issue in understanding how the approaches of donors, governments and development agencies can be transformed. At the grassroots level empowerment typically occurs through the activities of women's groups or development agencies with a stated commitment to people in rural areas. Such organisations may aim to increase women's knowledge, improve their confidence, develop leadership and technical skills and organisational capacity or improve women's income-earning capacity. As the majority of women in the Third World function at the grassroots level, and also face constraints at this level, this is where attempts to empower women must start. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be done from the national level to assist women's empowerment. While empowerment of the majority of women cannot take place at the national level because empowerment is not a top-down process, institutions working at the national level can support or facilitate the process of empowerment at grassroots level through various actions, which will be specified next.

Sen and Grown (1987:87) have suggested four vital strategies for women's empowerment: popular education, consciousness-raising, political mobilisation and legal changes. I will discuss each of these in turn, suggesting how national-level organisations can support such strategies and how they can be implemented by women's groups and others at grassroots level (Table One).



**TABLE ONE: Examples of strategies for the empowerment of women at grassroots and national levels**

	GRASSROOTS LEVEL	NATIONAL LEVEL
<b>POPULAR EDUCATION</b>	Theatre groups; classes in literacy, numeracy, health, agriculture & other topics requested by villagers	Funds for NGOs bringing development education to villages; budget allocation to non-formal education; re-training male and female extension workers; training for women's leaders in non-traditional skills
<b>CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING</b>	Networking; encouraging women to explore their feelings and needs; building solidarity; using role play and drama to explore and publicise issues of concern	Guest speakers to tour villages; free radio time; distributing newsletters or magazines aimed at issues of concern to rural women; support & resources for women's groups with feminists aims
<b>POLITICAL MOBILISATION</b>	Discussing why women should vote & what makes a good political representative; helping women candidates with their campaigns	Allocating political seats for women; assisting politically-motivated women's organisations with funding; funds for women candidates to do study tours
<b>LEGAL CHANGE</b>	Discussing how the legal system works and any weaknesses in it; lobbying the local MP, or higher levels, for desired changes	Implementing legal changes to protect women's interests; ensuring that if traditional laws are upheld, men are still punished for crimes against women and women's land rights are protected; widespread consultation with people when law changes are to be made

Popular education involves making education available to all, not discriminating against some people because they are adults, they have no money for fees, little free time, are based in rural areas or because they belong to disadvantaged groups, such as women. Effective information flows are an essential part of popular education, particularly in countries where settlements are dispersed or separated by difficult terrain. At the grassroots level, travelling theatre groups can play an important role in educating villagers on issues such as deforestation and health. Women's groups based in villages may also promote popular education by starting up literacy and numeracy classes for women at a time of day when they are most likely to be able to attend. At the national level funds can be provided for popular education, for example, the government can devote part of the education budget to non-formal education while donors can choose to support NGOs which have a commitment to grassroots education, rather than those that base their teaching activities at urban or rural centres. Furthermore, the government can re-train women extension workers who are supposed to be catering for women's interests but have focused solely on domestic topics and can re-train men involved in agriculture or health extension to more effectively get their messages across to women.

Secondly, consciousness-raising programmes for men and women, regarding women's issues, can be empowering. Before people can be mobilised to work for change they must have an understanding of development issues effecting their lives. Consciousness-raising for women should aim to:

*...deepen...their understanding of the legal, cultural, political and economic underpinnings of their subordination and [help them to] gain...the skills needed to utilize the system (where possible) or challenge and even subvert it (where necessary) to assert their rights, redress injustices and access economic and political resources (Schuler, 1986:1).*

Consciousness-raising for men should enhance their perception of the injustices which women face in society, with the aim of gaining men's support for any changes women wish to bring about. At the grassroots level, women's groups can build their members' esteem, develop solidarity and offer opportunities for group counselling and discussion so that women can explore their feelings and needs (Anderson and Baud, 1987:156). Women's groups can also encourage networking as this draws women from different areas and of different persuasions together to learn from each other. By encouraging women to express their concerns through role play or drama, NGOs or women's groups working with rural women can build women's confidence. This may lead to them performing in front of their own and neighbouring communities, providing women with a public outlet for their grievances. At the national level, development agencies can compile lists of rural women's groups and send regular, informative newsletters or magazines to them, using local languages and broaching issues which rural women specify are of concern to them. Donors or the government could provide funds for guest speakers, such as female lawyers, politicians or doctors, to tour rural women's groups stimulating discussions and answering questions. For example, women at grassroots level need to be made aware of their rights under their country's legal system, especially of statutes covering family law and domestic violence. Governments could also provide free time on national radio for people or organisations to discuss how the political system is run, to get health and education messages across and to discuss controversial issues, such as foreign companies exploiting their resources.

Sen and Grown's third strategy, political mobilisation, involves activating women's voices in community, local and national government arenas as well as spurring women on to take independent action or make a stand against formal levels of government on issues which concern them. Consciousness-raising is a pre-requisite for political mobilisation as women who put themselves forward for positions of power must have faith in their own abilities and the support of those around them. At the grassroots level, women's groups can hold meetings to inform women of the importance of their vote and why they do not have to vote for the same person as their husband. When women understand the importance of having political representation, they may be more likely to support and rally for other women

who decide to become candidates. At the national level, governments can show that they value women's perspectives by allocating seats specifically for women in area councils, provincial assemblies and other such official political bodies which have a low representation of women. There is a danger that such seats will fall into the hands of the wives of prominent business, political or religious leaders but this may be alleviated if local women's organisations are asked to nominate candidates for these seats and all women have the right to vote for their representative. Donors can assist women political candidates to prepare for elections by funding study tours. They can also choose to assist more politically motivated women's organisations, such as those which seek to change the traditional relations between men and women.

Fourthly, Sen and Grown comment on legal change as a strategy for empowering women. I have already noted that legal changes do not usually result in changes in people's attitudes, which continue to perpetuate inequalities throughout society but changes to the law may undermine some of the structures which have accorded women second place. For example, it is essential that legal changes are made to correct situations in which women are disadvantaged in the workplace. At the highest official level such changes are evidence of at least some commitment by government to women's development and the treatment of women as equal citizens. Complications often arise in countries which maintain dual legal systems with traditional courts and 'modern' courts operating simultaneously. Cases of violence against women and systems of property rights may become particularly confused under such circumstances. In such situations, governments must provide clear guidelines so that men who are violent to women in the domestic realm are not protected by tradition and also, so that tradition is upheld concerning women's rights over land in matrilineal societies. National women's organisations, like the VNCW, can lobby rural women for their opinions when a law change is being considered. At the grassroots, women can be encouraged to discuss how the country's legal system protects them and to consider any weaknesses with the system which they would like to challenge. They can then petition their local MP or take their concerns to higher levels.

In addition to the consciousness-raising, political mobilisation, popular education and legal change espoused by Sen and Grown, there may be other factors which affect women's empowerment. There is a school of thought that one of the best strategies contributing to the long term goal of empowering women and achieving gender equity is to improve women's access to productive resources, such as training, credit and land, and basic goods and services, including education (Moghadam, 1990:47). This is also a strategy which national level organisations can be involved in. Establishing a resource base can enable women to initiate their own forms of development rather than just reacting to policies and programmes (Charlton, 1984).

In summary, while national level organisations often have hierarchical structures and inappropriate systems in place to reach rural women effectively and empower them, they can play an important role in facilitating the process of empowerment. Furthermore, both grassroots and national level organisations need to look beyond developing the skills and confidence of individual women because, while this contributes to their psychological empowerment, it does not necessarily lead them to work for change. For this to happen and, therefore, for women to show signs of social or political empowerment, they must have a sense of collective solidarity. Women's organisations can play an important role in building solidarity and conscientising women to recognise structures which oppress them and to find ways of dealing with these.

Women in individual countries, towns and villages of the Third World will have their own views and priorities on development, so it is important for national level organisations to listen to them if they wish to facilitate their empowerment: 'Whatever we do, if we do it as feminists, we focus on women's needs and women's experiences; and we find these out by listening to women' (Bulbeck, 1993:10). Next we consider some alternative development agendas as suggested by a number of women from the Third World.

### *Visions of a future development agenda set by women*

It is clear that strategies for women's empowerment could considerably alter women's life opportunities but it may also be necessary for an alternative development paradigm which supports such strategies to emerge. One argument supporting an alternative agenda is that for centuries now male perspectives, male policies and male strategies have been to the fore and yet this has not led to an improvement in the living conditions of the majority of the world's poor. Since the mid-1980s there has been increasing support for the possibility that heeding women's perspectives and ideas may provide new, more effective approaches to development. Thus those in the development industry who hold power, that is, the planners, policy-makers and officials of all kinds of development agencies, have been urged to listen to the voices of women from the Third World. According to Antrobus (1991:311), women's '...values, views and visions [should] serve as a central focus for our policy-making'. This view is supported by Boulding who asks:



*"Who will create the new images? It will be those who are marginal to the present society, who are excluded from the centres of power, who stand at the world's peripheries and see society with different eyes...(they possess)...practical everyday skills at the micro and intermediate levels of human activity<sup>5</sup> - the family, the neighbourhood, the town...I am referring, of course, to women" (quoted in Jaquette, 1982).*

Others also support this argument. They believe women have evolved special skills because many have demonstrated great resourcefulness in adapting to the global economic and environmental crises and they have somehow managed to balance reproductive, productive and community management roles to meet the needs of themselves and their families (Molyneux, 1992:255; Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:78; Tamate, 1985:65; Antrobus, 1993:59). Kihoro (1992:21) argues that women's voices deserve to be heard because it is they who have been most disadvantaged by past efforts.

A problem with these prescriptions is that women are once again being asked to be the saviours of the world, which presumably burdens them with extra responsibilities. While the aim is for women to have a bigger say in decision making concerning development policy and practice, something which is in their long term interests, this should not mean that women are responsible for implementing all of the necessary changes involved with creating a new development agenda. In the same way, many see women as the saviours of the environment and this provides the rationale for development agencies to use women as a source of cheap labour in social forestry projects, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Thus, when discussing the roles women in the Third World can play in defining an alternative development agenda, it is essential that we ask how the responsibility for implementing the necessary changes may be shared.

The process whereby women are creating their own development agendas has already begun:

*Today, a rapidly expanding group of Third World women is committed to a search for a more equitable development paradigm based on...decentralization of power...the sustainable use of resources and a people-centred approach to the satisfaction of human needs (Momsen and Townsend, 1987:17)<sup>6</sup>.*

Those supporting such an agenda aim for societies to be transformed so that non-oppressive and non-exploitative relationships exist between men and women, and among classes, ethnic and social groups (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:155). Several women writers and activists have spoken out in support of such an ethic. The DAWN network argue that a

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<sup>5</sup> Women who are preoccupied with the daily survival of their families have evolved skills and knowledge which have enabled them, for example, to use a basic level of resources to attain a water supply for their area, to earn an income so at least some of their children can go to school and to evolve other creative strategies for development despite their sometimes desperate situation.

<sup>6</sup> These Third World women have received considerable support from Western women too who have tried to support and build on their ideas.



major challenge for the 1990s is for women to convince governments that '...women-focused, community-based approaches can provide basic needs in economically viable ways' (Antrobus, 1990:17). Shiva (quoted in Cleves-Mosse, 1993:167) argues that through their traditional gender roles women followed the principles of respect for life in nature and society, following sustainable, environmentally-sensitive and just forms of development. It is suggested, therefore, that rather than being muted by existing power structures women's voices should be heard, not just for women's sake alone but so that all people may benefit (Boulding, 1981:27).

It would be short-sighted, however, to assume that all women in the Third World pursue 'just' forms of development, just as it is short-sighted to suggest that all men are opposed to sustainable, life-enhancing forms of development. While those women who have relied on the land, forests, lakes and rivers to meet the daily sustenance needs of themselves and their families are likely to live in balance with their environment, other women are employed by companies which promote destruction of the environment as part of their search for profits or, they may be part of a landed family who exploit the peasants employed by them. It is important to specify, therefore, that it is the opinions and ideas of women pursuing sustainable forms of development that are being advocated by those urging planners and policy-makers to listen to women's voices.

Some women writers from the Third World have started to advocate feminism as a perspective to end domination and oppression and transform society. They show feminism to be concerned with a wide range of issues, not just looking at women as if they existed in a vacuum (McFarland, 1988:303). The approach they follow does not force them to reject all traditional morals and values:

*...equality is no longer the overriding goal; women are encouraged to seek empowerment on their own terms and not to abandon their moral perspectives or desert their family and community roles (Jaquette, 1990:66).*

Thus a balance is being sought between the feminisms of Western women which, as was explained in Chapter Two, have often been rejected by women of the Third World, and Third World women's own ideas on an ideal structuring of society. The DAWN team stress that the present male-dominated system needs to be more open, to reject hierarchy and to nurture a sense of responsibility (Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:79) and that a feminist vision could foster this change. Feminism can illuminate many issues, from the industrial disaster at Bhopal to the international debt crisis because it comprises,

*...a transformational politics, with the capacity to transform not only individual lives but all the structures of oppression and domination which shape women's lives, including racism, class and nationality (Antrobus, 1991:315).*

Bunch and Carrillo (1990:77) discuss several attempts by Third World women to promote their own agendas for future development. These women have based their writing on their personal definitions of development, which are typically not based on a primary goal of economic growth (Elliot, 1987:74).

The first of these visions to gain public recognition arose out of a meeting of the Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development, held in Bangkok in 1979. Two long-term goals were proposed, the first concerned with equality, dignity and freedom of choice for women as well as the power to control their own lives, and the second focusing on the creation of a more just social and economic order, with the removal of inequity and oppression as pre-requisites. This meeting really brought the issue of women's empowerment to the fore:

*...power for women was seen as essential...as a sense of internal strength, as the right to determine one's choices in life, and the right to influence the direction of social change (Bunch and Carrillo, 1990:77).*

Antrobus (1991:313), a co-founder of DAWN, calls her view 'the wisdom approach'. She makes several points regarding the development process and the study of its effectiveness. She argues that in any analysis of development we must be explicit about the theories we are drawing on, especially realising the difference between paradigms which maintain the *status quo* and those which challenge it (for example, the equilibrium and alternative paradigms of Chapter Two). Micro level experiences must be used to inform policies and programmes implemented at the macro level and further, at the micro level, individuals must be able to understand how macro level policies are affecting them, otherwise they will not be able to press for meaningful change. Any analysis of development must be holistic, combining political, social and cultural dimensions as well as the long-favoured economic analysis. According to Antrobus it is no longer acceptable to blame 'underdevelopment' on a lack of resources when 'development', or lack of it, really reflects power inequalities. The household must be seen as an integral part of the economy, whether work within it is paid or unpaid. Lastly, she argues, an alternative analysis must be feminist in orientation therefore giving equal weight to feeling or intuition as to scientific rationality (Antrobus, 1991:314).

Mies also devised a feminist model for development based on two principles. Firstly, she believed there was a need to return to self-reliance of individual countries for their food, clothing and shelter needs which would drastically alter '...the existing and non-reciprocal international division of labour' and would mean that countries would be free from hunger and political blackmail (Mies, 1991:136-137). Her second principle regarded the need for recognition by men and women that men must also begin a movement towards destroying patriarchal relations in society. This would involve men sharing more equally the

social reproduction roles which are largely considered women's responsibility, particularly caring for children, the sick and the old, and housework (Mies, 1991:139).

Ideas concerning alternative models of development have changed the lives of individual women but, because of women's lack of political power, have had little impact on transforming wider social structures (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:156). A major concern seems to be the absence of the political will, at official levels, to bring these feminist visions into being. It is obvious again why so much faith has been expressed in women's organisations:

*The feminist transformation of development will not happen all of a sudden. It is a long-term process of growth that these organizations represent, as women learn to take control over their lives and to exercise more power and responsibility in the development and direction of their societies...The feminist perspective calls for faith that in the process of women's organizing, more visions of how to create the new development will unfold (Bunch and Camillo, 1990:82).*

What we can learn from the feminist views of development of Antrobus, Mies and Boulding is that, whether or not some of their ideas will every win widespread support, it is clear that the issue of power within gender relations must be considered when any development problem is being discussed. This includes discussions on topics such as the environment, human rights and population growth (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1992:23).

## ***Summary***

Chapter Three began by stating that it is time for all concerned with women's development and empowerment to start challenging the *status quo*. Donors, governments, development agencies and concerned individuals alike must look beyond healing the symptoms of women's oppression and find strategies which work towards overcoming the causes of this oppression. In other words, they must consider how they can cater for strategic gender interests. The types of oppression women face in any instance varies according to class, ethnic and religious variables as well as gender, which is the overriding power relation that this thesis is concerned with. Thus the solutions will be various and multi-dimensional. No single strategy has all the answers or is right for all women.

Certain writers from the Third World have shown that we do not have to accept the current predominant development agendas which focus on economic efficiency, often to the detriment of social concerns. They have provided us with examples of more equitable and just alternatives which women can start to strive towards, alternatives of a society not based on economic goals alone. Despite women's limited power to put these agendas into practice, their visions are an important starting point for social change.

This chapter has suggested that women's organisations can contribute significantly to strategies for change for women. It is they who, through solidarity building and raising collective consciousness, can take women beyond psychological empowerment to social and political empowerment. By equipping women with skills, knowledge and confidence, women's organisations can inspire women to work to transform social structures which have disadvantaged them (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:158). By acting on concerns which face women collectively, they can enhance their control over their lives and gain more political power.

While some writers have questioned the usefulness of separate women's organisations, claiming that they marginalise women, women in the Third World continue to rally in support of them. As long as gender hierarchies prevail, there is a need for separate organisations. Women's organisations do not, however, have to adopt formal procedures and structures to be effective. Informal women's organisations and grassroots movements which exist somewhat separately from the dominant male-organised, hierarchical development system have great potential to transform oppressive structures in society. Other women's organisations, however, will have to overcome weaknesses such as a welfare-legacy and elitist tendencies if they are to go beyond assisting women to cope with everyday survival and empower their members. It has also emerged that women's organisations need to build alliances, with other women's groups, with grassroots organisations, with the state, and with men and women with feminist visions, if they are to maximise the resources and power at their disposal and to influence a change in attitudes regarding women's development. Before they can successfully develop these alliances, however, they need to establish an autonomous base so that they can operate without fear of compromising their initial objectives.

While much faith has been placed in governments as implementors of policy and programmes supporting women's development, this chapter points out the limitations of such an approach. It is apparent that governments and states have their own interests which typically are not in line with those of oppressed groups such as women. Building alliances with the state to secure power and resources or working from within the state to transform it, can, however, be effective strategies.

It is apparent that states, governments, donors, development agencies, men, women's organisations, women's machineries and movements of women can all play a role in empowering women. They cannot, however, all play the same role. While organisations and institutions working at the national level, including the women's machinery, can facilitate women's empowerment, grassroots women's organisations and women's movements are in the best position to initiate a self-determined process of transformation. They can propose



alternative strategies for development based on the resources they have available to them and the needs and interests most important to women.

This chapter has also explained why empowering strategies have proved to be popular with Third World women who have had the opportunity to be involved with them. Women are starting to build on their experiences with women's groups and are becoming emboldened to take action and stand up for their own interests in their homes and communities. Women from around the globe have made some extraordinary achievements by working together, including gaining greater control over their lives and effecting change in their communities and in wider society. Already, much has been achieved:

*Women have developed an increased capacity for internal resilience, and for collective non-violent resistance. They have been forced to shed traditional submissiveness and to withstand community and family pressures. They have organized using traditional cultural forms to raise the consciousness of men and women about injustice and inequality (McFarland, 1988:305).*

Later chapters will consider if this trend is occurring also in the Solomon Islands and whether empowering strategies are making any headway there.

Whereas Chapter Two discussed Moser's five policy approaches to women's development, Chapter Three has shown that, at grassroots level, much depends on the work of women's groups and movements of women which may be quite detached from the planning process and rarely feel the effects of official programmes that planners implement. Empowering women is not simply an issue of modifying policy approaches. Development agencies could learn a great deal about how to facilitate a process of change for women through observing the actions of certain women's organisations and movements.

My thesis, then, proposes that women's organisations and movements which operate at grassroots level, having little direct association with mainstream development processes and institutions, are contributing a great deal more to women's development and empowerment than has been acknowledged. This lack of recognition is due to the fact that they do not usually focus on large-scale, material development and that, rather than starting a revolution, they are involved in an on-going process of negotiation with the power-holders in their communities and further afield, working from below to negotiate for more resources, for political representation, for recognition for their work and for changes in the structures which have limited women's opportunities. The fact that they rely to a large extent on local resources and derive directly from the needs and interests of grassroots women leads to the suggestion that mainstream development institutions could learn a great deal from their operations. Further, my thesis proposes that unless mainstream development institutions and agencies start to actively challenge the *status quo* and to look beyond the material,



project-bound definition of development, their efforts will continue to have little positive impact on the lives of women in the Third World.

Chapter Four, to follow, explains the methodology behind my research on women and empowerment in the Solomon Islands, keeping in mind that the empowerment approach advocates use of empowering research methodologies. Following this, results of fieldwork are revealed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

# CHAPTER FOUR: Methodology and fieldwork techniques

## *Introduction*

Previous chapters have discussed why many attempts to assist women in the Third World have been ineffective and why an empowerment approach, which recognises the potential of women's organisations as well as official development agencies to promote women's development, could provide an effective alternative. This chapter, by contrast, focuses on my research philosophy, the research techniques I chose to use and how my research went in practice. The aim is to illuminate my rationale for research, which effected how I chose to carry out the research and which, in turn, impacts on the results which emerged.

Acknowledging that the means by which data is collected also offers the researcher opportunities to enhance women's lives, I attempted to optimise the benefits of my research for women while still obtaining the necessary information for my thesis.

## *Fieldwork rationale*

Initial reading about women's development in Melanesian countries, including the Solomon Islands, revealed that despite a surge of interest in funding projects and programmes aimed at women, they still faced enormous disadvantages compared to men. Statistics showed that literacy rates for women were very low and that women were poorly represented in formal political spheres and tertiary education. Personal contacts informed me that development initiatives rarely reached those in remote rural areas. Further research revealed that much emphasis was placed on the potential of the national machinery for women (the government women's division and the National Council of Women) in these countries as a facilitator of women's development. My original research proposal emerged, therefore, as an analysis of the national machinery for women in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, comparing how they related to women at grassroots level and how effective they were at facilitating the empowerment of women. When research permission was denied for Vanuatu two months prior to my planned departure date<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> At the time, no explanation was given for denying me a permit. I had corresponded with several leaders of women's organisations in Vanuatu who were in support of my research and several months after my permit was declined one wrote explaining that, as there had just been a change of government, it was likely that anyone applying for a permits at this time had become unfortunate subjects of the new government's decision to exert its powers.

however, I decided to expand the research topic. Rather than just focusing on the national machinery, I planned to consider the programmes of a wide range of agencies and organisations with a stated commitment to women's development, analysing whether or not they were meeting gender needs and interests and considering what strategies were most effective in facilitating women's empowerment<sup>2</sup>.

An extensive exploration of current programmes for women and the activities of women's organisations was planned, as well as interviews and casual discussions with rural women to gain insights into development issues which were of concern to them. Based on theoretical material presented in earlier chapters, my expectation was that those initiatives which focused on overcoming women's subordination and empowering them would have the most positive impact on rural women's lives by enabling them to have more control over social, economic and political forces and bringing about a long term transformation of society.

## *The research philosophy*

### **Important considerations for finding a suitable methodology**

The process through which the research enquiry is carried out, whether implicitly or explicitly, impacts upon the findings which will emerge: 'How human behaviour is described has considerable consequences for the kinds of explanations that are developed about it' (Tiffany, 1987:347). Thus, if one wishes to assess what difficulties women have faced in their involvement with a water supply project, the decision to use either a questionnaire with 'yes' and 'no' answers or to assess the project using participant observation is likely to impact greatly on the results which are received. Methodology influences everything from the researcher's choice of topic, to collection and analysis of findings and to the way in which the research results are made known.

Chapter One mentioned that researchers have tended to avoid GAD topics which are related to the subordination of women, claiming that it is best not to interfere with the culture of those being researched. A few research institutions are, however, now challenging this non-confrontational approach. For example, the Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers (1984:144) argues that feminist geographers must be actively concerned with making changes to gender relations so as to overcome gender subordination, rather than merely understanding gender relations. Also,

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<sup>2</sup> Material on how well gender needs and interests were being addressed is discussed in Chapter Six, while Chapter Seven provides a selection of case studies of GAD initiatives to see what effect they had on women's lives, including gender relations.

the Women and Development Program at the Institute of Social Studies, the Hague, and the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, are both carrying out action-oriented research on women's struggles, including women's organisations and grassroots movements of women (Institute of Development Studies, 1991:189; Institute of Social Studies, 1991:218). Such research is highly appropriate as it shows what divergent groups of women are doing, on their own initiative and relying mainly on their own skills and resources, to improve their position.

This new trend in the orientation of GAD research backs up the claim that although some feminist research still takes place within a conventional, positivist paradigm, '...an increasing amount operates out of a critical, praxis-oriented paradigm concerned with both producing emancipatory knowledge and empowering the researched' (Lather, 1988:570). My research, with its concern for documenting a wide range of development initiatives for women in the Solomon Islands, including the work of women's organisations, is adding to this new trend in action-research on Third World women as it goes further than describing the disadvantages faced by women in the development process, in fact, it suggests how strategies for the empowerment of women can be devised. It also analyses whether various initiatives challenge the structures of society which subordinate women, and whether they change gender relations, rather than simply seeing whether they assist women in carrying out everyday survival tasks. Other recent studies of women in the Solomon Islands (Pfanner, 1987; WDD/ILO, 1991; UNICEF<sup>3</sup>, 1993), have been limited to describing the work of development agencies, government and women's groups, rather than assessing the effectiveness of their work or suggesting better strategies for addressing gender needs and interests.

### **Empowerment-oriented methodologies**

Central to this chapter is the aim that my research strategy and techniques would be guided by the principles advocated by the empowerment approach, which I have supported in previous chapters. Several 'methodological schools' which incorporate such principles are described below.

Empowering research methodologies focus on non-exploitative techniques of data gathering, questioning the role of the participants in the research rather than assuming they will be there to be 'used' by the researcher at will, and formulating ways in which participants will learn about themselves, individually and collectively, as a result of the research process. A researcher using an empowering methodology actively seeks to harness the opinions of research participants and encourages them to see that they have knowledge or beliefs

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Children's Fund

which are of interest and importance to others. Where appropriate, the researcher will also encourage the contribution of participants into research design and analysis. In my case, using an empowering methodology involved finding methods which would empower the women participating in my research and finding ways in which my findings could benefit women in the Solomon Islands in the long term.

Action-oriented research, which aims to accomplish change, has become a popular research methodology in the GAD field, for political as well as scientific reasons. The aim of action research is to gain empirical information about women worldwide but to do this in conjunction with women from the Third World, according to their research priorities: 'This type of research not only aims at data collection, but also endeavours to activate and liberate women's own resources and raise their consciousness about their conditions' (Ostergaard, 1992:4). This is in line with the notion that research can be a process of mutual education (Sen and Grown, 1987). It is argued that cooperative research ventures provide an appropriate environment in which strategies for dealing with women's subordination can be devised.

Under the heading of action-oriented research comes participatory action research (PAR). In participatory research those studied are involved in devising the study format and in analysing the data (Reinharz, 1992:181). Participatory approaches are, '...for those who take people's lives seriously and do not just make use of people for their own, basically external purposes' (Swantz, 1992:119). The PAR methodology arose in Asia and Latin America in the 1970s through the work of grassroots development activists seeking, '...to set in motion processes of social change by the populations themselves, as they perceive their own reality' (Rahnema, 1992:129). Participatory research approaches, while stressing immersion in the communities to be studied, do not promote participant observation in the conventional anthropological sense. PAR is about involving the researcher as, '...an active participant in the life process she or he observes', rather than leaving them as an outside observer (Swantz, 1992:119).

There are several drawbacks to participatory research. Firstly, training initiators requires a lot of time and resources. A lack of appropriate initiators in the past meant that change was often imposed from the outside, rather than being culturally defined, thus meaning that PAR was unlikely to bring about new forms of knowledge and power (Rahnema, 1992:124-125). Apparently in many cases 'agents of change' have used participatory methods, '...simply as new and more subtle forms of manipulation' and '...the way many an activist interpreted their mission contributed to dis-valuing the traditional and vernacular forms of power' (Rahnema, 1992:125, 123). Although the philosophy of action-oriented approaches is commendable, it is evident that there have been difficulties with implementing them in practice.



Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) was designed for use by teams of 'experts' going to appraise projects where time and money were limited. RRA's developers clearly acknowledge the usefulness of RRA techniques beyond project evaluation: '...a wide variety of fields of study with very different objectives can make use of the concepts and principles of RRA and, at least some of, its core techniques' (McCracken et al., 1988:14).

Although RRAs are not lengthy they aim for maximum use of local resources, particularly relying upon the skills and knowledge of local people, rejecting conventional methods of rural development analysis which are top-down and highly structured. Observations by those conducting the RRA are recognised as often being more important than the appraisal itself. Conventional methods of research which used standardised questionnaires and statistical economic analysis are rejected. It is thought that they, '...were characteristically inflexible, insensitive to local conditions and lacked breadth or integration...' (McCracken et al., 1988:7).

Various techniques have been devised to reduce potential bias posed by the lack of available time for an RRA and to overcome the dangers of superficiality and error. For example, it is recommended that interviews are conducted on-site so that a person's work is minimally interrupted by interviewing, that they take place in a setting in which the individual is comfortable (for women this may be in a cook house when they are preparing a meal), and that an effort is made to reach less accessible villages (not only those near to roads) and more marginalised groups within the village. Interviews are intended to be informal in nature, with questions phrased in simple language and asked in a non-threatening manner, with opportunities for two-way dialogue (Molnar, 1989:24-25). In order to cross check information, RRA employs the technique of triangulation through which several different sources and means of gathering information are used: 'The accuracy and completeness of an RRA study is maximized by investigating each aspect of the situation in a variety of ways' (McCracken et al., 1988:12).

Various guidelines have been proposed relating to an appropriate methodology for feminist research. Mies (1983) believes that feminist research should serve the interests of dominated and oppressed groups, with a change in the status quo being a starting point for scientific quests. Research would then take a view from below according to women's collective interests, rather than topics being decided by what is strategic for the researcher's career. She argues that both the researchers and the researched should be conscientised by the research process, with a relationship of mutual trust being developed. In a move away from the male-dominated, objective methods of the past, the feminist researcher should be able to partially identify with the researched, rather than placing themselves as

distant observers, and actively participate in actions and struggles for women's emancipation.

Researchers at the Asia and Pacific Development Centre have similar ideas on feminist research. They state that researchers have certain responsibilities including: building relationships with and between women activists and grassroots women; putting knowledge in the hands of individuals, action groups and policy-makers; drawing up research agendas in consultation with policy-makers; and helping to publicise issues of importance to women by, for example, publishing research results in a popular style (APDC, 1984:13).

Many writers now argue that there should be provision for feedback between researcher and informants and that both conceptualisation and methods used for obtaining information should incorporate the interests of the people being studied (Driscoll and McFarland, 1989:189). Some even suggest that to use exploitative methods of enquiry in the interests of one's own career advancement is to engage in "rape research" (Lather, 1988:570). This is not to discredit foreign researchers completely, however. Indeed, it is excessively romantic to claim that only indigenous people are competent to speak on the social issues effecting their countries (Goodman, 1985:8). What is essential is that women should not be seen merely as a source of data through which a researcher can further his or her career; the researcher should be accountable and research should be a two-way process of interaction (Elson, 1991:193).

## **Qualitative versus quantitative techniques**

In recent years it has been recognised that research can become a way of working with women, either through informal, participative techniques or more detached, long-term efforts (Wallace, 1991:188). Some wonder, however, whether research has actually been transformed to become more participative and able to provide explanations after the long domination through the seventies and early eighties of methodologies promoting, '...value-free, neutral, uninvolved, research, of a hierarchical, non reciprocal relationship between research subject and research object...' (Mies, 1979). In attempts to remain objective and detached from research participants, researchers often blinded themselves to the reality that:

*...non-involvement can itself obscure truth. We need to allow the purportedly 'female' characteristics of empathy, intuition and concern for the feelings of others to temper the purportedly 'male' characteristics of objectivity and rationality if we are to understand people's actions and attitudes (Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers, 1984:135).*

This leads us to the debate on quantitative versus qualitative research techniques. A move was made towards supporting qualitative methods of data collection within the social sciences when it was realised that quantitative methods, which were particularly favoured during the 1960s, were not necessarily more 'scientific' than qualitative methods. This move has sponsored greater interest in forms of research which prioritise women's experience. Quantitative methods, as they were typically used in the past, often failed to come to terms with the complexity of social phenomena (Driscoll and McFarland, 1989:189), whereas qualitative techniques, such as observation and in-depth interviewing, were recognised for their potential in providing the researcher with insights into people's attitudes and the meaning of behaviour (de Vaus, 1991:57). Certainly qualitative methods require greater interaction between the researcher and the research participants. This may be why Boesveld (1986:20) argues that, where the needs and concerns of women are the object of research, research at grassroots level using qualitative methods is the most effective means of data gathering available.

This is not meant to reject quantitative techniques outright. McCormack (1989:25) argues that a pluralism be maintained in our research design utilising both qualitative and quantitative techniques and including case histories, participant observation and group studies. Further, while quantitative techniques have not always been associated with participatory methodologies, there is no need for there to be dissension here. If participants are involved in setting the research agenda, designing surveys or questionnaires and helping to analyse the results, quantitative techniques can also be participatory.

It is still important that we recognise, however, that either quantitative or qualitative techniques will be most appropriate in some circumstances. Quantitative techniques can provide quick and clear results which qualitative techniques are invaluable where the researcher wishes to delve into sensitive matters. For example, in many cultures,

*Conflicts between the sexes are kept particularly hidden from outsiders...[but] behind-the-scenes reality must be uncovered if the voices of the less powerful are to be heard and their viewpoints made known. It goes without saying that information of such a sensitive nature cannot be obtained by using quantitative techniques...qualitative research is required, which takes more time and more intensive contact with the target group... (Boesveld et al., 1986:31).*

Overall, while supporting McCormack's views on the value of a pluralistic approach, I opted to use a variety of qualitative techniques for gathering data. This was largely because my research was exploratory, requiring the use of methods which provide scope for a range of new information to be acquired. For one to be able to write the structured questionnaires and surveys used in much quantitative research, the basic parameters of the topic must already be known. Also, rather than just describing development initiatives directed at women, my research aimed to analyse these initiatives. Qualitative techniques are useful as they can help to explain, not merely to describe, social phenomena. As I

wished to consider women's perspectives of how development initiatives had impacted on their lives and on gender relations, it seemed appropriate to use research techniques which gave optimum scope for subjective views to be expressed.

### **A synthesis of methodological practices**

Any researcher concerned with empowering methodologies must specify at the outset their intention to make a tangible contribution related to the development issue they are studying (Boesveld et al., 1986:50). This contribution should involve feeding back results both to those who fund and plan for development and to those participating in the research: '...a stream of researchers and consultants continue to quietly slip out of the Pacific with valuable information for their own PhD or for foreign aid proposals' (Goodwillie and Lechte, 1986:18). This situation should not be allowed to continue. Researchers have been forced to be more accountable in the light of past experiences in which much research has been of no benefit at all for the country concerned:

*Leaders of Pacific states and Aboriginal movements are concerned to monitor and restrict foreign researchers and to ensure the research benefits more than the researchers themselves. There is a prevalent resentment of what is seen as a cultural imperialism persisting past decolonisation...Pacific scholars have been forced to re-examine both the relevance of their work and their right to do it (Jolly and MacIntyre, 1989:17).*

Thus I wanted to benefit those who participated in my research, rather than just taking information off them. My basic philosophy was that as a researcher in a Third World country I had a responsibility to use my power and privilege to make a space for marginalised groups to speak for themselves and define their situation (Johnson, 1990:19). I also had to recognise that my power and privilege could affect the way in which I carried out my research and thus the results I received. As a white, Westernised woman, and as an academic, I carried certain preconceptions which were likely to influence my fieldwork, as will be elaborated upon below. What is apparent is that feminist researchers, including myself, need to, '...examine the *political* implications of our *analytic* strategies and principles' (Mohanty, 1988:64).

Although some of the principles of action-oriented research could be incorporated into my methodology, it did not seem appropriate in my case to train Solomon Islands women as co-workers to collect data with me. Basically I lacked the time and money to find, train, employ and supervise assistants. I knew it would be complex enough determining the effects I had on the research results, let alone the effects of several others who came from different backgrounds and had interests different from my own. My fieldwork plans, including village visits, were to be loosely scheduled to allow for the inevitable delays and for chance opportunities which I wanted to take advantage of. It would have been difficult to be so flexible if I also had to account for assistants helping me with the research.



Action-oriented research, RRA and feminist methodologies share some basic principles and advocate the use of similar research techniques. They suggested that women can be empowered by the research process as well as by the results of the research. For my research on how development initiatives can empower women in the Solomon Islands, I felt it was necessary to justify the means I intended to use to find my results. Thus I decided upon a methodology based on the principles that: research should focus on the problems of disadvantaged or oppressed groups and therefore be willing to challenge the status quo; research should be beneficial and empowering to the participants; research should aim to uncover practical strategies for change which can be used by policy-makers and development planners; and a variety of research techniques should be used to cross-check information. These principles were built into my research design, as follows.

## ***Research design***

### **Information needed to establish my thesis**

A research control plan was drawn up in preparation for fieldwork (Appendix One). This listed my aim, reasons for my enquiry, logistical information such as my time frame, research techniques to be used, tasks to be completed in both rural and urban areas and checklists of guiding questions for interviews. This plan was frequently referred to during fieldwork as a means of checking that my work was progressing as planned and that major questions were being addressed.

Both primary and secondary data needed to be collected. In order to understand the status of women in Solomon Islands society and which gender needs and interests were being addressed, I needed secondary data such as government and NGO reports on health, education, social and political issues, project documents, National Development Plans, unpublished and published statistics from government departments and census information. I also planned to stop in Suva on my way to the Solomon Islands so I could consult the extensive Pacific Collection at the University of the South Pacific library.

Of my two main foci in collecting primary data my first was to assess programmes, projects, group activities, training schemes or other development initiatives which were in operation with the stated aim of benefiting women. My intention was to analyse to what extent they were meeting gender needs and interests and to select a number of case studies which demonstrated effective strategies for women's empowerment or, which showed



problems characteristic of traditional approaches to GAD<sup>4</sup>. I envisaged that this would involve discussions with key personnel of NGOs, churches, diplomatic and government offices, most of whom were based in Honiara, followed by visits to their project sites or to see their programmes in action in rural areas. Several development initiatives I wished to study were funded or organised through regional development agencies in Suva so officials there needed to be interviewed also. The other focus of primary data collection was visits to women's groups in rural areas both to assess how significant these groups were for women's development and to ascertain whether or not rural women felt that their needs and interests were being addressed by either their women's groups or outside agencies. Checklists were devised for interviews to be held in both urban and rural areas (Appendix One).

Also during my stays in rural areas, in addition to those directly involved with women's groups or development programmes, I wanted to speak with political and religious leaders, outsiders (for example, expatriate volunteers or local extension officers), husbands of some of the women I spoke to, women who were not involved with women's groups or programmes, and other individuals stumbled upon along the way. My intention was to gather together a wide range of impressions and attitudes reflecting how people in the Solomon Islands feel about women and their work, how development has effected women, relations between men and women and changes their society is undergoing. Such information is important in establishing the context in which development is occurring.

## **Techniques to be used**

As discussed above, a secondary data review was used to collect background information. For primary data collection, a variety of qualitative research techniques were appropriate to my research requirements, including participant observation (for shorter periods than in the conventional sense of the term), interviews and workshops.

Participant observation was a major technique in my endeavour to cover a topic which had previously not been researched in the Solomon Islands. Participant observation offers the opportunity '...to go beyond external patterns of behaviour and to explore the perceptions, motives, aspirations and beliefs of the population concerned' and it, '...can be especially useful in gaining insights into conditions, needs and behaviour patterns of the rural poor and other vulnerable groups unable to communicate their problems' (Gabriel, 1991:123, 126). This was very important for my research which was to attempt to gain insights into how development was effecting women's lives and to suggest strategies for

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter Seven will discuss the twelve case studies of GAD initiatives which I chose to focus upon. The aim is to illuminate what strategies were most effective in leading to women's empowerment and development. The twelve were, therefore, chosen with a specific purpose in mind. My selection process is elaborated upon at the beginning of Chapter Seven.

change, rather than just describing how women's groups or a particular programme operated.

Conventional participant observation has several drawbacks, however. It tends to leave the researcher as an outside observer, which is not what I wanted (Swantz, 1992:119)<sup>5</sup>. Participant observation is also extremely time consuming. As I did not have the time to do a lengthy study it was essential that I immersed myself in community life wherever possible, not remaining as an outside observer. For the short time which I planned to spend in each village (1-5 days) I intended to interact as much as possible, mingling and talking with people, visiting gardens, attending meetings and church services and whatever constituted everyday life for local women<sup>6</sup>. Because I was relying on contacts made once in the country for entry into villages, I had little control over where participant observation would take place and how long I would spend in each location.

Gabriel (1991:127) has noted that participant observation cannot be used successfully to collect data among populations which are heterogeneous because choosing observation sites representative of the entire population would be impossible. I could have easily decided to focus on just one ethnic group in one area of the Solomon Islands but as I was interested in studying examples of women's involvement in the development process throughout the country, I was dealing with a heterogeneous population. I decided participant observation would be appropriate if I took a case study approach to my fieldwork. Thus I would not aim to make universal claims from the observations made and discussions had when staying in villages, attending meetings or visiting development projects, rather I would come up with data which provided examples of how Solomon Islands women have been involved with, and affected by, the development process so far. My argument was that the case studies would provide some guidelines as to which approaches and strategies could be effective in promoting women's development and empowerment in the Solomon Islands context.

The other major research technique used was interviewing. Reinharz (1992:19), argues that interviewing is particularly relevant to studies of women:

*...interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women (Reinharz, 1992:19).*

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<sup>5</sup> There is a tension here. If one participates fully in the lives of the research participants, it is difficult to observe, especially, to make objective observations. If one only observes, they miss out on the opportunity to gain valuable insights into the thoughts and motives of the research participants.

<sup>6</sup> I was not under the illusion, however, that 'everyday life' would carry on precisely as it had before I arrived. As a stranger, a young European woman, my potential impact on what was observed and discussed will be analysed below where I comment on 'being reflexive'.

I decided to use semi-structured interviews in preference to formal interviews because, according to the RRA school, they encourage two-way communication through which explanations can be provided, not just answers (McCracken et al., 1988:20). Topics for questions, in the form of checklists, and a decision on what information is of key importance, are organised beforehand but otherwise their exact phrasing and the direction of questions is decided at the time of the interview. There is no rigid interview sheet to be complied with, only open-ended questions, so the researcher can follow up new ideas as they arise and interviewees have the freedom to discuss any matter related to their development. Only some of the questions are predetermined. Semi-structured interviews are intended to put participants at ease as they encourage dialogue more than questionnaires would (Davis-Case, 1989). In order to make participants comfortable, however, questions concerning everyday matters should be asked first while those of a sensitive nature are left until later.

Semi-structured interviewing was planned for use in both individual and group interviews. Group interviews have the advantage that a wide range of experience is brought to bear on the topic being discussed, more criteria can be quickly identified by participants (for example, if asking for advantages of a particular programme) and information collected may be more accurate as participants are open to correction by others in the group. Dissension within the group on various topics can itself be illuminating (Molnar, 1988). Individual interviews, however, provide individuals with the privacy in which to raise sensitive issues and may be an environment in which less confident women are more willing to speak out.

Another technique used was stories and portraits: '...short, colourful descriptions of situations encountered by the team in the field or stories recounted by people met there' (McCracken et al., 1988:31). They are a useful way of recording some of the more illustrative or interesting incidents observed or heard of during fieldwork. In rural settings where traditions are very strong stories and portraits can help one to understand the significance of 'culture' for the local population. I planned to record some information in the form of stories and portraits to help to bring life to the conditions of rural women, showing how they perceive their local situation, their needs and development opportunities.

Another technique I planned to use was workshops, an innovative technique again utilised by proponents of RRA: 'The workshop is a means of bringing people together, including the field team and outsiders introduced for their skills and experience, to participate actively in reviewing, analysing and evaluating the information gathered' (McCracken et al., 1988:44). I planned to hold a workshop in Honiara at the end of my research for two purposes. Firstly, I wanted to share my initial findings with people who might act upon them, that is, GAD practitioners, donors, women's organisation leaders and

planners at a national level. Secondly, I wanted to get some feedback from these groups on the validity of my results, evaluate their reactions to the results and incorporate any additional ideas into my findings. This is another technique which helps to ensure that research is a two way process whereby practitioners, planners and donors benefit from new findings.

### **Logistics of data collection**

Three months were to be spent in the Solomon Islands, in accordance with my research permit. Due to the sensitivity attached to the presence of foreign researchers in many Pacific Island nations, not least in the Solomons Islands, I did not want to risk needing an extension to this permit so had to gear my fieldwork to be completed in this time. As I discovered in my attempts to gain permission to carry out research in Vanuatu, the political situation can change overnight and the granting of research permits can be suspended.

I planned to spend two thirds of my time in rural areas and the remainder in Honiara speaking to informants and officials, collecting secondary data and setting up fieldwork in rural areas. My permit allowed me to carry out research in Guadalcanal, Western Province and Malaita, three of the eight provinces in the Solomon Islands. Although these provinces were predetermined, the exact villages in which I was to stay could not be chosen randomly. I knew that choosing these villages would depend on invitations and suggestions from contacts made once in the Solomon Islands.

Particular recording mechanisms were chosen in order that I remained as unobtrusive and unimportant as possible. Notepads were the main recording device for interviews and to keep a diary of day-to-day events. I also decided to take a small tape recorder to record some interviews and proceedings of meetings, when I might not have been able to keep track of all the discussion taking place. My personal experience of fieldwork and casual observations about village life, which I planned to use retrospectively in a reflexive manner, were to be discussed in letters sent back to New Zealand where they would be kept as a record for me. The other recording mechanism used was a camera, with the intention that pictures taken would reflect the life circumstances of Solomon Islands women, including their women's organisations, their work and their social activities.

With over sixty indigenous languages in the Solomon Islands and many dialects as well, I envisaged that it would be necessary to use translators at some stage of my fieldwork. I planned to hire secondary school students as translators where necessary if I came to villages where I was unable to communicate with the women in either English or Pijin. I realised that Pijin was more widely spoken than English, especially in rural areas, so I set about learning Pijin from books before I left for fieldwork.



## ***Research in practice***

How well did the fieldwork plan work in practice? What problems were encountered during fieldwork? How might an alternative methodology have produced different results? These questions need to be addressed. I will also reflect on the fieldwork experience, for example, how villagers' perceptions of myself influenced the amount and type of information shared with me.

### **Implementation of the fieldwork plan**

Overall, my fieldwork went according to plan. Discrepancies will be mentioned in so far as they help to explain the factors out of my control and whether or not they influenced my findings.

The rather short time I had did not prevent me from collecting the necessary research data. I was well organised for fieldwork, gathering secondary information and corresponding with several agencies involved in GAD work before going to the Solomon Islands. I was fortunate in that my fieldwork was not disrupted by political problems or natural disasters.

Time constraints and my emphasis on participant observation meant taking advantage of any opportunities to be involved in and learn about life in the Solomon Islands. A major factor allowing me to collect the necessary material within three months was the luck I had in meeting people who helped arrange contacts in villages, invited me to workshops and informed me of other chance gatherings. I participated in meetings, conferences and special women's activities which I could not have planned prior to my arrival in the Solomon Islands because information on such events is not widely known even within the country. Also, I had no strict deadlines to keep so I could follow up interesting events and accept invitations which were not planned for in my loose schedule. Overall, I aimed to use my three months to the full. For example, I arranged interviews at people's homes or visited women's groups during weekends in Honiara and if my boat was overdue I used the extra time to talk to provincial government officials.

I spent approximately half my time in Honiara, longer than intended, but I had underestimated the number of persons there involved in GAD-related work and I had not anticipated the number of significant national women's meetings or workshops which were held there during my stay. These meetings brought together women's leaders and development practitioners from throughout the country, thus giving me the opportunity to talk with women development practitioners from provinces I did not have permission to visit. In



this way I was able to meet leaders from the Mothers' Union of the Anglican church, Women and Development Assistants from the government women's division and Women's Initiative Programme leaders from the Solomon Islands Development Trust.

I chose to stay with local people or expatriates, where invited, in towns where alternative accommodation in guest houses or hotels could have been provided. A researcher concerned with remaining impartial and objective may have politely declined such invitations but to me they provided excellent opportunities to learn more about women's situation. Informal conversations which resulted often yielded more information and insights than I could have gained in formal interviews.

Fieldwork in rural areas was, to some extent, based on chance. I had to seize opportunities as they arose. For example, in Western Province I found myself sharing a half hour canoe ride with a prominent woman agriculturalist who had not been available for an interview in Honiara because of her busy schedule. Casual conversation during this canoe ride revealed details about the new women's policy which was being written and about problems facing women in the public service. Although fieldwork in rural areas could not be pre-planned this did not mean that time was wasted or that my experiences were limited.

My fieldwork plans for rural areas were, however, sometimes upset. In one case I flew from Honiara to South Malaita where I had arranged to meet a national trainer from the Mothers' Union (of the Presbyterian church) who was to conduct a workshop there. Rather than giving me the name of the village where the workshop was to be held, she said a contact person would be sent to meet me at the airstrip and would take me there. In fact, I was the sole passenger on the six seater plane which landed on the grass airstrip near Parasi on the arranged date and there was no one there to meet me. I assumed my contact was late so I waited as the aircraft reloaded and departed. There was no other transport back to Honiara for at least five days, when a government boat was due. After waiting for some time two local boys asked me if I wanted to go to the nearby Presbyterian village to see if anyone there knew about the workshop. No one had heard of it. Next we walked to the Catholic mission station in Rokera, a few kilometres away. They suggested I hire a tractor, the only transport available, to take me to another Presbyterian village, Liwe, where a priest was in residence. Everyone assured me that he would know where the workshop was being held as he was in radio contact with all of the local parishes. On arrival in Liwe the priest said that he had not heard of the workshop and he thought he would have been told if there was one because the women of his parish would have been involved. I was invited to stay with his family that night and reassured that they would radio around the island in the morning to check if a workshop was being held. The next morning I was advised that the radio was broken. Someone in the village, however, had heard that there

was a women's workshop further South in Sa'a. Relieved at this news I hired a motorised canoe to take me to what I expected to be my destination for the next week. On arrival in Sa'a I asked the canoe driver to wait, however, just in case I had been wrongly informed again. I had. There was a workshop in Sa'a but it was being held by Danchurch Aid nutrition workers and had nothing to do with the Mothers' Union. I found out, however, that the planned Mothers' Union workshop had been cancelled a few days beforehand due to lack of finances.

But such situations were not wasted. In Sa'a I interviewed the Danchurch Aid workers in the field and saw for myself how interested village women were in their nutrition talks and demonstrations. Sa'a women talked to me about development occurring locally, their impressions of the Danchurch Aid workshop and about their women's group. Afterwards, the canoe driver took me back to the Catholic mission at Rokera where I was allowed to stay with the nuns for three nights until the next boat came. This enabled me to interview the nuns about their work with local women over the past decade, to meet with the newly formed Parasi women's group and to observe a traditional 'post-brideprice' ceremony, *torana*, at which much malice was directed at a woman whose in-laws considered her lazy. Thus the flexibility of my fieldwork was my key to some unique experiences.

More typical of my fieldwork experience in rural areas was that I would be sent to a village by either a church representative or an town-dweller originally from the village, who was associated with local women's groups. These contacts were arranged while I was still in Honiara. On arrival in a village I would explain who had sent me and why I was there. Invariably I was hosted by a representative of the local women's group and during my stay I would meet with the group formally on one occasion, when an interview would take place, and spend spare time with my host family or going for walks around the village. In addition, I followed up any opportunities to visit nearby development project sites, training centres or other women's groups, to attend special gatherings of women, and to interview development workers, government officials and other individuals in the area involved with aspects of women's development

Not surprisingly, women's groups were often confused upon my arrival in their villages, wondering why I had come to see them. This was different from experiences in town where development practitioners, advocates and donors were used to discussing GAD issues with outsiders. During my first village stay I almost wished I had learned some form of craft to share with the women. I soon realised, however, how important it was to tell the women that I was not there to teach them anything and neither was I going to offer them any money for projects; clearly I did not fit into the mould set by European women who had come before me. Rather, I was there to learn from them because their knowledge and experiences were of interest to me. This still caused some embarrassment as several

groups did not know what to do with me. Despite emphasising that I would like to talk with them and observe their meetings and their work, some women's groups felt that the typical format of their meetings (prayers, European handicrafts, prayers) was not enough. In such cases I suggested, for the sake of putting the women at ease, that they show me some traditional skills, such as weaving, and cooking on a traditional hearth. Then it was possible to talk more informally with the women and merge my questions in with more general conversation as we sat in the cookhouse or went for a walk along the reef looking for edible seaweed. Initial questions focused on what they were showing me and later I would probe more deeply into the benefits of their women's group, problems women faced and what forms of development they would like to see occurring in their village. This strategy for putting women at ease increased my understanding of the complexity of women's day-to-day lives in the Solomon Islands<sup>7</sup>.

The recording mechanisms I used were adequate. Taking notes from interviews in exercise books was largely unobtrusive, although more educated people whom I interviewed tried to check what I was writing about them. In such cases I waited until the interview had finished and then annotated my notes, adding comments which may have caused offence. The tape recorder was never used during interviews as, once actually with a person in front of me, I thought it too imposing. I also realised that I would not have had time to transcribe tape recorded notes while in the Solomon Islands. Had I waited until I was back in New Zealand the essence of some of the interviews may have been lost. With my exercise books, I had the opportunity to read through my interview notes nightly and to add observations or comments about the interview. It was also ineffective trying to tape record the proceedings of meetings as I could not decipher whose the various voices were and much of the conversation was muddled when several people spoke at the same time. When this became evident, the tape recorder was only used for recording women's programmes on the radio. My letters to New Zealand helped me to understand how I was affected by the research experience, my preconceptions and how local people perceived and responded to me. These points will be discussed further below.

There were some problems collecting secondary data because sources in the Solomon Islands were often incomplete or had been lost. For example, none of the libraries had a complete collection of provincial development plans or of newspapers published since independence. Photocopying information also proved difficult as material was not allowed to be removed from the National Library and yet their single photocopier was frequently out of order. In a number of government ministries and some private organisations record keeping is poor. When the National Council of Women was disbanded by parliament in

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<sup>7</sup> It also had the advantage of giving younger women present the opportunity to learn traditional skills or knowledge, which had been dying out, from the older women.

1991 some of their records went to the YWCA, others were taken home by former employees and others again were 'borrowed' by overseas consultants and never returned. Consultations and reports on women and development in the Solomon Islands from the last five years were difficult to locate as they had very short print runs. In such cases I had to find individuals who held copies and hope they would entrust me with them for a few hours.

### **Techniques used and problems encountered**

Of the techniques for data gathering which I had chosen, participant observation and semi-structured interviewing were used most often and complemented each other in practice. While interviews provided specific information related to the questions I had hoped to find answers to during fieldwork, if I had based my research solely on interviews I would have undoubtedly missed much background information which helped me to understand the way in which women were perceived and treated in Solomon Islands society, especially more marginalised women who could not speak Pijin or were too shy to speak with me, or both.

Much valuable information was gleaned from informal conversations and chance observations; just being there was often the most vital element. For example, at Guadalcanal Women's Week I had been present at a number of talks, held in a large hall, on topics such as nutrition and the future direction of women's groups. Throughout the participants had sat around the hall, talking amongst themselves. A dramatic change occurred when it was announced that the next speech would be on family planning and contraception. Chairs were dragged to the front of the hall and women clustered around the stage as closely as possible, continually 'ssshhhh-ing' each other so they could hear the speaker clearly. Yet when I had asked women's groups previously what development they would like to see occurring in their area or what things they would like to know more about, no one had mentioned family planning. It was clear to me then that participant observation is essential especially in the case of sensitive topics like family planning, which many women would not be keen to discuss with a stranger.

The technique of recording stories and portraits was very useful in reminding me that incidental information passed on in the course of casual conversation, and later recorded in my diary, could provide insights about the context in which development occurs. For example, I was told of a volunteer with the task of 'community development' who spent his two year posting establishing as many village based projects as possible, itemising them on his *curriculum vitae* in an attempt to win a lucrative job with a foreign government. This case served to remind me that individuals, as much as development agencies and governments, have their own agendas when initiating programmes under the guise of 'GAD'. Examples quoted in later chapters are also drawn from casual conversations as,



depending on the circumstances, I ascertained information gleaned in this way to be as valid as that drawn from more conventional techniques, such as interviews.

Interviewing generally went well. The interview checklists for both urban and rural areas were useful although not all of the categories of questions were relevant in every context. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe widely and follow up any interesting leads as they emerged in the dialogue. For example, in Parasi I was told that the meeting house used by the women's group was also used by visiting politicians and extension officers when they came to give talks. I asked, 'Who was here last then?'. No one could remember back that far. This emphasised to me the extent to which villagers feel isolated and neglected by the government. I also tried to keep interviews informal so the participants would feel at ease. When I met with a women's group involved in a market gardening venture, rather than asking them to sit down with me immediately so I could conduct an interview to suit my time schedule, I spent the first part of my visit chatting informally with the women as we picked strawberries together. This was a good opportunity to build up rapport so by the time we came to sit together in a shed for an interview, we seemed comfortable with each other.

Group interviews were useful in some circumstances but not so in others. I was not able to conduct group interviews in Honiara as planned as people were very busy and I had to fit into their schedules, rather than vice versa. To get several people together in one place at the same time would have been very difficult. Two key women working in the development field did not have time to meet me in person but were willing to be interviewed over the phone.

In rural areas group interviews were often used when talking with women's groups. I found that asking general, open-ended questions yielded the best response in terms of the number of women willing to contribute to the discussion. At the same time, it was difficult to stop some articulate and outspoken individuals from dominating the conversation. After an outspoken person had offered an opinion on a certain topic I would ask the rest of the group if they agreed with what was said, but even then the others often did not speak up. There may have been several reasons for this. Firstly, public speaking was not traditionally regarded as a woman's role and many women, therefore, feel very shy about doing this. Secondly, it would not be considered appropriate to disagree with someone publicly if the other person was of higher status, for example, a school teacher or the pastor's wife. In some cases it seemed that one woman was recognised as the leader and spokesperson of the group and this made it very difficult to draw others out. I attempted to overcome the problem of non-representative opinions in group interviews by approaching individual women in villages or those attending meetings for informal interviews. I found that the opinions of dissenters came out more in individual interviews. Their opinions were



important in understanding, for example, whether or not women were happy with a development project occurring in their area. At a group meeting I was more likely to get the 'official' answer to the question 'Has project X been beneficial to most villagers?', with lots of nodding heads and smiles from people who thought that, as a white person, I must be connected with donors who hand out money for such projects. Individuals were more likely to say, 'We need money, but this project has caused pollution of our rivers and distracted our young people from school and we are not happy about that'.

Although I had planned to hold a workshop before leaving the Solomon Islands in order to share my ideas and get feedback on my findings, this was not possible. The difficulty in arranging interviews with individuals (many of whom were on courses, at conferences overseas, on annual leave or just very busy with their own work) indicated the enormity of attempting to arrange a suitable time for many of them to attend a workshop. Instead, I had to settle for discussing my ideas with individuals (a project manager, a representative of a major donor, several officers from government ministries and a development worker with an NGO) who were available during my last week in Honiara before leaving the country. On reflection, a workshop setting may not have been an appropriate forum for me to discuss my 'findings' as they were not immediately apparent to me at that stage. Because of the qualitative methods used, a number of significant 'conclusions' or 'results' only occurred to me after several months of collating and analysing my data back in New Zealand. Workshops may serve their purpose better in a true PRA when at least some quantitative techniques are used. This can be as simple as asking villagers to rank certain development issues in order of importance to them.

## **Being reflexive**

In order to understand how social researchers are strategically located in relation to the participants in our research, that is, the "strategic formation" within which thought and research take place (Opie, 1992:67), it is necessary to be reflexive. Reflexivity is required because, '...all outside observation...alters the observed environment' (Gabriel, 1991:126).

### ***Interaction with the research participants***

Researchers must be aware that what women say about their lives is not a simple reflection of their status in society, rather, 'What they can and will tell us depends on circumstances of politics, on contexts...and on historical processes in which we ourselves are actors' (Keesing, 1985:37-8). It was, therefore, important for me to deconstruct the research process and consider how I was perceived by participants in my research and how this might have affected the way they responded to my presence and to my questions. Driscoll and McFarland (1989:189) firmly believe that the researcher's participation and

experience should be consciously used as part of the research process. They criticise those who try to deny or conceal such influences in an attempt to seem more 'objective'.

*The gender, class, race, and educational status of the researcher as well as her/his institutional affiliation, may all set up patterns of power and subordination (Driscoll and McFarland, 1989:186).*

I would add to this list of the researcher's characteristics, age and nationality, both of which probably had an impact on the participants' responses and behaviour during my research.

Who, then, did people think I was? They could see that I was a young, white woman, independent and comparatively well off, as I had been able to afford to fly to their country and was now travelling around freely to undertake research. During interviews I introduced myself as an unmarried university student from New Zealand.

The fact that I was from New Zealand was significant because some women's groups (notably those of the United or Methodist Church in Western Province) had received gifts of second hand clothes or toys for children from their sister women's groups in New Zealand, and others had tried to get funding for projects from the New Zealand High Commission in Honiara, which was known for its positive discrimination towards women's projects. I was, in these cases, considered a legitimate agent through which aid money could be secured. No doubt this enhanced the villagers' generosity to me during stays in certain villages. Where requests for funding were made through me I gave the women addresses of agencies in Honiara and NGOs in New Zealand which could help, as well as informing the women of an appropriate format to use when writing funding applications.

The women's reaction to my being a young woman travelling alone was, most often, to try and protect me. I was usually provided with a young woman as escort on my walks around the village, a practice which proved to be useful as I could ask them to explain various things I observed. In addition, it gave me the opportunity to build up a rapport with individual women. In one case the woman of the house actually slept in the same room as me stating that her husband would have to do without her for a few nights as she was concerned that local men or boys might try to sneak in the windows of my room at night.

Despite the fact that I was from a different class and culture, and that I had reached a high level of formal education, I think the women felt comfortable with me quite quickly. I did my utmost not to set up patterns of power and subordination: I dressed in casual dresses or gathered skirts like the village women did; a backpack was carried, not a briefcase; school exercise books were used for recording interviews and ideas, not intrusive tape recorders, video cameras or lap-top computers; I spoke Pijin and tried to learn local greetings wherever I went, rather than insisting that conversations or interviews took place

in English. Where possible I sat on a mat with women's groups when discussions were being held, rather than using a chair put out specially for me; and I travelled by canoe, boat or by foot like the local people most places I went. In addition, although I was treated as a guest in the villages I stayed in, I tried to help with household tasks whenever I was permitted, especially with cooking. It appeared that trust was built up quite quickly as on two occasions I was asked to take handicrafts, which had taken months to prepare, either to Honiara or to New Zealand to sell.

Perhaps the most important aspect of my strategic location, considering my topic of research, was my gender: 'Male and female interviewers will not necessarily see or be allowed to see the same social worlds' (Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers, 1984:135). This had both advantages and disadvantages.

Disadvantages were associated with people assuming that I was only interested in talking to women, as it was women's development and women's groups I was studying. I knew that women could not be looked at in a vacuum, however, and that gender relations explain much about women's position in societies throughout the world. I had planned to talk to leaders and men in general about their opinions on women's development and gender relations but few opportunities for this arose. Even during free time in the villages I was accompanied by women. I felt it would have looked too suspicious had I called a special meeting of all of the husbands of women involved in a certain women's group or if I had spoken at length with individual men. In a society with rigid gender-segregation it is important not to behave in any manner which would raise suspicion if the trust of the community is to be secured. Those men I did have the opportunity to speak with informally were the husbands of women who were office bearers in their women's groups. In addition, I interviewed male field officers, religious leaders (a priest, a pastor, a Bishop), community development workers and project managers. Some of these discussions were very illuminating. For example, a male health worker explained some of the reasons behind men's reluctance to use various forms of contraception. Obviously men's input was very valuable.

Apart from the limited access I had to men's opinions, it seems that my being a woman was generally an advantage. Although I would have liked to have had the opportunity for more discussions with men, I was pleased that because I was studying what was regarded as a woman's domain, I had few problems with men trying to intervene in my research by answering questions on behalf of women. Such problems may have arisen had I been studying agriculture or fishing, for example. Men were certainly curious about my research and some of them attended meetings I had with their local women's group but they never stayed for long.

Feminist researchers suggest that in gender-segregated societies where there is sensitive information to collect about women it is best to use a female researcher (Sollis and Moser, 1991:29):

*...in many developing countries the world of women is not open to men so that translating the needs and desires of women into research problems and vice versa can best be done by women (Boesveld et al., 1986:46).*

Male researchers may still find it possible to talk to women, as long as they are sensitive to the cultural setting. If I had been a man arriving in a village to study women's groups, however, it is most likely that I would have been treated with suspicion and it would have taken longer to build up the trust of participants in my research, and their husbands. Sexual jealousy appears to be common in parts of the Solomon Islands (Dureau, 1993). As a man it would have also been almost impossible for me to conduct interviews with individual women unless I remained well within the public eye and this would have precluded me from walking alone with a woman to her gardens or talking with her alone in her cookhouse or home. I was expected to eat with, bath with, sleep with and wash my clothes with the women of the village. Many such opportunities for informal research and insights into women's lives would have been lost to men trying to do the same research.

The limited languages in which I could communicate are also likely to have influenced the feedback I received from research participants. While I had learned Pijin, this was never a first language for those women I met and there are still large numbers of women who speak only vernaculars. Still, there were only two situations in which I required an interpreter; in my first field visit to a village where my Pijin was not adequate and in a South Malaita village where Pijin was not understood by most of the women. In both cases the problem arose of translators 'interpreting' and 'summarising' the answers to questions I had asked. In the Guadalcanal village one of my questions to the local women's group was followed by five minutes of discussion in the vernacular, followed by a one sentence 'official' answer provided by the woman interpreting for me. After I had completed a Pijin course in Honiara, however, I found that as long as I asked questions in Pijin, this was the language in which women discussed their answers. In the South Malaita village where a local nun who spoke English, Pijin and the vernacular, translated for me more women actually responded to my questions than in other villages where questions were directed at them in Pijin. Perhaps these women felt more comfortable because they were speaking in their local language and through an interpreter well known and trusted in the area. They could also be certain that I would not understand what they said. The main disadvantage of this situation was that it was more difficult than usual for me to try and encourage the quieter members of the group to speak because I had to do this through an intermediary.

It is apparent, in retrospect, that the women I dealt with may not have been representative of the village as a whole. Besides the lack of time I had for women to



become familiar with me in a village and my lack of knowledge of vernaculars, there were several other reasons why I had limited access to the opinions of marginalised women within the village, including those who were old, illiterate, who could not speak Pijin and who were not involved in women's groups. I was typically hosted by the most articulate member of the women's group, who often spoke both English and Pijin so I had less interaction with women in the village who were shy or could speak neither of these languages. Such women rarely approached me and it was essentially 'easier' for me to communicate with my host and with other women who spoke fluent Pijin or English.

Women's negative sense of self-worth, coupled with the notion that only certain individuals are qualified to speak out in public, hampered my attempts to gain a thorough overview of women's situation. Prompting women to disclose problems they faced was my most difficult task during interviews. There are many reasons why these women may have been reluctant to speak to me about their problems. For example, Melanesian women are brought up to work hard, without complaint. They may have been trying to be courteous to me, they may have not trusted me, or they may have worried that other women would gossip about them if they complained openly. Keesing stresses how women's sense of inadequacy can influence what they will tell a researcher about themselves:

*Reflexive autobiography is possible only when subjects believe that their own lives are important enough to deserve recounting, and when social support is provided....If a people's dominant ideologies, expressions of male political hegemony, define what women know and do as secondary and unimportant, then creating a context where women can and will talk about themselves and their partly separate realms of life and expertise may indeed be difficult... (Keesing, 1985:37).*

While Keesing argues that it is possible to create contexts in which women in certain societies are willing to open up their private worlds to view (Keesing, 1985:31), this is more likely if the researcher spends a long time with the women. Although, at least superficially, women appeared to trust me, it was probably not realistic to hope that I could create a context in which women's muted voices regarding problems facing them, would be brought out. The case study approach I used did not give me the time to build close ties or a sense of familiarity with most of the women I met in the villages. Had I spent a long time in just one village I could have also learned the vernacular and in this way opened up further channels of communication. I did not stay in any village long enough to be able to move freely about the village talking to people without attracting a lot of attention. I was clearly an outsider.

It was consequently mainly women's group leaders or office bearers who I interviewed individually; others I spoke to mainly during group interviews. Although I was interested in the views of grassroots women, it may be that more weight was given to the opinions of those women who were more educated and articulate than the norm (McCracken, 1988:24-25). Although many women are involved in their local women's



groups there are certainly some who are not. Activities or meetings organised for my benefit were inevitably only with members of the local women's group so I missed getting the opinions of non-members. I was always sent to where women's groups were active so I had few opportunities to talk with women in less organised villages to discuss their interests. To a degree participant observation helped to offset this bias as it meant I had some perception of the differences in life for those more marginalised groups of women but I still failed to hear their views on development as much as the views of other women.

Efforts were made to control potential sources of bias. Although I could not choose my villages, I ensured that I contacted representatives of each of the five major churches, as well as members of secular NGOs, in order that there would be some spread of religious beliefs in the villages I was put in contact with. I also knew I would have to make a special effort to speak to women who did not come to meetings and to visit some villages which were not easily accessible. This was difficult in practice but I still managed it by, for example, talking to women who happened to be washing their clothes in the stream at the same time as me and asking my hosts if someone could accompany me to visit women in nearby villages.

### *The effects of preconceptions*

Tomm (1989:4) argues that the researcher needs to become, '...more aware of the ways in which one's presuppositions about the subject as well as the methods of interacting with that individual shape the findings of the research'. Above I discussed how methods of interacting with participants in my research shaped my findings so now, as Tomm indicates, it is essential to consider how my preconceptions of women in Solomon Islands society impacted on my findings.

It is a common misconception that external researchers or evaluators will be independent because they are free from emotional involvement in the issues to be considered: '...outsiders also have professional and economic interests...' (Swantz, 1992:105). The 'facts' they collect may be considerably distorted by their preconceptions, as Tiffany (1987:347-8) notes:

*The process of knowing entails perception, articulation, judgement, selection, and synthesis. What anthropologists (and feminists who use anthropological data) think they know about women of other societies is therefore bound up with culturally-loaded valuations of gender, sex and power.*

My interests must, therefore, be scrutinised to consider their impact on my research outcomes. Research was being undertaken primarily because this was a crucial aspect of my PhD. The particular topic, however, was chosen because of my concern for the problems faced by women in Third World countries and their apparent lack of power to

change their situation. My preconceptions of the situation of Melanesian women were, therefore, likely to influence how research was conducted and what results emerged. Researchers have been told that they should not try to fit women's actions and thoughts into a framework generated outside of their experiences (Driscoll and McFarland, 1989:187) and that they should not make culturally determined prejudgements of women's predicaments (Hirschmann, 1991:1691). While I was not greatly influenced by simplistic accounts representing Melanesian women as downtrodden beasts of burden (Thompson, 1992:21,23), I did fall prey to generalisations in the anthropological and general literature which I read prior to leaving for the Solomons. In this way, for example, I came to assume that women were solely responsible for subsistence gardening and that most men spent their money on beer and tobacco rather than their children's education. I overcame such narrow preconceptions only after observing different situations in the Solomons and discussing such issues with both women and men.

A lot had been written also about the negative effects of the missionary influence on women's lives, notably their focus on European handicrafts and baking as important skills for Melanesian women. I had the preconception then that the major networks of church women's groups throughout the Solomon Islands today would still be based on this conservative 'home economics' approach. While this was largely true, it led me to the false assumption that this would preclude the groups from offering women opportunities for empowerment. In practice, some very inspiring development initiatives were set up by 'conservative' church women's groups. Another incorrect assumption was that Western Province, which boasts relatively good socio-economic indicators of women's status, would be the site of more 'progressive' initiatives for women's development and that such initiatives would not be found in the strongly patrilineal Malaitan societies. At least I was sufficiently open-minded to recognise events contrary to these assumptions when they emerged, rather than trying to search for 'facts' to support my preconceptions.

Clearly many preconceptions are made by the researcher, both consciously and unconsciously, due to literature read and other forms of information consulted before arrival in the area to be studied. This is an inevitable occurrence. What can prevent this occurrence from becoming a problem and a blot on the research findings, however, is adopting a methodology which allows for flexibility and gives weight to information derived from informal conversations and unofficial sources. If formal questionnaires drawn up in the researcher's home country were to be the main means for collecting data, preconceptions could indeed be a problem.

## Empowering research methodologies

### *Ways in which research can empower participants*

There are many ways in which research may be conducted and each will influence, to a greater or lesser degree, the research findings. As my chosen methodology was concerned with empowerment, next I consider how empowering my research was in practice.

Opie (1992:65-7) is a feminist scholar who works within a 'praxis, empowerment, reciprocity paradigm'<sup>8</sup>. She asks feminist researchers to consider what kinds of texts we should be producing. My choice of research topic with its focus on women's empowerment inherently accepts the need for the *status quo* to be challenged. As stated earlier, it aims to reveal strategies which may encourage a transformation of society. The focus of research is rural women, reflecting my commitment to expressing the views of disadvantaged groups with little means of speaking out about their situation. Before deciding on a topic I corresponded considerably with heads of national women's organisations and divisions in both Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. I made it clear that I would be willing to adapt my research to incorporate issues which they thought were important and that, in the course of my fieldwork, I could collect extra information which was of specific use to them. Women in these offices had an opportunity to comment on my research proposal before it was finalised. While women leaders in Vanuatu did wish to have some input, Solomon Islands women did not take up this opportunity. In the long run this may have been best as their priorities may have been those of elite women or they may have reflected the interests of the organisation with which they were involved.

Opie argues that, as well as leading to the reduction of women's subordination on a general level, feminist research can empower individual participants if the research design is appropriate. First, it can empower through seeking the opinions of the socially marginalised because this assumes they can contribute to the description and analysis of a social issue. Second, interviews can be therapeutic for the participants if the interviewer is sensitive to individual preoccupations, encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences and to understand how the system which disadvantages them can be challenged. Further, the researcher's writing can have an empowering influence:

*Deconstructive textual practice can...assist in political empowerment, through the incorporation in published research of participants' multiple and very different voices [especially where] ...qualitative research incorporates the voices of marginalized and hence previously silenced groups into the text... (Opie, 1992:64).*

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<sup>8</sup> Opie writes on action-oriented research with reference to her study of a group of New Zealand women. Her research experience, while not focused on the Third World, is still regarded as relevant here as it is a feminist discussion concerning how marginalised individuals and groups may be empowered through qualitative research.

Reinharz (1992:191) emphasises that, when the views of the disempowered are not known, they can have little influence on the conditions under which they live. Thus, '...the study of certain groups is political because it demystifies'.

From the outset of fieldwork, villagers and those interviewed in town were treated as competent individuals from whom I had much to learn and who should be treated with due respect. In Honiara I was careful to avoid acting like a GAD consultant with two weeks in which to interview thirty administrators, project officers and planners and one visit to a project site. Solomon Islands women working on GAD issues have been targeted by such consultants and are becoming increasingly annoyed at those who arrive expecting interviews with them at short notice, not recognising that the Solomon Islands women are equally busy with their own work.

I had to be very careful not to assume that all women, by virtue of their subordinate position to men, shared the same interests and ideas. By spending time in a number of rural communities I was able to gain a better understanding of women's different perspectives on their situation. I made a conscious effort not to build up a picture of 'the Solomon Islands woman', rather, recognising differences according to class, age and ethnicity (Boesveld, 1986) and also discussing informal modes of power and divergent groups, in line with Mohanty's (1988:80) recommendations. There were clear differences between some groups of urban and rural women but I also had to look more deeply to see differences, for example, amongst the priorities and behaviour of women in villages. There were, for example, those who had recently married into the village, sometimes from a different province and ethnic group, illiterate older women who had rarely been beyond the shores of their island and women with a formal education who undertook office bearing roles in their women's group. The differences between women and their varying interests had to be acknowledged if I was to understand the dynamics of interaction among women and between men and women and if I was to accurately pin point whether there were development concerns of importance to all women.

I tried to make the fieldwork experience empowering both for myself and my participants. For example, many interviews, I asked about a women's group's problems and achievements over the last ten years, giving the participants an opportunity to reflect on the progress their groups had made, hurdles they had overcome and on areas still requiring attention. Some women, such as members of the Munda YWCA, were obviously proud of their achievements while others were dissatisfied with, for example, the leaders of their group or the lack of government assistance for their endeavours. Discussion of such issues can lead individuals and groups to challenge the system under which they live, as Opie (1992:64) notes.



At the end of a meeting or interview I always asked if anyone wanted to ask questions of me. Those who took advantage of this opportunity were mostly interested in how they could find funding for a project they had in mind, or how they could diversify the activities of their group. In relation to the latter question, I shared with them the experience of other women's groups throughout the country and also some overseas groups known for their innovative development work with women. For example, I described a group in Malaita where a woman with Standard Five education was holding literacy classes for thirty women in her village. I also informed the women of opportunities for sending one of their members for training, which could benefit the whole group, at the six week Women and Agriculture course at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, for which only a basic level of English literacy was required. Women were also interested to hear of initiatives from neighbouring Pacific Island countries, for example, the establishment of a Women's Crisis Centre in Suva which provided a refuge for battered women and their children. I found that sharing stories about sensitive issues such as wife-beating gave the women an opportunity to open up and talk about their own situation, even when the discussion was only among themselves. Thus conscientisation became part of many discussions and meetings (Mies, 1983). Overall women were encouraged by the achievements of other groups and were made aware of their own potential, as well as realising that they were not alone in the problems they faced as a group.

It transpired that my fieldwork also encouraged networking among local village women's groups because when staying in a village I would ask if they could put me in touch with any other women's groups in the vicinity. For example, in the Kopiu Bay area, Guadalcanal, over a week I met with three different women's groups: two church groups and one non-denominational women's club. At the end of the week they all came together, a rare occasion for them, for a farewell feast before I left. Also, the non-denominational group had not been running regularly since their club house was destroyed by Cyclone Namu in 1986, but this renewed interest in women's groups in their area encouraged several members to consider rejuvenating their group.

### *Implications of my chosen methodology*

If I had chosen different research techniques my findings would have been quite different. Longer, more orthodox participant observation may have been useful had I been interested in carrying out an intensive study on women's lives in a specific area or the effects of development on a particular group of women. I was more interested, however, in how different approaches to development for women resulted in drastically different outcomes and in using this idea to explain why the situation of many women in the Solomon Islands had not greatly improved despite all of the resources directed at them in recent years. A case study approach enabled me to analyse a number of development initiatives



in detail questioning what strategies had been most effective in leading to women's empowerment.

Also I could not have studied the subject of women's empowerment as effectively had I used a different methodology. Such a sensitive topic required much probing beneath the surface which would not have been encouraged if structured questionnaires had been used. Surveys or questionnaires may have made for a very orderly collection of data, with every piece of information slotting into place under a neatly defined heading but if this was my main method of data collection it is unlikely that I would have learned so much about the explanations for certain behaviours as I did through semi-structured interviews and casual encounters. The sensitivity of my topic and the time frame I had to work within required that a participatory type of participant observation was used. This involved immersing myself in the communities to be studied so that I could begin to understand the situation of marginalised groups of women, including those who would not speak out at meetings.

#### ***Feedback to Solomon Islanders***

Having decided that my research was not merely going to be an intellectual exercise to benefit my own career, I had to think carefully about how I would apply the outcomes. During interviews I ensured that I introduced myself, explaining to those present my background and why I was doing research in their country. I also touched on how my research could benefit them by, for example, making government planners and developments agencies aware of the inadequacies in their women's programmes and by passing on rural women's concerns and needs to those with the power to offer them resources.

I planned on various ways of feeding my findings back to the women of the Solomon Islands and others who could act upon them. As discussed earlier, it was not possible to arrange a workshop prior to my departure so most feedback occurred after my return to New Zealand. Here I met with officers of the Ministry of External Relations and Trade (MERT)<sup>9</sup>, which had contributed to funding for my research, to update them about current problems facing Solomon Islands women and to give examples of successful and unsuccessful attempts at development for these women. They will receive a copy of my thesis on its completion. As MERT supports several large GAD initiatives in the Solomon Islands, some of which I assessed while there, it is hoped that my critical accounts can indicate to them why certain ways of supporting women are more effective than others. Early feedback to the Solomon Islands consisted of two papers focusing on specific organisations working with GAD issues, which I had prepared for conferences. One of these

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<sup>9</sup> MERT is now known as MFAT, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

papers entitled, 'A Quiet Revolution: Church Women's Groups in the Solomons' was requested by a coordinating body for NGOs in the Solomon Islands in order that the College of Higher Education could use it in some courses. A report summarising the conclusions of my thesis will, however, be circulated more widely among women's organisations, NGOs and government bodies. The report will be written in simple English, with a Pijin version also provided, and will focus on the strengths and weaknesses of programmes for women, suggesting how initiatives for women could benefit from being more empowerment-oriented. A short summary of my findings will also be sent to *Mere Save*, the only Pijin language magazine intended specifically for women readers in the Solomon Islands.

While wishing to share my research results with those who participated in the research and with agencies who may learn from my research, I did not wish to cause any problems from those who had agreed to be interviewed by me. Both in the reports and papers listed above and in this thesis, therefore, I have endeavoured to retain the confidentiality of my research participants. Where the nature of a person's comments alludes to a sensitive issue I have not named them, choosing instead to note their title or position

One dilemma I was faced with in terms of feedback, was that my analysis was critical of several organisations involved in the GAD field whose staff members had given me great support during my time in the Solomon Islands. I did not wish my criticisms of their organisations to offend them, particularly as many of the individuals were very dedicated to their work. I had to accept, however, that as my research was related to empowerment, a topic which inherently challenged the status quo, I had an obligation not to censor my findings just because they may cause offence. Indeed criticism of organisations in the Solomon Islands could promote questioning of existing procedures and programmes, leading to changes in development programmes in the long term. As Reinharz (1992:191) notes, feminist research raises consciousness if those in power are 'taken aback' by the questions asked or the topic of research and, I would add, if they are taken aback by the results of the research. This is a political act in itself.

## *Conclusion*

Chapter Four has discussed the roots of my methodology, shown how it was reflected in my research design and lastly, explained how well this methodology worked for me in practice. A methodology which stressed women's empowerment needed to be found, in line with the empowerment approach which I had supported in Chapter Two. The feminist, participatory model proved to be a good guide, situating women as participants in the research process rather than merely as a source of data.

Throughout, I followed two key principles. The first was that research should focus on the problems of disadvantaged groups and, therefore, be willing to challenge the status quo. Thus I aimed to reveal strategies which promoted a transformation of the rules and structures of society, practical strategies for change, rather than simply describing the situation of disadvantaged women. Secondly, my philosophy was that research should aim to benefit those who participate in it. This involved stressing to women how valuable their knowledge and ideas were, encouraging them to reflect on their situation and providing them with information about the activities of women's groups elsewhere in their country. Also, it involved attempts to feed back results both to women's groups and to institutions with the power and resources to act on my findings. These results may provoke controversy and suggest changes needed. This is appropriate as feminist research has a responsibility to raise levels of consciousness and promote social change.

I implemented this methodology through the techniques I chose to use. Techniques, particularly semi-structured interviewing and participant observation, were chosen according to their potential to explain social phenomenon, rather than simply describing them. I purposely avoided 'objective' methods in which the researcher remained distant from the research participants and in which structured questionnaires and standard quantitative techniques were promoted. I needed techniques which allowed flexibility, provided sensitivity and which put the research participants at ease thus allowing women's divergent experiences and modes of expression to be revealed. Semi-structured interviews provided answers to questions I devised while participant observation provided an understanding of the ways women were perceived and treated in society. Casual conversations and secondary data from reports and documents also provided good sources of information.

The theoretical aspects of my thesis have now been established. The remaining chapters will focus on women's situation in the Solomon Islands and how theory can be used to understand and explain the problems they face and the action they take. Chapter Five discusses the context in which development initiatives occur, specifically considering how women's situation and their relations with men have changed over time. Chapters Six and Seven analyse various development strategies in order to suggest which of them are most effective in leading to women's empowerment. Chapter Six does this by examining a number of key sectors, including agriculture and the law, in terms of what gender needs and interests are being addressed, which are ignored and the implications this has for women's lives. Chapter Seven then looks at a dozen case studies analysing how different agencies and organisations have chosen to approach women's development and considering the implications of their chosen strategies. Chapter Eight provides the final conclusions.

# CHAPTER FIVE: Women's changing position and status in the Solomon Islands

## *Introduction*

Chapter Five discusses the context in which rural women in the Solomon Islands act out their lives. After a brief introduction to the Solomon Islands in general, the socio-economic position and status of women in pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary society is discussed in order to see how this has altered over time. Women's control over set domains, their feelings of self-worth and their relations with men and with each other will all be discussed. Women's contemporary needs and interests, which should be of concern to those agencies promoting women's development, derive from this dramatic period of change<sup>1</sup>.

## *The Solomon Islands*

### *Geography and culture*

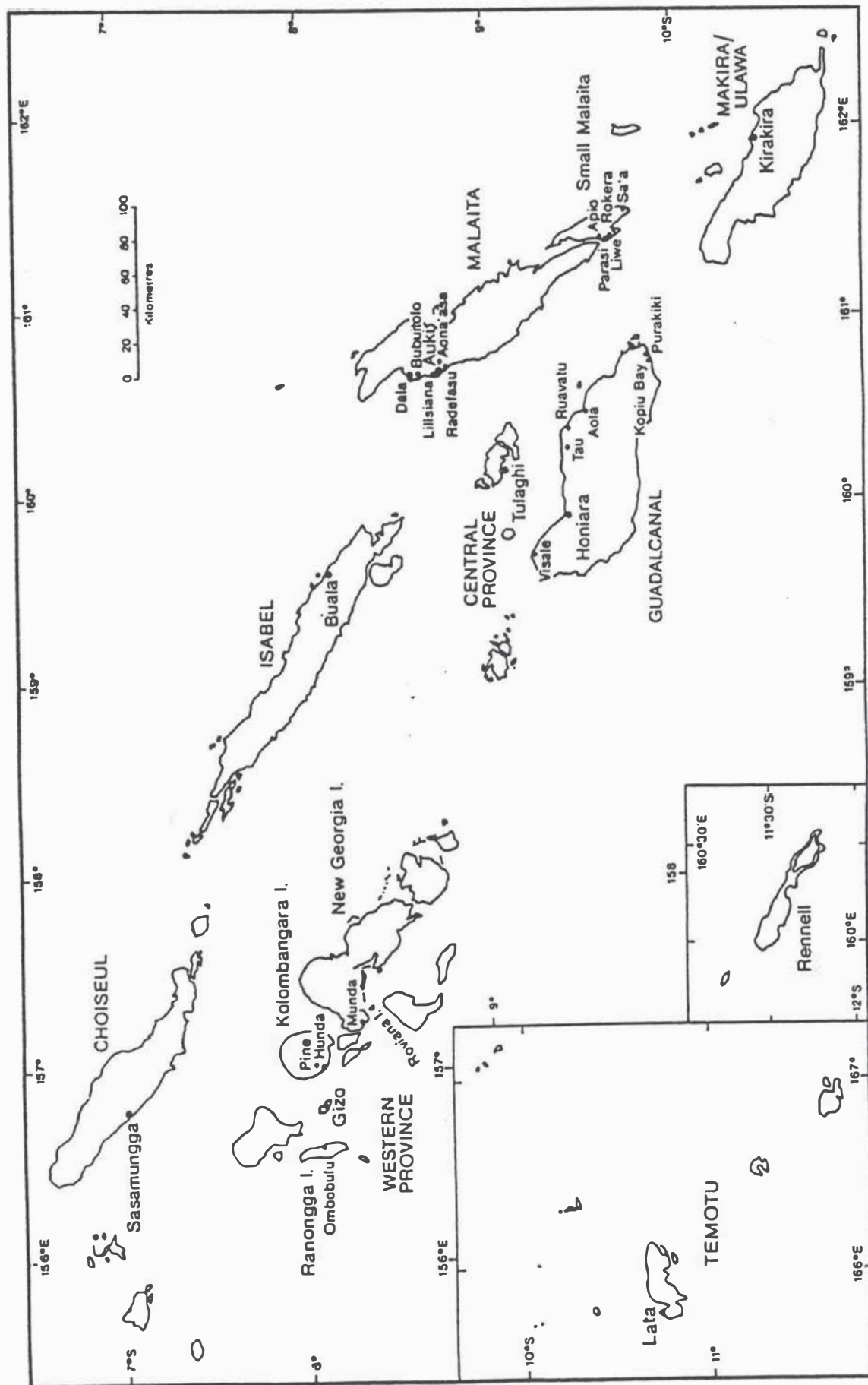
The Solomon Islands has been an independent nation since July 7, 1978. They comprise a scattered archipelago of over 900 islands situated in the south-west Pacific Ocean (Figure Two, page 122). The population of 339,134 (1992 estimation) is 84 percent rural. Almost 95 percent of the inhabitants are Melanesian. There are also Polynesians and small pockets of Micronesians, Chinese and Europeans. The people live in about 5,000 widely dispersed settlements with an average of only 44.3 persons in each (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:273). A diversity of ethnic and language groups characterises the Solomon Islands (Ryan, 1975:2). There are 68 Melanesian languages, Pijin is widely spoken and English is the official language (Solomon Islands National Literacy Committee, 1991:21).

The early inhabitants of the Solomon Islands established small, self-contained communities, composing kin groups and captives from other places. Early contact between settlements took the form of trade or warfare and today there are still cases of hostility between neighbouring groups. Leadership was focused on small areas of tribal lands. Most societies were not based on hereditary systems of leadership, rather, they followed the 'big

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<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged, however, that not all categories of women have the same interests (Baud et al., 1992:101). Ethnic, age and class distinctions will, therefore, be specified where relevant: '..."women" should not be considered as an undifferentiated category' (Charlton et al., 1989:10).

FIGURE TWO: The Solomon Islands showing provinces, major provincial towns and villages visited by the author





man' system whereby a person gained status in a community by accumulating wealth and then redistributing this through mechanisms such as feasting. The 'big man' played an important role in strengthening social ties and influencing community activities.

There were both matrilineal and patrilineal descent systems, with women generally having higher status and greater control over land under matrilineal systems (Pollard, 1991:5). Under both systems women could help to reinforce the status of those in power thus giving them an important influence over the maintenance of social structures. Under both systems also, women have rights to the use of the land. Even when women moved away at marriage to live with their husband's kin, they could claim rights to work on their own descent group's land (Foanaota, 1989:71-72).

Traditionally, production was almost exclusively from the land or the sea and traditional religions sought to preserve this bond between people, nature and the supernatural (Narakobi, 1989:30). The British colonisers protected the rights of Solomon Islanders to their land so that when independence was declared, 83 percent of the land remained under customary ownership.

### *The contemporary situation*

The fact that much land has stayed in the hands of rural people has meant they can maintain a rural lifestyle based around agriculture and fishing. In the 1990s the vast majority of the people still live off the land, producing a mixture of subsistence and cash crops. There is little industrial development and urban areas have remained small, despite urban drift. There are approximately 30,000 people residing in the capital, Honiara, while the provincial centres in the eight provinces each have between a few hundred and several thousand residents.

Religion plays a very strong role in Solomon Islands society in the 1990s. While traditional religions are only supported exclusively by small groups of worshippers in isolated pockets of the country, over 95 percent of the population now claim to be Christian<sup>2</sup>. Christianity has been embraced so thoroughly by the people that it seems to be regarded as part of 'tradition', as the following quotation suggests:

*[The National Council of Women]...is a council with confused values which accommodates foreign ideas on women's issues and has no Christian values (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:108).*

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<sup>2</sup> Most people belong to one of the five major churches: the Church of Melanesia or Anglican church (33.9 percent); the Roman Catholic church (19.2 percent); the South Seas Evangelical Church, whose members are commonly known as the SSECs, (17.6 percent); the United Church (11 percent); and the Seventh Day Adventist church, whose members are known as the SDAs (10 percent).

Apparently Christian values are no longer foreign values. Certainly Christianity has become an integral part of life, from the villagers who attend daily morning prayers at their church to the politicians who raise the issue of 'Christian values' in parliament.

The strength of some traditional values such as equality, communalism, self-sufficiency and respect for tradition have, however, been undermined by social, economic and political change: 'The locus of social values is shifting toward social stratification, individualism, dependence and conflict' (UNICEF, 1993:21, quoted from May et al., 1982). Big men lose status as access to cash becomes more important than feast giving and as church leaders vie for influence over the communities they serve. However, *kastom*, which has been described as '...a set of rules observed within a particular group...a way of life' (Kenneth and Silas, 1985:68), still has considerable influence over the way people act. It is significant that despite the impact of colonisation in the Solomon Islands, there are fundamental similarities between ancient and modern lifestyles:

*The bush may have been cleared in places for plantations or timber gathering, fish may be more scarce, motor vehicles may be a greater threat to life than the hostility of strangers, leadership may no longer be won by feast-giving; but the family is still the principal social building block, leading on to larger units such as the clan and the language district. The essence of social identity is still the relationship with one's relatives and wantoks<sup>3</sup> (Foanaota, 1989:71).*

### ***Development potential***

The scattered nature of the islands and the great ethnic diversity result in problems with communication (Lateef, 1990:3). The largely mountainous and heavily forested terrain is hard to negotiate thus the delivery of basic services and development assistance is a difficult operation (Photo 1). For example, urban households are twice as likely as rural households to have safe drinking water and almost four times more likely to have access to sanitation services (ESCAP, 1989:78).

The Solomon Islands has a weak formal economy. With an estimated GNP of US\$ 430 per capita in 1988, they are classified by the World Bank as a low income country (AIDAB, 1991:1)<sup>4</sup>. Debt servicing exceeded the total recurrent expenditures for agriculture, education and health in 1991 (UNICEF, 1993:15). Poor economic growth is compounded by a fast-growing population which could double in only twenty years. The strong subsistence sector and the kinship system have helped save the majority of the population from lapsing into poverty.

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<sup>3</sup> Under the *wantok* system, which ties people together by extended family relationships, the old, the very young and the sick will usually be given support by their relatives, who have an obligation to care for them (UNICEF, 1993:7):

<sup>4</sup> As noted in Chapter One, however, using per capita income as an estimate of a country's worth is both simplistic and misleading. It is only mentioned here in order to explain how international institutions such as the World Bank view a country like the Solomons and why they encourage them to adopt certain strategies for their development, notably, structural adjustment policies.



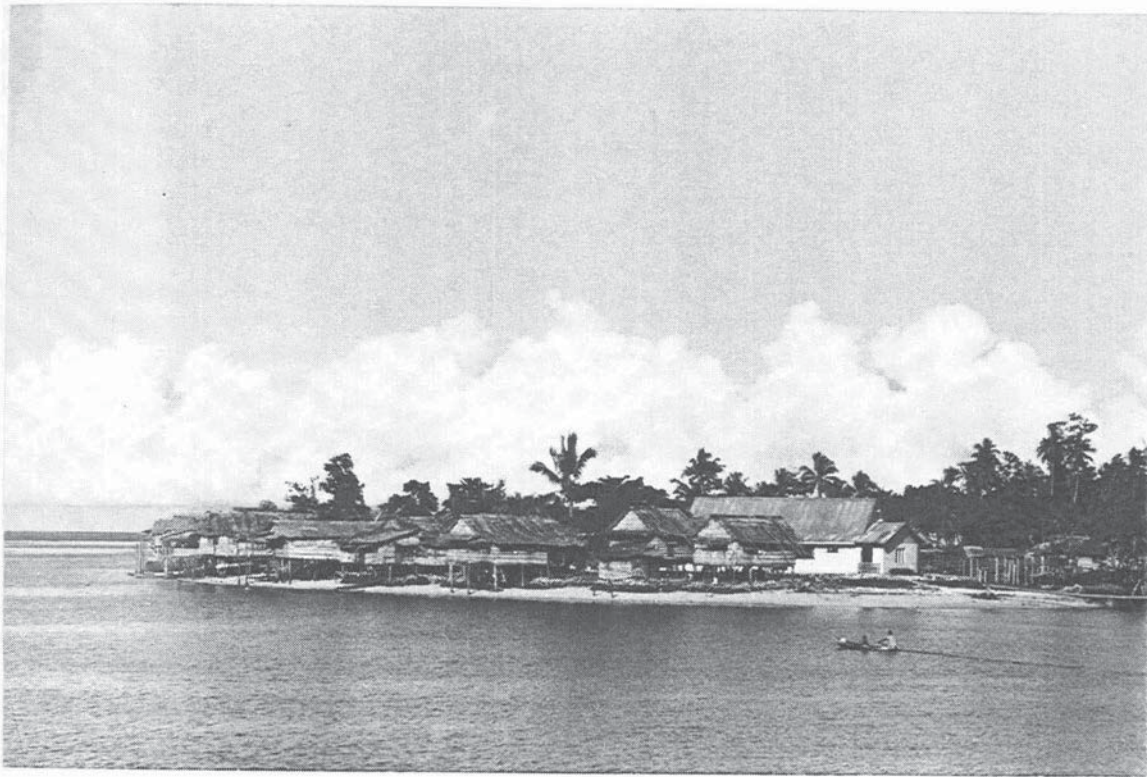


Photo 1: 'Development', in terms of aid projects and government programmes, rarely reaches any of the 85% of the population who live in small villages such as Lilisiana, Malaita. Women are trying to change this.



Photo 2: In addition to traditional tasks such as subsistence gardening, fishing and caring for their families, women are increasingly under pressure to earn cash: here a woman and her husband near Ruavatu, North-East Guadalcanal, are involved in copra production

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), together with the Solomon Islands government and the World Bank, have been devising a structural adjustment programme to try to rectify the poor economic situation (AIDAB, 1991:4). The government's 1989-93 Programme of Action gave priority to achieving sustainable economic growth through appropriate restructuring and economic stabilisation programmes. Overseas examples show clearly that such programmes often result in reduced spending in the crucial health and education sectors and that women have to bear much of the burden of the country's increased efficiency (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989).

While many Solomon Islanders face difficulties in achieving what they see as 'development', women face particular constraints directly because of their gender, which influences the opportunities they have to broaden their knowledge and awareness, improve their economic standing and to rise to positions of power in society. Below I discuss how this inequitable situation has developed and changes needed before the situation of the majority of women will improve.

### ***Women's changing roles and status in pre-colonial and colonial society***

Next we consider the pre-colonial period, asking what women's roles and responsibilities were compared to men's and how women's power was established.

#### **Women's roles in immediate pre-colonial society**

There was a strict division of labour in pre-colonial society and women had a great deal of heavy work to do, both in their gardens and in the home. This included subsistence gardening, cooking, washing, fishing, collecting water and firewood, craft manufacture, ceremonial activities, maintenance of kin group relations, and caring for the young, the sick and the aged. Motherhood was an expected role and bearing a large number of children, besides ensuring the security of the parents in old age, was part of their duty to reproduce the lineage (Maiki, 1980:41). Thus women were heavily involved in production, as well as biological and social reproduction<sup>5</sup>. Women were often hindered in their work by poor nutrition and disease, especially malaria, but they continued to work hard as they were expected to gain the respect of their clan (Ryan, 1975:8-9).

Girls learned their role in life at an early age as this example from Cross (n.d.:76) indicates:

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<sup>5</sup> These tasks were still the focus of many village women's lives in the early 1990s.



*One evening there was some excitement as Jocelyn, aged three...had planted in the garden her first shoots of kumara...and this marked the beginning of her learning to make a woman's contribution to the family food supply.*

Early learning was vital if a woman was later to be accepted into her husband's clan. Once brideprice had been paid a young woman was '...expected to pay back her in-laws, by chopping and carrying home huge loads of firewood, together with water and food' (Cross, n.d.:101). Wasuka (1989:95) describes the different socialisation process of boys and girls. While aggressiveness, alertness and knowledge of the affairs of the group were encouraged in boys, girls were supposed to be '...hardworking, honest, peace-loving, and homebound'. Thus training for girls centred around the home and garden while boys became involved in activities which helped develop leadership skills (Wasuka, 1989:99).

Men were allocated tasks of house, weapon and canoe construction and in some societies, carving of items such as bowls. They also took on the role of semi-specialists, such as priests or *kastom* doctors, in some societies (Ipo, 1989:124). Men were involved in subsistence gardening too, mainly cutting down large trees and clearing the land when new gardens were made, while women were responsible for the daily tasks, such as weeding. Bennett suggests that women were left to do the mundane work:

*As elsewhere, men did the sporadic and interesting tasks of fishing, hunting, and fighting<sup>6</sup>, while women regularly collected shellfish, drinking water, salt water for cooking, tended pigs, made tapa or grass fibre clothing, and in some areas pottery, and carried out the most tedious stages of shell valuable manufacture<sup>7</sup> (Bennett, 1987:13).*

Men also acquired new land and defended the clan's land through warfare, in which women did not play an active part. It is apparent, however, that violence and warfare had an enormous impact on women's lives. The movement of women from a village was restricted due to fears they would be captured and sold as slaves (Ryan, 1975:9). In Jonathan Fifi'i's account of his early life in Kwaio society, Malaita, around the 1930s, he describes how killings of women were common as pay-back. For example, a group of men sought revenge against Fifi'i's father by killing Fifi'i's father's sister. As Keesing notes, 'Kwaio women were often victims of male violence' (Fifi'i, 1989:3).

In many ways women and girls were restricted, with more taboos controlling their behaviour than men or boys had and with less access to power. Incest taboos meant that girls were obliged to move from a path or outside of their homes if a boy approached (Cross, n.d.:104). In most societies women had to wait for men to finish their meal before they could eat (Ryan, 1975:7) and only men were allowed to make sacrifices to the

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<sup>6</sup> One mundane task they usually undertook, however, was clearing the land.

<sup>7</sup> Shell valuables consist, most typically, of strings of shell discs which are used in ceremonial exchange, particularly being used as a gift to the wife's clan during brideprice ceremonies.



ancestors in traditional religions. Women played an important role in maintaining or enhancing the status of men, however, by providing food for feasts given by their husbands, brothers or fathers. Women were seen as guardians of traditional culture.

### **Women's power and status in pre-colonial society**

While men and women had separate roles it has been suggested that, contrary to the views of early ethnographers, women did not necessarily lack status and neither did they play only subsidiary roles. It is now accepted that past representations of Melanesian women have been largely biased, often portraying them as appendages of men, as invisible, or only visible as wives and mothers: 'What men do is described much more fully and richly than are women's activities...' (O'Brien, 1984:53-54). Ethnographers also assumed that control of the domestic sphere was of less importance than '...legitimized formal authority' and as such, women are shown to be powerless (Rogers, 1978:152-153).

Tiffany (1987:338-339) laments the political insignificance accorded to Melanesian women in many anthropological accounts, '...as passive supporters of male decisions, or...as subversive power brokers who have no legitimacy in the eyes of men'. When discussing power relations, the focus is almost exclusively on 'big men' while relations between men and women are rarely mentioned. Gender relations are an important starting point for anyone concerned with the distribution of power in society.

In more recent years, several anthropologists have broken new ground regarding the status of women in Melanesian societies, arguing that they can perform different roles from men but be equal in intrinsic worth (Jolly, 1987:170, 174; Keesing, 1987:33,59-60). Now it is commonly accepted that the women's and men's separate roles were complementary and that each gender had an essential part to play in the maintenance of society, with women having specialist knowledge too (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1988:161). As Rogers (1978:156) argues:

*Assuming that each sex group... controls essential resources, one cannot dominate the other, because they are equally interdependent or complementary... they are related dialectically, at once opposed to each other, and equally dependent upon each other.*

It has also been acknowledged that if each gender group is excluded from the activities of the other but they do not feel there are negative implications of their exclusion, it is not fair to label either group as subordinated. An example from Kwaio society demonstrates this point:

*Kwaio women, largely excluded from public politics, consigned the heaviest tasks of domestic labour, seemingly marginalised and demeaned as well as controlled by rules of compartmentalising pollution, would appear to be in a clearly subordinate and secondary position... [but] The accounts Kwaio women have given cast in doubt any interpretation of their society in terms of a sharp and mutually antagonistic polarisation of the sexes...[they]...are not being marginalised or rendered passive...They are important social actors who see themselves as complementary to and sustaining of their brothers and husbands...(Keesing, 1987:35,58).*

Although Kwaio women could not claim public political positions, they felt that the domains which they did have control over were vital to the well-being of the entire community (Keesing, 1987:35). While their work may have been strenuous at times, women accepted this because they knew they were fulfilling an important role.

It is apparent that women were valued in pre-colonial societies but did they acquire power because of the value placed on them and, if so, what forms did this take? Strathern (1981:169) suggests that:

*Although the formal authority structure of a society may declare that women are impotent and irrelevant, close attention to women's strategies and motives...indicates that even in situations of overt sex role asymmetry women have a good deal more power than conventional theorists have assumed.*

The anthropologist Annette Weiner (1977:5) invites others to reconsider old theories of male superiority in Melanesia:

*Whether women are publicly valued or privately secluded, whether they control politics, a range of economic commodities, or merely magic spells, they function within that society, not as objects but as individuals with some measure of control...*

Women's power is said to come from those things associated with their femaleness, primarily, menstruation and childbirth.<sup>8</sup> Western feminists have generally misinterpreted pollution taboos surrounding childbirth and menstruation as being indicative of low status. As stated earlier, however, Third World women often consider that it is their ability to pollute which gives them unique powers (Bulbeck, 1993:8). For example, Keesing (1987:48) suggests that separate domains such as menstrual huts and special places for women to give birth in Kwaio society meant women had opportunities for solidarity building. Garrett (1992:70-71) notes that in some societies '...women...were believed to have dangerous malevolent powers associated with generation and menstruation'. Pollution taboos, therefore, can be seen as a signification of women's power because they incited fear in men who had to undergo a restoration ritual, or face illness or death, if coming into contact with symbols of pollution taboos (Mantovani, 1991:11). Mantovani (1991:14) argues that men

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<sup>8</sup> Women in various Melanesian societies had other realms in which their power came to the fore too. Garrett (1992:73) mentions that some women had the power to work sorcery. In Santa Cruz (Temotu Province), concubines were given positions of high status because their duties were separate from those of ordinary women. As concubines '...they transcended the limit of the domestic sphere and duties and were given access to the public sphere of men' (Samau, 1987:40).

deliberately tried to make women feel shameful and dirty about the acts of menstruation and childbirth so as to undermine women's power. Thus men secure their own superiority by discrediting women's power. Keesing (1985:29) agrees that through such mechanisms men have effectively claimed '...hegemony over matters of life and death that are ultimately in women's hands'.

While men have sought to control and undermine the power that derives from women's ability to conceive and bear children, both Keesing (1987) and Mantovani indicate that this did not jeopardise women's sense of their own importance and the significance of their contribution to society in pre-colonial times. Mantovani (1991:8) argues that for any Melanesian women, 'As long as she is part of traditional life, she is psychologically strong and secure. The hardships do not destroy this basic self-assurance'.

These researchers indicate that Melanesian women were not the subordinate beasts of burden many early writers portrayed them to be. Their domains were largely separate from those of men but to women these domains were a source of security, solidarity and dignity within pre-colonial societies. Further, provided women fulfilled the separate roles allocated to them, they would be accorded a degree of status in society. Melanesian women also had access to realms of power; they were aware that their bodies were a source of power essential to the reproduction and social well-being of society. Although they accepted the sanctions men imposed on their bodies through ritual, this did not undermine their sense of self-worth. Men typically held a monopoly on access to public stages but women had their own domains of influence and control.

## Colonisation and its impact on Solomon Islands women

Many writers argue that in various societies around the world where women once held some political power this was quickly undermined by the colonisers, both through overtly sexist policies and through their general attitude to and treatment of local people (Boesveld, 1986:37, Jaquette, 1982:273, Evans, 1990:33). The Solomon Islands' most renowned woman poet, Jully Sipolo<sup>9</sup>, indicates that this was the situation there too:

*In custom, when you hear stories it seems women had a lot of power. They could give out land and protect you and stop you from being killed and eaten; I don't understand where all this power has gone. It just fizzled out. So what happened? (Solomons Air Magazine, July 1992:34).*

This section discusses the impact of colonisation on the power and status of Solomon Islands women and particularly, how this has affected gender relations. It is evident that the differential treatment of women and men by colonial officers, the influence

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<sup>9</sup> Jully Sipolo is also known as Jully Makini.

of missionary women and Christian teachings on women and the introduction of a monetary economy, have had lasting effects on gender roles and relations.

The missions had a huge transformative effect on Solomon Islands societies. Jolly (1991a:47), suggests that missionaries had a more profound impact on women's lives and on altering relations between men and women than other colonising groups because they spent long periods of time in a particular place, they learned local languages and interacted widely with local communities<sup>10</sup>. They often tried to set up European ways as ideals to which all local people should aspire (Ryan, 1975:19), thereby discrediting traditional customs and beliefs: 'The blatantly presumptuous British assurance of cultural superiority, and its opposite face, racism and paternalism, have withered Melanesian pride and identity' (Keesing, 1973:22). Certainly, except when confronted with anthropologists keen to document every aspect of their lives and traditions, Melanesian people were not made to feel that their values, belief systems and rituals were of any importance. In numerous cases missionaries led Solomon Islanders to believe that *kastom* dress, *kastom* dance, *kastom* food and many traditions were inappropriate, immoral or evil.

The colonisers' first impressions of Melanesian society apparently appalled their Victorian sensibilities: 'All missionaries were shocked by the down-trodden state of Melanesian women...' (Ryan, 1975:19). Women's responsibility for the food gardens and for carrying home produce, water and firewood led missionaries to describe women's lives as being dreary and difficult, and even to compare them to slaves or animals (Ryan, 1975:8):

*Their assessment of the indigenous situation of women as 'down-trodden', 'debased', or 'degraded' is intimately linked to the observation that they did hard manual work outside the home, that they were "beasts of burden" (Jolly, 1991a:35).*

Often the missionaries tried to change traditional practices involving hard work by women by chastising the men but women were known to be outraged at such interference because they gained status in their communities by showing themselves to be hard working (Ryan, 1975:9). While the missionaries were keen to encourage women to work hard, '...it had to be proper work, not just working in the fields' (Pollock, 1989:67).

Women's workloads increased in the early colonial days. While new tools introduced by traders, including steel knives and axes, made men's work quicker as less time was needed to clear land for gardens and to cut wood for fences, women's work still focused on the use of the digging stick. Some men abandoned work in food gardens as the new steel tools enabled women to do the heavier work as well as planting, harvesting and general maintenance (Keesing, 1985:35). Other men abandoned this work because of

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<sup>10</sup> Christianity was adopted wholeheartedly so that now customary beliefs are only followed by 2.1 percent of the population, most of them living in bush communities in Guadalcanal or Malaita.



labour recruiting or blackbirding, leaving women to care for the food gardens on their own. Meanwhile, missionaries instructed some men in the use of new agricultural techniques. This knowledge led men to planting their own cash crops, which provided another excuse for them to forego their food garden obligations. Women's labour was also called upon to assist in maintaining these new cash crops. While men's obligations to their families, including assisting with aspects of food gardening, diminished (Slatter, 1984:6), women's obligations increased.

Paradoxically, although women's workloads had increased their subsistence work became undervalued as a cash-based economy took hold. Women's work was perceived as peripheral to the formal economy and was not accorded the same status as men's work:

*What women do is often perceived as unimportant or merely domestic....Men's work is viewed as the economic basis of society....No doubt the devaluation of women's domain by both colonial and subsequent governments can be blamed for the unwillingness of men to become actively involved in what they see as 'only' village women's work, an area lacking in any prestige (Stratigos and Hughes, 1985:4-8).*

Concurrently, women were encouraged to take on new roles focused around the home. When early missionary women began to teach local women about British housekeeping and domestic skills, 'They did so in the earnest belief that they were assisting their pupils along the path of progress and social evolution' (Schoeffel, 1986:42). By trying to focus women's activities on the household, however, missionary women were undermining the very fabric of many Solomon Islands societies in which women had commitments to their extended family, to persons of status in the community and to others beyond the village.

Further, outsiders effectively attempted to belittle or outlaw traditions or rituals in which women's power was affirmed, that is, those rituals associated with pollution and seclusion, or in which women's status was sanctioned, such as brideprice ceremonies<sup>11</sup>. Christian ideas about seclusion of women led to the collapse of indigenous patterns of segregation thus, '...we might see women...not as benefiting, but as being deprived of those sacred powers which the ancestral religion conferred on them' (Jolly and MacIntyre, 1989:14). Women were distressed when missionaries tried to impose their notions of a correct moral order onto various communities by trying to reduce brideprice payments: 'Not understanding the reason for this effort in one area on Gela, the women responded by collecting in an angry mob and asking why they were not now worth so much!' (Cross, n.d.:101). Rather than seeing brideprice ceremonies as celebrations of women's commodification, local women saw them as recognition of a women's value to her clan because brideprice provided compensation to the clan for the work a woman would not be able to contribute once she was married. Now even outside commentators are starting to

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<sup>11</sup> See also Lepowsky (1990:46-47) for an example of resistance by women on Vanatinai, Papua New Guinea, to attempts to undermine their traditional avenues to power and autonomy.



agree. Bennett (1987:12-13) states that in the Solomon Islands brideprice is, '...one of the rare public acknowledgments of the economic worth of women in the society'<sup>12</sup>.

The colonial experience offered different opportunities to men and to women. Although in theory attempts by the colonial government at setting up new administrative structures at local government level should have opened up new avenues to power, in reality these opportunities were only available to men. The colonial government offered men jobs in offices and the prospect of further training while the missions gave men the opportunity to acquire a formal, academic-based education and to join the religious hierarchy. Women seldom had such opportunities as the education which they received focused on domestic roles, as if the division of labour in the Solomon Islands should reflect that existing in middle class industrialised societies (Schoeffel, 1986:42)<sup>13</sup>:

*They were taught how to bake cakes and make European handicrafts, embroidery and crochet, while men were given formal schooling, training in cash crops and provided with jobs in the formal sector (Goodwillie and Kroon, 1986:i).*

In some schools, education for girls was seen as a means of providing Christian men with suitable wives (Ryan, 1975:37)<sup>14</sup>.

This early education still had some benefits for Solomons women, however:

*...the very act of educating these women must have eroded imperialist patriarchal relations, if only gradually. It gave indigenous women new choices, it gave them the English-speaking voice to which colonial society (and increasingly their educated menfolk) would listen, it offered them different perspectives on the world, even if they chose to reject them (Bulbeck, 1992:228).*

In terms of non-formal training, missionary women encouraged Solomons women to join women's groups in which wifely and motherly roles within the home were enhanced. This was partly an attempt to redirect women's attention away from their productive roles (Garrett, 1992:71; Jolly, 1991a:32,36). For example, the Melanesian Mission reported its success in starting a women's group in northern Malaita where they taught the local women about, '...mothercraft and babycraft, hygiene and general homecraft, of all of which our Malaita sisters are so woefully ignorant' (Melanesian Mission, n.d.)<sup>15</sup>. While they claimed to be trying to instil a sense of dignity in local women, the missionary women implied that they

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<sup>12</sup> While brideprice payments do show that women are valued, they also enforce men's control over women.

<sup>13</sup> Attempts by donors to pay specific attention to women's development were similarly biased at first. Early donors ignored women's productive roles and assumed that women were primarily housewives. Thus agricultural projects were directed at men and projects centring on maternal and wifely roles became women's lot.

<sup>14</sup> The Christian missions varied in the extent to which they attempted to impose European customs on the women and how much academic, as opposed to spiritual, instruction they were offered but space restrictions prevent detailed discussion of these differences here.

<sup>15</sup> This quotation demonstrates the notions of cultural superiority which were apparent in the attitudes of many European women working in the Solomon Islands.

were saving Melanesian women from a degraded existence thus upsetting local women's sense of pride in their own traditional cultures.

Despite the limited programmes offered, involvement in church groups gave women an opportunity which had never existed before. It allowed and, in fact, often encouraged them to share their ideas and opinions in a group, even when men were present. In addition to learning about crafts and childcare, women were taught about the Bible and, in conjunction with this, they learned the skills of reading and writing in English (Cross, n.d.:99), skills which were to become crucial for those who wished to pursue a life outside of the village. Church women's groups also offered women a role to play in ritual for the first time. While this may have been a limited step, for example, in allowing women to read out prayers during a church service, this was a bigger role than women had ever played in traditional ancestor worship:

*...only men had offered sacrifices or participated in religious feasting and dancing, but among Christians things were done differently... women not only took part in the religious ceremonies but also found new opportunities for social activity, for status advancement and for the exercise of influence through membership of organisations such as the Mothers' Union...(Foanaota, 1989:71).*

There are also examples of ways in which the colonial government and missionaries improved women's health and well-being. For example, some banned men from brutally punishing their wives for suspected cases of promiscuity. Women's health improved when rural clinics and health services were established. Meanwhile, the cessation of blood-feuding allowed them to work in safety and travel more freely: 'Before pacification, the threat of violence and sudden execution directed against women gave men an ultimate physical power over women's lives they no longer have' (Keesing, 1985:35).

Gender relations changed during the colonial period due to shifts in the balance of power of men relative to women. Women were not the only ones to lose traditional power. Men lost the traditional power which came from ritual practices such as head-hunting, cannibalism and warfare, and from their roles in controlling the spiritual world and communicating with ancestors. Jobs in offices and roles in the churches have only partially compensated for the status and prestige which men lost. However, at least men were given these opportunities to take on positions of authority and gain new types of power outside the household. Women were not so fortunate. The other difference between the undermining of men's and women's power was that the churches legitimised men's power within the household, giving men a new domain of control.

It was through promotion of the nuclear family that men were deemed to have more power in household affairs, directly undermining a domain previously controlled by women. Church leaders often focused on St Paul's statements about conjugal relations which allude

to husbands having ultimate control over their wives' bodies. For example, from the beginning of the twentieth century both the Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist churches working in Simbo have impressed upon the people a model of the family in which the father is the household head, the mother is subservient to him and the children are obedient to both parents. In pre-colonial times, relations between opposite gender siblings, or with one's mother's brother, for example, were accorded more importance than the relationship between husband and wife<sup>16</sup>. This promotion of the nuclear family and consequent changes in conjugal relations has impeded the freedom of many women and, Dureau argues, led to marital violence:

*Previously marriage was accompanied by strong symbolic statements on the equality of spouses and their kin groups. This has been replaced by emergent notions of...husbandly authority over women's bodies. [Women are thus]...subject to marital violence based on views of men as controllers of their wives' bodies (Dureau, 1993.:20).*

Missionaries further encouraged a reformation of the domestic space by urging men to move out of the communal Men's House<sup>17</sup> so they could live with their wives and children in individual dwellings. When men and women lived in separate dwellings, women had control over most family matters and some influence over matters such as land distribution (Dureau, n.d.:7). Consequently,

*The change to marital co-habitation was accompanied by a reorganization of patterns of authority and responsibility. Whereas previously men and women had generally operated autonomously in their respective spheres, the last 90-odd years have been characterized by men impinging on or appropriating women's former areas of control (Dureau, n.d.:7).*

## **Summary of the impact of colonisation on women and men**

The popular image of Melanesian women as being 'subordinate beasts of burden' is regarded by them as insulting because it ignores other dimensions of their lives, such as being guardians of traditional culture, and implies that they had no power in traditional society. In fact, a great deal of dignity and respect was accorded to women traditionally. However, women were told that brideprice payments and pollution taboos devalued them, thus a source of dignity and power for them was unequivocally undermined.

Despite any improvements in their lives there were few opportunities for women to regain lost power. While colonisation and the consequent Christianisation of society and monetising of the economy gave women new academic and leadership skills, opportunities to come together in women's groups and improved health, it is apparent that they did not have the same opportunities to reap the rewards of change as men had. Early colonialists

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<sup>16</sup> Because of the many different ethnic groups within Solomon Islands society it is difficult to generalise.

<sup>17</sup> Communal men's houses and individual dwellings for a woman and her children were features of some societies.

were appalled by women's heavy workloads thus the education girls and women received was aimed at redirecting their role, as if their traditional role was demeaning (Mantovani, 1991:18). Women, therefore, had fewer opportunities than men to access an academic education or the cash economy, which provided new symbols of status in society.

Men did have access to these new symbols of status and were encouraged to take on positions of power at local and then national levels when the British started preparing the Solomons for independence. Women had no reason to believe that their skills and knowledge in subsistence production and other domains not focused on cash were recognised by the colonisers. Because women had little access to the new realms of power, their knowledge of sustainable systems of agriculture, traditional medicines and managing large families with little cash, among other skills, were not harnessed by those in power. Likewise, that they might have alternative ideas on appropriate directions of change for their country seems never to have been considered. The paths taken by successive governments since independence reflect the legitimisation of men's traditional right to power but they delegitimise women's traditional realms of influence and women's traditional knowledge and experience.

The section above has described how women's traditional sources of power have diminished as a direct result of the colonisation process. To follow, we look specifically at women's situation in the 1990s, the roles they play, their relations with men and with each other, and the new challenges they must face.

### ***Women's position in the 1990s***

The 1990s are a very challenging time for women. Many wish to have more freedom and more power but their behaviour is constantly called into question by politicians, church leaders, employers, husbands, brothers and fathers who say that they are not showing due respect to *kastom*. *Kastom*, however, is a constantly evolving entity: women's roles, society's expectations of them, and their relations with men are subject to a constant process of negotiation in the post-independence period.

#### ***The breakdown of kastom***

The breakdown of *kastom* has affected women's lives in a number of complex ways. As discussed above, while the breakdown of blood feuding has worked largely to women's benefit, many women were not happy when missionaries tried to ban certain ritual practices, such as bride price, through which women felt their worth to society or their powers were publicly affirmed. While brideprice payments can be interpreted as a measure of women's worth in society (Bennett, 1987:12), they also bestow on husbands certain rights of control



over their wives. Clearly it is difficult to resolve which aspects of *kastom* should be retained and which should be challenged. It appears, however, that where women gain respect and when their knowledge is affirmed through *kastom*, its preservation is important to them. Where, however, women feel they are belittled by *kastom* or where they are denied access to power, *kastom* needs to be challenged.

In the 1990s women commonly lament the breakdown in good aspects of tradition. They feel there was better cooperation between husbands and wives in the past and they say that they miss the way people used to work together as communities, sharing food surpluses and helping out those in need.<sup>18</sup> Now, rather than having respect for traditional obligations to kin and working together in the community, many people expect to be paid for helping others in their village. Thus an old person's roof stays in a state of disrepair during the rainy season and someone with a big catch of fish sells it rather than sharing it with the community. The introduction of a cash economy appears to have changed people's attitudes:

*There is tremendous frustration behind the smiling faces you see; cash has led to the breakdown of society and traditional authority structures are collapsing...cash destroys the communal subsistence exchange-debt society, taking the foundation out of society (Gerry Loft, Catholic Bishop of Malaita, 1992:personal communication).*

In a very serious claim about the effects of a breakdown in tradition, anthropologists in Papua New Guinea have argued that the waning of traditions associated with the segregation of women and men has left women vulnerable to physical attack and sexual abuse<sup>19</sup>. The argument is that men no longer respect the traditional taboos concerning women's bodies. Meggitt's thesis on Enga society is summarised by Jolly and MacIntyre (1989:15):

*Because the attacks on...pollution beliefs by church and school were not coupled with concomitant criticism of male supremacy, the result has been a worsening of women's situation. Enga women are now raped with impunity since their male assailants are no longer afraid of female bodies or menstrual blood but are still certain of their superiority and control over women...the changes wrought by missions, administrators and economic development projects have transformed male-female relations in Enga society, but women have been the losers.*

There are still many traditions through which women are oppressed, their voices suppressed and their dignity undermined. These traditions, which are not universal among Solomon Islands societies but still impact on many women's lives, include the right of a

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<sup>18</sup> Certain basic social building blocks do, however, remain intact. Women still have families and wantoks who they can call on for support and this is what has assisted women to cope with the rapid change which has left many of them feeling vulnerable and disempowered.

<sup>19</sup> In reality there are likely to be several other reasons for the increase in physical and sexual abuse of women, some of which will be touched on in Chapter Six.



husband to admonish his wife with physical punishment and the duty of women and girls to serve food to men and boys in the family first, leaving them with the leftovers. The consequence is that the esteem of many women is so low that they fail to pursue personal development options, such as literacy classes, or to put themselves forward for leadership positions in their women's group. Traditions which undermine women's status, freedom and sense of self-worth need to be challenged if a more equitable society is to emerge in the long term.

### *The burden of fulfilling their roles*

Women are still largely responsible for traditional roles which centre around producing food, collecting water and firewood and caring for the domestic needs of their families. In recent years, however, escalating population growth, which increases competition for resources, and a lack of consultation with women when decisions are made as to use of a clan's resources, have made women's work even harder.

Economic development has been promoted largely through expanding the productive base of the economy (Lateef, 1990:48). This has led to an emphasis on cash cropping rather than subsistence agriculture and unsustainable exploitation of the rich marine and forest resources. The impacts of such development on women have included longer distances to walk (or paddle) to their gardens, gardens being located on inferior land due to cash crops being planted on the best land closest to the village and longer distances to travel to collect water where local sources have been polluted by logging or cattle farms upstream (Lateef, 1990:48). Furthermore, men may have to spend more time engaged in activities such as fishing because foreign trawlers have depleted marine resources, thus their labour is not available to assist women in the village (Dureau, 1993.:20).

While new products, such as rice and new technologies, such as water pumps, may have made some tasks easier women have had new roles added to their routine. Community management roles have increased including activities such as fundraising for, and cleaning of, the church and school, welcoming church or government guests into a village and keeping the village tidy. Men generally offer far less assistance to women in non-cash work than was common practice in the past: 'Activities regarded as "women's work" are not generally performed by males for fear of loss of status' (Lateef, 1990:24). In addition, women spend more time in pursuit of cash, whether this involves marketing fruit and vegetables or cooked foods, producing garments or handicrafts to sell to their neighbours or taking up wage employment. Sometimes women have to assume total responsibility for cash crop and livestock projects initiated by their husbands but then abandoned when the men go elsewhere in search of work. They say the cash is not needed for themselves; rather, it is needed for their children's education, for transport, for medicine

and clothing, for certain foods like rice and noodles which have become part of the staple diet of many, and for village programmes such as building schools and churches. The physical burden of labour has not decreased for many rural women despite, or perhaps because of, 'development' (Photo 2, page 124).

While women have shouldered extra responsibilities in addition to their traditional roles, men have typically discarded traditional obligations when adopting new roles. Women have added the 'men's roles' of cash cropping and plantation labour to their workloads but men have generally not, in turn, assisted women with domestic and childcare responsibilities (Schoeffel and Kikau, 1980:25).

Another pressure on women comes from development agencies keen to fulfil their charter of 'integrating women into development'. While income-generating projects and greater involvement for women in community activities are admirable aims, the agencies often fail to realise that they are adding to the women's already heavy work burden: '...the women and development push has sometimes placed new demands on women, requiring them to take on additional tasks and roles' (Lateef, 1990:49). This is why Lateef argues that, despite the positive aspects of development which have impinged on some women's lives,

*...for many other women, development has resulted in an increased workload, diminishing sources of fuel-wood, depletion and pollution of water sources, domestic violence and decreasing access to, and control over, traditionally inherited land (Lateef, 1990:48).*

Of concern is the fact that the added responsibilities women must bear often leave them with little time to pursue personal growth opportunities such as participating in community and church affairs or attending training courses and workshops. What Lee (1985:233) says of women in nearby Papua New Guinea could just as easily apply to Solomon Islands women:

*It is ironic that...women have been left behind in development, not because they are irrelevant, but because they are so central to production, so overworked and so burdened with responsibilities.*

### **Women's loss of confidence and dignity**

As quoted above, Mantovani (1991:8) suggests above that women have a strong sense of their identity and importance as long as they are part of traditional life. What happens, then, when the very fabric of their traditional society is disintegrating all around them? Prior to independence, Keesing (1973:22) listed several strengths of traditional society which he believed Melanesians could build upon: 'Most crucial, perhaps, was the conviction of Melanesian peoples of their own worth, their central place in the scheme of

things'. Women, especially, appear to have lost that conviction and are faced with a diminishing sense of self-worth.

Aitsi-McMahon (1991:71) notes that, throughout the Pacific, colonisation and modernisation have wrought dramatic change upon communities, often leaving the people with a sense of powerlessness. For example, a well educated woman who, after living in Honiara for a number of years, chose to return to live in her province of birth was dismayed to find that most women did not think in terms of future change or improvements in their lives, rather, they lived each day the same as the last (Jully Sipolo, Poet, 1992:personal communication). In another example, a woman from Honiara collecting information from women in rural areas about issues they would like to be addressed in a national women's policy, found it almost impossible to encourage a particular group of women to speak up. She wondered if this was linked to their oppression:

*I cannot help but think and wonder if they cared about themselves at all. Is it because they have been neglected completely for too long?....The long silence[s]... are either an indication of ignorance or it could be that the women's oppression is far too large to be discussed (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:45).*

Women's pride has been undermined and a major reason for this was the view that was imposed on them that their traditional way of life was inferior to that of the colonisers. Western education and health systems, government structures, styles of dress and religion were all established as superior to anything that Solomon Islanders could offer. Solomon Islanders have, therefore, come to feel ashamed of many things related to tradition. For example, mothers in some parts of the Solomons traditionally masticate food before feeding it to their infants. Teachers in the home economics course at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, however, waited three years before summoning up the courage to ask their expatriate supervisor if this was an acceptable practice. They were fortunate to have an open minded supervisor who realised that this was a more hygienic practice than using cutlery and crockery on which germs could gather. She even suggested that the acceptability of masticating food should be noted in the text books they produced.

Poor self-esteem is a severe problem holding women back in the Solomon Islands today. It has been stressed above that they have many skills, are hardworking and adaptable, yet what they do to feed, clothe and care for their families is rarely appreciated. Chapter One noted that throughout the world asymmetrical values have been accorded to men's and women's work. The lack of recognition Solomon Islands women experience despite leading busy, physically demanding lives and making personal sacrifices so that their children can go to school, go to the clinic when necessary and have tidy clothes to wear to church, has led to a widespread lack of confidence among women. Solomon Islanders, men and women alike, tend to look up to those with white collar jobs and the capacity to acquire Western goods, including houses made of permanent materials, trucks

and fibreglass canoes with outboard motors. As women earn little cash directly and it is not usually invested in these goods, their contribution to the economy is severely underrated.

In addition, women feel that their knowledge is no longer respected or preserved: 'Women have lost their traditional knowledge and self-worth without gaining the modern equivalents' (Alison Taylor, VSA worker in Vanuatu, 1991: personal communication). Women are no longer being consulted when important decisions affecting their whole family or clan, like signing a logging agreement, are made. Likewise, in the past outside agencies initiating development projects in villages consulted community leaders but ignored women. These realities add to women's perception of themselves as not having opinions or knowledge that is of value:

*...women are experiencing a decline in status and power as dependency on the cash economy and imported political and social systems become more entrenched...Pacific women often held a prestigious place in traditional society; they were economically active as producers, manufacturers, market managers and healers. Now women are increasingly marginalized. They are the least educated or consulted in the community. Their work is poorly paid (if at all) and often unrecognized in government and non-government research and development planning (Australian Council for Overseas Aid, 1986:iv).*

Just as a lack of time and energy because of heavy workloads prevents women from pursuing personal development options, poor self-esteem limits women's opportunities to improve their lives as it prevents them from, for example, starting up their own business, putting themselves forward for an office bearing position in their women's group, standing for election or taking up training opportunities. When some women hear of meetings or courses being organised they think they are only for educated women, '...they are hesitant to attend because they are uneducated and will feel out of place' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:140). This is despite the fact that women are very keen to learn new skills. For example, in 1987 the Women's Interest Office in Honiara held cooking classes away from their centre for women labourers who lacked the confidence to come to the training centre. As Veronica Hane, a Women's Development Assistant, noted:

*Most of them [the women labourers] thought that because they are low in their knowledge, they don't have the courage to attend any activity where high class women go... (Women's Club News<sup>20</sup>, December 1987:19).*

The undermining of women's traditional knowledge and power and, therefore, their sense of self-esteem and dignity, may yet be realised as the most harmful impact of development on women in the Solomon Islands.

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<sup>20</sup> *Women's Club News* was an irregular magazine, which did not list authors of articles, published by the Women and Development Division. As such it is treated as a newspaper herein and not referenced separately in the bibliography. *Nius Blong Mere* (a publication of the Solomon Islands National Council of Women), and *Mere Save and Link* (publications of the Solomon Islands Development Trust) are treated in the same way in this thesis.



Jully Sipolo (1986:8), in her poem 'Mi Mere', points out that for many rural women, life in their post-colonial, independent country offers fewer new opportunities than one might hope:

#### **MI MERE**

*I am a woman, born in the village  
Destined to spend my life  
in a never ending vicious circle  
Gardening, child-bearing, house-keeping  
Seen and not heard...*

Without a deep sense of their own importance it is unlikely that women will be willing to set out to change their situation:

*There is an urgent need to give back to the women the experience of the relevance of their role in the life and well-being of society. There is the need to find cultural substitutes for the celebrations of the past where the achievements of the women were praised (Mantovani, 1991:20).*

#### **New opportunities for women in the post-colonial period**

Despite the negative changes discussed above, development has not been all bad for women: '...some women, albeit a minority, have benefited through increased access to tertiary education and paid employment, decent health care, and a higher standard of living' (Lateef, 1990:48). Access to education, in particular, has broadened women's horizons. There have been improvements in job and training opportunities for women, with more women holding down good jobs, some of which are in domains dominated by men. More women are becoming involved in both business and politics. Women are working together on communal projects and, in this way, showing men that it is not only they who can successfully run a small enterprise and profit from it. In some churches, both men's and women's names are up on the roster for leading prayers and doing readings.

At the community level, more women are stepping forward to take on leadership roles. Some women have become quite outspoken and this is significant in that, in the past, women were not encouraged to take on public roles and it was men who spoke out on community affairs. Women's groups have helped to organise and educate women from the towns to the villages, although they focus on a limited range of subjects including home management, cooking, sewing, gardening, health and nutrition (*Nius Blong Mere*, 30 September, 1988:6). Some women have had the opportunity to be involved in wider decision making processes than the household through gaining election to their women's group executive. Involvement in women's groups has bolstered many women's confidence.



Women's mobility has increased in recent decades and not only in association with their husbands or families moving to town. Women are starting to move around the country more on their own, both to take up jobs or educational opportunities. Other women are travelling shorter distances, but more frequently, to market produce. Women's groups in rural areas are giving village women hitherto unavailable opportunities to travel to workshops or to bigger meetings where they are networking with other women's groups from outside their immediate area.

Despite the threat of criticism and even ostracism, some women are starting to challenge customs which they feel are disadvantageous to them. In one case in Malaita a woman was so angry that men had refused to fix the roof of an old person's house unless they were paid that she defied *kastom* by going up on to the roof, a position higher than men, and fixing it herself. She suffered no recriminations for her act (Sheila MacBride Stewart, supporter of the Auki Diocesan Team, 1992:personal communication).

Slowly the breakdown of certain traditions which control women's behaviour is beginning to be accepted as a positive step, both by men and women. For example, women from the Lau lagoon area of Malaita, who are now living around Honiara, have started fishing alongside men and selling their catch at the market for a very good return. In the past it was believed that if a woman was on a boat the fish would stay away so women were left with the jobs of boning and gutting the fish and cooking it. Some husbands have been impressed at how quickly women have picked up the necessary skills and women are starting to catch as many fish as the men out on canoes (*Mere Save*, October/November 1992:9).

Those women who have benefited from change are now providing role models to others and showing that women can successfully speak out and be listened to, they can challenge tradition where it threatens their interests, they can have their own business enterprise and they can become leaders in the community, church and wider society, if they so choose.

In summary, women have had to cope with many pressures in their rapidly changing societies including increasing workloads due to new needs, such as cash, and new problems, such as resource depletion. Despite the important contribution they make to society, women are often left feeling as if they are insignificant players in the development game because they lack access to cash and training. In this position, few women recognise the opportunities open to them and even fewer have the courage and confidence to pursue new options.

## ***Gender relations in the 1990s***

Chapter One discussed how unequal relations of power shape the reality of women's life options throughout the world. The power relationship which frames this disadvantage for women is gender, although the life circumstances of particular women will vary according to other social divisions too such as class and ethnicity. The argument which emerged in Chapter Two was that unless the *status quo* was challenged through development initiatives, women's disadvantage would be reinforced. The last section of this chapter, therefore, considers how gender relations in the 1990s affect women's ability to recognise and work towards meeting their own needs and interests. It also questions whether there are differences in the needs and interests of groups of Solomon Islands women. This is in preparation for Chapter Six which will specifically consider to what extent gender needs and interests have been addressed in development initiatives in the Solomons.

### **Diversity among Solomon Islands women**

Outside observers may be impressed by the confidence and assertiveness of women in the public eye who hold positions of power in government or non-government organisations but the life of women in the villages remains very different. For many years, while urban educated women have run national women's organisations and travelled to meetings around the globe, rural women with little formal education have stood back, scared to take a step into their changing society and to see what new opportunities are open to them. The following comment comes from women living on the island of Savo, only 32 kilometres by sea from Honiara:

*...how can we get involved [in development] when we are so ignorant and still in the dark of what is going on around us? (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:115).*

The division between the educated elite of Honiara and their rural or urban sisters without a formal education is significant, not least in their attitude to development. Many women leaders in urban areas have lost touch with the problems and priorities of rural women with some of them arguing, for example, that sewing demonstrations enabling women to make smart dresses to wear to church are vital if rural women are to become part of 'modern' society. Meanwhile, rural women find it difficult to fathom how women in positions of power can go on overseas trips when in their village they are still waiting for a water supply: 'Professional women and women in villages don't understand each other...' (Older woman working for an NGO, 1992:personal communication).

Rural women perceive their urban sisters in ambivalent ways. In some ways they wish to emulate them because so many urban women seem to possess envied advantages: a sewing machine or a job. While they admire urban women for gaining positions of status, some also criticise them for unreservedly adopting Western fashions and behaviour. Rural women are quick to criticise leaders of national women's organisations whose lives are not perceived to be models of moral virtue. Those who are divorced, for example, are often condemned even when they have suffered years of abuse at the hands of their husband. In rural areas there are similar divisions between women who have been brought up on mission stations and have several years of formal education and those who have lived all their lives in villages.

Further divisions occur between old women and young women<sup>21</sup> in rural areas. Young women often feel isolated when they return to their village after receiving formal schooling or training. Those who want to do more than the gardening and house work they engaged in before they gained an education find it difficult to settle back into village life. As Foanaota (1989:70) notes, these young women '...acquire new notions about such things as prestige, power, wealth and social obligations, so that they become unsuited to ordinary village life, should they wish to return to it'. Older women, however, may hinder the progress of younger women by making them unwelcome at women's group meetings, not allowing them to have a say in the proceedings of these meetings and making it obvious that they do not wish to learn new skills from someone younger than them. Younger women also feel that they are subject to criticism from older women who are unhappy with their new styles of dress or who say they are lazy because they do not like doing physical work any more. If given the opportunity, many such young women would prefer to live in town.

*Ethnic and provincial differences also affect women's behaviour and expectations. There is a lack of trust between women from different ethnic groups which goes back to pre-colonial days when people from different clans were often enemies. Accusations of favouritism are sometimes levelled at Western Province women, usually distinguishable by their very dark skin, who tend to disproportionately occupy leadership positions in women's organisations in Honiara<sup>22</sup>. As in Vanuatu, envy, innuendo and resentment have been directed at women in positions of power (Jolly, 1991b:12).*

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<sup>21</sup> Young women are not well catered for in the Solomon Islands. The National Youth Council (NYC), which is supposed to support their interests, has for many years focused on activities for young men. In 1991, in realization of the fact that the proportion of females to males at provincial youth training workshops was minimal, the NYC held a week long workshop specifically on skills training for young women. The participants reported back to the NYC several things they would like the NYC to do for them including holding provincial and village workshops with training for young women, provide funds for projects, encouragement and networking and to provide market outlets (Be'at'anisia, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> The fact is, however, that women from Western Province have higher rates of formal education than those from other provinces and this may largely contribute to their success in gaining these leadership positions.

Further problems prevent women from forming a powerful group, including the lack of cooperation and tendency to gossip which is said to threaten the cohesiveness of many groups:

*Jealousy and criticism is a big sickness which makes all things in Solomon Islands society break down, whether at national or village level (Rural women's church group leader, Malaita, 1992:personal communication).*

Women working for the government, women's organisations or NGOs often receive criticism rather than support from other women, a fact which is widely acknowledged by both women and men:

*Our women don't appreciate each other. Instead they criticise, talk behind each others backs and don't discuss things openly (Male family planning worker, 1992:personal communication).*

These many divisions among women in the Solomon Islands mean that women do not always share the same needs and interests. This does not, however, rule out the fact that women share certain interests on the basis of their gender. Social concerns such as health, legal rights, education and domestic violence are shared by many women across class, age and ethnic lines. It is these types of issues which will be dealt with in Chapter Six.

## **Relations between women and men**

Earlier the change in gender relations through the period of colonisation was discussed. Next we look at contemporary gender relations, how they determine some gender interests and how they can affect women's ability to recognise and work towards meeting their own needs and interests. A major issue here is men's reluctance to accept women's changing roles and their potential for self-development. At the 1963 Pacific Forum meeting in Fiji, when the discussion centred on women's advancement Francis Bugotu, later to be elected Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, suggested that the real challenge for Pacific societies lay with educating men to accept women as equals (Sadaraka, 1963:41). His suggestion still seems pertinent today.

Many women in the Solomon Islands lament what they see as a deteriorating relationship between men and women. In the past, they say, men and women relied on each other; survival depended on them carrying out their separate roles effectively. Now things have changed and men call on tradition and Christian morals to try to prevent women from making changes in their lives, rather than encouraging them. In a 1979 study a foreign researcher found that, 'Almost unanimously, women told me that the major obstacle in the path of personal and social development is the attitude of men (Crocker, 1979:25). She noted that men's attitudes even hindered women's projects. In 1992, during my own

research, women taking part in the Agriculture Education Conference agreed that the main barrier to future progress for women was men's attitudes which, they said, needed serious reorientation.

As long as women perceive men's attitudes to hinder their progress, most will be reluctant to pursue their own interests to the extent they would wish. When one realises that men have their own set of strategic gender interests, which are likely to centre around their desire to retain power in domestic, community and national arenas, it becomes obvious why they are likely to resist attempts by women to claim more power or to implement redistributive policies.

At almost every stage of their lives women are under the control of men. Unmarried women are subject to the control of their fathers and brothers while married women must defer to their husbands, who have paid brideprice and therefore assumed control over them:

*From a young age girls are also taught how to relate to men and the relative superiority of males. Respect and deference must be shown to brothers, fathers and husbands. Male dominance and female subservience is instilled into women... (Lateef, 1990:25).*

It is only old widows and women married to men who choose not to follow these traditions, who may escape these tight controls. Jully Sipolo laments the control that husbands have over wives in her poem, 'Anti-climax'<sup>23</sup>:

#### ANTI-CLIMAX

*When I married you...  
It was for love,  
Companionship, security.*

*When you married me,  
You put a ring round my finger,  
A ring through my nose,  
A noose round my neck,  
And a yoke on my shoulders.*

*(1986:33).*

In a situation of rapid change which has seen men's power threatened it appears that many men have tried to enforce their own control, and that of *kastom*, over women. Crocombe (1989:60-61) suggests that, throughout the Pacific, women's widening and increasing skills are making some men feel inadequate, leading men to take refuge in alcohol and violence against women. Men who call on *kastom* to control women often claim

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<sup>23</sup> Sipolo is an educated woman who had spent some years overseas. She has publicly discussed the difficulty of living with a violent husband, who she has since divorced. Her ideals of marriage are not likely to be the same as those of village women who, although they may be just as controlled by their husbands, are more likely to accept this as their fate.



that women's behaviour is inappropriate or immoral. While men change and 'modernise' with relative freedom, they are quick to criticise women for adopting European-style dress or habits and to call for a cultural revival involving a return to traditional ways. The forum of 'Letters to the Editor' is often used to chastise women for what the men see as inappropriate behaviour and to keep women's voices under control. For example, in 1983 the event of women attempting to persuade the Malaita Provincial Assembly Executive Committee that women should be allowed to play soccer caused an outcry from men. One letter to the editor read,

*'For women to relax openly in front of their male relatives is a huge concern....Women should be respected and not be decorations in the field to satisfy many impolite spectators....I must mention clearly that some women playing soccer are married and have different customs to observe' (Solomons Toktok, 5-5-1983:3).*

Another man complained that it was not valid for the Minister in charge of Sport to argue that women be allowed to play soccer on the basis of the constitution which promotes equality; rather, *kastom* should come first (Solomons Toktok, 12-5-1983:13).

Use of the term *kastom* to control women has caused problems for women in many parts of the Pacific, as the following poem by Grace Mera Molisa of Vanuatu exemplifies:

#### CUSTOM

*"Custom"  
misapplied  
bastardised  
murdered  
a frankenstein  
corpse  
conveniently  
recalled  
to intimidate  
women...*

*(Molisa, 1983:24). ]*

While many changes have occurred in the Solomons, there is still a great deal of resistance to that which involves women loosening the reigns which control their lives.

It is not just men's attitudes which are holding women back, however. Women also believe that tradition bestows upon men power which they do not have access to. When men involved in a community project would not teach women associated with the project to drive a truck so they could transport their vegetables to the market, women were not happy but were philosophical about the men's decision: *'Kastom blong mifala olketa men ya big'* (According to our customs, men are in charge). Women to whom I spoke in a Western Province village were adamant that they often knew more than men but they were also clear

that, according to their customs, men always had the final say on major decisions. In her research on women in Papua New Guinea, Brown (1988:136-7) talked with one professional who admitted that in her society,

*'Women have always been looked on as inferior...women were brought up to believe it. We, in our women's group, tell them they should not be treated as inferior. Some things women can do that men cannot do....We try to change women's concept of themselves. Men's domination is in their blood'.*

Many women need to be empowered on an individual level so that there is a growth in their self-esteem and sense of dignity, enabling them to have the confidence to take advantage of opportunities in the present system, or to challenge the system where necessary.

Besides the fact that many women believe it is men's right to hold on to most forms of power in their society, those women who would like to change this situation are often reluctant to do so because they fear a backlash from men. Educated women are in a particularly ambivalent position. Even those who have travelled overseas feel bound by their culture in the way they act and speak. They are typically reluctant to publicly bring up issues which challenge men's control over women. Their fears of a backlash are not ungrounded. Women who 'rock the boat' are not widely respected by either men or women because in the communal society in which they live, those who wish to be respected support the views of the majority. Vocal women face the threat of being outcast. Several well educated women in Honiara informed me that the problem with some of the women's leaders in the Solomon Islands was that they wanted to push for change too quickly and that they criticised men, rather than approaching them in a 'nice way'.

It seems logical that women desire men's support for their organisations and the various development initiatives they devise. Some feel, however, that they need men's support to give credibility to their activities. In the 1980s, for example, the National Council of Women was the only women's organisation willing to raise controversial topics and question men's authority. In the 1990s it has made a place available on its board specifically for a male in order to win credibility from men in the community. It is often concern when women compromise their own needs or interests to accommodate men in such a way. This is not to suggest that women should reject subtle strategies such as negotiation and alliance building in favour of adopting radical, separatist strategies for change. When women start to adjust their ideas or alter their programmes because of lack of approval from men, there is a problem. The whole point of women having their own organisations and programmes is that they can create a non-intimidating, autonomous space in which they can share ideas and set ideals for themselves to work towards. As long as women continue to lack confidence and access to power, it is important that they continue to meet separately to work out their own priorities.

The concern over stirring up a backlash from men may be hindering women's progress. For example, women working for NGOs, women's representatives on national boards and committees and the like are often afraid to broach issues relating to the needs and interests of women because they do not wish to be labelled as 'women's libbers'<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, women in Gizo, who regularly discuss problems associated with their husbands drinking, were also unwilling to come forward and speak anonymously about this on a women's radio programme. Women as individuals and within their groups are becoming more reluctant to criticise men. If change is to come about, however, women will have to challenge men, no matter how difficult this is:

*It is the men who hold most of the power in any society, but more so in Pacific societies. The task of educating them will be a tough one as it involves changing the patriarchal, hierarchical structures which we have inherited - and very often, unquestioningly accepted (Singh, 1992:20).*

Women with whom I spoke made it clear that they thought men generally had different development priorities from themselves, that while women were interested in social development, men's interest focused on ways of earning cash. Typical comments included: 'Women see development as improved sanitation and health while men see it in terms of new canoes and outboard motors', and 'Men are only interested in themselves when they talk about "community" development'.

Women have certain gender interests as a result of the structural patterning of their life chances but they are not necessarily conscious of these interests, they may not be 'subjectively perceived' (Kabeer, 1992a:30; Clarke, 1986:113). Collective empowerment must follow personal empowerment, however, if women are to go on to discuss, identify and attempt to address the causes of their subordination and their development priorities. They also need an autonomous space in which to do this. Mary Rogo, a mobile team leader with SIDT, noticed the difference between a leadership training workshop held for men and women, and one held for women alone:

*When the women were working on their own the workshop was much better. The women weren't frightened, and were keen to share ideas....We talked about men too and why some are not willing to share their ideas. I see this in the village, men seem to have no respect (Link, July/August 1991:15).*

While men are unlikely to support direct attempts by women to secure more power and influence if this means that men lose power, this does not mean that men always stand in the way of women's development. Chapter Three discussed the need for women to build alliances with groups and individuals who shared women's goals. Some men fit this description. A number of Solomon Islands women reported that their husbands are

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<sup>24</sup> 'Women's lib' 'feminism' and related terms have very negative connotations to many Solomon Islanders. A volunteer visiting a village with other representatives of a national women's organisation was almost refused permission to see local women because the chief thought they were 'the women's lib people' from Honiara.

becoming more supportive of their involvement in women's group activities, a man being to allow their wives to travel a long way from home to attend meetings or while the husbands take care of the children. We should not assume that men are the problem. It is non-sensitised men and non-sensitised women who pose problems for women's development (Reg Sanday, UNDP/UNIFEM consultant, Fiji, 1992 communication).

## *Summary*

The first part of this chapter briefly introduced the reader to the context of the Solomon Islands, before concentrating on how women's lives and gender relations have been transformed by the colonial process. It has shown how, contrary to popular opinion, women were accorded a certain degree of respect and power in traditional society. This has now been undermined, however. In the change that has ensued since the colonisation of their country, women have been the biggest losers. Where new technologies were available, they were most suited to men's work. The colonial government and generally bestowed on men the means of gaining status in the modern sector economy. Men had more opportunities to access new forms of power, such as wage employment and cash, while women have been left feeling that they have little to contribute to society. Gender relations have changed with men taking control of realms of power as well as exerting greater control over a domain previously controlled by women, the household. Many women feel that they can do little to change their situation and are how dissatisfied they are with aspects of their lives.

The changes outlined appear to be having a negative effect on women, particularly on stress levels and women's psychological well-being. The pressures on women to conform to a society in which traditional values controlling women's behaviour are upheld are enormous. Many women in towns and rural areas are searching for freedom and respect while the expectations of *kastom* and Christian morality weigh on them. While development agencies, the churches, colonial and post-colonial governments have made attempts to alleviate the hardships faced by women, 'development' has always been beneficial to them. For many, their workloads have increased and pressures for them to earn cash, environmental pressures and lack of cooperation from husbands. This often prevents rural women from pursuing opportunities for development. In the late 1980s Hilda Kari, who was to become that first woman president of the country, spoke out against the treatment of women in her country:

*...eighty-five percent or more of Solomon Islands women are still living a menial way of life, being treated as the slave, and thought of as nothing more than a tool to ensure that the man and children are happy....Her welfare does not seem to matter (Nius Blong Mere, 30 September 1988:1).*

Chapter Five has shown that many women in the Solomon Islands have been disempowered by the colonial process. Little has been done in the post-colonial period to alleviate this situation, partly because development agencies still stress material development. Much could be achieved if the focus of development was on balancing the development of self-esteem and dignity in individuals with economic, practically-oriented development. Also, however, women need autonomous space in which to identify their collective needs and interests otherwise they will be unlikely to work towards future change. As with any oppressed group, having time to build solidarity with others in a similar position can lead to identification of problems facing them as a group and ways of addressing them.

The fact that men have had more opportunities to take advantage of Western education, paid employment and formal political power to date points to structural inequalities in society, inequalities which will continue to hold women back unless there are development agencies in existence which are willing to challenge the *status quo*. Chapter Six will consider how women's needs and interests have been accorded priority by the development industry, analysing whether agencies are prepared to challenge the *status quo* through their programmes and whether women in rural areas feel that their priority concerns are being addressed.





## CHAPTER SIX: How well are gender needs and interests being addressed in the Solomon Islands?

### *Introduction*

The aim of Chapter Six is to identify practical gender needs and strategic gender interests in the Solomon Islands and to analyse to what extent they have been accorded priority by development agencies. It will then be possible to move on, in Chapter Seven, to consider what strategies are most effective in facilitating women's development and empowerment in the Solomon Islands context. Particular attention will be paid to any needs or interests which, according to feedback from women, have been neglected.

As discussed in Chapter Three, this thesis supports an empowerment approach to women's development which advocates strategies which go beyond meeting everyday needs. Chapter Two explained how practical gender needs are those which alleviate women's everyday burdens while strategic gender interests refer to ways of overcoming women's subordinate position in society. While practical gender needs have been the focus of development agencies' initiatives, for long term change focused on a more equitable society, strategic gender interests must also be addressed. Agencies adopting welfare, anti-poverty or efficiency approaches to women's development often fail to put women in a better position to challenge the structures in society which oppress them. The empowerment approach, by contrast, specifically includes the goals of increasing women's power and status so that women are in a better position to challenge the structures in society which oppress them. The empowerment approach acknowledges the importance of women having faith in themselves to change their situation before transformation will occur, therefore, strategies which build self-esteem are important.

To begin with, Chapter Six briefly introduces the key agents which promote women's development in the Solomon Islands. The main focus of this chapter, however, is an analysis of how well gender needs and interests are being addressed in relation to family planning, health and nutrition, agriculture and natural resources, education, employment and business, the law and political power.

## *Agencies concerned with women's development*

### *Government commitment to GAD*

Successive leaders, including Ezekiel Alebua, have spoken about the importance of women to the development of the Solomon Islands: 'I believe we have neglected the women for a long time and women have been crying for equal participation in the development of the country' (*Solomon Star*, 3 July, 1987:8).

Government rhetoric on commitment to the women of the country has not, however, been matched by allocations of resources and power. In fact, the development plans of governments since independence have sought increasingly to position women as resources which should be more fully harnessed in development efforts. The 1981-84 plan indicated that women were a development resource and that all development resources, both human and natural, needed to be mobilised (Lateef, 1990:27). One of the goals of the 1985-1989 National Development Plan was to organise training programmes to improve women's skills and knowledge in order to increase their contribution to the country's development (Solomon Islands Government, 1985:74), as if women did not work hard enough already. This focus on women as resources to be used by the government or development agencies runs contrary to the idea of development being a process which can empower women to bring about change themselves.

In reality, the government did little for women beyond helping to establish two poorly funded and under-resourced organisations for women, the Women and Development Division (WDD) and the National Council of Women (NCW)<sup>1</sup>, which were the two key secular women's organisations in the country. While some ministries had devised projects aiming to benefit women, it was difficult to find a government programme which challenged existing gender relations in society, which broadened the opportunities open to women or aimed to empower women. As one researcher surveying women's opinions in Malaita noted: 'A lot of people complained bitterly about how the government has neglected them' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:7).

### *The WDD and NCW*

At the time of my fieldwork, the WDD<sup>2</sup> was the most widely recognised national women's organisation<sup>3</sup>. Since the 1960s the WDD had been left largely to fend for itself

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<sup>1</sup> While the NCW was supposedly a NGO, it received a great deal of financial assistance from the government and was housed in a government ministry. The aims, priorities and activities of the WDD and NCW will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> Until the late 1980s the WDD was known as the Women's Interest Office (WIO) and most rural women who knew of it still refer to this division as 'women's interest' when I spoke with them in 1992.

while the government pointed to this token effort and said, 'We are looking after our women' (Ruby Titulu, Planning Officer, Policy Evaluation Unit, 1992: personal communication).

One of the WDD's main aims was 'To facilitate women's training programmes, to develop appropriate knowledge and skills for women and to improve their participation in development'. Constrained by poor resources and a welfare approach, however, the WDD supported a narrow range of programmes to promote women's development. They focused on home management, which consisted mainly of sewing and cooking demonstrations, with occasional instruction in appropriate technology, such as charcoal stoves. There was a strong European influence on the types of programmes offered, for example, peg aprons were sewn, jams made and tablecloths appliqued (see Photo 3, page 156). When primary school teachers requested that a workshop be run for them in 1992, instruction focused on making items to beautify their homes (Table Two). This was typical of courses designed for either urban or rural women.

**TABLE TWO: Training Course at the Women and Development Division's Training Centre, Honiara, 11-15 May 1992**

	9-10am	10.30-12 noon	1-3.30
<b>Monday</b>	Introduction; theory of kitchen management	Hand towels	Crocheting
<b>Tuesday</b>	Theory on bathrooms	Plastic bags	Bathroom curtains
<b>Wednesday</b>	Theory on bedrooms	How to tie-dye pillowcases	Begin toilet paper holder
<b>Thursday</b>	...toilet paper holder	...toilet paper holder	...toilet paper holder
<b>Friday</b>	Finish incomplete sewing projects	Closing ceremony	

(Source: Eva Wagapu, Women's Development Assistant)

While in a letter sent to the WDD the primary school teachers expressed their enjoyment of this workshop, they thought it most useful in that it had taught them skills which they could use to make their husband's lives happier. In a country where many women are illiterate, suffer health problems and want new opportunities to earn cash, among other things, it is of concern that 'making one's husband happy' was seen as the major benefit of a course at the WDD training centre. The practicality of such skills for rural women in particular can be called into question.

<sup>3</sup> From this point until the end of Chapter Seven I will discuss data obtained during fieldwork largely in the past tense. While I feel that many of the problems, as well as the inspiring development initiatives, I uncovered will not have changed, some details may have altered in the time it has taken to complete my thesis thus it seems appropriate to write in the past tense.

In addition to the direction of its programmes, the WDD's other main weakness was its inability to reach its major intended beneficiary group, rural women<sup>4</sup>. The WDD has been criticised for elitism and adopting an urban focus (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:16). Rural areas were poorly served with not even one Women's Development Assistant (WDA) allocated to serve each province. WDAs often held workshops in the provincial centre, inviting only women's group leaders to attend on the assumption that the information learned was passed on to women left in the villages. Village women felt neglected, as expressed by a woman from the Shortland Islands: 'Women's Interest came with patterns and recipes and disappeared forever...' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:55).

The overall approach of the WDD has been the organisation's major weakness. It has focused on the needs of women's families, rather than aiming to empower women. WDAs planned programmes without any consultation with individual communities, assuming that they could speak for rural women and assess needs on their behalf. While basic nutrition and sewing classes may have been practical, some activities contributed only to the beautification of women's homes. Meanwhile, vocational and agricultural training and literacy were neglected. The pervasiveness of a home economics mentality in their programmes is clear. A WDA holding a workshop in a remote area of Makira noted that the women complained a lot about the poor water supply system which meant they had to walk up hill every day to collect water. Despite this desperate need the WDA recommended that a follow-up workshop on the repair of sewing machines should be held (WDD, 1990:38). The WDD was blatantly criticised in a 1990 review of women and development in the Solomon Islands:

*The relevance of cake baking, intricate pattern making and doily crocheting to women who live in thatched huts and spend a large part of their time making and maintaining gardens, collecting firewood and water, is highly questionable. Even though many women enjoy such activities, little of what they learn through these projects is applied to their everyday lives since village women spend little time engaged in "housework" - "western style"... (Lateef, 1990:31-32).*

The NCW, alternatively, was a more political women's organisation. It was established in 1983 to influence government planning and policy making and to provide one voice to air women's views (*Solomons Toktok*, 5-10-1977:1). The NCW played an important role in putting sensitive issues such as domestic violence and women's role in politics onto the development agenda in the mid-1980s. For example, NCW activities in 1985 included lobbying for the appointment of a qualified woman to a position in the National Planning Office to advise of the effects of proposed developments on women, launching an investigation into the high incidence of domestic violence, campaigning to encourage more

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<sup>4</sup> Better connections with rural women could, however, only be seen in a positive light if changes were made to make programmes more appropriate to their life circumstances.





Photo 3: The focus of development initiatives for women is typically narrow: women from Purakiki village, South-East Guadalcanal, display craft items they have made.



Photo 4: Trainees at DIVIT, Visale, spend more time in classes on home economics training than on health, literacy and leadership put together.

women to register to vote and researching why so few girls chose to study non-traditional subjects (NCW, 1985:4-5).

Though the NCW raised the profile of some concerns facing women, it did this in a top-down manner. Despite initial good intentions, a widespread network of provincial and area councils of women never came into being so the NCW was primarily urban-based. It followed an equity approach, effectively promoting women's development in Honiara but carrying out its activities with little consultation with, or concern for, the opinions and the needs of women in the villages. Staff did not foster widespread grassroots consciousness raising programmes. Such work would have been more likely to change attitudes and structures in society which negatively affect women's lives and opportunities.

Further, the NCW's operations were compromised somewhat in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After a short-term suspension in 1987 during a review of the WDD and NCW (Pfanner, 1987), and another suspension in 1991 when employees were accused of financial mismanagement, there was little evidence of the innovative and challenging programmes which used to characterised the NCW's work. While in many countries organisations similar to the NCW are independent, in the Solomon Islands the NCW was a statutory body, relying on the government for the bulk of its funds. This dependence put the NCW in an ambivalent position as staff and members felt some allegiance to their benefactor, making it difficult for them to effectively carry out lobbying and watchdog roles. By twice suspending the NCW the government left women temporarily without a voice to comment on government policy or to lobby for future change and this appears to have subdued that voice in the 1990s.

### ***Donors***

Donors have had a powerful role in influencing the direction of aid in the Solomon Islands. A feature of the economy was the heavy use made of foreign aid, particularly for creating infrastructure and in financing the public sector (Flikkema, 1980:79). It was suggested that, despite the government's own planning and policy-making structures, development planning was essentially donor-driven (Joy Kere, Senior Planning Officer, MHMS, Honiara: 1992). Donors contributed the equivalent of a quarter of GDP to development projects. While this powerful position enabled donors to push to make women's development a priority, it also meant that aid was directed in an *ad hoc* manner, according to the interests of particular donors. This donor-driven project approach has been described as providing pre-packaged answers for questions which have never been asked (John Roughan, Director of the School of General Studies, SICHE, 1992:personal communication). Thus despite the good work they did in forcing women's issues onto the



development agenda, because women were not always consulted donors may have failed to cover some needs and interests which were of great concern to women.

Often donors worked in conjunction with a government ministry or division and this meant that the resulting projects or programmes were likely to adopt the emphasis of that ministry or division. For example, large amounts of the funds directed towards women's development were administered through the WDD and the consequent programmes or projects which emerged had a conservative, home economics emphasis.

#### *Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)<sup>5</sup>*

NGOs were dominant among agencies working in the villages to develop initiatives for service provision, sustainable cash-earning opportunities and to improve information flows. For a small island nation, there were an extensive range of both indigenous, regional and international NGOs in operation, some of which proved to be very capable of facilitating development (Hughes, 1988:17). Non-formal education was almost totally reliant on NGO activities. They offered inspiration to people in rural areas by adding to their knowledge and understanding of what was going on around them, teaching them skills and increasing their awareness of options regarding future development.

There were several NGOs particularly noted for their work with or for women<sup>6</sup>. PAWORNET, a network for women from throughout the Pacific, focused on networking and information sharing. Save the Children Fund Australia (SCFA) published material on topics such as women's health and domestic violence, as well as supporting the government's maternal child health services. The Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) focused on outreach work, training people to tour extensively running village-level awareness-raising and development education workshops on topics such as the sustainable use of resources and problems associated with the high population growth rate. Danchurch Aid had a more practical orientation which focused on sending small teams of women on tours of rural areas to spread information on nutrition. The Solomon Islands Planned Parenthood Association (SIPPA) provided family planning information and advice through their clinic and some outreach work was also done. The YWCA in Honiara ran a hostel providing moderately priced accommodation for young working women and it held classes for women in topics such as leadership training (*Women's Club News*, 1986:36).

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<sup>5</sup> While some NGOs could have also come under the category of donors discussed above, others, especially indigenous NGOs, relied largely on overseas funds.

<sup>6</sup> While the church women's organisations also constitute important NGOs working with women in the Solomon Islands, they will be discussed separately below.

While NGOs, especially those focusing on outreach, did a great deal of good work in the Solomon Islands, a major problem was that they failed to coordinate their activities. This meant that there was some duplication with government and NGO programmes covering similar topics, such as nutrition, while other gender needs and interests were not broached at all.

#### *Women's organisations and village groups*

Women's groups existed, or were in a state of limbo, in most villages in the Solomon Islands. The five major churches each had an extensive network of women's groups but there were a number of non-denominational groups in existence too. Their typical format consisted of weekly meetings following Western meeting protocol and including songs, prayers and other activities such as weaving, sewing, games or community service. A number of groups had income generating projects focusing on market gardening, sewing or poultry raising and many had a bank account. Most of the women I spoke to were, however, crying out for ideas or activities which could enliven their groups: 'This group is sort of blind...it needs help' (Ruth Rickson, Birao women's group, Guadalcanal, 1992: personal communication).

Chapter Five discussed how women first came together in groups through the work of missionary women who did not focus on feminist concerns. Activities of the women's groups were originally based on the European housewife ideal<sup>7</sup>, with classes, for example, on the now infamous topics of embroidering pillowcases and baking drop scones (Lee, 1985). This home economics legacy was still evident in the early 1990s. In Auki, for example, an expatriate woman organising a Women's Week for members of church women's groups in 1991 included sessions on flower arranging and setting a table for a dinner party. As in neighbouring Vanuatu, this focus on domestic topics '...fails to equip women to play a more dynamic role in the development process' (Women of Vanuatu, 1983:3).

Despite often limited resources and limited perspectives of what development can mean for women, women's groups generally had great significance for their members. Fleming (1992:4) contended that, 'Church women's groups constitute a powerful body within the Solomon Islands'. Certainly they were the only organisations with effective networks which reached down to, and made links between, women at village level. Many other agencies, which operated through official aid channels and had access to overseas funds to support their programmes and projects, did not really touch upon the lives of the majority of women. Women claimed that while politicians made promises, while national women's

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<sup>7</sup> As explained in Chapter Five, early education for women often centred on training them in the domestic skills of European women.

organisations sent representatives to hold workshops for them every few years and while NGOs occasionally visited, it was the churches that were always there for them (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:45, 132). Church women's groups provided a socially-sanctioned release for women from their daily obligations. Having separate groups '...permits the development of organizational capacity, skills and resources for leverage in mainstream interaction' (Staudt, 1981:371). Participation in these groups built individual confidence and solidarity among women (Photo Five, page 168), helping them to realise they could make choices about future development:

*Attendance at Women's Clubs has gradually helped women to develop their potential and make better use of their resources for the benefit of family and community....Women are learning not merely to accept, but to make choices, and to initiate action (Ryan, 1975:79-80).*

### ***Discussion***

Agencies with a stated concern for GAD issues in the Solomon Islands included government ministries, which rarely reached out to rural women, and women's groups, which retained great significance for rural women. NGOs were playing an increasingly important role in taking development education to the villages. Donors, meanwhile, were instrumental in directing funds into GAD projects and programmes but concern was expressed at the power they had over the direction of aid.

As discussed in Chapter One, 'development' is not only that which, in Third World countries, occurs as a direct result of aid money funding projects and programmes which are administered by governments, NGOs or donors. Not all development initiatives directed at women take the form of planned projects or programmes receiving outside funding and resources, as the example of church women's groups has shown. It is important to be aware of alternative forums for women's development when considering how gender needs and interests are being catered for in the Solomon Islands.

## ***Contemporary needs and interests of women in the Solomon Islands***

### **Introduction**

In the following sections I examine key sectors, such as health and education, and consider whether gender needs and interests are being adequately addressed. It will become apparent, then, whether concerted attempts have been made to enhance the knowledge and skills of grassroots women or whether old models of development for women, focusing on their domestic roles, still predominate.



Chapter Two discussed how some issues are deemed to be social problems, and consequently have resources and personnel directed to them, while others are ignored (Price, 1992). Donors, NGOs, governments and women's organisations often profess to know what women's needs are; they state these as facts and go on to direct their programmes to meet these needs. The Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB), for example, specified the fields of health care, family planning and vocational training to enhance employment opportunities as being the fields in which Solomon Islands women's needs were particularly acute (AIDAB, 1991:13). They did not, however, discuss their rationale for giving these needs priority. Did they use a top-down method, perhaps viewing statistics and written reports, or did they consult women at grassroots level? Here we need to examine whether development agencies and organisations are dealing with issues which women deem to be important and whether there are any significant concerns which they have failed to address.

Women's priorities regarding their needs and interests were not always apparent in my research. Much had to be assumed from women's actions, rather than from their direct response to my guiding question "what are your major needs and interests and are these being addressed?" (Appendix One), because they did not always outwardly state what they wanted. As discussed in Chapter Two, while it would seem ideal to confer with women about their needs and interests and to base development programmes on this, women are not always aware of what is in their best interests or, they may focus on the needs of their families rather than putting themselves first. They may be unaware of their own interests because they work so hard that they have no time to reflect on their situation, because they have been conditioned into believing that gender inequalities are to be accepted or, because they do not have a broad conception of all of the development options which are open to them. For example, previous discussion indicated that many initiatives for women's development in the Solomon Islands emphasised home economics, continuing a tradition started by missionary women. Thus development, for Solomon Islands women, has come to mean learning to sew dresses, making doughnuts to sell at a fundraising 'bring and buy' for their church or raising poultry to generate some income. This promotion of sewing and cooking classes provides an example of a colonially-defined (and development organisation and donor-reinforced) definition of appropriate development for women, which was the main definition of development which village women had come to know.

When women are living under systems of oppression their strategic interests may not be apparent to them. These may only be clarified in women's minds once they start to talk openly about their concerns or to struggle together against oppressive forces effecting their lives. Women are likely to continue to respond to questions about their needs and interests in terms of home economics projects until communal discussion, or action, results

in them experiencing a change of consciousness. Thus, development agencies, or researchers such as myself, need to be perceptive and to use other methods in addition to direct questions if they wish to identify women's key concerns and changes they wish to see.

In Chapter Two, two frameworks were discussed which can help us understand how gender needs and interests can be identified and satisfied. Moser's triple roles framework was very popular in the GAD field but it was faulted for its top-down approach and therefore its failure to seek out the opinions and perspectives of the so-called beneficiaries of development and for its failure to problematise the planning process. Social relations analysis specified the importance of meeting both practical gender needs (based on daily survival needs) and strategic gender interests (based on women's experience of subordination). Further, it did this within a context which recognised that people outside of the planning process were important because the way in which they managed their lives reflected their needs and interests. The needs and interests of those development is being planned for are often different from the needs and interests of bureaucracies '...which are organized around different goals and reflect different institutional imperatives' (Kabeer, 1992a:37). In this way, women's disadvantage can be entrenched by the way in which the planning process deals with issues of concern to them:

*...the ideological and material factors which contribute to women's poverty and to the devaluation of their productive and reproductive contributions may actually be reproduced by the way women are made objects of policy attention, the way their interests are (or are not) institutionalized (Goetz, 1992:8).*

The remainder of Chapter Six involves a sector by sector discussion of areas of concern to women, drawing on statistics and qualitative data to show how women fare in relation to each of these sectors and where agencies, such as those introduced above, are concentrating their efforts<sup>8</sup>. It also draws on studies documenting women's opinions, and on interviews with rural women and observations of their lives, to ascertain whether gender needs and interests are being adequately addressed. The format followed is for problems to be discussed first, followed by action taken, while a discussion section points to future priorities for development agencies which are committed to facilitating a process of change towards more equitable societies.

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<sup>8</sup> While the contrasting work of the government, NGOs, church women's organisations and donors will be mentioned where relevant, this will only be done in a general sense, including brief outlines of the types of programmes they offered or the approach they took. In-depth discussion of specific development initiatives aimed at women is left for Chapter Seven, when some examples mentioned in this chapter will be discussed in detail in order that I can analyse how different approaches to GAD have impacted on women's lives in distinct ways.

## *Health and nutrition*

Good health, both mental and physical, has an integral link with women's empowerment. When women are physically or mentally ill or run-down, it is unlikely that they will have the inclination to devote energy to issues beyond daily survival. Healthy women are more motivated to pursue an education for themselves. Health and empowerment are also linked because if more women were empowered with the knowledge of how their bodies functioned and how disease was spread, they would be in a better position to protect their health.

## **Problems**

Women's health has been of major concern in the Solomon Islands. Short intervals between births, multiple births and heavy workloads have long taken their toll on women. Despite impressive improvements in female life expectancy, from only 48 years in 1976 to 61 years in the 1990s, new health problems were constantly surfacing. For example, there was a rising incidence of breast and cervical cancer among women under 35 years of age (UNICEF, 1993:61). Meanwhile malaria and other tropical diseases were still widespread.

## *Government services*

Primary health care was said to be the focus of government health programmes. It was officially endorsed with nearly as many beds being located in rural clinics as there were in hospitals (AIDAB, 1991:13). Not all health care resources reflected this emphasis on primary health care, however, with only 32 percent of medical staff working in rural areas where they had to serve 80 percent of the population (UNICEF, 1993:71). The government spent a decreasing percentage of its budget on health between 1986 and 1992 (Bage et al., 1992:6). Thus the most decentralised health centres in the government's primary health care equation, aid posts and rural clinics, were badly lacking in resources and staff (Lateef, 1990:9). Fully trained medical personnel were concentrated in the large hospitals while partially trained medical workers intended to service nurse aid posts rarely stayed in these positions for long. Only 128 village health workers were active in 1992<sup>9</sup>, meaning that many of the country's 5,000 villages would have missed out on assistance. A further problem for women, who preferred to consult female medical staff, was that they made up only a third of the total number of village health workers (UNICEF, 1993:71). Well-trained health staff,

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<sup>9</sup> In Malaita a doctor involved in training eighty village health workers over a four year period estimated that only seventeen were actively working in 1992 (Graham MacBride-Stewart, 1992: personal communication).

such as those from the Health Education Unit, did not reach out to rural areas and nor did they even visit rural areas to assess the needs of the people first hand. Transport difficulties, lack of funds and apathy prevented medical staff in provincial centres from doing outreach work. It was no surprise that women in rural areas complained that their health needs were not being met. They felt that if the Primary Health Care Programme really had a high priority clinics would be more fairly distributed and all would be well equipped with medical supplies.

### *Water and sanitation*

Clean supplies of water and sound sanitation systems were further health care needs. Because of women's role in collecting water for the household, its supply was of considerable importance to them. The government increased the proportion of rural areas with access to adequate water supplies from 24 percent in 1978 to 62 percent in 1990. Women were the principal beneficiaries of this improvement, the time saved in collecting water sometimes being several hours a day (UNICEF, 1993:87). The remaining villages, however, will be more difficult to service because they include smaller, more remote settlements (UNICEF, 1993:86). Here women still have to walk up to two hours a day to collect water from a river during the dry season. Some water supplies have proved to be unhygienic. Women from Santa Ana and Santa Catalina in Makira/Ulawa province obtained drinking water from wells but because of the unclean water, problems like dysentery and diarrhoea were common (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:20). Further, a number of water supply systems provided by the government have failed. Some have suggested that this was because women, though they were the main users of water, were rarely consulted when plans were made for the installation or maintenance of water services (Schoeffel, 1992:23). Men dominated positions on water boards and committees.

Sanitation needs were also neglected, having been improved in only 10 percent of villages (UNICEF, 1993:86). This could result in serious health problems in the future especially since overcrowding of villages has become a significant problem. While some NGOs and provincial government staff provided instruction for communities on how to construct toilet bowls and other sanitation systems, this did not always go hand in hand with education about the need for sanitation. Thus people sometimes continued to assume that their present system was adequate. Further, some organisations constructed one demonstration toilet in a village but this was of little use because men and women had strictly separate toilet areas in most parts of the Solomon Islands.



Most ignored in the health sector were strategic gender interests related to the empowerment of women through health education, knowledge and skills. More and better quality information on health was one of the major requests made by women during the provincial tours (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:20,59,110). Thorough health education could go a long way to remedying problems such as poor sanitation, poor water supplies, the spread of disease, lack of knowledge of proper nutrition and family planning. Women who attended health seminars at the YWCA in Munda, Western Province, asked that topics covered would include malnutrition, worry and depression, AIDS and gonorrhoea, and the effects of smoking. These topics suggested new health concerns arising for Solomon Islands women. By enhancing women's knowledge of how their bodies work and how they can protect themselves from certain diseases, women's well-being and their sense of control over their own lives could be improved.

Some women suggested that health education could help them understand more about *kastom* medicines too. They wanted *kastom* medicines to be tested and documented so people could be informed as to which ones they could use safely. Many women complained that because colonial and post-colonial governments enforced on them the view that Western medicines were best, they forgot how to make or use *kastom* medicine. This was particularly frustrating for them because the government's clinics seem to be constantly short of medicine. Women wished they still had the knowledge to be able to go into the bush and collect the necessary ingredients to make their own remedies (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:64).

There were many traditional beliefs regarding sickness and health which women had little control over. Often sickness was said to be caused by women breaking taboos. In some areas, for instance, a woman who miscarried was thought to have been unfaithful to her husband. In other cases, women felt that traditional taboos prevented them from getting the support they needed. For example, during the provincial tours women from Malaita province expressed concern at rumours that their province had a policy allowing only female doctors or nurses to help with the delivery of babies. The women were worried that, because of the shortage of medical staff in general, such a policy could threaten the life of both mothers and babies. These Malaitan women,

*...strongly recommended that...the government should educate people on the hazard's women could encounter when cultural beliefs and attitude[s] override logic and justice (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:8).*

Health education for both women and men could allay fears as to why miscarriages or stillborn babies occur, shifting some of the blame off the mother, and explain why women



may sometimes need to be attended by trained male medical staff if there are no female staff on hand.

### *Nutrition*

The National Nutrition Survey revealed several nutritional concerns affecting women's health including anaemia, obesity<sup>10</sup>, a lack of fruit and protein in their diets and the negative effects of certain customs. For example, in some parts of the country it was customary for men and boys to be served their meals first while the leftovers went to girls and women. This custom reinforced men's dominance, and importance, while leaving women feeling that they were second best. Such practices need to be challenged if women's health, and self-esteem, are seen as being important. The survey also found that a small percentage of women still followed taboos which prevented them from eating seafood whilst pregnant, thus depriving them of an important source of protein (Nutrition Survey Project, 1990:135-143).

Women identified other nutritional concerns related to the production and use of food in their gardens. A nutritionist with the Maternal Child Health and Family Planning (MCH/FP) Unit, says of their workshops:

*Women tell us that they don't know enough about food value, their gardens are too far from their homes and because of economic difficulties food is being sold to pay for school fees (Annette Aqorau, 1992: personal communication).*

### **Action taken**

Progress in the health sector included the establishment of the MCH/FP Unit, the development of a national policy on population and the undertaking of the national nutrition survey from which a nutrition policy and strategy were formulated (UNICEF, 1993:69-70). All of these developments could specifically help women. The major success of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) in the provision of health services to women, however, was their ante-natal clinics, attended by 94 percent of pregnant women during 1989 (MHMS, 1990:20). Women appeared to be aware of, and to value, this service. While this was the only successful example of primary health care reaching down to large numbers of women at grassroots level, the service the women received was not always ideal. In some clinics there was not even a source of clean water or a toilet, making life difficult for women who went there to give birth and recuperate afterwards (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:7,20,112). Also, women from Guadalcanal

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<sup>10</sup> This primarily affected Polynesian and Micronesian women living in towns. People in towns tended to eat more store-bought foods which were often high in salt, refined sugar or fat, and lacked the nutritional properties of traditional foods.

complained that nurses at rural health clinics had been unnecessarily breaking the waters of mothers who had come to the clinic to give birth. The women thought this should be left to nature and no explanation was given to them as to why the nurse did this prematurely (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:28,37). Clearly women feel that the health service should be more accountable.

The need for more information on health care is crucial, especially considering the lack of resources available in the health sector. The government, however, paid little attention to health education and efforts by NGOs and women's organisations only partially compensated for this. SCFA published a good series of booklets on women's health including breast cancer and infertility. These were distributed through women's groups. The booklets were only published in English, however, which made them of limited use to many women. Some women's groups covered hygiene and nutrition issues. One innovative initiative which could be emulated in other provinces is the health education training programme for village women which was initiated in Malaita<sup>11</sup>. Overall, the limited forms of health education available focused largely on nutrition. While poor nutrition does pose serious health problems, there seems to have been an overemphasis on nutrition while other health problems affecting women were ignored.

Not all nutrition programmes offered were particularly good either. Nutrition programmes associated with the government were limited in focus and outreach. The MHMS's nutrition division focused on refresher training for government health workers in the MCH/FP field, rather than reaching down to grassroots level. Often they focused on the need for mothers to eat well to nourish unborn or breastfed babies, or how women could prepare interesting and nutritious meals for their families. Men's role in nutrition was largely ignored. This reinforced the gender stereotype of women being responsible for growing food and preparing meals for their families. If men were also targeted in nutrition education campaigns they could be more inspired to help with cooking for their families. Meanwhile the WDD's attempts at nutrition education focused on cooking demonstrations which often required store-bought ingredients<sup>12</sup>. For example, the WDA for Makira organised a nutrition workshop in 1988 which included a demonstration on how to cook curried corned mutton (*Women's Club News*, 1988:15).

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<sup>11</sup> This was implemented by the Auki Diocesan Team in Malaita, to be discussed in Chapter Seven.

<sup>12</sup> While store-bought foods were typically inferior to home-grown foods in terms of nutritional value, they were often easier to prepare, thus lessening women's workloads. They were also essential for the many women who worked for cash and did not have the time to meet all of their families' food needs from their own gardens. The point being made above, however, is that many women do not benefit from such cooking demonstrations because they cannot afford store-bought foods and also, by focusing on store-bought foods in such workshops on nutrition, they are established as being healthier than home-grown foods.

The initiatives of NGOs involved in health education were more grassroots-oriented. Danchurch Aid, for example, ran a comprehensive village nutrition education programme, sending out pairs of nutrition specialists, all of whom were women, to teach villagers throughout the Solomon Islands about good nutrition (Photo 6, page 168). Danchurch Aid aimed to improve the lives of village people by giving them a better understanding of the links between health problems and poor nutrition and showing them how to manage their food resources to preserve the health of their families and possibly earn an income (Development Service Exchange, 1992:60).

The Honiara Municipal Authority administered the *Supsup* Garden Project<sup>13</sup>. This project aimed to encourage those living in towns to grow vegetables and fruit on small, often marginal, plots of land next to their homes both to improve their daily nutrition and to save them the costs of buying produce at the market or store. The success of this project led to its principles being applied in rural areas where women living in villages with poor soils were encouraged to cultivate small vegetable and fruit plots beside their homes rather than having to walk to and from their main gardens to collect food.

## Discussion

Health care for women followed the welfare approach to GAD which stresses how women can take better care of their families. Women's health care as such was not the main issue; women's health in relation to them being able to fulfil their maternal roles was the focus. This was clear from the emphasis of the government health services for women on nutrition programmes, family planning and maternal-child health, including a well utilised ante-natal service. While these are all important issues, women's well-being is not necessarily the main priority. It is essential that the government and any NGOs or donors supporting women's health programmes consider the wide range of health concerns which women have. In a system stretched for resources, they may be best to provide women with thorough health education which would empower them with knowledge of how to effectively care for themselves and to prevent various illnesses.

## *Family planning*

Having access to a safe means of controlling their fertility is an important issue of empowerment for women. Multiple births with little spacing in between have put pressures

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<sup>13</sup> The *Supsup* Garden Project and Centre were often referred to with *Pijin* spelling as *Supsup Gaden Project and Senta*. Their English equivalents will be used here.





Photo 5: Church women's groups provide opportunities for networking and solidarity-building: members of the Seventh Day Adventist dorcas women's groups march in unison at an inter-village function in Tau, North-East Guadalcanal.



Photo 6: Over 100 women from around Sa'a, Small Malaita, turned up when Danchurch Aid workers held gardening sessions and cooking demonstrations to show the nutritional value of traditional foods.

on women's health and quality of life. Many have little opportunity, or inclination, to pursue personal development options because they are so embroiled in daily survival issues: growing enough food to feed their family, finding a means of earning money and caring for their children. Having control over their fertility is an important step if women are to have greater control over their lives.

## **Problems**

### ***Government services***

Until the 1986 census revealed a 3.5 percent annual population growth rate between 1976 and 1986, suggesting that the population could double in only twenty years (*Solomon Star*, 8 February, 1991:9), family planning services were characterised by a lack of personnel, resources and political commitment (Bage et al., 1992:44). Prior to 1985 the government had a sole nursing officer whose duties were supposed to cover family planning but as maternal child health was also in his brief, he chose to focus on child immunisation. SIPPA and the 'O' Clinic<sup>14</sup> also provided family planning services but these were basically clinic-based and therefore only available to those in Honiara.

After the 1986 census, SIPPA and the government drafted a National Population Policy which aimed to take family planning beyond rural health centres and into villages. A key objective was '...to establish a well co-ordinated network of properly trained family planning service providers to provide counselling, educational and other services to those who request or require such services' (*Solomon Star*, 22 December 1989:6). This would have been welcomed by thousands of women across the country but it did not emerge in reality.

### ***The will to practice family planning***

The level of contraceptive practice in the Solomon Islands has been extremely low (Figure Three, page 170). While as few as 2.8 percent of married women are family planning acceptors (Bage et al., 1992:61), there is ample evidence stating that women, in particular, want access to family planning information and devices.

Results of a survey on family planning in Guadalcanal<sup>15</sup> indicated a strong awareness among Solomon Islanders of the need for family planning. Ninety eight percent

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<sup>14</sup> A clinic run by the Catholic church, providing information on the ovulation method of natural family planning.

<sup>15</sup> Organised by Masters students from the Tropical Health Program, University of Queensland, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Honiara. This survey covered both rural and urban areas.

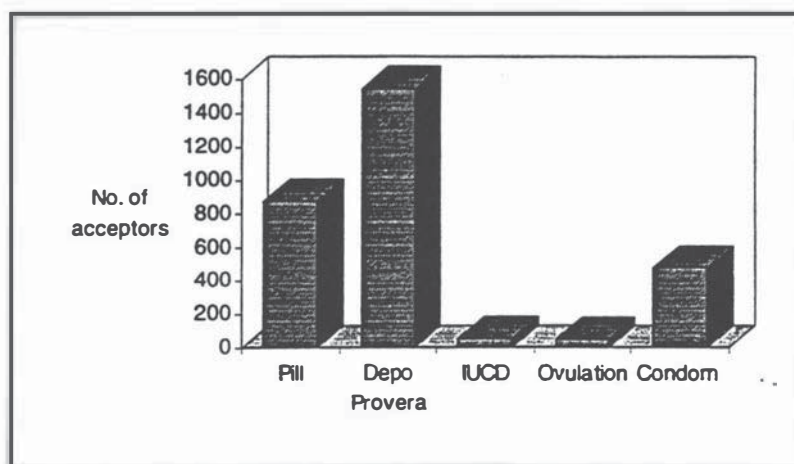


of respondents approved of family planning in principle. Of all non-users of contraceptives interviewed, almost three quarters wanted to practice family planning (Bage et al., 1992:124). Their primary motivation for wishing to have smaller families was financial constraints. It is apparent that the predominant message of SIPPA and SIDT, who have asked parents to consider how many children they can 'afford' now that various goods and services must be paid for, has been getting through to many:

*...financial constraints such as the need to provide food, clothing and education for families are a determining factor in peoples' decisions...[about] the ideal family size. Lack of land, inheritance of land and economic benefits of children were not seen as being important (Bage et al., 1992:141).*

Women's actions at Guadalcanal's Women's Week in 1992, also suggested that there was a definite wish for wider availability of family planning services and information. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the participants had paid intermittent attention to talks on health and nutrition and the election of Provincial Council of Women representatives but as soon as the SIPPA people came to the stage to commence their talk on family planning, a change came over the audience. The women all pushed their chairs into a huddle at the front of the hall and told each other to be quiet so that could hear the information being provided. Questions raised afterwards revealed misconceptions about contraceptive use, confusion over traditional explanations of miscarriage and stillborn babies (typically this has been blamed on the mother), as well as health problems associated with pregnant women. Most women were keen for the session to continue long after its set finishing time. It would appear that women, at least, desperately want more information on family planning options and how contraceptives work.

**FIGURE THREE: Number of new family planning acceptors, 1990**



Source: Solomon Islands Epidemiological Report No.5, 1990, Ministry of Health and Medical Services (NB Figures include only married people 15-49 years. Figures for tubal ligations and vasectomies are not included).

The many reasons why so few women practised family planning despite their strong interest in controlling their fertility are detailed in Appendix Two. Included were the pressures on women to bear many children and the expectation that children would provide security for parents in old age. Lack of support from men prevented many women from practising family planning. Dureau (n.d.:8) argues that some churches have stressed that men have control over the bodies of their wives, including their reproductive functions, thus men feel it is their right to expect their wives to bear them many children. Legally husbands have had to give their consent before any procedure to sterilise their wives took place and technically husbands also had to approve contraceptive treatment dispensed to them<sup>16</sup>. Only a small proportion of men supported male-focused methods of contraception such as condoms and vasectomies and many were unwilling to cooperate with either the withdrawal method or the rhythm method of natural family planning. Thus women in the Solomon Islands effectively had limited control over their own fertility. Women's dissatisfaction with the available methods of family planning compounded this difficult situation. Depo Provera was seen as having major side effects, as were the high dosage contraceptive pills which were distributed to women in the Solomon Islands because it was judged that they would not take them correctly. Many women knew someone who had experienced abdominal infections related to use of interuterine contraceptive devices (IUCDs)<sup>17</sup>. And tubal ligations were not highly regarded because women felt that they weakened their bodies. Further, the method which most women expressed interest in, natural family planning, was not covered by government health services or SIPPA. Only the 'O' clinic, run by the Catholic church, taught this method.

There is a clear need for family planning education, including instruction on all of the available methods of fertility control, their side effects and measures which must be taken to ensure that they are effective and do not harm the user. This information needs to be thoroughly explained and discussed before women or men can make a fair choice about whether or not to practice family planning.

In the National Population Policy of 1988 it was stressed that population growth should be compatible with the rate of economic development. In stating this, the government seems to have disregarded the reality that some methods of controlling population growth may interfere with women's well-being. Dureau sums up this situation with regard to Simbo society:

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<sup>16</sup> As long as a woman is married, however, she can sometimes forego this last requirement.

<sup>17</sup> Safety of IUCDs was a major issue for women. Many felt that conditions in provincial hospitals and clinics and techniques of staff were not as hygienic as they would be in Honiara.

*...contradictions attend all the birth control methods offered by the government - they are commensurate with the goal of containing general population growth, but not with those of individual welfare which provides the incentive for Simbo women (and sometimes men) seeking contraception. The latter are seeking improvements in their own lives, so the specifics of method, side effects, and so on, are highly relevant (Dureau, n.d.:27).*

Thus women may choose not to support family planning programmes simply because they are not satisfied with the methods of contraception or service offered by the government or SIPPA. While planners may find it acceptable for various methods of contraception to have a certain percentage of adverse side effects or failure, to the individuals who must live with the consequences, this is far from acceptable:

*...women's perceptions that the government services fail them leads to their failure to sustain government population control initiatives...women...will only please the planners when the planners please them (Dureau, n.d.:28).*

### **Action taken**

The government's commitment to providing a comprehensive family planning service has been weak. For example, while almost SBD\$ 11 million was to be spent on capital costs for the malaria programme in 1990-1994, only SBD\$ 260,000 was targeted for family planning (MHMS, 1990:109). Staff of the MCH/FP Unit rarely visited villages despite receiving many requests for assistance from women's groups in rural areas (*Solomon Star*, 8 February 1991:8-9). Instead they focused on producing educational materials and planning refresher courses, in Honiara, for provincial health staff. Although there were some health educators and family planning coordinators in the provinces with a specific mandate to reach villagers, in reality provincial health staff rarely worked outside clinics or hospitals. Their effectiveness depended largely on the motivation, training and interest of individual staff members (*Solomons Tok Tok*, 9 June 1983:5). There was a lack of trained male family planning nurse coordinators despite an interest in family planning indicated by many men (Bage et al., 1992:144).

NGOs played a stronger role in family planning in the early 1990s but their services still only reached a small proportion of the population. Appendix Two discusses some of the factors which hinder the spread of family planning information. SIPPA combined clinical consultations with educational awareness campaigns on the radio and in newspapers, workshops for community groups and the training of volunteers as Community Based Distributors (CBDs). CBDs sold condoms to villagers on a commission basis. SIPPA's main message was that well spaced families led to economic prosperity. Staff of the 'O' Clinic offered advice and instruction on natural family planning through their clinic in Honiara but from 1992, a full time staff member was also present in Auki and Gizo. Occasionally talks were given to community groups. There were also plans to decentralise

activities by training a couple from each Catholic parish throughout the country to be family planning educators but little progress was made towards this aim. Staff of SIDT provided development education workshops in villages and occasionally they focused on population problems and the importance of family planning. They were not, however, trained to distribute contraceptives or to provide family planning counselling. SIDT's theatre group sometimes broached family planning issues too and as comments from a woman in Temotu indicated, this was effective in showing villagers the importance of dealing with population problems:

*We were afraid when we learned about the problems of having many children after we saw your drama. It's true. If we aren't careful there will be problems in the future...a shortage of land, disputes, fighting will take place (SIDT, Summary Report 1990:5).*

## Discussion

Although the government, family planning agencies and women all appeared to support family planning they did not share the same rationale for doing this. While women's concern was centred on their own well-being and making improvements in their lives, SIDT and SIPPA emphasised that couples should reduce the number of children they had so that they would be able to afford to clothe, feed and educate them all. Thus economic criteria, not women's rights or women's health, were established as the rationale for their population control programmes. The government was also concerned with reducing the population growth rate for economic reasons.

The family planning programmes discussed focused on meeting practical gender needs by supplying contraceptives, even if they reached only a small proportion of the population. Women, however, did not simply want contraceptive devices, they wanted information and more accessible facilities (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:111). Rather than empowering couples to make the best decision on family planning for themselves by informing them of all the family planning options available to them, government medical staff and SIPPA personnel provided people with a limited range of contraceptives, often those with a high risk of side effects. Women were not empowered when they went to a clinic and had contraceptive devices dispensed to them without clear explanations of how the devices worked to prevent pregnancy, possible side effects and alternative methods available to them (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:75). Rather than underestimating women's ability to use the contraceptive pill properly, thorough education of family planning acceptors should have been provided, including information and backup support. The lack of information available on natural methods of family planning also showed an underestimation of women's and men's knowledge and motivation and disregarded many people's stated needs and wants. It is



apparent, then, that contraception can only be seen as addressing a strategic gender interest when the options available are safe and appropriate for the women concerned.

Family planning programmes have suffered from poor outreach, a limited range of options, inadequate explanations given to acceptors and too much emphasis just on women. Men need family planning education just as much as women, particularly because they have been so reluctant to allow their wives to practise family planning, let alone being willing to practice it themselves. More attention needs to be paid to informing the public about the safety and effectiveness of 'male methods' of contraception or sterilisation. If men could be encouraged to take more responsibility for child care they may soon realise the great burden which too many children puts on their family's resources.

Most women do not need to be convinced of why they should control their fertility. Rather, the issue for them is having access to safe and effective means of controlling their fertility while being supported by their partners (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:9). While the birth rate remains high, women's workloads will continue be detrimental to their health and will prevent them from pursuing personal development options. Although many women have made it clear that they would like to control their fertility, the poor network of family planning services in the Solomon Islands has not as yet enabled most of them to do this safely and effectively. Dariam (1993:50) calls for a reorientation of family planning services to ones which are gender-sensitive and woman-centred, bemoaning, '...women's lack of access to a wide range of safe and culturally acceptable contraceptives' and arguing that '...the goal of services should be to facilitate the reproductive autonomy of women and the enhancement and protection of women's reproductive health'. In the Solomon Islands in the early 1990s, the focus was very much on preventing births, rather than enhancing women's lives and so empowering them.

### *Agriculture, fisheries, forestry and natural resources*

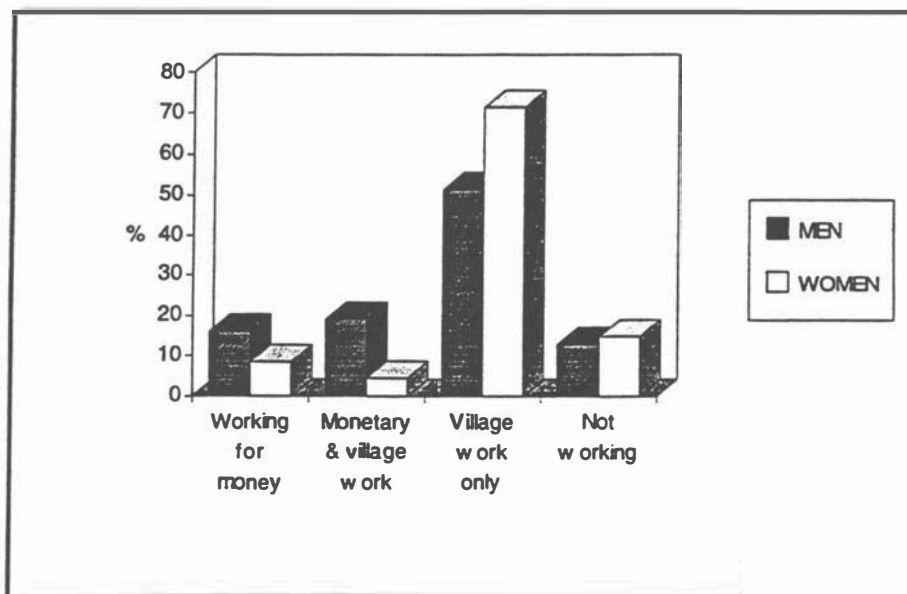
Most women in rural areas provide for themselves and their families through a close association with the natural resource base. Fertile land for food gardens, unpolluted waters for drinking water and to fish from, and bush land which has not been denuded by logging companies are what they rely upon for survival. Thus it is essential that women have some control over these resources, an ability to influence decisions about land and marine resources made within their clan or with outside companies. It is difficult for individual women to achieve this control. Women may need to be collectively empowered to have the strength to confront traditional leaders, government officials and foreign companies who threaten to harm the natural environment.



## Problems

Women make a significant contribution to both subsistence and commercial agriculture in the Solomon Islands. A profile of the time allocation of eight women in a rural area of Malaita was carried out in 1985. Over fifty percent of the women's working week was spent in the production and preparation of food. At the most the husbands of these women worked one day per week in the garden and at the least, they did not help at all (Warmke, 1985:9,13). The 1986 census revealed that subsistence village work for which no money was received involved 71.3 percent of females and 51.3 percent of males (Figure Four) but women's contribution to the cash economy, which has not always been recognised in the past, was also significant (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:180). In addition to maintaining food gardens, women did almost half the work on cocoa plantations and a third of the work in copra production and were expected to assist in weeding and harvesting family small holder endeavours.

**FIGURE FOUR: Percentages of men and women involved in paid and unpaid work**



Source: Census of Population (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:194).

### *The government's support for agriculture*

Although the government officially gave recognition to the subsistence sector in the 1986 census by including village work under the 'economically active' category, thus enabling 86.5 percent of males and 84.3 percent of females to be listed under this category, the government and donors have consistently portrayed the subsistence sector as being a hindrance to the country's economic development. The government's Programme of Action,

1989-1993, specified that '...development policy will be geared to transform agriculture from a traditional and low productivity activity into a modern and commercially productive enterprise...' (People's Action Party, 1989:3)<sup>18</sup>. Such an attitude detracts from the importance of this sector and the work women do in it. The rural, non-monetised sector of the economy has been vital in sustaining living standards in the Solomon Islands throughout economic fluctuations, failed development projects and natural disasters. It has prevented the need for large-scale importation of food. Furthermore, in 1991 subsistence agriculture contributed almost as much to Gross Domestic Product as the formal agricultural sector did, that is, SBD\$ 41 million as compared to SBD\$ 50 million (Statistics Office Fact Sheet, 1992:unpublished).

In practice, the government's priority has been to promote plantation agriculture. Their concern with export growth and the promotion of cash crops has led the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands (MAL) to focus on copra and cocoa production, while food gardens, small poultry and livestock projects have been given secondary importance. While MAL has officially recognised the importance of women as food producers, this recognition has rarely been translated into resources, training opportunities or technical assistance. By failing to give assistance to the subsistence agriculture sector, the government has failed to assist women:

*When you talk about agriculture in the formal sector in the Solomon Islands you talk about men but when you talk about food security, you talk about women (Ruth Liloqula, Director of Dodo Creek Agriculture Research Centre, 1992).*

Women are facing added pressures in carrying out their agricultural responsibilities because of both resource depletion, due to population growth, and men deciding to grow cash crops on the most fertile land close to the village. The 1989 National Nutrition Survey revealed that in some provinces it took women over an hour, sometimes more than two hours, to reach their food gardens (Figure Five, page 177). Once there, they often had to work harder to reap the same reward from the less fertile soils. Family nutrition standards and women's health can deteriorate in this way (Lateef, 1990:54).

Provision of extension services for women is vital if the subsistence sector is to remain strong and if food security is a priority for the future: 'It is important that interested women have access to information on crop diversification, maintaining soil fertility, nutrition and food preparation' (Frizelle, 1992:2). Past experience has shown, however, that male agricultural extension workers rarely interact with women or visit food gardens. This is not surprising because they generally receive very little training in food crops and have far less

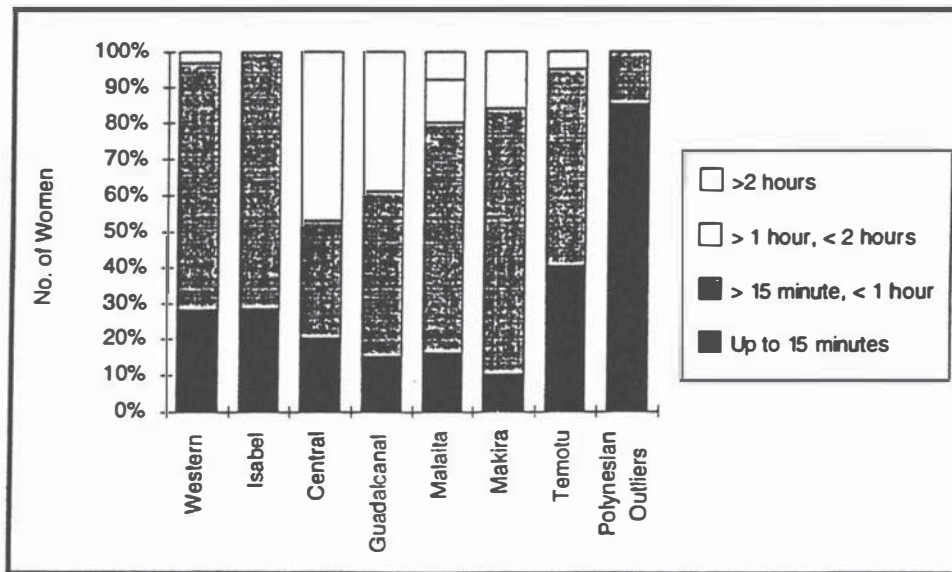
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<sup>18</sup> This so called 'low productivity' activity has started to cause erosion and depletion of soil fertility, so it is worrying to think what effects more intensive agricultural methods of farming could have on the land.

experience than women in the practical aspects of food production. Male agricultural extension officers also argue that it would be culturally inappropriate for them to instruct women, especially if they were alone together in the gardens. Some women strongly refute this claim, however. As women from Nukiki village, Choiseul, said,

*Some of us are old enough to be their grandmothers and so we see no reason why they make this excuse and [do] not come and see our gardens and help us when we ask them (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:61).*

**FIGURE FIVE: Time taken for women to reach their gardens, by province**



Source: Derived from Solomon Islands National Nutrition Survey, 1990:234

Women from Guadalcanal have asserted that, to them, 'agriculture' is '...a Government organisation for coconut, cocoa and cattle, and that is all' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:29). Most men attending agriculture courses are not taught about nutrition in relation to food gardening. Cash crops are the focus of the syllabus. As Berger (1984) points out, while it will be necessary to train more women as extension workers, it will also be necessary to retrain the men.

### ***Agriculture training***

Training opportunities for women in agriculture have not been impressive. In 1978 MAL employed 180 extension workers and 116 qualified agriculture officers but not one of them was a woman (Samau, 1987). At this time many courses organised by MAL were for, '...farmers and their wives' (Flikkema, 1980:62). Various attempts were made to recruit women extension workers during the 1980s (Slatter, 1980; Pfanner, 1987) but by 1992 there were only 14 Solomon Island women with tertiary qualifications in agriculture and none of

them was employed as an agricultural extension officer<sup>19</sup>. Most training for women so far has, therefore, been organised by women's groups and focuses on *supsup*<sup>20</sup> gardening and nutrition, with the aim of helping women to perform their maternal roles better.

The government has backed two major agriculture projects which received millions of dollars of funding from overseas but neither of which has assisted women:

*...the Rural Services Project (RSP) and the Livestock Development Project (LDA), both of which had immense potential for involving and benefiting women, failed to even address the question or needs of women....Although the LDA project proposed training for families...in reality the training was only extended to males. The explanation given was that women were not excluded, just that they chose not to come (Lateef, 1990:54-55).*

When women choose not to attend such courses it is usually either because they have no interest in what is being taught or the course is structured in such a way that most women are not free to attend. For example, the RSP established rural development centres but they focused on running short residential courses which few women could attend because of gardening and domestic responsibilities. Accommodation facilities at training centres are not designed for mixed groups, nor do they allow dependent children to be brought along (Fleming, 1992:10). The exception is the National Agriculture Training Centre (NATI) in Malaita which has introduced outreach field-days and village demonstrations to allow women to participate.

### *Natural resources*

Related to their interest in agriculture and providing for the needs of themselves and their families is women's interest in maintaining the rich natural resource base which has sustained generations of Solomon Islanders. The high population growth rate, the increase in cash crops which rely on chemical pesticides, the growth of manufacturing industries, the actions of foreign logging, mining and fishing companies, and development projects, such as cattle farms which pollute water sources, have all put great stress on natural resources (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:42). Population pressures, for example, mean women are now struggling because of the lack of significant sources of fuelwood close at hand (Warmke, 1985:16).

The bush provides food, materials for housing and canoe building, traditional medicines and fuel wood. Logging and mining operations appear to offer the greatest threat

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<sup>19</sup> One woman was employed by Isabel province to do agricultural extension work but she was not fully trained.

<sup>20</sup> *Supsup* gardens are small mixed fruit and vegetable gardens near to one's home, as opposed to women's conventional gardens which are very large and may be some distance from one's home.



to the maintenance of these resources. Deforestation can also pollute water supplies and damage food gardens. For the first time in their lives women are having to walk to distant rivers to find clean water because of logging operations upstream of their usual water source. Developers and politicians have often persuaded villagers that to leave the forests as they have been for thousands of years is to stand in the way of 'development'. Many villagers go along with this argument because exploiting the forests appears to be their only way of earning money. Women are concerned that they are losing control over the natural resources controlled by their clan because the men will not allow them to influence decisions regarding outsiders logging, mining and fishing their resources.

Logging agreements may bring in a limited lump-sum of cash to the village economy but this does not compensate for the depletion of the forest resource. A 1991 study revealed that the average household of seven members in a Choiseul village gained the monetary equivalent of SBD\$ 10,512.15 each year from the rainforest including, food, medicine, house and canoe building materials (Cassells, 1992:iii). In another Choiseul village comprising 21 households, a once-only royalty payment of SBD\$ 18,162 had been received. This provided substantial evidence that villagers benefited more from subsistence and sustainable use of the rainforests than they would through logging royalties (Cassells, 1992:174). Furthermore, control over the cash which derives from royalties is usually in men's hands.

Women's groups have shown interest in using walkabout sawmills, which have been promoted by various bodies as a way of harnessing an income from the rainforests without destroying them. They usually need credit, however, in order to have access to the necessary equipment. Fleming (1992:17) suggested that a major NGO encouraging use of 'walkabout' sawmills, Soltrust, did not encourage women to gain control of logging operations. Instead, Soltrust proposed that women should replant areas which men had already logged.

In the fisheries sector, the government has pumped money into large-scale ventures in the hope of earning foreign exchange but this left little for the development of small-scale and subsistence fisheries, which women are heavily involved in. Few resources, whether extension services, motorised boats or new technologies, have been provided to develop inshore areas, lagoons, swamps, tidal pools and rivers, places where women generally fish. Furthermore, boats coming in search of bait fish have considerably depleted these areas where women fish (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:206). Schoeffel (1985) feels that the development industry has not perceived women's fishing as being 'the real thing'. Most fisheries projects are based around deep-sea fishing, in which men predominate.



To the government, forestry and fisheries are the major foreign exchange earners and they typically receive priority over any concerns of sustainable resource development. As stated by a woman from Guadalcanal province,

*People only know the Ministry of Natural Resources as a Government Ministry that brings in foreigners...to extract our natural resources and destroy our forests, and leave them like a desert (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:31).*

Pollution of land, air and sea is increasing. Marine areas around industries like the Noro tuna cannery are becoming a concern. Jully Sipolo, a poet from the Western Solomons, has argued that effluent is being directly discharged into the sea, damaging nearby mangrove swamps. Other pollutants of air and water which women have expressed concern about include the chemicals sprayed around houses to control malaria and the pesticides sprayed on plantations (UNICEF, 1993:86). Many women are unaware of the dangers they face when being employed to spray cash crops like cocoa. In some areas women have been using insecticide containers as water vessels, unaware of the toxicity of the chemicals in the pesticides. Some women think that spraying of DDT for malaria control has resulted in increased blindness in children (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:103). Without the information to determine what effects such chemicals are having on people, women are left in a very vulnerable position.

### **Action taken**

There have been several attempts to expand women's training options in the field of agriculture. In 1992, the New Zealand government, in conjunction with MAL, initiated a project to train female agricultural extension workers. The difference with this project was that it was specifically designed to recruit village women, who would work part-time, rather than recruiting those with formal training in agriculture<sup>21</sup>. Those trained were expected to achieve objectives set down by local communities and to work closely with women's groups in their area. Another example involved AIDAB providing eight scholarships a year for three years for women to attend a Certificate in Tropical Agriculture course at SICHE so that there would be 24 newly trained women agriculturalists available. Until the AIDAB initiative there had only ever been one or two women a year in full time agriculture courses. The Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) also ran an annual Women in Agriculture course of several months duration which was geared to the particular needs of women involved in food gardening while also introducing them to other agricultural activities. This was specifically intended for leaders or representatives of women's groups who did not need

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<sup>21</sup> This programme will be discussed as a case study in Chapter Seven.

a formal education to participate. Through this course women's traditional expertise in food production was recognised and built upon with a curriculum which covered nutrition, food preservation, fruit trees, poultry farming, cocoa production (because many women are employed to prune and spray cocoa plantations), ornamental plants and vegetable growing. The course was designed as an intensive learning experience so that women with family obligations could learn as much as possible in a short time.

With regard to natural resources, women had started to act collectively and to speak out against what they thought was an abuse of the country's resources. SIDT has played a significant role in making villagers aware of their choices regarding development and the long term effects of unsustainable logging practices. At SIDT workshops encouraging the preservation of natural resources it was typically women and young people who, after breaking into small discussion groups, came back with strong anti-logging messages. This often did not impress men, however, who said: 'We are in charge here; don't you women talk back to the chief' (Victor Kelly, Field Officer for SIDT, 1992: personal communication). More and more women were starting to talk back, however, because they did not like to see men helping companies to explore resources which the women felt should be left for future generations (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:92,20). A women from Guadalcanal, Agnes Tuesday, made her sentiments known regarding men's lack of concern about women's views on natural resource depletion:

*'I am fully aware that in the old days men had the right to make all decisions but today the situation badly needs changing'... Agnes complained that though women did attend meetings, men did not let them air their views: 'We cannot express what we feel about logging or any issues which affects our environment and our children's future.... Women should not be treated as second grade copra' (Link, November/December 1991:11).*

Women have been trying to preserve the environment in various ways. Women and the Environment was the theme of 1992 Women's Week, with an emphasis on the problems caused by dominant logging practices (*Solomon Star*, 8 October 1993). It was noted that 'Women in one community on Guadalcanal had overturned a decision made by the men to log land once the damage was evident' (Fleming, 1992:17). Women have started to make their presence felt at logging seminars, questioning environmentalists about alternative ways of raising cash which could be open to them (*Solomon Star*, 20 August 1993:7).

## **Discussion**

Despite the fact that women's workloads have increased because their food crops have been pushed further away from villages and their responsibilities for cash crops have

expanded, there is still a large gap in the availability of agricultural training, information and technology to help women farmers. MAL has largely ignored food crops, women and nutrition issues thus undermining the importance of women's roles in subsistence production. Furthermore, although women contribute significantly to the production of cocoa and copra, they have not been targeted for assistance in these sectors even when multi-million dollar projects, such as the rural services project, were devised. It is assumed that commercial agriculture is for men. It is not good enough for staff of agriculture training centres to say that women are just not coming to courses. They would come if the courses were structured to meet their needs and lifestyles.

Both the new programme to train women as agricultural extension workers and the shorter SICHE course met a practical gender need by setting aside a space in which women with little formal education, who would not be able to access most agriculture courses, could gain training in both techniques of food gardening and new skills to help earn an income. They also attempted to work around women's other obligations with the former allowing women to work part time and the latter providing a short but intensive course away from home. As both aimed to work with leaders or representatives of women's groups, they had the potential to benefit large numbers of women. The agricultural extension programme for women and the longer SICHE course addressed a strategic gender interest in that they trained women to take on skilled positions in a profession otherwise dominated by men.

If the government provided more support for women in their role as subsistence agriculturalists they would be meeting a practical gender need. If they provided more support for women in their role in cash cropping, they would be meeting a strategic gender interest as this would break down an occupational stereotype which has existed in the eyes of the government, donors and banks. It could also be helpful to retrain existing male agricultural extension officers to encourage them to talk to women about food and cash crops and to ensure that any new men undergoing agricultural training learn about food crops and nutrition.

Control over resources was an important issue for women who have, for centuries, provided sustenance for their families based on the sustainable use of local resources. NGOs and women's organisations were instrumental in inspiring groups of women to confront those who wished to exploit resources rather than sitting back in frustration with their voices silenced. Women as well as men need to be informed of alternative, sustainable ways of utilising their natural resources so as to earn the cash that they need. It is not acceptable that organisations such as Soltrust offer knowledge and technologies of alternative methods of resource utilisation, such as walkabout sawmills, only to the men. Women also want information about the danger of chemicals and other pollutants because

whether or not their fears about them are grounded, they will remain vulnerable to the potential harmful effects of chemicals until they are empowered with knowledge about them. Women need to know where to go with their concerns and who to lobby when they want to see changes to current practices.

## ***Education and literacy***

Education in the formal and non-formal sectors is vital for women's development. As noted during the provincial tours:

*[The] majority of women today are still uneducated and thus thought of themselves as nobodys (sic) other than having babies and feeding a family (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:27).*

This suggests that education is as important for women's self-esteem as it is for the knowledge they can gain. For women and girls to have access to formal political posts and positions of responsibility in the wage employment sector, they need formal education. In 1992, however, almost twice as many boys as girls were gaining a formal education. Further, vocational training for young women offered opportunities to improve their homes, rather than to be future leaders. Women also needed education in order to take advantage of new opportunities in their changing society or to protect, or push, their concerns in official circles. Yet the government had a poor commitment to non-formal education and the literacy rate for women was very low.

## **Problems**

### ***Formal education***

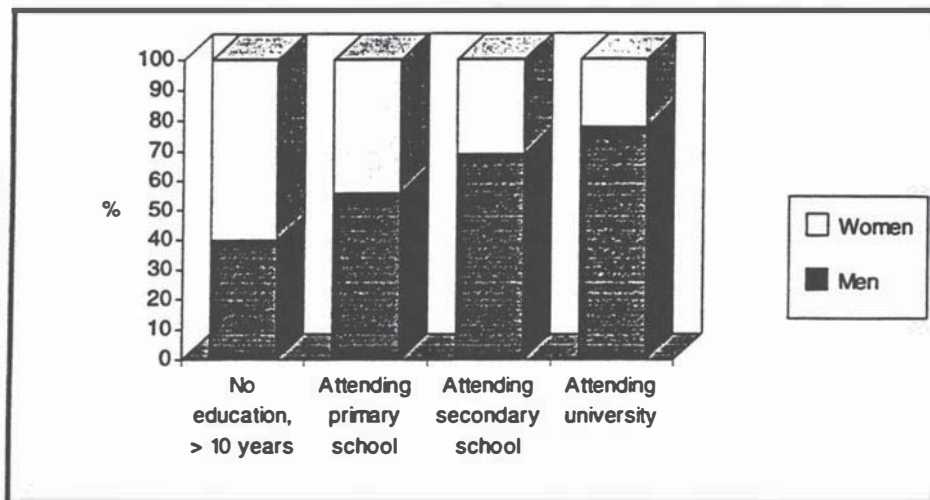
Despite the fact that there is a marked shortage of trained teachers and a general lack of education facilities, the government's allocation for education, training and human resource development declined from 15 percent of the recurrent budget in 1987 to around 12.5 percent in 1991 (UNICEF, 1993:75). While formal schooling received the bulk of education funds, the education ministry still could not provide sufficient places in schools for all who wanted to attend. Around 60,000 students attended primary school in 1991 while there were only 6,313 places available at secondary school (MEHRD, 1992: unpublished statistics). Under a system so stretched for resources it is girls who typically had fewer opportunities to participate.

In 1991 girls comprised almost 45 percent of those at primary school and 36 percent of those at secondary school (MEHRD, 1992: unpublished statistics). The proportion of girls



in each class, however, decreased as they progressed (Figure Six) so that of all sixth formers only 25 percent were girls (MEHRD, 1991:unpublished statistics). Although the overall percentage of girls attending school has increased this has not kept up with the population growth rate in that the number of women with no formal education has actually increased by 20 percent between 1970 and 1990 (WDD/ILO, 1991:10). Of those participating in the 1991 literacy survey, 95 percent of women had not reached Form One level, that is, only five percent of women had any form of secondary education (Solomon Islands National Literacy Committee, 1992).

**FIGURE SIX: Percentage of males and females receiving an education, 1986**



Source: Derived from Fong and Mamtota (1991:20)

The factors hindering the access of girls to education are numerous<sup>22</sup>. Parents have generally given boys priority in terms of opportunities for an education. Moseley (1991:21) cites the example of a girl who had to give up her schooling after two years to look after her brothers because her mother died. On reflection the girl said of her missed chance at an education:

*'Shame and sorrow came over me but that's life. The sorrow in my heart was greater than that of a man whose parents have just died, because it was going to spoil my future. It was as if I was held down by big chains'.*

The government also hindered access of girls to an education by providing far less boarding facilities for girls at secondary schools<sup>23</sup>. Harassment by boys, in the form of intimidation and excessive teasing, was another factor which prevented some girls from progressing up the grades. Thus it has been recommended that there should be a separate secondary school for girls only (National Policy Review Committee, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> These are detailed in Appendix Three.

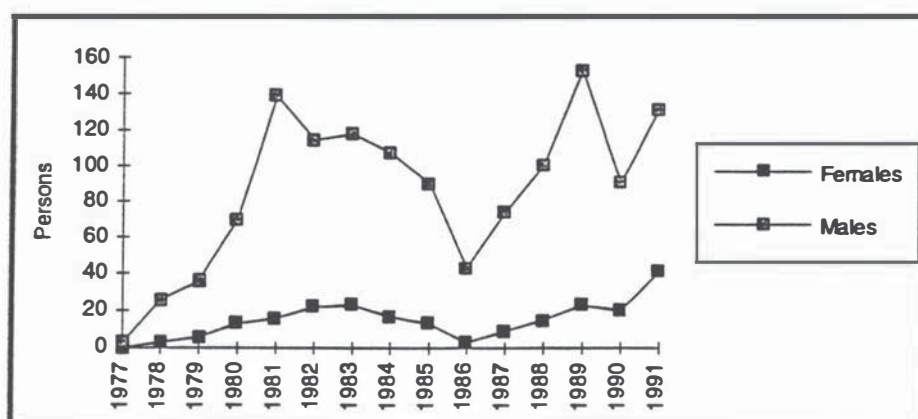
<sup>23</sup> Most secondary school students were boarders.



At the level of tertiary education, a number of students travelled overseas while others went to the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), which offered diploma, certificate and degree courses. Women made up two-thirds of the enrolments in the nursing and health school but less than a third of enrolments in the schools of education, finance and administration. Meanwhile women comprised a mere 2.5 percent of enrolments in the marine and fisheries, industrial development and natural resource schools (UNICEF, 1993:66).

The sex ratio<sup>24</sup> of those who had attended university worsened between censuses, rising from 206 in 1976 to 343 in 1986 (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:275). In the late 1980s donor countries started making stipulations about the proportion of women on overseas scholarships and although the number of women concerned did grow from only two in 1988 to 43 in 1992, Figure Seven reveals that in the years between women continued to make up a small proportion of all overseas scholarship holders (MEHRD, unpublished statistics). There have been claims that women are not justly allocated these scholarships because of the fear that they will become pregnant and have to give up their studies.

**FIGURE SEVEN: Solomon Islanders trained under awards, 1977-1991**



Source: National Training Unit, Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, Unpublished statistics

Overall, because men and boys have had greater access to formal sector education, they have had a better chance of gaining formal sector employment and the status which comes with this. Despite obvious discrepancies in the access of girls to an education, the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) had no official policy to promote the education of girls and young women.

<sup>24</sup> Number of males to every 100 females.

Rural training centres (RTCs) offered a source of education for school leavers who had not reached a level at which they would be allowed to embark on formal tertiary training. There were an estimated 1,700 students attending RTCs in 1991, less than a third of whom were women (Alan Teli, Coordinator of the Association of Rural Training Centres, 1992:personal communication). All RTCs were run by the churches and their main courses were residential, typically lasting one to two years. Most RTCs focused on skills training and at promoting local customs. All tried to equip students with skills for village life and to instil in them the confidence to initiate projects on their own.

The pattern of vocational training was clear. Inherited ideas about appropriate education and training for girls and women saw courses at RTCs centring on maternal and wifely roles and community service. Young women were offered a restricted syllabus while young men engaged in a wide variety of courses. In 1980 a survey was carried out on vocational training centres around the Solomon Islands (Flikkema, 1980). Activities included teaching young women 100 basic embroidery stitches as well as dressmaking, cooking and laundry. Only boys received instruction in agriculture, mechanics and business principles. It is particularly disturbing that young women often missed out on agricultural training given their vital role in maintaining food gardens.

The only courses young men were unable to attend at vocational schools were those which focused on household roles and chores, which were compulsory for young women. If domestic training was compulsory for young men too this could help them to understand the importance of work around the home and encourage them to share responsibility for this when they have families of their own. As Elizabeth Cox notes, with reference to the Papua New Guinean situation:

*The problem is essentially a division of learning based on a presumed division of labour. This...takes for granted that women are predestined primarily to the role of wife and mother...the food provider and homemaker...this emphasis on women's obligations serves to detract from neglected issues such as what a man's obligations to the family are, obligations to responsible fatherhood, their complementary role in food production and the importance of their contribution to the creation of a happy and healthy home (quoted in Goodwillie and Kroon, 1986:71).*

There were signs of dissatisfaction among students, both male and female, who were forced to participate in gender-segregated programmes. Both students and teachers at Kaotave RTC, for example, requested that men's and women's courses would become less segregated (Jemima Tuhaika, SSEC women's coordinator, 1992:personal communication). Seghe RTC in Western Province made an effort to break down the gender

barrier each year by organising a two week swap between the men's and women's courses (Fleming, 1992:6).

### *Non-formal education*

The non-formal education sector is vital to the development of personal confidence and skills in women, particularly older women who have missed out on a formal education:

*The low literacy rate combined with the current incapacity to provide universal access to primary and secondary education render community education programmes of critical importance (UNICEF, 1993:76).*

Besides providing an opportunity for women to learn new skills and knowledge, non-formal education can lead to great gains in confidence and self-esteem. Non-formal education does not usually have an academic orientation like the formal sector, rather, courses can be designed according to the needs of communities. For example, women may want to learn about the forces affecting their lives, including the laws of their country and how the political system runs, availability of safe contraceptives and how to protect their natural environment. Women have been left vulnerable without such knowledge, particularly considering the rapid change their country has undergone.

Non-formal education seems particularly suited to women for several reasons. Firstly, it does not require a large time commitment. Secondly, it is more flexible than formal education as short courses can be arranged to suit village women's groups in particular areas. Thirdly, it can be based in the villages and therefore does not need to take women away from their work and obligations to their family. Fourthly, women seem to thrive on practical forms of training which are an integral part of non-formal education<sup>25</sup>.

As John Roughan reported, however, the government spent only 56 cents per person on community education in 1986. At the same time it spent SBD\$ 1,028 per student at the National Secondary Schools and SBD\$ 10,000 per year for students attending the University of the South Pacific in Fiji (*Solomon Star*, 20 December 1990:12). The government's non-formal education efforts focused on a Community Education Division which provided one community education officer per province. These officers were able to provide funds for training run by women's groups and also could help by providing facilitators but very few women's groups even knew of their existence. The principle community education officer in Honiara admitted that the NGOs could do a much more

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<sup>25</sup> At workshops for women around the country, a common complaint in evaluations was that there was too much talking about how to do things and not enough 'hands on' experience.

effective job in the field than his officers, whose work was restricted by the bureaucracy (Moses Rahari, Community education officer, 1992: personal communication).

### *Literacy*

Related to the need for a broad education for all women, not just those who can attend formal educational institutions, is the need for classes in basic literacy and numeracy skills to be taught to all who desire them. These skills can enhance women's control over their lives by enabling them to read their children's clinic cards so they know when the next vaccination is due, to sign their name on official forms rather than putting an 'X', to write down prices for their produce at the market and to know how much change to give people buying their goods. It can also help women who wish to understand the logging or prospecting agreements which men of their clan are signing.

In 1991 a survey of literacy was conducted covering people 15 years of age and over. The major finding was that the overall literacy rate was 22 percent, which included 27 percent of men and only 17 percent of women<sup>26</sup>. The literacy rate varied among the provinces, hitting a low of three percent for women in Temotu. *Pijin* was by far the most popular spoken language, with 77 percent of women speaking *Pijin* compared to only 19 percent of women speaking English. Only 12 percent of women were literate in *Pijin*, however, an indication that the focus on English literacy for many years may have been self-limiting. People find it much easier to learn to read and write in a language in which they are already fluent. The literacy survey also tested numeracy and found that 60 percent of women could not recognise numbers (Solomon Islands National Literacy Committee, 1992).

Despite the importance of literacy skills the focus on literacy in development work throughout the Pacific has been poor, especially compared to countries in Asia and South America. Only since 1990, when literacy year was celebrated, has widespread attention been given to literacy in the Solomon Islands<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> This figure does not include those classed as 'semi-literate' therefore in figures quoted here the literacy rate plus the illiteracy rate will not equal 100 percent.

<sup>27</sup> In 1992 LASI, the Literacy Association of the Solomon Islands, was formed. It was an NGO which aimed to coordinate literacy training throughout the country and to provide a resource base for all literacy organisations in the country. It also aimed to help literacy groups find funding (*Solomons Voice*, 30/9/1992:9).

## Action taken

In terms of vocational training, the International Labour Office (ILO) was the only organisation to make a concerted attempt to overcome occupational stereotypes. They did this by running short courses focusing on topics such as plumbing, carpentry, electric wiring for the home, sewing machine and outboard motor repair and car mechanics (*Women's Club News*, 1990:42). While these courses were popular, they were only held in Honiara and they focused on women's leaders, thus limiting their potential outreach.

Church women's groups and NGOs were the dominant groups which undertook non-formal education work with women, providing a notable exception to the government's focus on formal, centre-based education. While many church women's groups focused only on domestic skills some expanded beyond home economics topics with, for example, the Mothers' Union training a number of village women to be early childhood educators and Catholic women's groups in Malaita being taught about health education<sup>28</sup>. Without church groups and NGOs many women in the villages would have had little opportunity to develop new skills and knowledge. Most training by NGOs was short-term, typically consisting of several days in one village using practical demonstrations, discussions, published materials and popular theatre to raise awareness of issues related to development. These issues included nutrition, the need for family planning, the problems of deforestation, health and hygiene. SIDT, for example, touched upon the lives of over 150,000 villagers between 1982 and 1990 through their village-based work (*Solomon Star*, 20 December 1990:12). Its adult education budget was five times that of the government.

Since 1990, various literacy programmes have been run especially for women. Lesley Moseley, coordinator for the national literacy committee in 1991, ran a series of literacy training workshops which promoted use of vernaculars and *Pijin* in language teaching. She showed people, including women's groups, how they could produce their own resource materials by writing and printing books in vernaculars using a self-screening method. Some of the churches also had their own literacy programmes, particularly the Catholic Church and Church of Melanesia, which did a lot of their work through women's groups. They have found that it is mostly women who have shown sufficient interest and determination to attend literacy classes.

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<sup>28</sup> The work of these two church women's organisations will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.



## Discussion

At all levels of education women and girls appear to have been disadvantaged. While some of their practical gender needs with relation to a formal, or academic-based, education have been met, a large proportion of women have not had access to this form of education. Social and cultural factors which deterred parents from sending their daughters to school were compounded by the government's inequitable provision of places for girls in secondary schools. The government could considerably enhance women's education opportunities, as Lateef (1990:19) suggests, by stipulating that a certain percentage of all students entering secondary school are female, by arranging for more boarding facilities for girls in secondary schools and by subsidising school fees for girls. To increase the number of beds available for girls in secondary schools and to protect them from the harassment they face when sharing schools with boys, a separate girl's school could be valuable.

At the level of vocational training for young women, most schools have failed to equip trainees with a wide range of skills for village life, instead focusing on duties in the domestic realm. Skills like the repair of kerosene lamps, water supply maintenance, outboard motor repair and carpentry, which challenge occupational stereotypes, could be of practical use to young women in the village as well as offering them an opportunity to earn an income<sup>29</sup> (Goodwillie and Kroon, 1986:72). Goodwillie and Kroon (1986:73) also suggest that the following topics, which are rarely raised, should become part of the curriculum at vocational schools for young women: the law, wife beating, gambling, alcoholism, rape, family budgeting, politics and negative images of women in the media. They argue that an understanding of these issues and how they can be dealt with, as well as training in public speaking and group dynamics, would give young women a much better chance of being successful community leaders when they return to their villages.

Meanwhile the government has neglected non-formal education thus preventing a large proportion of the populace from gaining new skills and knowledge. The main areas of non-formal education for women which need attention include contraception, health education, how the country's legal and political systems function, numeracy and literacy. Without such knowledge, women have been left feeling vulnerable and powerless in their rapidly changing society. To address these concerns would be to meet a strategic gender interest because it would enhance women's control over their own lives.

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<sup>29</sup> The problem here is that if women had these skills they would be expected to do these tasks in addition to their other work. As stressed above, however, at least with these skills women would be able to demand payment for their work.

## *Employment and business opportunities*

Although women have long played a vital productive role in the country's economy, particularly through their work in the subsistence agriculture sector, they have been increasingly faced with pressures to earn cash<sup>30</sup>. Women spoken to in villages rarely wanted money to spend on personal items but they did need it to contribute to community projects, such as school and church building, to pay children's school fees, to buy basic goods such as food, clothing and medicine, and to improve their own homes.

Access to cash was important to women because it had the power to bestow status on its holders. While women wanted cash employment, however, several issues emerged suggesting that they might have been vulnerable to exploitation in certain employment sectors. Women needed to know their labour rights, therefore, and how they could remain safe within the workplace.

### **Problems**

#### *Earning cash outside the formal sector*

Many women have become involved in small scale, often informal, self-employment ventures or in casual employment. To women who lacked a formal education and who had many other obligations to fulfil, self-employment or casual employment offered them their only opportunity to earn an income. In 1986, two-thirds of women engaged in work for money also did village work (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:180,186,276). For some rural women the opportunity to earn a wage came from assisting with cash crops, either labouring for someone else or, for example, assisting men with the production of copra. This sometimes yielded only NZ\$ 1-2 per day (UNICEF, 1993:17)<sup>31</sup>. Other women had access to capital to establish a small store or bakery. Others again chose to sell surplus produce, cooked or processed food, clothing or handicrafts. This latter option was particularly viable for women who lived near a town or large village where there was a ready market for their products. Sale of food crops, which women were largely responsible for producing, made the largest contribution to household income. While in 1976 only 15.2 percent of households were involved in producing food crops for sale, by 1986 this figure

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<sup>30</sup> This section refers to employment for cash, whether this be in the form of wages, a salary, or payment for goods sold at the market. It does not deal with the significant amount of work which women do in raising children, caring for their families and producing food for family consumption, for which they receive no cash reward.

<sup>31</sup> Some women's groups attempted income-generating schemes such as selling handicrafts or cooked foods but funds raised in this way are channelled into communal projects rather than being distributed to individuals.

had risen to 37 percent of households (Solomon Islands Government, 1986:220). This latter option could provide opportunities for a greater number of women to earn cash if there were more market places outside of the towns. Transport difficulties, storage and pricing provide further constraints to the expansion of food crop production and sales (UNICEF, 1993:80).

Women in rural areas wishing to market cooked produce may, however, have to be wary in case they are treated in the same manner as women selling fish and chips at the Rove market in Honiara. Officials of the Honiara Municipal Authority (HMA) evicted these women because of claims that the food attracted flies. The women were not given any opportunity to devise an appropriate solution to this hygiene problem. Many of the affected women had been working there for a number of years and paid a daily fee to the HMA so they were surprised at this sudden disruption. One woman, in a letter to the editor of the *Solomon Star*, suggested that rather than discouraging women from being involved in small business enterprises, a permanent building should be erected in which women could sell their fish and chips. In other words, the suggestion was that the HMA should improve the market site rather than destroying women's attempts at operating a small business (*Solomon Star*, 1 February 1991:3). *Link* magazine interviewed several of the affected vendors who commented that selling cooked food at the market was often their only option for earning cash. Furthermore, they said that they enjoyed being their own boss (January/February 1991:7).

### ***Wage employment***

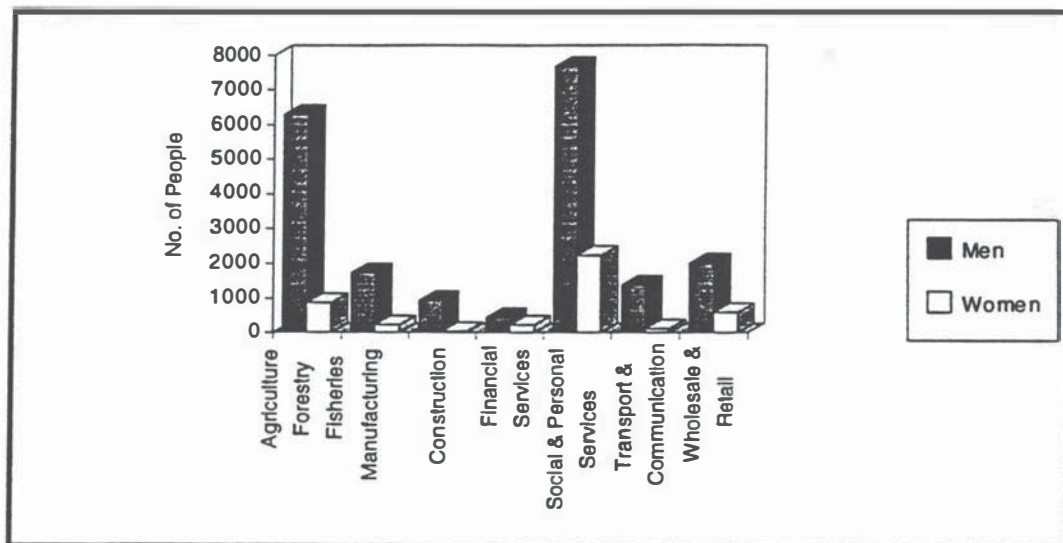
Wage employment offers women an opportunity to earn cash but it can also give them status. When women receive promotions, they challenge men's right to monopolise senior positions and they may enhance women's power through giving them control over significant resources. Before more women can participate in this sector, however, they need faith in themselves, skills and knowledge to compete with men and internal resilience to survive potential harassment and discrimination: that is, they need to be empowered.

Full time employment for wages involved less than twenty percent of the population aged 15-59 and only six percent of women. Furthermore, the growth of formal sector employment declined in the late 1980s. Over 50 percent of formal sector jobs were in Honiara and just under half were jobs in the public sector. It may be that development of the informal sector and self-employment will provide a more viable employment option for women seeking jobs in the future (UNICEF, 1993:17,57).

Barriers to women's progress in formal employment certainly existed. Women faced many difficulties in securing formal sector employment because of their lack of an

academic education and because of bias in the workforce. There were few women employed in non-traditional occupations (Figure Eight) or in management positions. Women were mainly concentrated in clerical, nursing, teaching and service sectors. Younger women had, however, started to broaden their horizons, choosing courses like carpentry, plumbing, mechanics and surveying (*Solomons Tok Tok*, 14-6-1990:1; *Solomon Star*, 15-12-1989:9). Their exploits were often acknowledged in national newspapers, providing publicity for the fact that women could succeed in non-traditional fields. There were a small, but growing, number of women employed in senior management positions. Phyllis Taloikwai, Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs in 1992, said that in her 20 year career she had seen around ten women who were ahead of her in the public service give up along the way. Reasons for this included a lack of encouragement from senior staff, a lack of female role models and frustration regarding promotion, especially when men junior to them were offered senior positions. Further, pressure from their husbands, children and parents-in-law forced some to give up work.

**FIGURE EIGHT: Number of men and women in specific employment sectors, 1991**



Source: Solomon Islands Statistical Bulletin 7/92, *Labour Force Statistics*

The government has encouraged growth of the manufacturing sector in order to expand the economy and an increasing number of women have found jobs in this way (WDD/ILO, 1991:18). While still quite small, growth in the manufacturing sector needs to be monitored. There is some concern that women could be exploited as in factories overseas, working long hours for little pay and with no trade unions to act on their grievances. A garment factory, employing almost 200 women, was established in 1991. Its Korean owners aimed to expand operations so that in the future up to 1,500 workers may be employed there (*Solomon Star*, 13 December 1991:2). The Solomon-Taiyo Tuna Cannery at Noro in



Western Province, a joint venture of the Solomon Islands and Japanese governments, employed several hundred women in 1993. Women occupied low paid jobs on the production line while men monopolised management positions. As there were few opportunities for women in rural areas to earn wages, it is not surprising that those employed here were pleased to have found cash employment. UNICEF, however, expressed concern over the low wages and tough conditions facing production line workers at Noro: 'While long hours and hard work are not new to women, the factory setting is new and [the women receive] inadequate social support' (UNICEF, 1993:57). Employees were predominantly young women, often living away from home, so they were particularly vulnerable. Claims were made by women around Munda that alcoholism and prostitution had become significant problems because of the growth of the Noro cannery.

Other concerns facing women as wage earners included childcare facilities and sexual harassment<sup>32</sup>. Women working in town often faced the problem of inadequate kindergarten and day care facilities and this discouraged some from taking on paid employment. Sexual harassment was an issue not well publicised but prevalent under the surface in many workplaces. Women complained of demoralising and derogatory remarks made by co-workers but often they felt there was no one they could talk to about this. Women felt particularly powerless when their managers harassed them as this could disrupt their opportunities for advancement. While some women refrained from complaining because they did not want to risk losing their jobs, for others the situation was so unacceptable that they left paid employment. There was no system for them to claim compensation, however, as no legislation covers sexual harassment in the workplace.

### ***Business***

There were a growing number of successful business women in the Solomon Islands who managed various enterprises, from bus companies to beauty parlours. To women with a good education and collateral, support services and technical expertise were readily available when they wished to start a business but for the hundreds of women who wanted to establish a small-scale enterprise but who lacked these requirements, assistance was hard to find. A growing number of women, like those at the Rove market, were involved in self-employment, with many of them being the only provider of income in their household. Their need for business support services was great with many of them admitting that they had problems with costing and pricing, managing finances and purchasing material (WDD/ILO, 1991:49).

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<sup>32</sup> Maternity leave provisions are a concern in many countries but provisions are not too bad in the Solomon Islands, as discussed under 'Women and the Law', below.



The Business Development Division (BDD) of the Ministry of Commerce and Primary Industry tried to promote private business. It employed 26 business advisers who were based in the provinces but up until 1992 at least, all of them had been men. The advisers were largely unaware of the existence of women's businesses and therefore failed to acknowledge them or offer them assistance. Even when women were targeted by BDD endeavours there were problems. For example, a project focusing on the promotion and development of small and medium scale industries was run in conjunction with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). It aimed to improve existing industries, to help new ones to become successfully established and to promote women's role in business. The goals of this project were to set up ten businesses a year, twenty percent of which would be owned by women. Participants had to devote themselves to the business on a full time basis, they had to be able to raise starting capital and they needed at least a basic level of formal education. Effectively this project ignored many women, discriminating against those who were illiterate, who could not work full time and who could not raise starting capital. Thus the project could only expect to meet a practical gender need with respect to a very small number of women who, most likely, were already comparatively well off. Also, a problem with using a quota system to ensure that women participated in the project was that some women were headhunted by project managers. Under such circumstances it is unclear whether the project actually helps the women, especially if they feel coerced into meeting the project requirements, such as working full time, even when this does not fit in with their other commitments<sup>33</sup>. Such projects may meet the project manager's objectives without being in the best interests of participants.

### *Credit*

As has already been suggested, a major hindrance for many women wishing to start a business was access to credit. Banks presented many barriers. Loans officers said that very few women applied for loans because they lacked confidence and were unfamiliar with banking practices. Some women, for example, stood outside the bank until they were invited in. Once inside there were complicated forms to fill in, a challenge for even the literate. When the European Economic Community funded a credit scheme managed by the Development Bank of the Solomon Islands, only four percent of loans were dispersed to women. This was not because women did not want credit. Rather, the majority of women were unaware that these credit facilities existed. Those who were aware of them often regarded credit as being a man's concern. The one female loans officer working at the bank

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<sup>33</sup> Many women chose to operate small-scale, informal, part-time businesses because this gave them the flexibility they needed when balancing their multiple roles.

in question served to reinforce this notion. Further, loans at this bank and others were for a minimum of SBD\$ 3,000, which was beyond the aspirations of most women. Banks ignored women's requests for small loans and demanded large amounts of collateral, thus failing to meet the needs of many potential women customers. Banks often treated men and women customers differently as well. The National Bank of the Solomon Islands required the husband's signature on any loan application by married female applicants (WDD/ILO, 1991:29), while other banks have allowed men to sign money out of their wife's account without her permission. Clearly administrative and management practice in the banks is biased against women (Fleming, 1992:15).

There were few alternative sources of credit for women who did not wish to approach banks. The WDD had a revolving loan scheme which dispersed small loans of up to SBD\$ 300 to women but it was oversubscribed from its inception in 1990. After its first year of operations 38 applications had been approved, mostly for bakeries, sewing or poultry projects, but there were a further 500 projects awaiting approval (WDD/ILO, 1991:34). Another potential source of credit for women was credit unions. The Solomon Islands Credit Union League hoped to recruit a woman's affairs officer who would promote credit unions among women's groups, especially those in rural areas where there were no banking facilities. In 1991 a few of the 92 registered credit unions had only female members (WDD/ILO, 1991:32).

### **Action taken**

Some attempts were made to increase women's skills to help them earn cash in the informal sector, mainly by church women's groups, the WDD and NGOs who taught skills such as baking bread and sewing. Even though the skills were domestic-centred, they have given some women the opportunity to have an independent source of income.

Several initiatives emerged to promote women's role in business. The BDD organised courses in basic business management for women extension workers (WDD/ILO, 1991:18). The ILO, in conjunction with the WDD, tried to show business advisers how they could assist women entrepreneurs by holding a workshop which brought together WDAs and business advisers from all the provinces. Another major venture, the Mere Made Marketing and Training Centre<sup>34</sup>, planned to give women an outlet for goods they produced and to be a centre for training in business techniques. This was a joint project of the ILO and the WDD who planned for it to be completed by 1993 (WDD/ILO, 1991:3). It also aimed to overcome

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<sup>34</sup> *Mere* means women.

the lack of support for women involved in small business operations and to promote self-employment as an option to women in general:

*...in the Solomon Islands, women operating businesses have so far not been taken seriously enough as entrepreneurs and economic actors in their own rights and therefore have rarely received adequate support in terms of upgrading their technical and business skills or appropriate market and credit facilities (WDD and ILO, 1991:1).*

The training component provided for intensive training of government officers and extension workers from the health, education, commerce and agriculture ministries, as well as teachers from vocational training institutes and NGO staff. These staff were then expected to hold workshops to train women who wished to become self-employed. This meant that, once again, women from rural areas with little education or experience in self-employment would not be directly assisted by the centre. The marketing component of the project focused on the centre as an outlet for goods produced by self-employed women (WDD/ILO, 1991:56-7).

A step has been made to give public recognition to sexual harassment. In 1993 a one-day workshop on sexual harassment was held in Honiara to inform participants of their rights and to encourage them to promote women's safety at work. A major recommendation was that a committee be formed to liaise with women who were victims of sexual harassment (*Solomon Star*, 24 February 1993:13). The committee which was to be formed would do little good, however, if women and men were unaware of its existence. It was particularly unlikely to benefit women outside of Honiara unless a concerted public awareness campaign was launched.

## Discussion

In the realms of business, women who were already comparatively well off or who had a sound educational base have been able to take advantage of projects sponsored by development agencies to enhance their business skills. There has been little help for women interested in self-employment in the village. These women needed access to support services and credit facilities. It is these women who already make clothes to sell to their neighbours, bake bread to trade in the village store or take produce to the local market every week. Such women may have had the drive and initiative to make a business scheme a success but no one seemed interested in assisting them. If donors or NGOs really wish to promote women's involvement in business they could start by holding training sessions in numeracy and household budgeting skills for some of the thousands of women in villages across the country who are still coming to terms with handling their affairs in a cash environment. Then they could move on to basic training in costing and pricing and ways to diversify or add value to the products or services that women sell. Women's

organisations could also assist these women by providing transport to markets or putting pressure on area councils to establish regular market places or to provide stalls for the sale of fresh or cooked produce in existing markets.

With relation to employment opportunities, there were some positive developments with a number of women rising to management positions and younger women embarking on careers in non-traditional areas. Affirmative action programmes are still needed, however, to attempt to overcome the restrictions which prevent many women from accessing parts of the workforce, including the upper management levels. Men's attitudes need to change so that they support such moves rather than, as has more often been the case, putting pressure on their wives to stay at home with their families. Women employed in low skilled jobs, such as those filleting tuna in a cannery, were largely unaware of their rights and without a union to represent their interests, were vulnerable at the hands of foreign companies. Women in all employment situations potentially faced the additional problem of sexual harassment. While progress may have been made in Honiara to raise awareness of this problem and to establish a committee with which women could lay complaints, in other parts of the country victims had few places to turn for support. As more women join the cash sector, either formally or informally, it will be important that they have advocates who can provide support services for them and protect their interests.

### *Women and politics*

If the causes of women's subordination are to be addressed, women will need power and not just on an individual level. Political power includes having an influence on public policy decisions, allocating authority, having the capacity to mould public opinion and mobilising people to act collectively to achieve certain goals. Until suitably qualified and confident women gain representation on boards, committees, councils and in parliament, women will have little control over formal decision making arenas and therefore, little influence over the future direction of development in their country<sup>35</sup>.

Political power is certainly not restricted to the official government structure which, in the Solomon Islands, included national, provincial and area council levels. While women's access to formal political structures is certainly important if they wish to gain control over the large pools of resources and power held at these levels, involvement in informal political forums can provide a greater number of women, who may not have the

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<sup>35</sup> It has been suggested that a

If they are not confident they are likely to be, in the words of a young graduate working for the public service, 'like flower pots', pretty decorations sitting around board room tables and barely raising their voices to speak.



skills or confidence to be elected to formal political posts, with opportunities to exercise power and influence.

## Problems

Men dominated all areas of formal politics, from area councils to provincial assemblies to national parliament. While a handful of women had put themselves forward as candidates at each of these levels, they rarely gained political posts. Hilda Kari was the only woman MP since independence. She could have potentially had a large impact on women's development in the country by influencing decision-makers and planners to take on board a broader range of issues of concern to women. Kari stated, however, that she was not willing to jeopardise her political position by raising issues which challenged women's subordinate position in society as she did not wish to be labelled a radical by her colleagues (*Solomon Star*, 24 September 1993:7). She did, however, inspire other women to become involved in national politics. Up until 1993 a maximum of three women had campaigned for a parliamentary seat in any one election then suddenly eleven women put themselves forward as candidates. Although none of the new candidates were successful, they certainly raised women's political profile and showed the public that women want to be leaders at the highest level in their country rather than sitting back and having decisions made on their behalf.

Most women, both rural and urban, attending meetings during the provincial tours agreed that suitably skilled women could make a positive contribution to the formal political system. There was a general feeling that women were directly in touch with many of society's problems and that they had good management skills because of their role in caring for large families. Some women were worried, however, that women gaining election to political posts would not be respected because the prevalent view in society is still that men should be the leaders (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:107).

The example of one woman, Jolly Sipolo, who stood for election to the Western Province's Provincial Assembly in 1991, provides some indication of the difficulties faced by women political candidates in practice, especially in gaining support from other women. Sipolo received funding from the YWCA office in Suva to tour villages. Village women, however, seemed indifferent when it came to talk of politics and few attended her talks. In one village only men turned out for her meeting and when Sipolo asked where the women were, the men said they would tell them whatever they needed to know. Many appeared to think that their vote would make no difference and that *wantok* loyalties came first, no matter how good a candidate Sipolo might show herself to be. To Sipolo it appeared that



the majority of these women felt they had no control over their lives; they let men make most decisions and just lived each day the same as the one before.

Schoeffel (1992:16) posed several reasons why Melanesian women were, in general, reluctant to put themselves forward for political positions. Firstly, they were traditionally excluded from, or had limited input into, political and decision-making arenas. Secondly, they were heavily involved with practical, day-to-day matters and thus tended to think in terms of daily survival, rather than contemplating how their situation might be changed for the better in the long term. Thirdly, many women felt disempowered. Women in such positions need adequate time and an increase in self-esteem before they can be expected to be interested in participating in politics or supporting women candidates.

While many women may have lacked the confidence to stand for political posts, they still argued strongly that they want to be educated about the country's political system (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988). Kari, for one, believed that the lack of understanding about the party system prevented women from becoming involved in politics: 'Women don't understand why they need to vote. It is not a lack of interest...we need more public education' (Hilda Kari, MP, 1992:personal communication). Clearly there was a need for more awareness-raising so that women would have more faith in each other's abilities and understand how they could influence the direction of development and change.

### **Action taken**

Support from women's organisations was a crucial element in inspiring women to stand for election to formal political posts during the 1980s. The NCW encouraged women to gain representation on various committees and boards in the capital including the Film Censorship Board, the National Youth Congress, the National Scholarship Board and the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (NCW, 1985:1). Both the NCW and YWCA assisted eight women who stood for bye-elections in the Honiara Town Council in 1985, with two of the candidates being elected to the council.

It was at informal levels, however, that women gained more power and influence. Women were exercising political power beyond the household level in unprecedented ways. They were elected to parish and school councils, for example, and they collectively influenced decision-making processes by protesting at the operations of logging companies. Some women gained a greater voice in community affairs through working for the church by, for example, becoming lay preachers. While the upper structure of the churches was still exclusively male, some women had started to speak out against being treated as the

church cleaners, fund-raisers, entertainers of visitors and flower arrangers while they were not given the opportunity to hold positions of power which men enjoyed (Mera, 1975:11)<sup>36</sup>.

Many more women became leaders or held posts in church or secular women's groups, which provided an important avenue through which women could progress. Such groups showed women how to set goals and priorities and work towards meeting these, to develop skills in leadership, public speaking and fundraising. They also provided women with a space in which to discuss their problems and ways of solving these. This was an important first step in developing political awareness and a sense of solidarity among women. Participation in church decision-making forums provided a socially-sanctioned means of women gaining confidence to put themselves forward in secular political forums.

## Discussion

Despite its importance regarding women's access to decision-making arenas, resources and power, women's role in politics was simply not an issue on the mainstream development agenda in the Solomon Islands. This was a strategic gender interest which only captured the attention of women's organisations. It was left up to them to increase women's political awareness and to encourage them to stand for election to various bodies. Future needs for women include, firstly, confidence building so that they have faith in their own abilities and in one another and, secondly, awareness-raising about politics. Until women understand political issues, the difference their votes can make and how they can gain positions of power, many will continue to be complacent.

Most action taken has been with respect to informal, rather than formal, political levels. While experience at less formal levels, such as school committees, is crucial for women to build up esteem and skills, it is important that they are encouraged and supported so that they put themselves forward at higher levels too. If women's bid for political power stops at the level of the community, men will continue to dominate formal political structures with much greater power and control over resources.

## *Women and the law*

All of the issues to be discussed under this section on women and the law relate to women's control, control over their bodies, the land and their families. Women's lack of control in these arenas is a direct reflection of their subordinate position in society. As such,

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<sup>36</sup> This author, Grace Mera, is elsewhere in this thesis referred to as Grace Mera Molisa. She is writing with reference to her experience in Vanuatu but much of what she says can also be applied to Solomon Islands societies.

this section deals specifically with strategic gender interests which, if addressed, can lead to women's empowerment.

## Problems

### *The legal system*

The legal system was based on English Law, although facility was made for customary law to be affirmed as well. The Constitution promoted equality of women by prohibiting discriminatory legislation and decreeing that, '...no person shall be treated in a discriminatory manner...' (Lateef, 1990:12). There was still one rule of citizenship which overtly discriminated against women<sup>37</sup>, however, and in addition, women faced many injustices at a covert level. For example, as discussed above, women suffered discrimination in the education sector when they were not permitted the same range of courses as men in vocational schools and in the employment sector, when they were sexually harassed in the workplace and coerced into silence.

Women were largely unprepared to address injustices they faced because the majority of the population had little knowledge or understanding of English Law, making women's rights a mystery:

*For the vast majority of women in the Solomon Islands, the laws that protect them and their legal rights and constitutional equality are somewhat meaningless. In a society with particularly low rates of literacy and with some two thirds of the population still practising subsistence agriculture, an imposed western legal democratic system hardly influences their lives (Lateef, 1990:13).*

That the court system was centralised hindered women's access to legal assistance and their enlightenment as to how it could be used to their benefit. While slowly women had started to bring cases relating to separation, divorce or maintenance to court, the majority of women were still unaware of their rights under English Law and how these could be enforced. During the provincial tours many women complained that the government only enforced laws, without explaining to them what the laws meant. Women from Malaita suggested that legal documents should be simplified and translated into languages which they could read (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:14).

Additional to the fact that access to and knowledge of the modern legal system was poor, traditional systems controlling and protecting women were failing them: '...modern, that is written law, does not cover many significant areas in which traditional rights and

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<sup>37</sup> If a Solomon Islands woman marries a foreigner, he must be resident for ten years before he can obtain Solomon Islands citizenship whereas, if a Solomon Islands man marries a foreigner, she can become a citizen after only two years residency.

responsibilities are breaking down' (Hughes, 1985:5). As traditional methods for resolving disputes and mechanisms of social control were eroded, women who did not have a knowledge of the new laws governing the country became increasingly vulnerable (Lateef, 1990:14). Women's customary rights and privileges were no longer respected in some circumstances. This was particularly evident with issues concerning women's rights to use and control communally held land.

### *Violence and sexual abuse*

Physical and mental abuse of women is a serious, but often unrecognised, development issue. When women are abused, their dignity is undermined, their confidence shattered and their freedom is impeded. Emele Duituturaga recognises this problem with relation to domestic violence in Fiji:

*If we accept that development enables people to maximise opportunities to realise their own potential then by targeting domestic violence we can remove a barrier that has been holding both women and children from developing....Domestic violence produces women and children that lack self-esteem [and] are unlikely to achieve (quoted by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993b:10).*

Domestic violence was evidently widespread in the Solomon Islands, although it was of particular concern in urban areas where alcohol, which is more readily available, may trigger it, where traditional roles have broken down, and where women often do not have kin nearby to come to their assistance and place traditional sanctions on the man concerned. *Nius Blong Mere* (1986:5-7) published a series of statements concerning domestic violence which were heard around Honiara:

*'She wanted to do Custom dancing, so he beat her up. She won't be dancing'.*

*'I don't think that I have worked with any woman who hasn't come into work with a black eye at some time'.*

*'He threw me around like a bag of copra'.*

*'He thought that she was talking about him with the other women, so he beat her up'.*

Lateef (1990:15) wrote that men and women in most of the diverse ethnic groups in the Solomon Islands '...share[d] the view and recognise[d] the right of husbands to impose violence on wives as a means of chastising them'. For example, a volunteer working in Western Province was upset when awoken by the sounds of a neighbour's cries and screams one night but was more disturbed the following morning to find that her cries had only stopped because other villagers warned the woman, who was receiving a beating from

her husband, that she was 'keeping the white woman awake' (Julie Eagles, Volunteer at the Munda YWCA, 1992:personal communication). It is vital that men's attitudes undergo some change even though, 'The task of educating them will be a tough one as it involves changing the patriarchal hierarchical structure which we have inherited - and very often, unquestioningly accepted' (Singh, 1992:20). Women's attitudes need to change too, however, because as long as they accept domestic violence as a justifiable punishment, women deny themselves the opportunity to come out from under the control of men to take charge of their own lives.

Lateef noted that many people cite alcohol as the cause of physical attacks on women within the home but she argues that this provides a 'safe' explanation and does not force people to consider the fundamental inequality between men and women which provides the deeper explanation for continuing domestic violence. With the increasing freedom and independence women have gained through improved education and money earning opportunities, men sometimes resort to violence in an effort to reassert their dominance (Lateef, 1990:150).

In addition to domestic violence, sexual abuse has been a problem for women. It was rarely reported to the authorities, however, because women did not know where to go for help, they were scared to bring up this topic with a stranger or they feared repercussions from the abuser. Samuel, Honiara's public solicitor, said that in Polynesian societies women did not report rape cases because it would bring disgrace to their family.

The legal system of the Solomon Islands was set up to deal adequately with those convicted of domestic violence or sexual offences, the laws in place were strict, but in practice most cases were kept hidden within families or were dealt with through traditional systems, like compensation. When compensation was paid this typically went to the victim's family rather than the victim herself. Traditional means of dealing with serious offenders were becoming more lenient and this was of concern to women. While in the past a rapist may have been outcast, now he may have a fine imposed on him before being forgiven<sup>38</sup>. Some chiefs have been reluctant to bring such crimes out in the open because they do not wish to taint the image of their village (*Solomon Star*, 15 November 1991:12). Traditional rules governing behaviour are becoming obsolete in the urban environment, making women living here particularly vulnerable. As one woman told a journalist from *Nius*

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<sup>38</sup> I am referring here to rape occurring outside of marriage. There is no documented discussion of rape within marriage in the Solomon Islands and I chose not to broach this subject with the women I met because I felt I did not know them well enough to ask such a personal question. As men's control over women and their bodies is generally accepted in the Solomon Islands, it is unlikely that there would be much sympathy for the view that forced sexual relations within marriage is a crime.



*Blong Mere*, 'Honiara is the only Solomon society where a man can break the rules [about domestic violence] and still be part of the society' (1985:7).

Only since 1990 have women started to bring their husbands to court to be prosecuted for domestic violence. Sexual abuse was rarely reported (Maily Samuel, Public Solicitor's Office, 1992:personal communication). Of those cases of violent or sexual abuse of women which did get reported to the police, very few convictions resulted. For example, in 1990, 35 cases of rape were reported but while 34 of these were accepted as breaches of criminal law, not one conviction was laid (UNICEF, 1993:64). Charges were often withdrawn before cases were held in court, sometimes because of family pressure to settle the matter privately and church pressure to bring about reconciliation. This just made police more reluctant to intervene in cases of domestic violence.

There has been little support in the community for women suffering from domestic violence. There were no refuge centres for women in strife to go to. Jully Sipolo's poem indicates the sense of helplessness women and children in violent domestic situations felt:

#### *WIFE BEATING*

*"Sister, I've come to you with my black eye and bruises"  
"I'm afraid of your hubby, don't want to get involved,  
Go to big brother"*

*"Brother, can you shelter and feed four more mouths?"  
"Any time sis, but my wife's tongue is sharper than a two-edged sword,  
Ask Dad"*

*"Dad I've come back with my problems, plus 3 kids"  
"What did I say daughter"  
I was against this marriage from the start,  
but you were too strong for me and wouldn't listen  
Go back to your husband, he owns you now"*

*"Policeman, help me  
My husband belted me up last nite"  
"I'm sorry, but this is a domestic affair  
It's private, I don't want to pry"*

*"Pastor, is there any consolation or prayer for my tormented soul?"  
I'd divorce him if I could"  
"You can't, cos you have promised,  
and the Bible says, 'No divorce' "*

*Impossible to go back to Dad  
Sis doesn't want to get involved  
Can't stand sister-in-law's tongue  
The police don't want to pry  
I don't like this cruel treatment from hubby  
But where can I go?*

*Hubby,  
I'm back,  
I've brought back this battered body  
battered face, plus battered case  
I am the ball that players pass around  
I've had enough of being tossed around  
like a hot sausage  
Now I'm back,  
Have a ball!*

*(Sipolo, 1986:12-13).]*

### *Land*

Land is the major resource held by a clan and as such, women's control over how land is utilised is an important strategic gender interest. Traditionally, land was an economic resource as well as the basis of the social and political way of life of a clan, therefore it '...was not to be abused or exploited' (Ipo, 1989:122). A major debate had arisen in the villages of the Solomon Islands between those who wished to exploit the land for economic gain and those who wished to preserve the land for themselves and future generations. This often emerged as a debate between a large group of men who wanted a quick economic gain, and women (plus a few men) who argued that sustainable use of the land is crucial to their survival. Finding any middle ground was difficult.

Women have in many cases been distressed because the men of their clan have not consulted them before planting cash crops on good land near to the village, or before signing logging agreements or helping miners to prospect for minerals on the clan's land. In both matrilineal and patrilineal societies women were traditionally consulted over the use of land because they needed access to land to fulfil their vital role in food production. While legally men did not need to consult women on these issues, because even in matrilineal societies<sup>39</sup> '... the main powers over land were still exercised by men' (Crocombe, 1989:110), by failing to do so men were undermining women's customary rights to use that land.

Another threat to women's access to, and control over, land has emerged. The legal system based on English Law provides that land and property can be registered. When this occurs, however, it has usually been registered in the name of the husband so that it can be passed on to sons. This practice has serious implications for women as it threatens their traditional rights to ownership and use of the land (Fleming, 1992:3). There

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<sup>39</sup> Societies were broadly matrilineal in Guadalcanal, Isabel, Malira, Russell Islands and Nggela while Choiseul, Malaita, Rennell and Bellona, Shortlands, Tikopia and Ulawa were home to patrilineal societies (Ipo, 1989:123).

has been little effort to assist women in ensuring that their rights to use communally-held land are endorsed in the written law.

### **Action taken**

Crimes associated with physical and mental abuse of women were rarely redressed through the legal system. Action taken to increase women's awareness of the law, to reduce the incidence of domestic violence and abuse and to assist victims of crime was poor. Clearly strategic gender interests related to women's legal rights have been largely ignored by the development community. There were a few exceptions emerging, however.

Due to the work of women's organisations, sensitive topics such as domestic violence and rape did enter the women and development agenda, although they have rarely been broached outside of women's publications or meetings. In Munda, the YWCA organised self-defence classes. The full enrolments in the class and the enthusiasm of participants implied that there was a need for similar classes around the country. Several other women's organisations have published articles in magazines or newspapers in an attempt to raise public awareness of these problems and to let women know what they can expect when dealing with the police or Public Solicitors (*Nius Blong Mere*, 1985:1; *Mere Save*, October/November 1992:6). Save the Children Fund, Australia (SCFA) published a series of booklets to explain why rape and wife beating are wrong, what penalties the court could hand out to perpetrators of such actions and who women could turn to for help. They suggested that women's groups could organise their members to help victims of rape or domestic violence and support them if they had to go to a doctor, the police or to court. They also suggested that, in a situation where an individual does not wish to report a rape, their women's group could gather together community representatives to talk to the rapist about his crime. Such publications have helped women to raise issues surrounding rape and wife beating and to find ways of dealing with these crimes both collectively and individually. More information will have to be written in *Pijin* and vernaculars, however, and communicated through other mediums, such as radio and travelling theatre groups, if it is to reach the majority of women.

Women's organisations which support anti-domestic violence campaigns or which have attempted to set up a women's refuge have, in the past, come under attack. Church leaders have argued that they are promoting marital breakdown (Lateef, 1990:16). While the Soroptimists and YWCA have not followed through with plans to provide a refuge, the Mothers' Union was, in 1992, trying to raise funds for a proposed training centre which would include a floor with family units which would provide a safe haven for abused women and children.

While the police have not had a great reputation for dealing with crimes relating to Family Law and sexual offences, this situation could improve dramatically if a proposed unit to deal with sexual offences is established. There were also plans to train more women officers to counsel those who reported crimes relating to Family Law. In 1993 a two week long 'Sexual Offences Course' was attended by 23 of the 36 female officers in the country to equip these officers with the knowledge and skills to deal with victims of sexual offences.

The New Zealand government was the only donor which, in the 1990s, actively supported education about the unacceptability of domestic violence. In 1993 they sponsored a trip to New Zealand and Fiji of several women's leaders to show them how different governments and social organisations were dealing with domestic violence. The women noticed the different attitude to domestic violence in New Zealand, with the government and the general public being aware of the problem that it was, rather than seeing it as a family matter which was to be tolerated (*Solomon Star*, 8 October, 1993:7). Once back in the Solomons the women put together an action plan for the immediate future, featuring a series of meetings, lobbying and training of trainers. For the long term, they have devised a five year strategic vision involving a media campaign, data collection, publications and training of counsellors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993b:10-11). If this results in support networks being established for women subject to domestic violence and in public acknowledgment of this crime, then the effects of the study tour will be far reaching.

On the issue of land rights, women have collectively started to put pressure on leaders and other men of their tribe who have neglected to consult them before important decisions are made about the future of their resources. Women interviewed during the provincial tours argued that the 'Government must ensure that signatures of both men and women are seen before any agreement is valid in regards to land for logging'. They also suggested that traditional laws on land needed to be legalised for each island and ethnic area because there could be no single law which accounted for all the customs of the country (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:38,113,65). In 1988, women from a matrilineal society in Malango Ward, Guadalcanal, formed a Women's Council after men consistently failed to involve women when making agreements with gold mining and logging companies. As a representative of the Council said:

*Many companies have come into this area. As a result they have spoilt the land. But we have never been consulted...Where will the children live and grow their gardens? (Solomon Star, 19 February 1988:1).*

Thus the Malango women organised a meeting with Guadalcanal land officers, the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Natural Resources, a Provincial representative and a legal adviser to the Ombudsman to discuss issues relating to customary land (*Solomon Star*, 19 February 1988:1).

## Discussion

Women's rights should be a priority on any development agenda. It is not acceptable that crimes such as domestic violence and rape go unpunished, nor that women continue to be confused about the legal system. Women interviewed during the provincial tours felt strongly that they needed more information about the legal system and their rights under this. Some suggested that all provinces should have community lawyers who could advise them on issues such as land rights disputes, how to enforce maintenance payments on fathers of children born out of wedlock<sup>40</sup> and how to control foreign companies coming onto their islands (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:43). The government, women's organisations, and NGOs should move forward to inform women of their rights and to ensure that they receive assistance when their rights over their bodies, their property or their families, are under threat. In the long term there need to be more women trained as lawyers, particularly those who specialise in family law, and they must be available to represent women in local courts, not just in Honiara. In a society with strong sex segregation, it is apparent that it would be very difficult for women to discuss issues such as rape and incest with a man.

It is of concern that so few reported rapes result in convictions. Those women who want to lay complaints about sensitive issues such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and incest, need support. If their families do not wish to be involved, women's groups could provide an effective network of support, from the time when the crime is reported to the police through to when the woman has to appear as a witness in court. Women's groups could also provide a safe forum for women to discuss such problems because only when they are brought out into the open will women be able to start working through the problems they cause and try to find solutions. As long as women feel coerced into silence, a sense of shame and lack of dignity will continue to negatively effect their lives. If victims of violent or sexual crimes do not wish to use the court system there may be an alternative way of confronting those who have committed crimes against them. Public humiliation of men who continually beat their wives has been a method successfully

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<sup>40</sup> Women sometimes have innovative suggestions as to how the legal system could work better for them. For example, women from East Rennell suggested that, if the father of a child has abandoned the mother and has no income with which to pay maintenance, he should be made to give a piece of land to that child, rather than being put in prison where he is of no use to the child (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:125).



used by women's groups in India. These crimes are not matters to be left only to women's groups to resolve, however. All organisations need to move forward with these issues, including the churches. The way the churches have dealt with domestic violence in the past, covering it up for the sake of preserving family unity, is unacceptable. A role for the churches could be to provide good counselling facilities, with counsellors specifically trained in the areas of sexual abuse and domestic violence, both for victims of abuse and their abusers.

Changes to traditional rules and a new legal system which few of the population understand or have access to has left women in a very vulnerable position. As far as the state is concerned, women are protected equally under the law. In practice, however, they face discrimination in access to employment and education, and they have little knowledge of how to use the legal system to redress problems they are having. There are still a great deal of unreported crimes. The key areas of the legal system in which women need to acquire knowledge are property ownership, domestic violence, divorce, custody, marriage and maintenance. It is essential that people realise that crimes under these laws are a development issue because they make women feel powerless.

## *Analysis*

### **How well are gender needs and interests being addressed?**

After debating the views of Antrobus (1991) and Baud (et al., 1992), Chapter Three concluded that there was merit in addressing practical gender needs and strategic gender interests concurrently, rather than assuming that one category must receive priority. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in the Solomon Islands. In many of the examples discussed above, development agencies took the politically safe option of meeting practical gender needs but they made no effort to address the causes of women's subordination by tackling strategic gender interests. For example, while Soltrust was willing to allow women to participate in replanting programmes, women were not encouraged to be involved in the walkabout sawmill project. Women's labour was utilised but their access to technology which could earn them an income was not encouraged. In agriculture, while women's groups, Danchurch Aid and the *Supsup* Garden Centre have assisted women with their role in food gardening in relation to nutrition, they have not targeted men in their workshops thus enforcing the trend for men to ignore their traditional role of assisting with aspects of food gardening. Likewise, women have not been taught the skills of cash cropping, thus preventing them from gaining skills in what has become known as a man's domain. Instead they have to settle for labouring on men's plantations. The criminal justice system is set up to prosecute perpetrators of crimes of a sexual or violent nature but no NGO or women's

organisation has established a support network to provide counselling and assistance for victims of such crimes, thus few prosecutions result. In health fields, while NGOs teach women how to care for themselves whilst pregnant, no one has attempted an awareness-raising programme to allay traditional misconceptions about stillborn babies and miscarriages. Thus women in some areas continue to be persecuted for supposed infidelity. With regard to family planning, the health ministry is willing to disperse contraceptives to women and to encourage women to have tubal ligations but they have not designed any comprehensive programme to increase awareness and support for 'male' methods of family planning, including sterilisation. Further, while various agencies assist women with skills to enter the workforce, none have attempted to raise awareness among women in the manufacturing sector in Honiara on trade unions and their purposes, or on their employment rights. Certainly women need access to jobs but they also need to know how to protect themselves from exploitation.

As Cleves-Mosse (1993:166) expressed, by choosing to focus only on practical gender needs, planners and development agencies are in fact propping up the present system. The present system provides women in the Solomon Islands with fewer opportunities than men, less power over decision-making forums and less control over their own lives. This is why it is so crucial that strategic gender interests, which arise directly from women's subordinate relationship to men, are dealt with. Most development agencies seem reluctant to raise issues which challenge men's power and privilege in society. While agencies may claim to have been successful in achieving their aims, when their aims do not include challenging the *status quo* in some way they are unlikely to result in long term structural changes which will benefit women. Table Three (page 212) summarises the issues dealt with in this chapter and indicates that there are a lot of strategic interests which have yet to be addressed. The official planning process is not doing enough for women.

Where Table Three indicates that strategic interests have been addressed, it is NGOs and women's groups who have been behind the initiatives. They provide the main contrast to indications that development agencies are not willing to address strategic gender interests. The NCW, for example, brought the issue of domestic violence out into the open in the 1980s and encouraged women not to accept this practice. The Munda YWCA responded to women's need to protect themselves in their own homes by providing self-defence classes, which were very well attended and the Mothers' Union is attempting to establish a women's refuge so that women in Honiara without family support do not have to endure violent domestic situations. SIDT's development awareness publications, dramas and workshops have shown villagers that they can make choices regarding the exploitation of their resources. This has inspired women's groups to stand up to men in their communities who want to sign agreements which would allow foreign companies access to their clans forests or minerals. In the realm of politics, it has been the support and

**TABLE THREE: How gender needs and interests have been addressed or ignored in the Solomon Islands, 1992**

	Practical needs (PN) and strategic interests (SI) that have been addressed	Practical needs (PN) and strategic interests (SI) that have been ignored
<b>Population growth and family planning</b>	PN: Provision of contraceptives to those in Honiara, provincial centres and some rural areas; SI: raising awareness of the need for family planning through the media and dramas	PN: Ensuring all women have access to safe means of controlling their fertility, and comprehensive information about all of their options; family planning education by and for couples. SI: widespread teaching of methods people express interest in, especially natural family planning; encouraging men to participate in programmes; family planning as a means to enhance women's well-being.
<b>Health and Nutrition</b>	PN: Nutrition programmes; maternal child health, especially ante-natal clinics; water supplies to accessible areas	PN: Well-resourced and staffed rural clinics; water supplies to remote areas; sanitation systems SI: Health education, including information on new health concerns such as STDs and depression; nutrition programmes which target men.
<b>Agriculture, fisheries, forestry and natural resources</b>	PN: Agriculture training for women with various levels of education; assistance with <i>supsup</i> gardening SI: Education on the negative effects of logging	PN: Training, information and technology relating to subsistence agriculture, cash crops, sustainable logging and fishing to be made available to women as well as men SI: Any courses to cater for women's other obligations; retraining male agriculturalists to know more about food crops and to work with women; information on dangers of chemicals (eg pesticides).
<b>Education and literacy</b>	PN: Formal education for a limited number of girls; vocational training focusing mainly on domestic roles; non-formal education on nutrition and home economics SI: Literacy classes for some women; non-formal education on environmental issues	PN: Access to formal education for all girls who desire it; secondary school for girls only SI: broader ranges of subjects to be open to young women and men at vocational schools to break occupational stereotypes; broader non-formal education to increase women's skills, awareness and confidence; training in literacy and numeracy available to all women
<b>Employment and business opportunities</b>	PN: Business courses for women with education and capital; basic skills training; \$300 credit scheme SI: Media encouraging girls to consider non-traditional careers; sexual harassment committee for Honiara	PN: assistance for women with few business skills, little education or capital; facilities for women entrepreneurs in market places SI: Trade union protection; knowledge of workers' rights; information/awareness on sexual harassment in provinces; user-friendly banking facilities to meet women's needs
<b>Women and politics</b>	SI: Women's organisations encouraging women to become involved in politics at local and national levels	SI: Confidence-building so that women have more faith in themselves and each other; broad-based political education through alternative media
<b>Women and the law</b>	PN: Public solicitors available in main towns; a legal system which can punish offenders for sexual and violent crimes SI: Women's organisations have given domestic violence publicity; newsletters offer ideas on ways to deal with domestic violence	PN: Widespread knowledge of women's rights under English Common Law; a decentralised court system which more people have access to SI: Protection of women's customary rights to land; awareness-raising on unacceptability of domestic violence; safe forums in which women can discuss sexual abuse; education for church and community leaders in how to deal with cases of violent or sexual abuse in ways which are acceptable to the victims

Source: Fieldwork, 1992

assistance of women's organisations which has helped some of the handful of women who have attained formal political posts to gain these positions. In addition to these initiatives by NGOs and women's organisations, some donors and multilateral organisations have addressed strategic gender interests. The ILO have organised vocational training courses for women leaders in topics such as plumbing and outboard motor repair in a direct attempt to challenge occupational stereotypes. Further, the WAESP, funded by New Zealand, addresses a strategic gender interest because it is training women to enter an area, agricultural extension, previously dominated by men.

For many of the unmet strategic interests indicated in Table Three to be addressed will require a major change of attitude in both institutions and individuals that impinge on women's lives. Women's opportunities and quality of life are restricted when men are unwilling to cede control of their wives' bodies and prohibit them access to contraceptives, when parents send boys to school in preference to girls, when business advisers fail to seek out women who may need their assistance, when agricultural extension workers neglect to assist women with either food or cash crops, when banks fail to arrange credit facilities which would be more accessible to women and when councils neglect to provide market facilities which would allow for women to sell cooked products in hygienic surrounds. Women's rights are denied when communities remain silent about rape, wife beating and sexual harassment, thus protecting the perpetrators of these crimes rather than supporting the victims.

Close observation of Table Three indicates that even when practical needs are addressed, this may only assist those women living in or near Honiara or the provincial centres, women's groups leaders and other women who are already comparatively well off. For example, only women's leaders attended the ILO workshops, educated women were targeted by the BDD and a wide choice of family planning options were only readily available to those living in or near Honiara. Rural women, those who are illiterate and lack access to capital, that is, the majority of women in the Solomon Islands, constantly miss out on services and development assistance.

### **The narrow focus of programmes for women**

In the preceding discussion of how gender needs and interests have been addressed it was apparent that there are still serious concerns facing women which have barely been touched upon by the government or development agencies. There are two major reasons for this. Firstly, many development agencies and government ministries do not have the same priorities as village women and they make few attempts to consult women so they can apply their ideas to the design of projects. Consequently, many projects



and programmes focus on superficial issues, such as cooking skills using store-bought ingredients, rather than crucial issues regarding women's sense of self importance and their access to power in society. Secondly, most development agencies and staff of government ministries focus on practical gender needs in relation to women's wifely and maternal roles, rather than concurrently depicting the empowerment of women as being a priority. The focus on women's roles as wives and mothers is problematic in that, like many other programmes directed at women in the Pacific, the implementing agencies make '...assumptions about gender roles which limit the aspirations and achievements of women' (Thomas and Hill, 1987:106).

The sections on education, health and agriculture provide pertinent examples of this narrow focus. In the health sector, family nutrition and maternal child health were the main foci. Women's psychological well-being was not addressed at all, however, and there was little information available on STDs, cervical and breast cancer and problems associated with smoking, which were affecting an increasingly large number of women. In education, vocational schools offered young women topics related to the domestic arena and community work, whilst young men were offered a wider range of subjects related to trades and how they could earn themselves an income. In agriculture, those agencies which did assist women encouraged them to develop *supsup* gardens to improve their family's nutrition, while male agricultural extension officers continued to focus on helping men to grow cash crops.

Also, a focus on women's roles as wives and mothers meant that women's potential to achieve or to have skills to contribute in other areas was not recognised. For example, business advisers in the provinces did not even consider women as potential clients until a special course was held to instil this idea in them. In communities, men sometimes ignore women's traditional role as guardians of the land and therefore they fail to consult women when a logging agreement is signed. In the arena of politics, as members of the NCW have acknowledged, it will be difficult to give rural women the confidence to step forward for political roles and to encourage their communities to support them, especially when women are often '...viewed by the community as producers of food and children with no right to express their views' (NCW, 1985:3).

While there is a need to teach skills related to nutrition, the domestic scene and maternal and child health, and not only to women, what I am questioning here is the appropriateness of an over-emphasis on women's roles as wives and mothers when this means that other gender needs and interests are neglected. This is similar to the situation Oliver found with church youth groups throughout the Pacific. Oliver (1983:37) feels that



these groups rarely question the assumptions upon which their activities are based. He argues that youth groups are not meeting the real needs of the youth:

*If Jesus walked the earth today he may say, "I was unemployed and you held another Bible quiz; I dropped out of school and you held another choir contest; I needed a market for my taro, and you built another church".*

To turn this statement around to increase its relevance for women's groups in the Solomon Islands, we could imagine a rural woman lamenting:

*"I had no money to pay my daughter's school fees, and you showed me how to sew her an apron; my husband came home drunk and beat me again and you preached forgiveness; my water supply was polluted because of logging operations and you gave me a recipe for curried mutton flaps".*

The tradition of assisting women in their roles as wives and mothers has left a self-limiting legacy in the Solomon Islands. Certainly women have shown interest in sewing and cooking classes but in the past they were rarely offered any alternative development initiatives to become involved in. It is not as if they are unaware of other needs and interests, including those which challenge gender subordination (Moser, 1989) but they learn to live with their burdens because they feel powerless to change the way their societies are run and the way that they as women are treated. As discussed in the sections above, women have asked for access to safe methods of contraception, official recognition of their traditionally-sanctioned control over land in matrilineal societies, regulation of the intrusion of foreign logging companies and education about the country's legal and political systems (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988). Is it appropriate for many agencies concerned with women's development to follow a welfare approach when many women are obviously politically weak, lack vital skills such as literacy and have nowhere to turn when they face abuse in their homes? The importance of sewing classes to women's development pales in light of these other challenges women face yet there have been few attempts by development agencies to offer women a means of addressing their other concerns.

It is apparent that many donors, NGOs, government ministries and departments do not consider the empowerment of women to be a priority. Many of the initiatives discussed could be more beneficial for women if they focused on empowerment. For example, most of the agencies involved in family planning regard their work as an exercise in population control, rather than seeing it in terms of improving women's health, well-being and life options. Thus rather than empowering women with knowledge of all available methods of fertility control and their side effects, staff administer a limited range of contraceptives which seem to have a high rate of side effects. Likewise, despite the number of women employed to spray cash crops with toxic chemicals, only teachers at SICHE have educated women on

the dangers of these chemicals, thus empowering women with the knowledge needed to protect their long term health.

## Summary

Chapter Six has looked at efforts being made for women in various sectors of the economy and society by the government, development agencies, donors and women's organisations. It has shown that the priorities of these agencies do not always correspond with those of the women whose development they are supposed to be enhancing. In many cases development agencies seem pre-occupied with initiatives which are of low priority in the eyes of women. Furthermore, few agencies are willing to challenge the *status quo* by addressing strategic gender interests. While it may be admirable to ease women's immediate burdens as long as this continues to be the focus of most development agencies' programmes it is unlikely that society will be transformed so that it is more equitable for all disadvantaged groups, including women, in the long term.

While Chapter Six has focused on the needs and interests of Solomon Islands women and whether or not these are being addressed, it has only briefly delved into the action taken by various agencies to address needs and interests. Chapter Seven, building on the issues which have been uncovered here, will look specifically at strategies. It is comprised of twelve case studies of GAD initiatives, including some mainstream examples of development projects and programmes directed at women as well as several innovative examples of women working for change on their own terms. Just because women's voices are rarely heard beyond the village does not mean that all women are sitting back and complacently accepting their fate. Chapter Eight, in conclusion, will consider future priorities for those development agencies which wish to facilitate a process of transformation towards a more equitable society.

# CHAPTER SEVEN: Development in practice - the effectiveness of initiatives directed at women

## *Introduction*

Chapter Six discussed the effectiveness of attempts to assist women's development in key areas, thus providing the background for the present chapter. This chapter analyses 12 case studies of initiatives by government agencies, foreign and local NGOs, church women's organisations and donors to put into practice their stated concern for women's development. By analysing these initiatives we can discover which strategies are most effective in facilitating women's empowerment. This provides the crux of this thesis.

I chose to research agencies or organisations with a stated commitment to women's development because I wanted to find out whether or not the resources they were committing specifically to women were leading to women's empowerment and development. While I collected information on approximately 25 agencies and organisations while in the Solomons, some of which have been mentioned in Chapter Six, space restrictions forced me to discuss only 12 of these in detail. The 12 chosen were either representative of conventional approaches to women's development<sup>1</sup>, which still dominate development initiatives aimed at women, or they involved utilising quite innovative strategies in an attempt to empower women. It was expected that contrasting these case studies would highlight which approaches were most effective in leading to the empowerment and development of women.

After each case study is described, a discussion section will consider what was achieved or what failed to be achieved, what policy approach was adopted (according to Moser's notion of the five policy approaches to GAD<sup>2</sup>, discussed in Chapter Two) and whether or not strategic gender interests were addressed. The latter point could be judged by the extent to which the *status quo* was challenged. The case studies are arranged in alphabetical order, leaving all comparison for the analysis section at the end of this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, those in line with the equilibrium paradigm, discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup> Gender and development.

## *Case studies*

### **Catholic women's groups in Malaita**

In 1992, the Catholic Church in the Solomons was divided into three dioceses. One of these was Auki diocese, centred on Malaita, a province associated with strong patrilineal traditions. Women in Malaita seemed to face even greater struggles to gain equal status and opportunities with men than did women elsewhere in the Solomons.

In 1990 the Auki Diocesan Team was established in response to requests from Catholic women in surrounding villages for assistance to form women's groups. Two religious sisters and an expatriate woman were the first members of the team but by 1992 the team was run largely by several local women. From the beginning the team had the official endorsement of the Bishop of Malaita, an expatriate who had lived in Malaita for over 30 years and was known for speaking out publicly on issues of women's rights and status. This lent the team a great deal of credibility, which was especially important in the early stages of their work when team members needed to build up the trust of villagers.

The team started out by visiting women in villages alongside the Langa Langa lagoon to see what they wanted from their women's groups. Most said that as this was the first time anyone had done something just for women, they were keen to learn whatever they could. At first sewing classes and cooking demonstrations were provided but before long the team found, by drawing women into discussions about their lives, that there were more fundamental changes women wanted to work towards. These changes involved husbands and wives working together and sharing together, and building sisterhood through their women's groups (Sheila MacBride Stewart, supporter of the Auki Diocesan Team, 1992: personal communication).

The team's first effort at networking was the organisation of a gathering of 129 women's representatives from every parish in Auki diocese for a ten day meeting at a centre in Buma. This involved many women travelling large distances by land or sea. For many it was the first time women from their village had been allowed to travel to a distant place without their husbands. Many were afraid because they had to mix with women from different tribal and language groups. They were pleased to discover, however, that those facilitating the various learning sessions were basically women like themselves from the villages, mothers and wives, not young, highly educated women dressed in fancy clothes. For example, one of the team members, Patricia Wale (Pati), had seven children. Another was Mary Taikui who had only five months of primary school education but had attended

several agriculture courses and spoke six of the local languages, plus Pijin and English. Some of the participants at Buma expressed that they liked having these women as leaders because they were tired of listening to men telling them what to do.

The meeting at Buma turned out to be a watershed event for participants. They had come to learn about community work, women's leadership and women's role in development. They also came to share their burdens, to talk about their experiences as women. Although they spoke of hardship and frustration and many tears were shed, several women commented that they had not been so happy since their school days, just to be with their sisters. Through discussions on their roles in society and the importance of what they had to contribute, women came to realise that they were not useless. These discussions had, '...for the first time given to the women a sense of their worth... this has stressed their dignity and value to the family and the community' (Notes on the Women's Development Programme, 1992, Diocese of Auki). Women at this gathering were also given ideas to take back to their village with the aim of establishing women's groups there. All were encouraged to revive traditions whereby community work was practiced and the old, sick and others in need were taken care of.

The team followed the Buma gathering with an extensive programme which saw them travelling to organise workshops for women in every parish in Malaita, often in remote areas where there had never before been a course organised especially for women. The approach the team took meant that within three years the number of active Catholic women's groups in Auki diocese rose from seven to just over one hundred.

Rather than focusing on material development, the team chose to try to build up Malaitan women's sense of dignity and self-esteem. This is in contrast to attempts to secure sewing machines and fabric, the 'material' development which characterises women's group activities across the country. One topic covered in village workshops was leadership. Because the only leaders most women knew of presided over and made decisions for many people, the village women did not feel that any among them had leadership potential. It took some time before the women realised that they had their own style of leadership which came into play when they were preparing a feast or working together in the gardens. Emphasis was placed on sharing the various talents that different women had. They were shown that they did not need to choose as their leaders those women whose husbands were considered important or those with a formal education. Each group needed a secretary who could read and write but apart from that any woman with the commitment, spiritual strength and confidence to speak out was regarded as fit to be a leader (Sheila MacBride Stewart, supporter of the Auki Diocesan Team, 1992: personal communication).



Comments arising from these first workshops reflected the joy women felt at this new opportunity to come together and learn, as well as a certain degree of nervousness about the challenges ahead of them:

*Speaking out and standing up was tambu<sup>3</sup> before...now we have taken the yokes from our necks and we do speak out.*

*This is the first time that women in our parish came together to learn from each other and share their feelings*

*...the workshop is opening our eyes to see our role as women.*

*This is the first time women in our community are taking the initiative in leadership and it is not easy.*

*Husbands don't understand our role...*

*We need more awareness raising for husbands so they will support and encourage us...*

While the work of the team stirred up a great deal of dissatisfaction among women and many groups found it difficult when left on their own to work out what goals they wished to work towards, it was significant that women realised that they did not have to resign themselves to their present situation. They came to realise that, as groups of women, they had potential beyond craft activities and sewing classes. Further, the team tried to address the problem of lack of support from husbands by devoting one day of the village workshops to awareness-raising for men.

Some practical workshops for women covering topics such as agriculture, nutrition, literacy and health education were held after those building up women's esteem. Participants felt that these topics were all presented in a way they could easily understand, with one saying in her evaluation: 'Every topic easily fits grassroots level'. Armed with this knowledge, village groups went on to produce their own agendas for action. For some the first priority was to build a women's club house, for others, to establish *supsup* gardens, while several saw literacy as being of prime importance. In one village located on the shores of a lagoon where the soil was rocky and previously only certain trees could grow, every women's group member now has a *supsup* garden thriving next to her house. They were shown how to remove the salt from mangrove soil so the soil could be used for their gardens. Then the women worked communally to carry the soil until each of their members

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<sup>3</sup> *Tambu* means taboo or prohibited

had a plot to work on. Further, when these women discovered that another group of women living down the coast, whom they had met at the Buma gathering, were prevented from starting *supsup* gardens because of poor soil, they agreed to bag mangrove soil to be transported to them too. Literacy groups also became popular. In Bubuitolo a woman with standard seven education started to run literacy classes three mornings a week for thirty women in her village (Photo 8, page 222): 'Without doubt there is a hunger from the women to learn to read and write' (Notes on the Women's Development Programme 1992, Diocese of Auki).

In other villages around Malaita women started to open themselves to new opportunities and to speak out in public. In one village there were two women on the school committee and in another two women were elected to the parish council. Such moves were unprecedented in these areas and their implications for women in Malaitan society should not be underestimated. Team members were encouraged to note that women were often the driving force behind planning activities in their village. They no longer sat quietly at the back of community meetings as they were not so afraid to speak out for what they believed to be right. Their improved self-esteem inspired women to take up training opportunities too. When a literacy trainer from Honiara held a workshop for representatives of women's groups who had worked with the team she was amazed by how keen they were to learn. The trainer felt it was as though someone had proved to the women that they had something worthwhile to offer and this made them stand out from other groups she had trained (Lesley Moseley, literacy trainer, 1992: personal communication).

Women's groups also started to get formal recognition from men. In some villages which hosted workshops, for example, local men played pan pipes to welcome women from other areas into their community. This was a sign of the status such women's events were accorded. In individual villages it was claimed that women had earned renewed respect from some men. The older men, in particular, applauded the community work that the women's groups were doing. They said that by visiting the sick and helping the old and frail, the women's groups were binding their communities together again like in the old days and rejuvenating the tradition of caring for others. In one tragic situation a woman was struck by lightning and killed as she travelled home from a women's workshop. This threatened the cohesiveness of her group and women's freedom to travel away from home as, traditionally, death by such a cause was seen as a sign of the woman having committed some great sin, such as adultery. Her husband stood up at the funeral, however, and urged the women to continue with the good work they were doing, stressing that they must not stop because of the death of his wife. Another woman from a group in South Malaita, an area in which hereditary systems of leadership prevail, was asked to join the local Council of Chiefs because the men in the area were so impressed with the work women were doing for their communities (Sheila MacBride-Stewart, supporter of the Auki Diocesan Team, 1993:

personal communication). In these circumstances although the community work may have increased women's workloads, it has also opened up unprecedented opportunities for them to earn respect from those with authority and power, and this had started to give them access to this power.

Other men came to support the work of the team because they saw that the new skills their wives were learning, such as literacy or *supsup* gardening, could benefit their families. While the direct objectives of the team were not to teach women to provide tastier meals for their husbands or to have the skills to help their children with school work, these indirect consequences of their work meant that the team faced little resistance despite the fact that the work they carried out was transforming the lives of many women in Malaita.

### *Discussion*

This independent initiative was very much a programme by, and for, women at grassroots level and it had widespread effects. The Auki Diocesan Team was noted for the strength of spirit which it helped to bring out in women across the province of Malaita. Clearly the team's work supported an empowerment approach to women's development. Rather than focusing predominantly on physical development, such as sewing clothing or initiating poultry projects, the team tried to restore in women a sense of dignity and self-esteem and this gave them the confidence to speak out and make changes in their lives. Practical skills associated with health, literacy and agriculture did not receive prominence until later in the programme.

As the team's work progressed, more and more women were affected by the messages and inspiration they spread. Perhaps the biggest transformation was the fact that, as women became empowered, they started to question things. This was an important indication that women were becoming aware of their strategic gender interests. They went on from this stage to challenge forces in society which were preventing them from realising their potential. They challenged *kastom* by travelling away from home without their husbands accompanying them and they challenged their set roles by taking on leadership positions at the community level. Women gained access to domains of power previously dominated by men, such as school councils and even the council of chiefs in South Malaita. Women's status increased as they took on such new positions. Some women's groups felt that they were able to set their own agendas for development, according to their own priorities, rather than fitting into the typical home economics mould as was commonly expected of women's groups. Even those groups which may never get around to initiating innovative programmes fulfilled an important role in that they gave women a chance to meet, to escape child care responsibilities and to be part of a supportive network.





Photo 7: Members of the Saenaua Women's Association near Aona'asa, North Malaita, stand proudly in their communal garden, the funds from which are being used to build a women's club house.



Photo 8: Women from Bubuitolo, North Malaita, gather in front of the 'Women's House' for which they saved for two years and where meetings and literacy classes are now held.

While those men who feel threatened when women take on new roles or cast aside traditional responsibilities are likely to pose some problems, at least an attempt was made to harness their support by holding awareness-raising sessions for husbands. The team, therefore, has shown that they realise that women's programmes do not occur in a vacuum and that women across Malaita really want to have men's support. Other men have seen the tangible benefits of the practical aspects of the team's programmes and therefore, they have not interfered with its work. Women are being empowered right under men's noses but in such a way that they have not had to face widespread opposition.

The team's rationale has been that without a sense of self-esteem and dignity women cannot hope to see themselves as being able to contribute substantially to their country's development. There was nothing radical in this prescription but it had a major impact on the lives of thousands of women across Malaita province. They were empowered.

### **District Village Training Centre (DIVIT)**

DIVIT was the name by which the District Village Training Centre, run by the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (DMI)<sup>4</sup>, was commonly known. DIVIT began in 1971 as a rural training centre for young women who, after completing their primary education, could not find places in secondary school. Its philosophy was to stress the dignity of village life. The course has attempted to help the trainees to develop the skills they have learned at school and to integrate these with a new set of practical skills, as well as leadership training, which they can apply when they return to their villages (Ryan, 1975:50).

The centre was open to young women from throughout the country and from any denomination. Staff preferred to choose two or three young women from one area to train at DIVIT so they could support each other when they returned home. It was required that they had lived in the village for at least one year after leaving school and someone from their village, for example, a church leader, had to recommend them. The training at DIVIT offered young women, who wanted more out of life than producing food, getting married and bearing children, the chance to return to their village with skills which could enhance the lives of themselves, their families and communities. There has been a great demand for the 60 places available in this two year course.

The curriculum has involved expanding the trainees' academic skills as well as emphasising practical instruction. In theory, early childhood education, primary health care

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<sup>4</sup> The DMIs are an indigenous order of Catholic religious sisters.



and literacy are offered at DIVIT but there has been a lack of qualified staff to carry this through. In 1992 there was no early childhood education programme, while health care and literacy were only touched upon. Staff were mostly involved in teaching basic academic subjects, home economics, including sewing and cooking, traditional basket weaving, leadership skills, agriculture, how to build a good marriage, religious education and basic bookkeeping. Most afternoons the trainees had to tend to vegetable gardens which provided food for themselves to eat and for sale.

The DIVIT timetable revealed that academic and home economics classes predominated in 1992 (Photo 4, page 156). There were twice as many scheduled typing classes as there were literacy classes, despite the fact that teachers were aware that students often put their typing skills to work in the offices of Honiara<sup>5</sup>. Constraints in staffing were not entirely to blame for the limited programme. One of the sisters teaching at DIVIT in 1992 had previously worked as a field officer for an NGO and thus had skills in making cement, building water tanks and repairing outboard motors. These skills could be valuable to any young woman working in her village and may also be able to earn her an income. Such skills are not traditionally taught to young women in the Solomon Islands, however, and DIVIT staff say that they would not be able to afford to buy the materials to teach such subjects.

In conjunction with teaching, staff organised short courses and training experiences for their students. Block courses of up to one week covering family planning, maternal-child health, livestock management, nutrition, first aid, and business management were regularly provided by outside agencies. DIVIT was fortunate to be in fairly close proximity to Honiara allowing resource people to be drawn upon. Trainees could also attend short term courses outside of DIVIT. In 1992, for example, two went to a Women in Agriculture course at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) and in 1991, two others did a one month literacy training course at the Nazareth Apostolic Centre.

Staff also tried to run one or two projects both to help raise money for the centre and so that the trainees could experience how to run projects in their own villages, either for a women's group or for their families. In 1992 DIVIT was involved with a SBD\$ 3,000 vegetable garden project and a SBD\$ 7,000 poultry project, both funded by the Commonwealth Young Women's Economics Development Fund.

In order to give them an opportunity to apply their skills and develop leadership experience, trainees were sent out to a village each year for one or two weeks. In 1992 they

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<sup>5</sup> Sewing skills were also resulting in more graduates going to Honiara. In 1992, around two-thirds of the 30 graduates were employed to do sewing at a new garment factory in Honiara. This is incongruent with DIVIT's aim of promoting the dignity of village life.

conducted a survey of women in nearby villages to find out what their needs and problems were so that when it came time to do their practical experience, they would be able to devise programmes which directly related to village women's needs.

As with all rural training centres, funding has been a problem. Fees covered only one third of the expenses for each student's tuition. DIVIT's principal thought the school could get all the outside funding it needed if only they had someone with the time and administration skills to organise it. The paucity of funds for day-to-day expenses caused disruption to the curriculum with teaching often being interrupted because staff had other commitments. During the week I visited DIVIT, the principal was away for four days out of five because she was trying to buy some newly hatched chickens elsewhere on Guadalcanal for the school's poultry project. At the same time, all students were having a two week break from their normal studies to produce craft goods to sell at an upcoming bazaar so that their cash-strapped centre could earn some money. Staff acknowledged that this may not be the best investment of student time but could see no alternative when they needed funds.

Upon leaving some trainees contributed considerably to women's groups in their area by passing on the skills and knowledge they had gained. For example, three young women from Makira started up a women's group which had 20 members. They also initiated bakery and gardening projects which were managed by the women's group and profits were used to buy fabric to sew clothing. Other graduates went on to do useful work for organisations such as SIDT and Danchurch Aid, or to do pre-school teaching or nurse-aid training, while some have become religious sisters. The majority, however, have ended up unemployed in Honiara or bored and inactive in their villages. It is often difficult for young women to initiate classes for those in their village women's group as older people fail to recognise their abilities or feel it is not the place of the young to teach the old. Facing such constraints the young women quickly lose confidence<sup>6</sup>. Further, graduates usually lack the funds to buy materials for various projects they may wish to initiate in the village. In the past those who return home after they graduate were given about 12 metres of fabric, various sewing and gardening equipment and packets of seeds. This did not seem to result in any concrete projects being established. In 1992, therefore, DIVIT tried to rectify this situation by providing a number of second year trainees with a bank account in which they could deposit a share of the profits from DIVIT projects. The rationale behind this is that graduates needed capital to put their ideas into action when they returned to their villages<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Evidence from other countries in the Pacific indicates that church women's groups make more use of graduates if the group recommends a particular young woman for training and helps to pay her fees (Goodwillie and Kroon, 1986:76).

<sup>7</sup> In practice, it is likely that many graduates returning to their village with money in the bank would be pressured to spend this on everyday family requirements, such as food, kerosene or medicine.

Those in charge at DIVIT wanted to have one staff member doing follow-up visits on students who had returned to their home areas. This could have helped the young women gain recognition and to feel they had support. As yet, however, DIVIT has not had the funds or sufficient staff to be able to organise regular follow up visits from staff.

### *Discussion*

Graduates of DIVIT seemed to agree that the most important thing they gained from their time at DIVIT was an increase in confidence. Staff indicated that the trainees also grew in maturity and self-respect. They learned many new skills covering a diversity of subjects including how to manage a small business, establishing a poultry farm and methods of fertility control. Whether or not they put their knowledge into practice in the village, however, depended largely on their inclination and the resources and support available to them. Many parents felt that investing in their daughter's education at DIVIT was a loss to them because they came home and did little to help their family, let alone the wider community. The confidence graduates supposedly gained was not always displayed in practice. A problem seems to be that while at DIVIT many young women became individually empowered but this does not lead to social empowerment. Without a sense of collective solidarity and a clear notion of what problems women faced and how they could be overcome, graduates were unlikely to be prepared to challenge and change things upon their return to their villages.

DIVIT displayed aspects of the welfare and anti-poverty approaches to women's development in its programmes. It focused both on skills which would help graduates contribute to the welfare of their families or communities and on ways to earn money, either individually or with a family or community group. The course content was still based on a Western home economics model thus it did not challenge trainees to look beyond gender role stereotypes and to see many of the opportunities open to them. Strategic gender interests were not addressed. Staff admitted that sometimes the most they could hope for was to equip their graduates to be good wives and mothers. Unless changes are made, DIVIT will continue to do little to enhance gender equity.

DIVIT's programme could certainly have been more empowerment-oriented. Training in teaching skills and in group dynamics, so that trainees understand how to encourage groups to cooperate and work effectively and how to plan to meet various needs, could be usefully incorporated into the course. It could, for example, focus on literacy training, personal growth and non-traditional skills, such as carpentry. It would benefit the trainees to receive some experience in public speaking, role play, discussion groups and presenting a drama, both as confidence raising measures and as media to incorporate into

future work with women's groups or their community. DIVIT could also enhance the trainees' understanding of social issues affecting villagers, such as domestic violence, alcoholism and misuse of family income, by inviting guest speakers to draw the trainees into discussions of such topics (Goodwillie and Kroon, 1986:73). The research skills the trainees developed through implementing surveys could be a step in the right direction.

### **Home economics course at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education<sup>8</sup>**

There has been a great deal of negative comment about home economics programmes in Third World countries, especially when they are modelled on the needs and resources of Westernised countries (Rogers, 1980). Not so with the home economics course at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE). An indication of the uniqueness of this course was the proposal by staff to change the course's name to 'Study for Living Skills', which they felt defined it more accurately.

In 1984 the New Zealand government funded a teacher, Lois Siepkes, to go to the Solomon Islands and act as an adviser on a home economics course being established to train secondary school teachers. As she had to write a new syllabus and had few resources to get the course under way, Siepkes planned from the needs of local people and used resources from the local environment. Thus, instead of metal tongs, they used bamboo, instead of bleach, they used limes, instead of steel wool, they used so-called 'sandpaper leaves' from a certain plant and instead of soap, they used cold ashes. The syllabus devised was wide and varied. Clothing and textiles, nutrition, shelter, child and maternal health, hygiene, tropical disease, water and sanitation were all important components of the course. Western text books were not used because they dealt inadequately with topics such as sanitation, which needs special attention in tropical countries.

The home economics course was designed for two groups of people: first, for new trainee teachers, most of whom were young women and second, for upgrading the knowledge of existing home economics teachers from rural areas who were trained using British textbooks. Training the existing teachers through distance education did not work because most of these women were mothers with many other obligations like gardening, cooking, cleaning and child minding, which left them little time to study. Thus in 1991 Siepkes toured the provinces from August to November to find suitable teachers for upgrading, with a hidden agenda to talk to their husbands and convince them of how the course could benefit their wives and families. Without the support of their husbands it was unlikely that the women would be able to attend the on-campus course. After some

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<sup>8</sup> Information in this case study is based upon interviews with Lois Siepkes, the woman who established the home economics course at SICHE and Larmour Gina, a teacher of the course.



convincing men from Malaita approached Siepkes and said: 'We've decided it's the mummies' turn to go to school'. They realised that the extra training would help their wives' careers as well as bringing benefits to their households, thus a number of men gave their approval even though they knew they would have to take over some tasks normally considered 'women's work' while their wives were gone. Once it was clear that men in Malaita were allowing their wives to attend this helped to gain the support of men in other provinces whose wives also wished to attend the training course. In all it was agreed that seventeen women could attend SICHE for one year. A house was found and upgraded so that three lactating mothers were not prevented from participating<sup>9</sup>.

Siepkes felt that the biggest problem she had to overcome was the low self-esteem of teachers and trainees stemming from a lack of confidence in their own cultures. Thus, in an attempt to help trainees realise the value of traditional tools, materials and customs they were given an assignment to visit their home village during the Christmas break and to talk with the village elders about traditional materials used for clothing. They were then to bring samples back to SICHE. This was one way in which trainees were encouraged to acknowledge that traditional ways need not be seen as inferior.

### *Discussion*

The home economics course at SICHE proved that home economics could be taught in a way which was appropriate and relevant to Third World countries. Unlike the majority of home economics courses for women in the Pacific, it was not preoccupied with sewing and cake-making or with teaching young women to serve their husbands and families well, which is characteristic of a welfare approach to women's development. While the SICHE home economics course did not challenge women's roles, and therefore it did not address a strategic gender interest, it did do an excellent job of meeting a practical gender need. By modelling itself on the needs of Solomon Islands women and resources available to them, as well as drawing upon their traditional expertise, it appears to have been more of a grassroots, empowerment-oriented programme.

The SICHE course enhanced the confidence of both staff and trainees. It encouraged trainees to regain respect for traditional ways of doing things, rather than seeing Western technologies and methods as being ultimately superior. Trainees could then go on to instil a sense of pride in Melanesian ways and culture in the secondary school students they taught. In the process of designing a course appropriate to women in the Solomon Islands, staff gained in self-esteem, one so much so that she decided to embark on her own

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<sup>9</sup> There were no facilities for parents with children in the college dormitories.

research projects. Her studies may ultimately help a wide range of people to understand the problems facing Solomon Islands women and how they can be solved.

The home economics course has enhanced gender equity in the respect that husbands of many of the existing teachers were persuaded to see the value of their wives expanding their education, even when this meant the men had to take over domestic responsibilities in the village. More could be done to enhance gender equity, however, if men were encouraged to become home economics teachers and if boys were encouraged to study home economics at secondary school. This would be a good way of addressing a strategic gender interest. If men and boys could be seen to be involved in house cleaning, childcare, cooking and other domestic duties, which have been considered women's sole responsibility for so long, it is possible that they could help to break age old stereotypes. Otherwise the course could perpetuate the stereotype of home economics being an exclusive concern of women and not a suitable subject for boys and men to study academically.

### ***Kastom Bilong Mere Workshops*<sup>10</sup>**

*Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops were initiated by Barbara Riley, a Canadian volunteer residing in the Solomon Islands from 1987 to 1991. She was the Cultural Affairs Adviser employed under the Division of Culture, Environment and Human Affairs in Western Province. The Cultural Affairs Office encouraged the appreciation of traditional culture as a means of affirming identity and instilling pride in the peoples of Western Province (Riley, 1991:24). While her brief covered women, youth and sports, Riley chose to focus largely on women and culture.

In 1990 Riley ran a series of eleven *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops in Western Province, attended by around 250 women<sup>11</sup>. The aim of the workshops was cultural preservation. This included encouraging women to preserve their oral traditions, emphasising women's knowledge and abilities and enabling women to examine social change as a precondition for thinking about their future (Riley, 1991:24). Women from several villages gathered for each workshop, with women's groups being encouraged to send as their representative a mature woman who was interested in passing customs on to others. It was requested that the representatives would bring traditional objects to, or that

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<sup>10</sup> The spelling of Pijin words varies. The word *bilong* used here has the same meaning as *blong*, used elsewhere in this thesis. Both signify possession. *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops are Women's Custom workshops.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Riley had returned to Canada by the time I came to do field work in the Solomon Islands so I had no direct experience of these workshops. I feel they deserve mention here, however, because they provide a unique approach to women's development which had, until then, not been seen in the Solomon Islands.

they be prepared to demonstrate traditional skills at the workshops, in order to bring *kastom* to life for those present. For some this meant recalling the history of their tribe, for others, showing participants how to make traditional cloth, and others, demonstrating traditional birthing practices, dances or games.

The significance of women agreeing to participate in the workshops was considerable:

*The women had no organisation and were as shy as mice...when we did 'ice-breaking' games on the first day, one woman had to turn her back on the group in order to get up the courage to speak (Barbara Riley, Canadian volunteer, 1993: personal communication).*

Not all participants felt comfortable discussing *kastom* in front of a group of women which included strangers. It was essential then, that the workshop instilled in women a sense of faith in themselves:

*'Kastom Bilong Mere' highlighted women, their knowledge and skills. Traditionally excluded from contact with outsiders or any public role, Solomon Islands women are still shy in front of men or 'Europeans' (Riley, 1991:24).*

To overcome this shyness men were excluded, apart from chiefs or 'big men' who wanted to be involved, and the workshops were held entirely in the vernacular, making the women feel that it was really their workshop. This also meant that many older women, those who knew the customs best, were able to participate freely. Younger women learned much from them in the course of each workshop.

The main part of the workshops involved recording oral traditions, a particularly effective technique in a country where many women are illiterate and there is a strong oral tradition. The women all learned how to operate a tape recorder, a major achievement for many of them. Women who were illiterate also had the opportunity to learn how to sign their name for the first time. Women were left with the tape recorders so that they could decide for themselves what was of sufficient value to justify preservation. Their recordings included songs, descriptions of traditional medicines, methods of childbirth and marriage practices, games and stories. With the women's permission, some of these items were aired on the cultural affairs programme of the Western Province radio station. Some women chose to write down information which they wished to share and these stories are to be published and distributed to clinics, schools and libraries throughout Western Province (YWCA, 1990a:3).

Discussions on change in their communities were another aspect of the workshops. Negative changes mentioned most often included the break down in respect and a decrease in people's desire to share with one another. By analysing both the positive and negative

changes they had faced, women came to understand that individuals can make conscious choices which determine their community's future.

The workshops were very successful with the participants' only recommendation being that more women should be involved next time. They relished the opportunity to meet and share with other women, learn new skills and learn about the past from each other. The participants were very proud to receive certificates at the closing ceremony: 'Tears and cries of "come back again", marked our separation, all of us enriched by the enthusiasm, learning and sharing' (Riley, 1991:25).

### ***Discussion***

Any programme which emphasises women's knowledge and abilities is likely to be firmly set within an empowerment approach to women's development. The *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops instilled a sense of pride and dignity in the women because their culture, their memories and their traditional beliefs were the subject of interest and respect. No one told them what parts of their tradition were appropriate to record. Anything which the women thought was important was considered acceptable by the organisers. They also empowered women by teaching them to use modern technology, in the form of tape recorders and, for those who were illiterate, how to sign their own name.

While meeting strategic gender interests was not a direct aim of the workshops, they did enhance gender equity because they brought respected chiefs together with women of the various tribes to record traditions. This was an outward sign to the communities in which the workshops were run that women's role as guardians of traditional culture was still an important one. Women's confidence was enhanced through their involvement in group discussions and sharing stories with other women and the chiefs who were present. Older women, who often miss out on the opportunity to attend training workshops for women, were particularly encouraged to attend *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops and because workshops were conducted in vernaculars, no women were excluded from participation.

These workshops may also inspire long term change because by discussing the past and changes that had occurred women were left in a better position to make decisions about the direction they would like development to take in their communities in the future.

### **The Mothers' Union**

The Mothers' Union is the name of the women's organisation of the Church of Melanesia (Anglican) and is part of a world-wide charitable society. The Church of Melanesia was, in 1992, the largest church in the Solomon Islands, counting 35 percent of



the population as followers. Consequently the Mothers' Union staff, comprising a coordinator, a field trainer and a bookkeeper, was larger than any of the other church women's organisations.

The Mothers' Union was established in the Solomons in 1924. Until the 1970s all activities were church-oriented, focusing on the role of mothers in providing for their families. On the surface the Mothers' Union in the Solomon Islands still seems a very conservative organisation. Its aims and objectives stress spiritual development and maintenance of Christian family life and, as is evident in the organisation's name, the maternal role of women is promoted. It is not surprising, therefore, that village women's groups have focused largely on home economics activities. The Mothers' Union would not formally associate itself with the Solomon Islands National Council of Women in the 1980s because it did not want to be seen to be involved with a political organisation. Gradually, however, there has been a move away from this conservative stance as those running the Mothers' Union have taken a fairly liberal interpretation of their objectives: 'Now we realise we have to stretch our awareness' (Pamela Abana, Provincial Secretary, Church of Melanesia Mothers' Union, 1992: personal communication). This was reflected in the seventies with the introduction of health and sanitation projects, in the early eighties with awareness-raising about foreign logging companies and the start of village kindergartens run by local women, and in the late eighties with the initiation of literacy programmes.

The focus of the Mothers' Union in the early 1990s was non-formal education, looking particularly at literacy and training women to be early childhood educators. When the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) was looking for a strong, well-organised women's organisation to sponsor a major early childhood education programme they chose the Mothers' Union. The Mothers' Union trainer, Edith Ehamana, had been largely responsible for setting up a network of around 44 village kindergartens in the province of Isabel in the 1980s. This was a significant achievement in organisation because, apart from Ehamana's initiatives, there were only a few kindergartens, mainly in Honiara, at that time. It was also an achievement because the Isabel provincial government and the national government refused to contribute funding to the pre-schools. Most of the women who ran the kindergarten centres around Isabel were volunteers who gave up several hours a day, three days a week, to work with the children (UNICEF, 1993:41). The idea of the AIDAB project was to strengthen existing kindergartens by providing training for teachers, resources for classrooms and to expand the network of kindergartens.

The Mothers' Union also became one of the major organisations concerned with literacy training in the Solomon Islands. It started a pilot literacy programme in Honiara in 1989, which later expanded to Auki, Kohimarama, Buala, Lata and Kira Kira, thus spanning five provinces. Funds were provided so that teachers could travel more and additional

learning materials were purchased. Both mothers and their children were welcome at the literacy classes enabling those without the funds or family support to find child care to still be able to attend. Teachers found that the women were very enthusiastic and dedicated to learning once given the opportunity.

Besides launching into non-formal education programmes, the Mothers' Union showed more concern for political issues, including both family violence and logging. In November 1991 they organised a meeting of the Isabel Honiara Community to raise awareness and issues of concern regarding the Axion logging company which was in the process of establishing itself in Isabel. Considerable organisation went into this meeting with the MP for East Isabel, a representative of the chiefs and a church representative being present, as well as almost 100 members of the Isabel Honiara Community. Mothers' Union members presented alternatives to allowing foreign companies to come in and log their forests. Next a statement was made on behalf of the women of Isabel and the Mothers' Union strongly recommending that large scale mining and logging development be discouraged:

*We are greatly disappointed with the way the current logging issue has been handled. We feel we have been disgraced and betrayed of our birth rights by our leaders in selling our motherland to be raped and molested by foreigners while we...watch with no power to defend her (Appendix I, Minutes of Meeting held at Isabel Club on 24th November 1991, Honiara).*

The Mothers' Union's efforts to prevent the destruction of resources on Isabel was not limited to this meeting, however. Before the meeting they had raised their concerns at a Diocesan Council and gained the church's support to write an open letter to Members of Parliament, the Premier of Isabel province, other prominent leaders in Isabel and various authorities. The Mothers' Union also held meetings for their members to which officers from the Environmental Section and Forestry Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources were invited. The officers discussed and answered questions regarding environmental degradation and the legal aspects of logging companies gaining access to customary land. An awareness programme was planned for 1992 whereby 600 women from around the Isabel diocese would come together to learn about the importance of their roles as the foundation of the family, to see what the future held for them and to highlight key issues in logging.

In terms of dealing with domestic violence, the Mothers' Union was, in 1992, trying to raise funds to construct a three-story building, the 'Saint Agnes Training Centre'<sup>12</sup>. This was to include a ground floor with classrooms and training facilities for literacy and other

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<sup>12</sup> In 1992 leaders of the Mothers' Union could not be certain that they would be able to raise sufficient funds for the training centre to go ahead. SBD\$ 400,000 was needed for the first two floors and they had to raise half of this amount before construction could commence.

work, a floor above for cheap transit accommodation for trainers and trainees, and a third floor for family units. These units would be built as a facility for women and children who were fleeing abusive relationships and had nowhere else to turn. The Mothers' Union purposely did not promote the intended use of the units because they do not want to attract negative publicity. Any organisation which had considered providing a similar type of refuge for women in the past had been criticised with the argument that they would be helping to break up families.

This gradual swing in direction within the women's organisation of the largest church in the Solomon Islands was a very encouraging sign. Unfortunately not all of the Church of Melanesia leaders agree. Mothers' Union leaders and trainers were not, however, daunted by this. Things like cooking and sewing, which are now deemed 'traditional' activities of women's groups, will always be in demand but by refocussing their programmes leaders and trainers of the Mothers' Union hope that women will realise that the time has come to move beyond the narrow home economics approach (Pamela Abana, Provincial Secretary, Church of Melanesia Mothers' Union, 1992: personal communication).

### *Discussion*

While the aims and objectives of the Mothers' Union set it up as being a conservative church organisation following the welfare approach to women's development, the Mothers' Union managed to facilitate some major changes in women's lives. It did this without aggravating too many people and thus causing unnecessary conflict which could stand in the way of its operations. Mothers' Union groups in villages may still centre their activities around home economics issues based upon women's maternal roles but leaders of the Mothers' Union in Honiara have supported an empowerment approach, gradually redirecting the emphasis of the organisation's activities so that, in the future, these women will have more opportunities to be politicised and empowered.

The Mothers' Union has challenged gender subordination and thus addressed strategic gender interests, in several ways. Firstly, it has made discrete steps to provide a refuge for women and children so that they will not have to endure abusive domestic situations, something which other organisations have considered but have not been brave enough to plan for. Secondly, leaders within the Mothers' Union banded together to lobby politicians, church leaders and chiefs to ensure that women's views are not ignored on the sensitive issue of logging rights. Thirdly, by targeting women in literacy programmes, the Mothers' Union sought to bridge the large gap between men and women which saw women as less able to gain an education or paid employment and less able to communicate at an official level, where the written word is often required. Literacy classes have, therefore, expanded many women's life options. By inviting women to bring their children to the

literacy classes the Mothers' Union has actively supported women in their reproductive roles.

While superficially the early childhood education programme may have seemed like just another welfare-focused programme, good for the children, non-threatening to the government or to traditional power relations and not particularly concerned with strengthening women's position in society, in fact, village kindergartens have great potential for empowering women. Skills in financial management, administration, organisation and leadership can be gained through practical experience and those doing the teaching gain respect in their communities (John Roughan, Director of the School of General Studies at SICHE, 1992: personal communication). In order that the labour of these partially trained teachers is not exploited, however, with teaching being just another addition to women's community management roles, communities should be encouraged to contribute to a wage for these teachers.

Of concern was that the Mothers' Union had started to face criticism from members within their own church for supposedly straying from their objectives. If the organisation becomes even more political in orientation and further challenges politicians, chiefs and church leaders, its leaders will have to be very strong to persist with the path they have chosen to take. Striving for gender equity is bound to attract such controversy when it is done within a mainstream church.

## **Munda YWCA**

The Munda<sup>13</sup> YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) was, in 1992, the only rural-based YWCA operating in the Solomon Islands. Until a formal centre was established in 1990, a coordinator had been organising home economics-style activities for young women in the local area and running a kindergarten from her own home for around 12 years. In 1992, YWCA leaders focused instead on teaching women skills and raising awareness in areas which had the potential to catalyse some significant changes in women's lives.

After completion of the centre in 1990, local women, some with little education and many without leadership experience, were active in managing the centre and directing its activities. The process of learning, cooperation and solidarity building which was essential in building a team which could get the new centre up and running was very significant for all involved. A management committee was responsible for making decisions about the

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<sup>13</sup> Munda is not a rural town, rather, it comprises a mission station and a number of villages dotted along a lagoon.



direction and policy of the centre. Many other women became members of the YWCA, giving them voting rights. In 1992, 58 women attended the annual general meeting, quite an achievement when one considers that a similar number came to Honiara YWCA's AGM later in the same year.

The Munda YWCA centre aimed to provide a place where women could learn, a place to meet other women, a place for women to obtain information and a base from which to reach out to the villages and hold workshops (YWCA Munda Women's Centre, 1991:1). Within these broad aims, staff devised some innovative programmes which were a boon to women's development in the area. Over 2,000 women passed through the Centre in 1991 alone.

There was a perceived need for the YWCA to offer something different from what the existing women's organisations in the area had been doing. They wanted to strengthen, rather than compete with, existing women's groups by offering a new range of development options for women. By 1992 a regular series of programmes was well established. These have included English literacy, for women who wanted to feel more confident when talking with officials and tourists, gardening, for those who wanted advice about their bush gardens and tips on starting *supsup* gardens, and a health programme for women at which health educators from a nearby hospital talked about problems such as breast cancer, diabetes and tooth decay. A monthly child health clinic was also held at the centre to save women in the surrounding area walking another few kilometres to the hospital to have their children immunised and weighed. An agricultural officer provided demonstrations of *supsup* gardening techniques, the skills of composting and how to use chilli sprays instead of chemical insecticides. He even gave up a week of his holidays to help the centre. Many women were thrilled with the opportunity the YWCA provided them with to learn new skills and gain knowledge:

*At the end of our first English course, Jessie, one of the participants, talked about how she left school in 1957 and how happy she was that this year, 34 years later, she has had the opportunity to school [sic]<sup>14</sup> more (YWCA Munda Women's Centre, 1991:2).*

Self-defence classes, held weekly, were popular with some women walking over one hour each way to attend. These classes were held in response to women's concerns after a series of serious incidents of domestic violence in their communities. Outwardly, however, it was stated that the classes had been arranged to teach women how they could protect themselves when they walked alone to their gardens or along empty roads. Neither the instructor, a man who gave his time voluntarily to the YWCA, nor his students wanted to

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<sup>14</sup> 'To school' means 'to learn'.

raise opposition from the women's husbands or other men in the community. These classes were enough of a novelty, however, to invite the attention of Area Council members who came along after one of their meetings to see what the women were being taught.

Videos were shown occasionally, always attracting a keen audience because of the rarity of this sort of entertainment. A Papua New Guinean film on domestic violence was played during Munda Women's Week in 1991 while two films on logging in Melanesia were shown as part of the preparations for the centre coordinator's trip to a World YWCA workshop being run concurrently with the World Summit on the environment in Rio de Janeiro. Many women were horrified to see the environmental destruction that had been taking place across their country and in neighbouring countries too. In planned discussions the next day women suggested that the YWCA could help to promote environmental issues by encouraging old men and women to pass on customary ways of doing things to young people because traditional practices were typically sustainable and environmentally sound. They also suggested that issues concerning the environment be built into as many workshops as possible, with, for example, a fishing workshop including a discussion on the care of the reefs.

In addition to regular weekly and monthly programmes and organising a women's week, the Munda YWCA organised some major workshops during 1992. In March there was a Red Cross First Aid Course, in April there was a Labour Laws workshop, in May a seminar on budgeting for families was held, in July there was to be a honey bee workshop run by Ministry of Agriculture and Lands staff, and later workshops planned for the year included women and the law (as part of Women's Week in September), fishing techniques (run by the Fisheries Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources), sewing machine repair, kindergarten training for teachers, a small business workshop and a session on alternative technology for kitchens. The coordinator's role was to find resource people, network with other groups and organise programmes and workshops on this basis, rather than trying to run them herself. Thus she drew on a diversity of resource people from different organisations, for example, government ministries and NGOs, which was why the Munda YWCA was able to offer such a wide range of activities.

The seminar on Labour Laws was organised primarily for women working at the nearby Noro fish processing plant as most were unaware of their rights regarding working conditions. The Senior Labour Officer from Honiara came to Western Province and informed women of their rights to maternity leave, holidays and the terms and conditions of their employment. He also talked about safety conditions for women who worked around machinery. As one woman said after the workshop, she was very pleased that she knew whether her employer was treating her right or not: 'Before I was working in the dark, now I am in the light' (YWCA Munda Women's Centre, 1992:2).

Staff at the centre were actively involved in broaching political issues. For example, in 1991 the YWCA supported several women who decided to stand for the area and provincial elections. While not promoting any particular political stance, the YWCA members thought it was important to have more women represented in decision making bodies so it allowed the candidates to use their hall for meetings and also helped them to promote themselves. YWCA members have also become committed to having their voices heard on issues which are of concern to them. For example, they wrote a letter of objection to the Liquor Licensing Board regarding an application for a public bar near the tuna cannery at Noro.

While the management committee wants the support of men in the community and the support of the churches, they have restricted men's involvement. So far they have refused men's requests to join in courses, such as English literacy and beekeeping, because they decided that if men wanted to learn these things they should go and raise funds, build their own centre, form their own groups and plan activities according to their own priorities. In the same way requests by some members that the local Bishop and other church leaders be invited to hold Bible study classes for the women at the centre, were turned down. The management committee vetoed this idea because they were concerned that this would divide the women, with only United Church women coming to hear their minister speak, only Seventh Day Adventist women attending their pastor's class, and so forth.

### *Discussion*

The Munda YWCA benefited local women in several ways. It provided women from the Munda area with a central place at which to meet, share ideas and learn new skills. The new skills and opportunities to enhance their knowledge were quite different from what their church women's groups had offered for so many years. It also improved information flows in the area by informing women in outlying areas of upcoming workshops and programmes. Significantly, the YWCA brought women of different ethnic groups, ages and religions together. They were challenged to overcome the barriers erected by religious beliefs and ethnicity which prevented women from mixing socially and working together.

Women have proved to the community that they can run a very impressive centre. By taking on leadership, administrative, fund-raising and decision-making roles on committees, local women have learned to work collectively to achieve their objectives. The women are extremely proud of their achievements and they have earned the respect of their families and the community in general. A woman, who had once cried out of shyness when asked to stand and say a prayer in front of her women's group, was in 1992 a key member

of the YWCA's management committee and regularly required to deliver speeches to inspire other women.

Women who attend YWCA workshops state that the major benefits they have gained from their association with the centre are increasing confidence and knowledge. For example, videos are not shown just for entertainment. They are used to initiate discussion on topics such as domestic violence and destruction of the environment, after which women are encouraged to put forward their views on how the Munda YWCA could try to deal with these problems. The centre has stretched the boundaries of people's perceptions of appropriate roles for women. It has encouraged local women to be involved in politics. Likewise, local women have had the opportunity to learn skills such as honey production and money management which could encourage them to run their own small business. Through its programmes the Munda YWCA has challenged the tradition that men have control over their wives' bodies by providing self-defence classes which may put participants in a better position to deal with violence in their own homes. Workshops on budgeting have given women confidence and knowledge which may help them to exert more control over their family's finances. Women working at the Noro fish cannery are now more aware of their rights and in a better position to challenge their employers if they are not happy with their working conditions or treatment. In several ways the Munda YWCA has, therefore, addressed strategic gender interests. It has challenged gender subordination, sometimes simply by encouraging women to say 'no' to men. The decision not to allow men to participate in YWCA courses was a clear sign that those managing the Munda YWCA felt it was necessary to resist involvement from persons who might compromise the organisation's interests.

It was significant that the centre was highly regarded in the eyes of many men in the area, as well as women. One man was so pleased with the new skills his wife had learned that he wrote to the YWCA in Honiara saying that he wanted to encourage other men around Munda to send their wives there (YWCA Munda Women's Centre, 1991:4). Such support may have encouraged other men to allow their wives or daughters to be involved with the YWCA. The fact that the instructor of the self-defence classes gave his time free of charge and the agricultural officer gave up a week of his holidays to assist the centre shows that it should not be assumed that men will be unsupportive of women's organisations, even those which challenge women to make changes in their lives.

The Munda YWCA centre was a base of power for women and it followed an empowerment approach to women's development. It was a centre run by women, for women. For many, attending YWCA courses has given them an unprecedented opportunity to increase their knowledge and eventually, this may help them to gain more control over their own lives. This YWCA provides an example of how a women's organisation can



empower women whilst gaining the respect of women and men alike in the community. It has not gone about its work in blatant, forceful ways, rather, the YWCA has through subtle measures managed to catalyse some significant changes in women's lives.

## PAWORNET

PAWORNET, a Pacific-wide women's information network, linked and shared information among government bureaus, non-governmental organisations, community groups and individuals concerned with women's issues. It was established by the Pacific Regional YWCA Office in Suva, Fiji, in an attempt,

*...to meet the growing demand by Pacific women for information that [is] reliable, accessible and appropriate and [it] aims to improve communication links between women in the region...[and to disseminate] regular and relevant information that will enable them to actively contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies, programmes and strategies appropriate to their own development needs (Development Services Exchange, 1992:40,41).*

The rationale behind this information network was that through using various means of communication it is possible to get important information to, and raise awareness among, illiterate or semi-literate women, thus empowering them.

An office of PAWORNET was established in the Solomon Islands in March 1991. Doreen Sam, the national information officer (NIO), was expected to collaborate with existing women's organisations, government ministries and other interested groups and individuals in an attempt to improve information-sharing between rural, provincial and national levels. This included collecting, producing and disseminating information. Her only obligation to the regional centre of PAWORNET in Suva was to send them information about women's activities in the Solomon Islands, which could be circulated around the Pacific region (Shah, 1991:112). In turn the Pacific Regional YWCA supports Sam and the other NIOs around the Pacific by providing them with further training needs.

Those women who were aware of PAWORNET's existence usually heard of it through the radio programme, *Olketa Mere*, run by the NIO. This has been PAWORNET's major means for circulating information on women's events around the country, with air time available to any women's groups wishing to distribute information. In practice, only women in large organisations, and those based in Honiara, knew of and utilised this service. *Olketa Mere* included reports on women's meetings, information on forthcoming events, interviews with people on subjects such as nutrition, agriculture, health and domestic violence, as well as items from overseas regarding women's development. An item from overseas often took up one of the three segments of the programme. Occasionally the NIO interviewed rural women if she had the opportunity to travel somewhere for an event. In 1992 she applied to

the Republic of China for a vehicle so that she could travel easily to interview women for programmes on *Olketa Mere*.

Work has commenced on several other projects. The PAWORNET office was being established as a resource centre to hold information from the Solomon Islands and abroad related to women's development. The NIO planned to compile statistics, produce a newsletter and create mailing lists so that current information on women could be disseminated. A women's resource directory, which will list women in the Solomon Islands according to various areas of expertise, was also being compiled. To help gather information for the directory the NIO was, in 1992, half way through a survey on women employed in the public service and was planning to follow this up with a survey on women in the private sector. The survey looked at the background of all women employees, their specific skills and any problems they have had in their work, including difficulty with promotions. Besides using this information to compile a resource directory, there were plans to publish a statistical report regarding women working for both government and the private sector. The NIO hoped the information would be used to lobby government to give women recognition for their capabilities if indeed they were being discriminated against in opportunities for advancement, as had been suspected for some time.

### *Discussion*

PAWORNET's main aim was to promote women's interests, especially the interests of those women who were illiterate or semi-literate, by providing an effective information network through which women's groups could share information and from which women could learn about issues of interest to them around the country. Although the NIO was supposed to improve information sharing between women at rural, provincial and town levels, in 1992 her mailing list included few rural women's groups. PAWORNET in the Solomon Islands did not present itself as an organisation for rural women and by 1992, very little outreach had been completed.

Much onus was placed on the radio programme, *Olketa Mere*, to be the flagstaff of PAWORNET's work in the Solomon Islands. *Olketa Mere*, however, included little input or feedback from women in rural areas, women who compose the group that PAWORNET was supposedly trying to reach. These women said *Olketa Mere* dealt too much with issues concerning overseas women, issues which they felt were not appropriate to their situation. It was apparent that women in rural areas did not see *Olketa Mere* as 'their' programme. They argued that more effort should have been made to get local news items where possible. While the NIO has asked donors for a vehicle so she can reach more women and hold meetings and interviews with them, in the scattered Solomon Islands where roading systems are minimal this would give her access only to women in Honiara and on the Guadalcanal

plains. It would seem more appropriate, if the programme was really committed to rural women, to apply to donors for travel funds which could be used for flights several times a year to different island groups where village women could be interviewed.

An information network such as PAWORNET has great potential to empower women. The NIO, however, has not taken a bottom-up approach to networking and thus dissemination of information has not been PAWORNET's strong point in the Solomon Islands. On the other hand, inspired effort has been made to compile a resource directory, carry out a survey on women employed in Honiara and set up a resource centre. These efforts are all likely to benefit women in Honiara, especially the elite, rather than others around the country. For example, the survey of women in the public service asked women to reflect on whether they had been treated fairly, in relation to men, by their employers. This may have inspired some women to challenge gender bias within the public service. In this sense, PAWORNET may have enhanced gender equity in the Solomon Islands. Likewise, the *Olketa Mere* extracts on activities of women overseas were more likely to have been of interest to better educated women. An equity approach, which recognised that the present situation was disadvantageous to women and which sought to challenge this, but from a top-down perspective, appears to have directed PAWORNET's programmes in the Solomon Islands. Thus strategic gender interests, but with relation to elite women only, were addressed.

### **Rural Women's Skills Development Project of the WDD**

As discussed in Chapter Five, the Women and Development Division (WDD), formerly known as the Women's Interest Office (WIO), was established in 1964. It is a government agency which has been the most widely recognised organisation dealing with women's concerns in the Solomon Islands. The WDD played a major role in getting women onto the development agenda in the Solomon Islands (Lateef, 1990:33).

In 1989 a training project to promote rural women's skills was initiated. Funded by the New Zealand government, the purpose of the three year project, costing SBD\$ 240,000, was to pass on skills and knowledge to as many rural women as possible. As church women's groups comprise the most extensive women's network in the country, WDD and New Zealand government staff decided that much of the funding should be allocated through the women's organisations of the five major churches. The leaders of these church women's organisations and staff of the WDD were the implementors of the project. It was up to each church women's organisation how they distributed the money. They could organise national workshops for women leaders from the provinces or they could divide the funds among village groups to run their own training programmes.

The church women's organisations had little freedom, however, in deciding on which skills they would focus their efforts. Staff at the WDD specified a focus for each of the three years of the project and proposals from the church women's organisations had to comply with this. The rationale was that this would give the women's organisations some direction and it would ensure that the women's development assistant (WDA) for each province had the necessary skills to help run appropriate workshops, if requested. In 1990, the topics were sewing and household management skills and in 1991, food and nutrition. The proposed topic for 1992, leadership and assertiveness skills, was withdrawn for fear that it would be perceived as too threatening by chiefs and church leaders in the areas where workshops were to be run. Thus in year three the women's organisations could apply for funding on the basis of the topics offered in year one or two of the project. As it turned out, therefore, no interpersonal or communication skills were covered in the course of the project. Some leaders of women's organisations were upset that they did not have more input into what the funds were spent on. For example, Goodlyn Tozo, coordinator for United Church Women's Fellowship groups, had hoped to organise literacy training workshops with the first year's funding.

Although the church women's organisations were training the women on the same topics, they all had their own ways of going about this, some more successful than others. In 1991 the funding which went to Catholic women was divided among their three dioceses, as there was no national organisation of Catholic women in the country. In the Honiara Archdiocese, plans for workshops on nutrition to be held in all 14 parishes fell through due to arguments between some of the women organising the workshops. The workshops did not take place in 1991 so instead WDD staff decided to distribute the funding between only four parishes in 1992, leaving it to each parish to run their own workshops and send reports to the WDD. One of these parishes, Holy Cross, used its funds for a five day nutrition workshop. I visited this workshop on the fourth day and found that, despite detailed plans drawn up by the organisers, there were only six participants present. Thus one twelfth of the funds made available to Catholic women's organisations in 1992 were spent on a workshop which benefited only a handful of women. Likewise, in 1991 the UCWF coordinator used the project funds to organise several workshops on nutrition and sewing. A sewing workshop in Roviana Circuit, which looked at how to make two types of men's shirts (a Hawaiian shirt and a shirt with a pleat in the back) was attended by only ten women.

The New Zealand funds were certainly a boon to the women of the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC). Their women's coordinator, Jemima Tuhaika, had not been able to run any type of outreach programme in the past because the church did not provide funds for this. For the first two years the funding provided through the WDD was used by Tuhaika to run workshops in villages in different parts of the country. In 1992, however, she



decided to offer it to women's groups which wanted funding to start a project. From the SBD\$ 8,000 that was received that year, four grants of SBD\$ 1,000 each were given to women's groups which applied for funding, all wanting to buy a sewing machine and fabric for their groups. The remaining SBD\$ 4,000 was used to help fund a project in Bellona which Tuhaika was involved with. Thus only five SSEC women's groups benefited from the New Zealand funding in 1992, hardly in line with the project's overall aim of passing on skills and knowledge to as many rural women as possible.

### *Discussion*

The Rural Women's Skills Development Project was disappointing in that rural women's skills were defined narrowly as sewing and nutrition, with an emphasis on cooking demonstrations, rather than gardening. Other skills which are becoming increasingly important in the changing world in which Solomon Islands women live were not even considered. Such skills include literacy and numeracy, small business management, water pump and outboard motor repair and awareness skills to help women understand the country's legal and political systems.

There were some positive spin-offs for the limited number of women reached by the project. A review revealed that women felt the project had legitimised their right, in the eyes of their husbands and communities, to spend time training and there appeared to be increased cooperation between church groups involved in the training. The project gave some women the opportunity to earn money from sewing techniques they learned, while others gained a better understanding of the nutritional value of various foods. Also, even though the skills taught were narrowly focused on maternal roles, learning new skills usually develops women's sense of self-worth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993a:7). As many of the crafts they learned derived from Western cultures, however, there is a danger that the importance of their own traditions was undermined and with it, the dignity that comes from knowing that one's traditional role is important. As argued in Chapter Five, while any traditions which undermine women's sense of self-worth or their freedom need to be challenged, traditions which affirm women's dignity and knowledge are valuable and should, where possible, be preserved.

The project's emphasis on sewing and nutrition supported a welfare approach to women's development. The project was top-down in orientation, not encouraging any input from church women's organisations into the project's design. More women could have benefited had church women's organisations been consulted before boundaries were set regarding the type of training which could be carried out. While the WDD estimates that 6,500 women were reached by the project between 1989 and 1992 (Ministry of Foreign

Affairs and Trade, 1993a:7), it is apparent from the examples provided that far fewer women were reached than was possible.

The Rural Women's Skills Project has not challenged gender subordination, rather it has sought to reinforce the *status quo* by focusing on women's roles as wives and mothers. Furthermore, it is unlikely to enhance gender equity because staff are unwilling to broach topics such as assertiveness training for women, which may challenge men's access to power and status. Rather than looking at skills in communication or personal development, WDD staff have decided to focus on practical skills, all in the home economics mould. This reinforces gender bias by continuing the assumption that women must be responsible for the domestic domain. The skills chosen were not specifically related to the situation of rural women, so the project's name seems incongruent with its chosen focus. While the skills learned may result in nicely decorated houses, new clothing for women's families and more nutritious meals, they are not likely to alter the balance of power which sees women accorded secondary status in society. Strategic gender interests have not been addressed.

### **Saenaua Women's Association**

In 1982 a reforestation project was started near Aona'asa, North West Malaita, in an attempt to improve land damaged by slash and burn farming methods. The project was funded by the New Zealand government which realised that this system of farming was no longer sustainable here and that it had jeopardised the future availability of agriculturally productive land.

At first it was just men who were involved in the reforestation work. As the landowners, the men combined plots of land and were paid to clear and replant them with teak and mahogany trees. After a forestry officer attended the first mid-year review of the project, however, she suggested that women should be involved too. Thus the women were offered paid work to weed, thin and generally maintain the seedlings and stands of trees. Although this added to their already heavy workloads, the women relished the opportunity to earn some cash (Jan Henderson, First Secretary at the New Zealand High Commission 1992:personal communication).

In 1988 the women decided that they wanted more bargaining power when negotiating their work with the reforestation project, thus the Saenaua Women's Association was formed. The women became concerned that the reforestation project was squeezing out their traditional garden plots so they successfully negotiated a modification whereby they could plant communal vegetable gardens between the stands of trees. They devised

flexible work schedule so that women would have time to work on these plots as well as fulfilling family obligations and carrying out paid work for the project. Further, with their individual work in maintaining new seedlings and stands of trees for the reforestation project, the women stated their preference for working under other women and being allowed to choose their own supervisors (Peace Corp Volunteer in Malaita, 1992:personal communication).

In addition to providing the women of the area with an effective bargaining tool, the Saenaua Women's Association became the basis for a social club. The women agreed to work in the communal vegetable garden every Wednesday and at least 50 women turned up each time. Some women were prevented from doing so by husbands who resented the fact that profits from the garden would be accumulated communally by the women's association, rather than individually by their wives. For the women involved, working communally was the means by which they would be able to raise money to build their own club house (Selina Misuka, President of the Saenaua Women's Association, 1992: personal communication). Periodically the women transported their crops to the Auki market and profits were deposited in the association's bank account. When I visited in June 1992, the women had around SBD\$ 1,000 in their account and needed to save another SBD\$ 1,000. They wanted a club house because this would provide them with an autonomous, permanent space in which to hold meetings as well as other activities, such as sewing demonstrations. They hoped to be able to afford to send one of their members to Honiara to learn various skills which she could teach to women at their club house. The women also realised that being able to build their own permanent structure would give them status in the community (Members of the Saenaua Women's Association, 1992:personal communication).

The overall result of the reforestation project was that deforested lands were replanted, local people's nutrition improved because of the variety of vegetables being grown and many women were earning an income for the first time in their lives. Forestry officers and the men who owned the land readily agreed that the project had benefited from women's involvement.

There have been a series of other, deeper changes in women's lives due to their involvement with the reforestation project and the formation of the Saenaua Women's Association. Women's sense of self-respect has grown as they have received recognition for their work. The women's association's work on the reforestation project and their large communal garden have been observed by interested men and women from different parts of Malaita as well as visitors from Guadalcanal and Western Province. This gave the women a sense of satisfaction and pride in knowing they had achieved something together which outsiders admired (Photo 7, page 222). While some husbands were not in favour of

their wives working in the communal gardens, others decided to help them in their individual gardens, even though it was traditionally seen as demeaning for men to be involved with women's work. There were reports that husbands were treating their wives more as equals, perhaps because women were bringing home an income or because women's work on the project has gained them respect throughout the community. Further, the association brought together women from three different religious denominations, the Church of Melanesia, South Seas Evangelical Church and Seventh Day Adventist church. For such an array of women to form a group and work successfully together for five years was a significant achievement in a country where most women's groups are based on affinity to a particular religious denomination.

### *Discussion*

While the Saenaua Women's Association initially followed an anti-poverty approach to women's development, seeing the reforestation project as merely a means for individual women to earn cash, they have moved on to become an empowerment-oriented association. Through their association women have stood up for their rights when negotiating contracts with the managers of the reforestation project and consequently their interests have been directly incorporated into the project. By enhancing women's control over their involvement in the project, a strategic gender interest has been addressed. Women's self-esteem has been built up due to the project's success. They have accumulated money individually, to assist their families, and collectively, to build their own women's house. Men in their communities now take women more seriously and respect them for earning cash and being successful at their new endeavours. Despite opposition from some men to the existence of the Saenaua Women's Association, it appears that women's status has increased and gender relations have improved in the area.

### **Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) and its Women's Initiative Programme (WIP)**

The Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) was an indigenous NGO concerned with building the awareness of villagers through development education, rather than initiating projects (Roughan, 1990:98). It was regarded as the organisation with the broadest network of outreach workers in the country. Certainly more villagers had contact with SIDT workers between the mid-1980s and early 1990s than with government officials. SIDT's outreach work, conducted by over 200 village-based mobile team members (MTMs) was based on a model which stressed '...information sharing, deepening awareness and empowering villagers...as a means of engaging local people in the long term development of their resources' (Roughan, 1992:8).



While SIDT was not a women-only organisation it did run a special Women's Initiative Programme (WIP) and women were involved heavily in its general outreach work. This was possible as MTMs did not require formal educational qualifications and they worked only ten days per month.

MTMs arranged village workshops to increase people's awareness of the difference between 'good' and 'bad' development. They empowered men and women by giving them a better understanding of the long term implications of changes going on around them and showing them how they could make a difference to the development process through their actions, especially through the wise use of local resources (SIDT Summary Report, 1990:2). When women's groups have spoken out publicly in protest against the actions of particular logging companies they have often admitted that they were inspired by the messages of SIDT.

In addition to village workshops, SIDT has used several other mechanisms to promote development education including the SEI! Akson (Action) Team, a theatre group which has toured villages along with mobile teams, relaying through skits powerful messages relating to population, health and environmental issues. The skits have explained, for example, why local food is better than imported food, what happens to the environment when trees are sold to loggers and why family planning improves health and is better for a family's standard of living. Another endeavour by SIDT to improve information flows to rural areas was through its publications. Bi-monthly, SIDT published *Link*, a magazine which aimed to keep villagers in touch with local and global news about development. *Komiks*, by contrast, was a Pijin language publication which used humour and the popular comic book style to get its messages across. In 1992 a bi-monthly women's publication, *Mere Save* was started with 3,200 copies of the first edition being distributed to women's groups. This publication was almost entirely in Pijin and dealt with issues of direct relevance to women including stories about women who have been successful in earning money by using their initiative, those who have entered a male-dominated trade, such as mechanics, and problems facing women, including violence in the home.

The WIP was started in 1986 '...to educate women on development issues and to develop and strengthen their capacity to participate more effectively in decision making in their communities' (Lateef, 1990:43). The WIP had a coordinator based at Head Office and some female MTMs were trained as WIP leaders. The main skills which WIP leaders concentrated on teaching in villages were technology, including charcoal stoves, water storage jars and concrete toilet slabs, sewing and machine maintenance, and cooking, with an emphasis on nutrition (*Mere Save*, October/November 1992:13).

For the purposes of administration SIDT divided the country into 12 areas, with MTMs in each coming under the leadership of a field officer. The WIP team leader in each of the 12 areas worked closely with her field officer to decide how to spend the SBD\$ 1,000 which they were allocated for the WIP annually. Head office provided guidelines for the WIP programme and these have included leadership training for women in villages and strengthening women's groups. It appears, however, that in practice field officers have opted to use the SBD\$ 1,000 to train women in some of the practical skills discussed above, like sewing.

An important facet of SIDT's management structure which allowed staff to have their say about their needs and problems and the direction the organisation was taking, was the Advisory Council to Management (ACM). The ACM met in Honiara approximately twice yearly. It comprised three management staff in Honiara plus the field officer and two representatives from each of the twelve SIDT areas. Women members of staff have complained, however, that issues concerning the WIP are not accorded priority during ACM meetings. Furthermore, women felt that they did not have a fair chance to put their opinions across because men at ACM meetings did not show respect when they tried to speak. This occurred during other meetings at SIDT headquarters as well. Mary Rogo, a WIP team leader concerned that men within SIDT were not very supportive of their women colleagues, had this to say:

*SIDT is guilty...Men and women work at SIDT and should help each other to make us share ideas....At the 10th anniversary meeting I was cross because every time a woman stood up to speak the men laughed and didn't concentrate. Some whistled and shouted. That destroys your confidence, it really makes you shake (Link, July/August 1991:16).*

The same problem, concerning attitudes of male staff members, seems to have deterred women from being involved in SEI!, the travelling theatre group. Initially the idea of women being part of SEI! was set aside when some parents expressed concern about the safety of their daughters travelling away from their home islands. This attitude was reinforced by male employees of SIDT. At a drama workshop for staff members, for example, the men decided among themselves that women present should not act because it would make their husbands or fathers cross. Further, they suggested that women would be too frightened and ashamed to act in public. These men's negative opinions inspired the women staff members to try acting at the workshop, an experience which they all enjoyed (Carrie Hooten, Peace Corp Volunteer at SIDT, 1992:personal communication).

### **Discussion**

SIDT chose to empower villagers through development education rather than the initiation of projects. In this respect the NGO was unique. The messages that came across in their general awareness-raising workshops, dramas and publications have effectively

highlighted issues of great importance to women, issues such as harmful logging practices and fertility control. This has given women the knowledge to understand and question much of the so-called 'development' going on around them and to distinguish between 'development' and exploitation of their resources. By inspiring women with the confidence to act on their concerns, SIDT has led women to challenge men from their families and communities who wish to sign land away to logging or mining companies. Women are no longer satisfied to sit back and let men make major decisions about their clan's resources. Through its general programme, therefore, SIDT has addressed a strategic gender interest but its women's initiative programme has been disappointing by comparison.

SIDT's women's programme appears to have fallen into the trap of many programmes for women in that it focuses on teaching women domestic skills, a characteristic of the welfare approach to GAD. This fails to challenge women to change their situation. Only the occasional leadership training workshop runs contrary to this generalisation. While training women to construct charcoal stoves or toilet slabs may teach them new skills, such as mixing concrete, the focus remains firmly on the domestic realm. Such concentration on women's domestic roles does not acknowledge women's important productive roles in the village. Initiatives, however, like the women's magazine, *Mere Save*, which deals directly with women's issues and receives input from rural areas, shows that the WIP has greater potential. The fact that only 2.4 percent of funds were spent specifically on the women's programme in 1991, however, a programme which was intended to reach out to all rural areas (Roughan, 1992:7), is of great concern. The meagre funding received by the WIP and the limited focus of its programmes on home economics topics appears to further marginalise women within the organisation and to suggest that SIDT's structures reproduce gender bias.

While the flexible employment conditions of SIDT's outreach programme have allowed many women to become MTMs and, therefore, to develop new skills, knowledge and confidence<sup>15</sup>, SIDT's internal dynamics have proved to be less than favourable for women. For example, field officers, most of whom have been men, have had power over the focus of, and funding for, WIP workshops in their area. Further, women staff have had fewer opportunities for promotion. In 1992, in the North Malaita area, there were five mobile teams operating, consisting of fourteen female and five male MTMs. Men were leaders of four out of the five mobile teams. Some female MTMs felt that, in general, women were only promoted to team leader positions when there were no men available. Women have not been fairly represented in the upper echelons of SIDT either; they have never held any of the three top managerial positions. Women have felt unable to express their views freely

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<sup>15</sup> As one MTM noted, 'This kind of work helps you in all your other activities too. You learn to be brave, to talk up in village meetings and to get your opinion heard' (SIDT Komik Stori, 1991:7).

at ACM meetings, an indication of women's fear that their concerns are not given priority by the organisation. As they have not had positions of power, women staff members have not had the capacity to try and overhaul SIDT.

Concentrating on domestic skills in the WIP, having an all-male theatre group and appointing men rather than women to positions of authority, are all easy options. For example, by arranging for a single gender touring theatre group SIDT may be avoiding conflict with parents or husbands of women staff over their rights to travel and SIDT can also avoid having to implement precautionary measures to ensure the women's safety. By taking this easy option, however, SIDT has chosen not to challenge the social forces which dictate that women have less freedom to travel than men and, therefore, SIDT has failed to enhance women's life opportunities.

### **United Church Women's Fellowship (UCWF)**

In 1992 ten percent of Solomon Islanders, largely those concentrated in Western and Choiseul provinces, belonged to the United Church (Methodist). The United Church Women's Fellowship (UCWF) was a large department of the church, embracing hundreds of women's groups. Each group was supposed to be guided by a 'Four-Square Programme', altering their activities each week around the themes of devotion, education (such as weaving mats, sewing and craft), service (visiting and helping the sick and the elderly) and recreation (games, *kastom* dancing, and 'bring and buy' fundraising stalls). These official activities were clearly set in the welfare approach to women's development.

It has been more in the areas of networking and information sharing than in its programmes that the UCWF has really made progress. One of the ways in which leaders developed cohesion among UCWF members was by means of a UCWF uniform, dresses of a purple colour which members were very proud to own and wear, as well as a flag and a promise learned by all the different groups (Ryan, 1975:63). A more significant way in which cohesion was sponsored, however, was through networking. From their start as small groups of women meeting together with early missionaries for prayer and to learn to sew, UCWF leaders developed an elaborate structure binding women from the smallest villages scattered across Western Province and Choiseul into a single, cohesive organisation. In 1992, the UCWF's internal network consisted of individual groups, moving up to 'sections' which consisted of a number of groups, 'circuits' which embraced several sections and finally, the Solomon Islands 'region', made up of eleven circuits in total. This structure provided UCWF members with many opportunities to come together to meet and share with women from further afield than their own village. A typical pattern was for groups to meet once a week, then once a month they would have a meeting with other groups in their



section and once a year all women's groups within a circuit would be invited together for a time of prayer and fellowship at a 'rally'.

Rallies, for example, offered several hundred women a rare opportunity to leave behind their family and community responsibilities for a week and to express solidarity with those from different tribal and language areas. At rallies women had time to discuss problems, ideas and solutions to the pressures facing them. For example, when the Marovo circuit met in 1991 their aim was to raise educational awareness on the exploitation of the environment and pollution of rivers, air, land and sea. Women presented dramas relating to these themes which prompted discussions on their common concern about the preservation of reefs in the Marovo lagoon. Rallies also forced communities to recognise their women's groups and the work they did. The fact that twenty women from one small village were allowed to attend a rally was a testimony to the power which UCWF groups, with the backing of the church, yielded within their communities. In such circumstances husbands often had to take on duties unfamiliar to many of them such as child care, meal preparation and gardening. With support from the church UCWF women did not feel so afraid to challenge their husbands, and *kastom*, in this way. For the community hosting a rally the fact that men, women and children were willing to work together to erect temporary houses and gather provisions for all of the participants meant that the UCWF must have developed a certain degree of status.

Women's freedom to join in the activities of the groups could not, however, be assumed. Child care duties and pressure from husbands often meant that women would miss out on meetings. Women in some villages were, however, willing to challenge their husbands publicly on the right of women to attend UCWF meetings and gatherings. For example, a researcher on the island of Simbo noted at least two separate occasions when, after being asked why they were not fully participating in church affairs, women stood up and accused men of being lazy when it came to child care. The men reacted angrily to these accusations. At least part of the problem was that some men regarded women's participation in UCWF groups as a leisure activity, while the church '...presents the UCWF as a Christian theatre of female enablement' (Dureau, 1993:26). The church's official policy of endorsing the equality of women and men within the church appeared to give women the impetus and confidence to stand up against men in their communities who were trying to hold them back<sup>16</sup>.

In terms of programmes, rather than networking, the UCWF coordinator, Goodlyn Tozo, based at the mission station of Kokengolo at Munda, ran periodic workshops for

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<sup>16</sup> The United Church is regarded as the most liberal in the Solomon Islands in terms of its attitude toward allowing women to join the ranks of the clergy.

representatives of women's groups to supplement the Four Square Programme. Issues covered included health and nutrition (*Women's Club News*, 1990:10-11). In 1988 the UCWF started recruiting coordinators for each circuit, often young graduates from vocational schools, to expand the variety of activities of women's groups in their area. There were also plans to train women from villages to be literacy teachers. A major two week workshop was planned for September 1992 involving resource persons from Honiara and 33 women from villages around Western and Choiseul provinces. The UCWF coordinator hoped to set up eleven literacy schools in United Church areas, all of which would use local languages. While this was an ambitious project which was likely to face many obstacles, at least it indicated a willingness on the part of leaders to consider a broader scope of programmes for UCWF groups.

UCWF groups have had major significance for local communities. Often they provided the main medium through which money was raised for schools and clinics in an area and they took care of the sick or those with special needs in a village, bringing them food, prayers, and advice. Further, participation in UCWF groups meant a great deal to many women, such as those on Simbo:

*Most women wish to participate in the activities of this body [the UCWF]....The United Church frames the greatest number of, and most significant, social happenings on the island. Within this church, the UCWF is the women's exclusive sphere....the UCWF plays a significant part in all community events and issues....It facilitates contact between women across the island and on other islands, as well as being a theatre for discussion of matters of interest to women and input into public domains (Dureau, 1993:26).*

UCWF groups have also given women an opportunity to receive distinction in their communities. Even in the 1960s, Nancy Carter, the woman who was responsible for initiating the strong UCWF organisational set up, said after her transfer back to New Zealand,

*'What a thrill it was for me when I visited there in 1965 to be asked to dedicate the Women's Fellowship Flag at a celebration in which women were very much in the foreground and the men were merely spectators'. She recalled the days not long passed when the idea of anything solely for women was not encouraged (Ryan, 1975:64).*

The UCWF became more political in the late 1980s, their bargaining power aided by the cohesiveness of their organisation. At their Regional Conference in 1991 women expressed their concern for young women working at the Noro tuna cannery, a number of whom had become pregnant or contracted venereal diseases. They recommended that church ministers be urged to give talks on sex education to young people in the villages. They also agreed to write letters to the Provincial Secretary of Western Province and the province's Liquor Board to oppose the establishment of a casino in Gizo. In 1989 the synod

of the United Church accepted a recommendation by the UCWF that at least one quarter of the membership of the synod be women.

### *Discussion*

The UCWF essentially followed a welfare approach to women's development with the 'Four Square Programme' providing the basis of group activities in the villages. According to women I spoke with, coordinators needed to consider how they could revitalise this programme as a constant diet of 'lotu, lotu, lotu' (prayer, prayer, prayer) was not providing them with the variety and stimulation they needed. It was encouraging, however, that steps were being taken to expand on the organisation's overall focus with the attempted initiation of a literacy programme, issues such as environmental destruction being brought into discussions and concerns about the problems facing women who work at the Noro fish cannery being raised. While these programmes and issues are important they have not impacted on most village women's lives to date, rather, it was the UCWF's approach to networking which managed to bring about small but significant changes for many women.

The network of UCWF groups across the western part of the Solomons provided the main avenue for women to achieve prominence in village life (Dureau, 1993:26). It meant that sometimes women were in the limelight of village affairs while men were only spectators or supporters of their activities. This directly challenged an old gender bias. Further, women were encouraged to stand up to husbands who tried to prevent them from attending meetings. This sometimes involved a breach of *kastom*, with women publicly challenging men, and was testimony to the importance of these groups to the women involved. Leaders within the UCWF were also starting to challenge the church hierarchy by asking that the synod include women as 25 percent of its ranks in the future. Through the UCWF, women have started to assert their rights in a stronger way thus the UCWF has helped women to address strategic gender interests.

The networking aspect of the UCWF's work appeared to support an empowerment approach to women's development. It was likely to enhance gender equity because the church provided women with an avenue to set aside their duties from time to time so that they could attend meetings, workshops and large gatherings and at these times, men often had to take on the women's roles and obligations at home. The UCWF provided women with unprecedented opportunities to travel and to meet and learn from women with whom they would normally have no contact. This broadened women's awareness and was likely to give women a wider understanding of ways of overcoming problems common to women in their country.

## Women's Agriculture Extension Service Programme (WAESP)

Two of the problems facing women in the agricultural field revealed in Chapter Six were the lack of support provided by male agricultural extension officers and the emphasis of the agricultural sector on cash crops. These factors have contributed to a situation whereby women and their food gardens have not received the benefits of new technology, new strains of food crops, and other agricultural information which could reduce their workload and improve their output.

Attempts to recruit women agricultural extension workers have been disappointing. In 1992 there was only one woman working in such a position partly because recruits had to have high school level education, something which few women have been given the opportunity to achieve. For those few women recruited to the extension service during the 1980s, being sent to live in remote areas away from their families was a significant deterrent. On the job harassment and a lack of support from their male colleagues also took their toll. In line with the funding which the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands (MAL) was receiving from donors, female extension officers were mostly expected to assist male farmers who were implementing cash crop projects. Thus their work infrequently took them to the extensive subsistence gardens which were typically managed and worked by women<sup>17</sup>.

During the 1980s several expatriate men who worked at the National Agriculture Training Centre in Malaita argued that, for reasons of efficiency, there was a need for a separate women's extension service. The New Zealand government supported their proposal and negotiated with MAL to establish a Women's Agriculture Extension Services Programme (WAESP). New Zealand agriculturalist Jackie Frizelle started in January 1992 on a one year contract to establish and operate the WAESP programme<sup>18</sup>. Her local counterpart was Daniella Zae, a young woman with a Diploma in Tropical Agriculture who was employed by the Training Division of MAL. The overall aim of the programme was:

*To establish an agricultural extension service for women farmers, supporting sustainable food production systems which meet families' nutritional needs and improve the economic well-being of households (Frizelle, 1992:2).*

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<sup>17</sup> It is also likely that both female and male agricultural extension officers feel they gain more status from working with cash crops.

<sup>18</sup> I did not have the opportunity to witness this programme in action because it was only in the planning stages when I was in the Solomon Islands. My assessment is, therefore, based on discussions with those implementing the programme about what their aims were and how they had planned the programme, particularly their process of consultation with rural communities.



The philosophy of the programme's designers was that the programme should be based upon the needs and interests of women. Thus Frizelle visited a number of rural areas discussing with local communities possible foci for the programme. At first people were quite hostile to Frizelle but when they learned that she had come to harness their ideas, rather than coming with a project ready-made for them, they were very cooperative. After an initial discussion paper had been circulated and women throughout the country were consulted, Frizelle found that women had certain recommendations as to how the extension service should be structured. Firstly, they wanted local women to be employed to do most work on the programme as they would be able to speak local languages, understand local farming practices and would respect cultural values. Further, it was suggested that individual communities should nominate which women they wanted to be involved in the programme to ensure that those who went forward to receive training had the respect and support they would need to carry out their work. Women wanted men to be consulted about what needs each community wished to deal with rather than isolating men from the programme and risking opposition from them. They also preferred that the extension workers be based in their villages rather than at agricultural posts where transport difficulties could hinder them from carrying out their work. Women argued that there should be direct links between the workers and local women's groups, who could help them with day-to-day planning and support. They wanted to be reassured, however, that the benefits of the programme would accrue to individual families, rather than being held within women's groups. A major issue to resolve was the hours to be worked by the extension workers. Village women who could potentially be recruited into the programme favoured working part time. Men already employed by MAL wanted recruits to work full time. This, however, would have excluded many women who had family obligations.

The proposal that Frizelle came up with incorporated most of these recommendations and concerns. Women were to be employed at two levels. Those located in the villages would be partially trained extension assistants, nominated by their own communities, who worked approximately ten days a month. The criteria for the extension assistants was that they must be respected and accepted by the women's groups in their area, have enough time to do the work and must be able to speak Pijin so that group training would be possible. Initially the extension assistants would work and travel in pairs for mutual support and safety and they would concentrate on their own village and six to ten villages in the surrounding areas, providing them with on-going advice and support. The next level involved one or two qualified agricultural extension officers who would be based at the Provincial Government's Agriculture Division and would work full time. Their job would be to work directly with farmers, providing technical advice and both practical and moral support to the assistants located in the villages and contributing to the extension programme's operational planning. Men were to be involved with any awareness-raising

aspects of the programme (Frizelle, 1992:4-5). This proposal has been described as providing,

*...an innovative approach to addressing the dual problems created by the lack of qualified women agriculturalists and the cultural constraints on the free flow of information from male extension officers to female farmers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993c:19).*

The programme was started on a small scale with trials taking place in Isabel and Malaita, which both had active women's groups involved with topics such as nutrition education, before it was decided to expand to other parts of the country. Six village-based extension assistants were to work in each province, with the support of a female agricultural extension officer. After two years the pilot cases were to be examined. The idea was for the programme to grow as it proved itself and that it would be oriented to the needs and resources of each province.

Frizelle did not want to create a new infrastructure for the programme which could have imposed a high recurrent cost on the country. By working through the existing agricultural extension service she hoped a secure career path would be set up for women. The initial training costs were covered by the programme but the onus was on individual provincial governments to provide wages. It was suggested that a Provincial Resource Group could be formed to coordinate provincial planning and to conduct monitoring and evaluations (Frizelle, 1993:3). Thus the New Zealand government provided a package of resources to establish the programme but it expected that provincial governments and the MAL would contribute to it in the short term and take over its administration in the long term. This could be an effective strategy for harnessing resources from the state while leaving women in control of the programme.

There were four potential barriers to the success of the programme. Firstly, the lack of skilled women available could have caused difficulty in filling the designated posts. It was considered essential that women took all positions of responsibility within the programme. Secondly, the MAL's and foreign donors' focus on cash crops rather than subsistence crops could have been a barrier to securing extra resources for the programme. Thirdly, it would be difficult to ensure that both the extension workers and their assistants received the support they needed, both technical support, showing them how to go about their programming and moral support. It was important that links between a coordinator in Honiara, qualified women at the agriculture posts in the provinces and extension workers in the villages, would actually work (Jackie Frizelle, New Zealand's Agriculture Extension Adviser to MAL, 1992: personal communication).

## *Discussion*

The WAESP had the potential to reach thousands of women in the Solomon Islands who could benefit from an agricultural extension programme directed at their needs and run by women from their local area who had been given specialised training. Village women were likely to benefit from the introduction of new agricultural techniques and technologies, improved nutrition and added opportunities to earn cash. The programme was planned specifically to fit in with the existing commitments of extension assistants by allowing them to work part time and to be based in their home villages, thus enabling a wide variety of women to consider taking on such a position. The fact that benefits were to accrue to individual families, rather than to women's groups, provided an added incentive for women to take part in the programme.

A potential problem was that by encouraging men's involvement in many elements of the programme there would be instances where men undermined the women's work or took over agricultural endeavours which proved to be economically successful. With careful monitoring, however, and with support from the supervising agricultural extension officer, this was likely to be prevented.

The WAESP sits firmly within the empowerment approach. While initiated at the national level, the basis of this programme was at grassroots level, working to enhance the agricultural knowledge of women in the villages. The programme was entirely women-centred: it was directed largely by the stated needs and wants of women. The WAESP was likely to be accepted by communities because it planned to utilise existing networks, particularly those formed by village-level women's groups and because it encouraged input from men.

Overall the WAESP had great potential to enhance gender equity: it provided access for women, and particularly women with little formal education, to agricultural extension, a field dominated by men and from which women agriculturalists had received little assistance. In this way the programme addressed a strategic gender interest. While input from men was encouraged, management of the programme was left firmly in the control of women. By employing village women the WAESP was likely to contribute to their empowerment by giving them training which could enhance their confidence, status and respect in their home communities, particularly because the programme promoted so much community involvement.

## *Analysis*

Below the case studies are compared and analysed, emphasising the significance of initiatives which challenged the *status quo* and specifying strategies which contributed to the empowerment of women. A model of institutional empowerment, based on my analysis of the case studies, has also been devised. This may help us to understand how empowerment can best be facilitated.

### **The significance of challenging the *status quo***

Table Four (pages 266-67) shows the implications of the different approaches adopted towards the case studies discussed. It is apparent that some organisations merely helped women to perform their domestic roles more effectively, while others have a transformative perspective. The latter involved strategies which attempted '... to influence in a profound fashion the social relations of gender...[or to create] conditions for more fundamental structural societal change' (Rathgeber, 1990:497). Those which contested gender role stereotypes, challenged individuals or institutions for power or resources, enhanced women's control over their lives or promoted gender equity, showed evidence of a transformatory perspective.

While all of the case studies had some positive effects on women's lives, those which failed to challenge the *status quo* were not neutral, rather, by default, they enforced gender subordination:

*Because gender is so integral a part of social life, all policy is filtered through a gender lens; some policies serve to perpetuate gender inequality, and others tacitly or unintentionally serve to "decompose" or break down gender inequality (Moghadam, 1990:28).*

Clearly while non-transformatory initiatives could be defended on the grounds that they help women to learn new skills or to understand about good nutrition, as long as such initiatives continue to dominate efforts to promote women's development it is likely that only the symptoms of women's disadvantage will be alleviated, while the structures in society which disadvantage women will not be transformed.

Thus those initiatives which did not include the empowerment of women in their agenda only achieved superficial benefits for women and it was apparent that the welfare approach still had a strong hold on programmes for women devised in the Solomon Islands. The WDD and DIVIT both mainly taught home economics skills, even though staff members



had additional skills. Those at DIVIT, for example, possessed expertise in outboard motor repair, which would challenge gender role stereotypes, and literacy training, which could empower women. In addition to adopting a welfare approach, staff at DIVIT appear to follow an anti-poverty approach through involving trainees in the manufacture and sale of crafts and in poultry projects. This assumes that earning an income advances women's position in society, without considering how to overturn those structures which continue to accord women less power and status. For example, by combining training on income-generation with assertiveness training, which directly empowers women, the graduates would have been in a better position to stand up to men if they tried to take over a successful village project which the graduates initiated.

There are several examples of case studies which reinforced gender bias through their programmes. For example, the WDD and SIDT's women's initiative programme did this by assuming that the only appropriate skills for rural women centred on the domestic arena, rather than opening up new opportunities to women by teaching them skills in subjects such as carpentry or mechanics. The home economics course at SICHE did this, perhaps inadvertently, by failing to encourage men to enrol in the course. SIDT also enforced gender bias through its management structure, in which women felt they had little say, and through the lack of opportunity women had to participate in some aspects of the NGO's work, especially the theatre group. Ideologies about gender stereotypes may therefore be present even in seemingly progressive organisations and this bias may be transferred through to their programmes.

### **Working for transformation**

Despite cases in which gender subordination was enforced, there is considerable hope for change. In some cases a transformation of the structures in society which oppress women did occur, as evidenced by the challenging of oppressive gender relations in homes, communities and at national level. While this change may not be apparent to the outsider and while the women's organisations and development agencies discussed did not explicitly state that they were working to overcome gender subordination, change towards a more equitable society was certainly a consequence of their initiatives. Whether challenging the *status quo* meant promoting women's role in politics or encouraging women to leave their families for a week so they could attend a workshop, the end result was the same; women gained a clearer perception of their life options and of their worth. Men were often forced to reconsider their relations with women and their expectations of women along the way.

As Table Four (page 262-3) shows, several of the case studies challenged the *status quo* by contesting gender role stereotypes. For example, the WAESP was working to

get women into the male-dominated domain of agricultural extension. UCWF groups and the Auki Diocesan Team indirectly encouraged men to take on the roles of social reproduction normally carried out by women, including cooking and caring for children, by inviting women to attend workshops. Women's groups such as the UCWF also gave women the opportunity to challenge men's right to dominate the centre stage in public domains by encouraging them to participate in community meetings. The Munda YWCA supported women who wished to enter another domain dominated by men, politics.

In other examples the *status quo* was upset by challenging the state, local government or churches to provide more resources or power for women. For example, the WAESP was established with funding from the New Zealand government but the long term plan was for the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands and provincial governments to take over the funding and administration of this programme. In this way an agricultural extension programme was being established according to women's own needs and priorities and afterwards the government was to be asked to take the programme over, without compromising any of the women's initial ideals. The Munda YWCA held a number of courses by drawing on resource people from the provincial government, such as a business adviser, and national government, such as the Senior Labour Officer, who otherwise had no involvement with women's programmes. Their skills were utilised at no cost to local women.

Some of the case studies posed a direct challenge to men's authority and power. The Auki Diocesan Team and UWCF women used the socially sanctioned avenue of their church women's groups to encourage men to make compromises, such as allowing their wives to attend workshops, which gave the women unprecedented freedom and a little more control over their lives. Men whose wives were secondary school home economics teachers were challenged to support the women's wishes to attend a year-long upgrading course at SICHE, even though this would probably mean more work for the men for a year. The PAWORNET survey of women's experiences of being employed by the public service, once completed, may point to specific concerns about opportunities for advancement for women and problems with sexual harassment. In the long term these results could be used to challenge men who have been harassing women and to challenge managers not to discriminate against women when opportunities for promotion arise. Mothers' Union representatives challenged church and political leaders by calling a large meeting of the Isabel Honiara Community, arguing that women's views about the exploitation of communal resources should no longer be ignored. If their plans to build transit rooms are fulfilled, the Mothers' Union will have also provided women and children with an option to leave unacceptable domestic situations rather than remaining under the control of abusive men.

**TABLE FOUR: Effective strategies for the empowerment of women in the Solomon Islands, 1992**

		Did the initiative ...											
	Activities	Approach used	...contest gender role stereo-types	...challenge the power of individuals or institutions	...challenge individuals or institutions for resources	...encourage input from grassroots women	...enhance women's self-esteem or dignity	...enhance women's confidence or skills	...enhance women's awareness of external issues	...give women more control over their lives	...promote solidarity/alliances among women	...enhance gender equity	
Catholic women's groups in Malaita	Strengthening women's groups, skills training, awareness-raising & networking	Empowerment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
DIVIT	Vocational training for young women	Welfare & anti-poverty					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Home economics course at SICHE	Home economics training for teachers	Empowerment		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes			
Kastom Bilong Mere Workshops	Recording women's knowledge of traditions	Empowerment					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Mothers' Union	Non-formal education, women's refuge, anti-logging, home economics	Empowerment (national programme) welfare (in villages)					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	



TABLE FOUR (continued...)			Did the initiative ...									
	Activities	Approach used	...contest gender role stereotypes	...challenge the power of individuals or institutions	...challenge individuals or institutions for resources	...encourage input from grassroots women	...enhance women's self-esteem or dignity	...enhance women's confidence or skills	...enhance women's awareness of external issues	...give women more control over their lives	...promote solidarity/alliances among women	...enhance gender equity
Munda YWCA	Self-defence, non-formal education and awareness-raising for women	Empowerment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PAWORNET	Networking, women's rights, radio programme	Equity		Yes					Yes		Yes	Yes
Rural Women's Skills Project (WDD)	Training in home economics & nutrition	Welfare & anti-poverty						Yes			Yes	
Saenau Women's Association	Reforestation, market gardening	Anti-poverty & empowerment		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
SIDT & the Women's Initiative Programme	Development education & skills training	Empowerment (general programme) & welfare (WIP)		Yes				Yes	Yes	Yes		
United Church Women's Fellowship	Networking, home economics, literacy	Welfare (in villages) & empowerment (through networking)	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Women's Agriculture Extension Services Programme	Agricultural extension for subsistence farmers	Empowerment	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Fieldwork, 1992



## Effective strategies for empowerment

Any initiative which empowers women to be more in control of their lives by providing them with skills, knowledge or confidence threatens the *status quo* because under the *status quo* many women feel as if they have little to contribute to society. The more confident women are and the more skills they gain in public speaking and dealing with bureaucracies, the more opportunities they will have to gain access to the realms of power in society. While women's groups in the villages have continued to ask for sewing and cooking demonstrations and the official development agency for women (WDD) has continued to oblige, many more women have benefited from involvement in activities which some may not immediately recognise as being within the domains of the women and development field, for example, self-defence classes, mass gatherings of women, sitting under a tree and sharing experiences of tradition with other women and learning to sign their names. The activities I am referring to contribute to women's self-development, to building their esteem and dignity, rather than being preoccupied with physical development projects as such. It is only with the increased sense of esteem which comes from self-development that these women can go on to work collectively to achieve broader societal change which enhances gender equity.

Some of the strategies which were most effective in empowering women have already been mentioned. When initiatives challenged gender role stereotypes, secured resources from powerful institutions such as the state and contested men's authority in a bid for more freedom, women were empowered. Other strategies which did not involve such direct challenges, for example those which gave women skills to help them feel more in control of their lives, drew on tradition to enhance women's dignity, gave women greater control over resources such as land and enhanced women's feeling of solidarity by building alliances, also worked to empower women.

Certain initiatives empowered women by providing them with skills or knowledge so that they felt more in control over their lives. For example, the Munda YWCA informed women about their employment rights through the workshop on labour laws. Courses on budgeting, English literacy and beekeeping also empowered women by providing them with new skills and the confidence to put their skills into practice. The Mothers' Union provided literacy classes which enhanced women's self-esteem and gave them skills to cope with living in a society where the written word has assumed increasing importance.

Other case studies empowered women by drawing on tradition to enhance their sense of dignity and self-confidence. This is linked to women's empowerment because without a strong sense of self-esteem women cannot hope to see their present roles as being important, nor can they see that there are other opportunities, including those which

would give them greater power, open to them. The home economics course at SICHE was centred on utilising local resources and knowledge to the full. It gave trainees a sense of dignity by emphasising the value of customs and traditional knowledge which have lost credibility as Western customs and products have gained acceptance. Similarly, *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops affirmed the importance of women's knowledge of tradition. The Auki Diocesan Team drew on tradition to emphasise the value of the roles women performed. They were successful in mobilising hundreds of women to form women's groups specifically because their approach was to focus on building women's self-esteem and dignity before moving on to dealing with physical aspects of women's development, such as *supsup* gardening techniques. The team's prescription was not radical but it inspired hundreds of women to further develop and empower themselves. Through such efforts women are being made more aware of their potential and their life options.

Control over resources is a serious issue for Solomon Islands women who traditionally have had strong ties to the land, forests and sea and who rely on resources from these sources to provide for the daily sustenance of their families. Chapter Six discussed how women's traditional rights to the use of their clan's land, especially their access to the best land, were under threat because of factors such as population growth and the commercialisation of agriculture. In this chapter, those initiatives which were related to the sustainable use of resources seemed particularly well supported by women. For example, SIDT's awareness-raising work on logging and the Mothers' Union's anti-logging public meeting were attended by women who wanted to ensure there would be sustainable use of resources so they could meet their immediate and future needs. SIDT has inspired a number of women's groups to lobby local leaders not to sign logging contracts or to try and put a stop to those which have already gone ahead. Members of the Saenaua Women's Association gained some control over the land between the stands of trees planted for a reforestation project and used it for their own benefit, producing crops of vegetables to be sold so they could accumulate money to build a women's house.

Those initiatives which built alliances with supportive groups and individuals were also successful. While churches, men, the state and other institutions have been shown to work against women's best interests at times, alliances can sometimes work for the good of women's groups or their projects. The Auki Diocesan Team, for example, showed that it is possible to work for transformative change with the backing of the church and to gain the support of traditional leaders and local men. Some men were so pleased with the work the women were doing for the community that they asked them to put a representative forward for the council of chiefs. A number of powerful development initiatives have emerged from the energies of grassroots women but with the support of men's voluntary labour. Staff of the Munda YWCA, for example, gained the unpaid assistance of men to set up a demonstration garden at their centre and to run self-defence classes.

A number of the initiatives discussed had an important networking and solidarity-building role in addition to their other purposes. Particularly significant were those which brought women together across religious, ethnic and geographical boundaries. Those women's organisations which organised large gatherings in the form of women's weeks or rallies gave women the opportunity to share with and learn from each other and perhaps, to recognise the similar challenges which they faced. For example, the Saenaua Women's Association brought women together from three different churches, the UCWF's gatherings involved women from different ethnic and language groups, and the Auki Diocesan Team organised meetings involving women from across Malaita, some of whose tribes had traditionally been enemies. As Chapter Three discussed, when potential points of weakness between women are dealt with, diversity can lead to empowerment for those involved in women's groups.

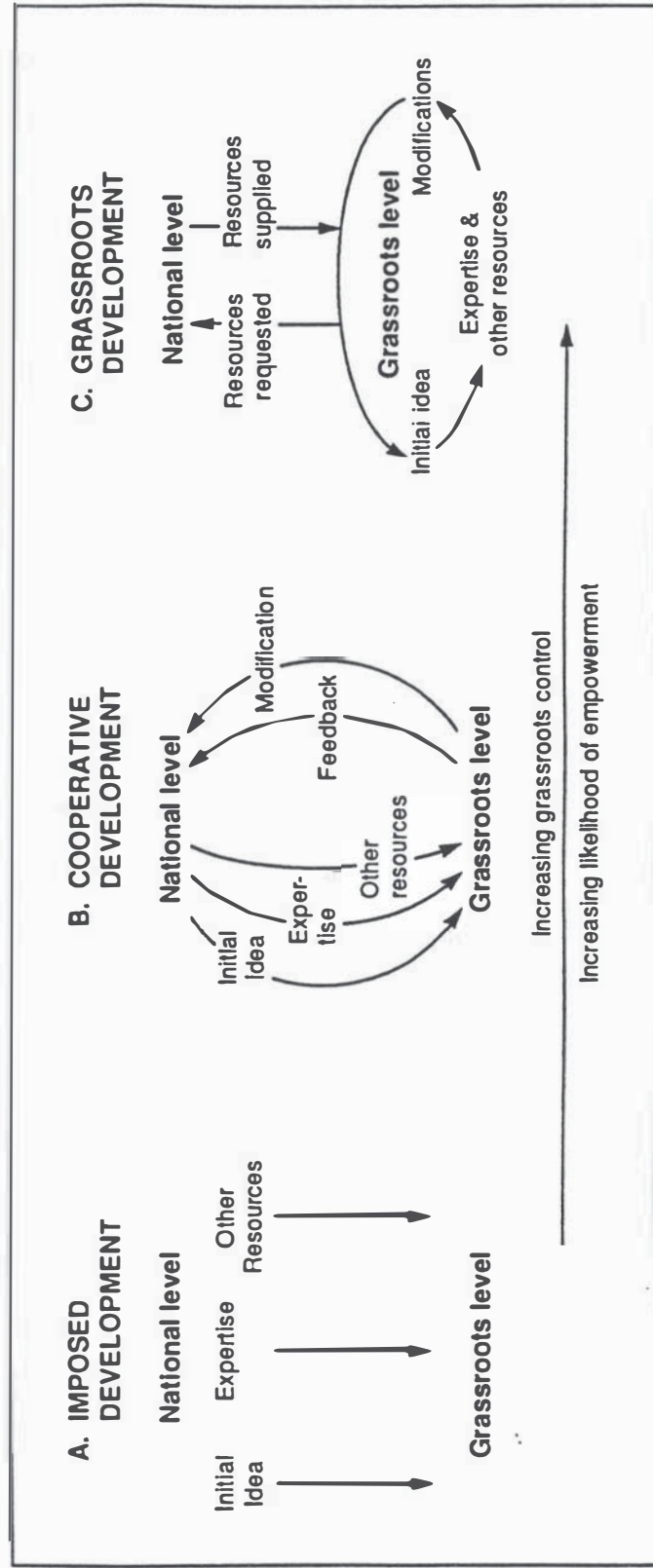
### **A model of institutional empowerment**

The degree of input from women who were targeted to benefit from an initiative can also provide an indication of how likely it is that empowerment will occur. As Chapter Six indicated, development agencies do not always operate according to the priorities of those they are planning for. When grassroots women are not consulted about programmes or projects which have the potential to benefit them, their needs and interests are often misinterpreted or neglected.

Figure Nine (page 267) presents three models of institutional empowerment which can best be understood as ideal types. The purpose of these models is to aid my analysis of GAD initiatives in the Solomon Islands and to aid the understanding of others who are involved with planning development initiatives for women. As the models are ideal types it is important to note that they are not meant to be exhaustive. I have tried to cover the main approaches that I observed but it is likely that, in other circumstances, there will be different approaches which cannot be explained by these models.

Figure Nine shows that the more input from women at grassroots level, the greater the likelihood that an initiative will empower women. Model 'A' of imposed development represents development initiatives, like that of the Rural Women's Skills Project, which were planned 'from above' by agencies who interpreted the needs and interests of women on their behalf and imposed resources on their supposed beneficiaries. This was also partly the case with DIVIT's programmes as no attempt was made to ask those in the villages what skills they wanted graduates to have on their return. Likewise, PAWORNET's activities were devised by the national information officer, again with no consultation. Even though

**FIGURE NINE: Strategies for development involving different levels of Interaction between the national and grassroots levels**





rural women complained about the amount of foreign items on *Olketa Mere* and lack of news from rural areas, the programme was not altered at all.

This does not mean, however, that national level organisations cannot play an important role in empowering women. The WAESP, an example of 'B', cooperative development, shows how a programme which involves women's ideas and input from the outset and therefore, is based on the needs and interests of grassroots women, can work for their empowerment. Very few initiatives planned 'from above' show such commitment to consultation with those they are planning for. This model suggests that when national level organisations evolve a process of consultation and modify their initiative in response to feedback from the grassroots level, they will be more likely to incorporate women's concerns and have a good chance of empowering women. While UCWF organisation could have been described by the model of imposed development in the past, now the organisation is moving towards cooperative development. It has responded to village women's complaints of a lack of new ideas for their women's programmes by employing graduates of vocational training schools to run programmes within each circuit. The Mothers' Union's literacy programme was also an example of cooperative development as it was highly responsive to the needs of participants in the programme encouraging, for example, mothers to bring their children along to classes.

Model 'C' of grassroots empowerment represents initiatives which are planned largely by and for women based in the areas where they occurred. They utilise local expertise and resources, although national level organisations may be contacted to assist with expertise and additional resources. The Auki Diocesan Team and Munda YWCA can be described by this model. They have a good chance of empowering women because they derive directly from the needs and interests of grassroots women and are run largely by these women. Another example of 'grassroots development' was the Saenaua Women's Association, which emerged in direct response to women's desire to have their own organisation which could push their concerns with regard to the forestry project and which could provide a social base for them. Likewise, the Mothers' Union's early childhood education programme emerged from one woman's efforts to establish village kindergartens throughout Isabel and later, a donor agreed to provide additional resources for the kindergartens including equipment and funds for training of teachers. While the home economics course at SICHE is, in one sense, at the national level, in another sense it can also be seen as an example of grassroots development because the course was based on the use of local resources and technologies and because the traditional knowledge of women participants from around the country was harnessed during the course. *Kastom Bilong Mere* workshops follow the grassroots development model because they were based upon a local resource, women's knowledge of tradition, and this is what was harnessed and

shared during the workshops. It is clear that women are becoming increasingly involved in grassroots initiatives to work for development and change on their own terms.

Some of the case studies which fall under the model of grassroots development have demonstrated that women have potential for self-empowerment and that development does not refer only to the top-down, project focused system that the planning process would have us believe. Rather than having their needs and interests determined 'from above' and being 'planned for', organisations such as the Munda YWCA and Auki Diocesan Team established their own priorities and worked towards meeting these:

*Shifting the power-and-knowledge focus to local communities suggests a...notion of success...that looks for concrete gains in the lives of local women, reflecting goals the women hold for themselves, through practices they control (Ferguson, 1990:300).*

While Figure Nine presents the model of 'grassroots development' as being most likely to lead to women's empowerment, it should not be assumed that good initiatives for development and empowerment can only be found at this level. Grassroots development can only occur in communities where women have a clear perception of their collective needs and interests and where there is some organisational set-up. Not all communities at the grassroots level are willing or able to initiate action and organise resources in the form of their own project or programme. The model of cooperative development may be most appropriate where communities feel they need an outside agency to come in and suggest ideas and, once a programme focus is jointly decided upon, to provide resources.

## **Summary**

This chapter has discussed attempts by various agencies to promote women's development. A stated concern for women's development seems to be all that the agencies shared: the issues they considered to be of concern were as diverse as the ways in which they attempted to address them. Every donor, government ministry, NGO and women's organisation built their work upon particular presumptions and aims. In this way, some chose to follow a welfare or anti-poverty approach to GAD which did not threaten to disrupt the *status quo*, while others did attempt to challenge the existing organisation of society. While some aspects of each of the initiatives directed at women could be seen to be of benefit to them, no matter what the approach, only those involving a transformatory perspective were willing to challenge the secondary status and lack of power accorded to women (Kabeer, 1992a:36).

Development agencies or organisations wishing to go further than merely alleviating women's burdens, that is, those that want to overcome the causes of these burdens, need to

adopt a transformatory perspective. This transformatory perspective can be displayed in a number of ways, as the case studies revealed. In some cases implementing organisations or agencies directly challenged men or the state while in others, indirect measures which enhanced women's esteem and built solidarity among women were adopted. Table Four listed a number of effective strategies for the empowerment of women which arose out of the case studies. It was apparent that in those case studies which had been most successful in empowering women, grassroots women had a strong input into the direction and control of the initiatives. A model which displayed this relationship was devised.

The following chapter, Chapter Eight, summarises the material covered in this thesis, it draws several major conclusions and provides a section on implications which includes suggestions as to how development agencies could more effectively play a part in the development and empowerment of women.

# **CHAPTER EIGHT: Choices for Solomon Islands women and agencies wishing to facilitate their development**

## ***Summary***

In this thesis I set out with the aim of determining what strategies were most effective in promoting women's development and empowerment. The introductory chapter established the need for such a study, particularly considering the disadvantaged position of women worldwide and the way in which many poorly designed development initiatives have entrenched this disadvantage. It stressed that women needed special attention because unequal power relations had given women less access to productive resources and to power within society and, therefore, fewer opportunities to pursue their own interests. Thus gender relations structure whether women will be able to participate in, and gain from, development initiatives. In addition to gender there are other social cleavages such as ethnicity and class which structure the reality of life opportunities for different groups of women.

Chapter One also established empowerment as a crucial aspect of development for any disadvantaged group, including women, which wishes to overturn systems of oppression. It was argued that development agencies should be prepared to go further than assisting women with daily survival, aiming instead to empower women by providing them with skills, knowledge and confidence to determine the development path which they wish to follow and to challenge the structures in society which oppress them.

Chapter Two discussed theory in order to gain conceptual tools which could guide my analysis of how effective development initiatives in the Solomon Islands were at improving women's life circumstances and empowering them. In an attempt to demystify the field of gender and development it was shown that several major policy approaches could be identified to help to explain the rationale behind the wide variety of programmes and projects directed at women. By determining which approach is behind a particular initiative one can gain clues as to what concerns will be addressed, how they will be addressed and what the possible outcomes could be.

These policy approaches were categorised according to whether they could be equated with an equilibrium or critical paradigm. Under an equilibrium paradigm only the symptoms of women's disadvantage are dealt with because it is assumed that the existing system works in their best interests. Women's everyday burdens, or their practical gender needs, are addressed, while enforcing, rather than transforming, existing gender



inequalities. The welfare, anti-poverty and efficiency approaches fall within the equilibrium paradigm. The equity and empowerment approaches, alternatively, were more in line with the critical paradigm. This paradigm seeks to explain how domination and oppression are structurally maintained, with an overall goal of transformation of oppressive systems. The equity approach advocated equal rights for women by means of positive discrimination and legislative change. A number of Third World women were not impressed by the top-down, Western-feminist emphasis of the equity approach, however, so they started to devise their own development agendas, in which the empowerment of women was a key factor<sup>1</sup>.

Of the five approaches discussed it was decided that the empowerment approach was potentially most effective as initiatives following this approach aimed to expand women's life opportunities and to assist them in challenging the structures in society which accord women secondary status. The empowerment approach is distinct from the equity approach in that its goal is to redistribute power and to increase women's dignity. It does not just demand more resources for women: it seeks to transform relationships between men and women, among classes and races, so that they are no longer characterised by oppression. Proponents of the empowerment approach pose women as disempowered social actors, rather than beneficiaries to be planned for. They listen to women's voices and actively seek to harness their knowledge so that women's priorities are actioned by the development industry. The power shifts advocated by proponents of the empowerment approach have made powerful individuals and institutions nervous. Although the empowerment approach is gaining strength, the politically safe welfare approach and the efficiency approach with its economic rationale are still predominant in practice.

Chapter Two also involved debates on how gender needs and interests could be defined and the relative importance of addressing these. In most cases planners and policy makers define needs and interests on behalf of women, a top-down, non-participative process. While they may be able to identify women's practical gender needs, those based on what women need for daily survival, through this process, it is difficult for them to identify strategic gender interests which arise from women's subordinate position in society. Yet it is only by addressing strategic gender interests and challenging oppressive structures that development agencies will be able to contribute to a more equitable society. Kabeer's Social Relations Analysis framework argued that because planning institutions are unlikely to establish goals related to the empowerment of women, it is essential that those people targeted by development planners have some control over how needs and interests are interpreted. Nevertheless, many development agencies continue to impose their plans and projects on people with little or no consultation.

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<sup>1</sup> Many Western writers, academics and development practitioners are fully in support of these new agendas and have contributed to the development of the empowerment approach too.

While Moser adequately explained how the planning process worked with regard to women, she diverted attention from the fact that many forms of development can occur outside the planned, project mode. Chapter Three focused specifically on strategies for empowerment including those initiated by grassroots women's organisations outside of the official planning process. The suggestion was that the best way to overcome the gap between those who fund and plan for development and those who are subject to development programmes is to empower people at grassroots level to define their own development agenda and work towards meeting their goals (Kabeer, 1992a:31). Thus the grassroots level growth of women's organisations may have more potential to transform oppressive structures than the many 'women's projects' initiated for, instead of by, women around the world. Women's organisations can initiate a self-determined process of transformation for women. The examples provided indicated that being based in patriarchal, hierarchical societies has not prevented women's organisations from working for future, transformative change.

While separate women's organisations have an important role to play it was also clear, however, that women could benefit from building alliances with individuals, organisations and institutions which could give them access to power and resources. States, governments, donors, development agencies and individual women and men can all play a role in facilitating women's empowerment as long as women's organisations retain autonomy and do not compromise their ideals.

Chapter Four discussed methods. My belief was that research should focus on the problems of disadvantaged or oppressed groups and therefore, be willing to challenge the *status quo*. I also wanted to uncover practical strategies for women's empowerment and development which could be used by policy-makers and development planners. This was a sensitive topic because it supported calls for women to become empowered to challenge the existing organisation of society. Consequently, I had to choose techniques which, firstly, allowed for subtle methods of investigation and secondly, allowed me to question participants further so that I could find explanations for certain behaviours and responses which I encountered. Surveys or questionnaires may have allowed me to collect ideas and opinions on women's development from a wide range of people in a very orderly fashion but they did not allow for the flexibility and subtlety which my research required. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews with both groups and individuals were, therefore, the main techniques used in practice. Semi-structured interviews with groups were also very useful because they allowed participants to learn about themselves as a result of the research process and they provided a forum at which I could discuss experiences that women's groups across the country were having. Thus in addition to enhancing my own knowledge, I attempted to make research empowering for the participants.

Fieldwork results were organised into chapters five, six and seven. Chapter Five established how colonial processes improved women's lives in some ways but in many others they aggravated existing inequalities and sometimes increased women's workloads. When missionaries, the colonial and post-colonial governments provided more opportunities for men to access power and resources, women were effectively disempowered. Chapter Five also discussed gender relations and relations among women in the 1990s in order to ascertain the context in which development in the Solomon Islands was occurring. After establishing that women had experienced a loss in status and consequently, self-esteem, it was apparent that women in the Solomon Islands needed to be empowered, both on a personal level and at broader political levels.

Chapter Six briefly introduced major agencies with a stated commitment to women's development and discussed the various approaches they adopted. An analysis was made of how well gender needs and interests were being addressed with respect to the sectors of health, agriculture, politics, the law, education, family planning, employment and business. It was apparent that development agencies establishing projects and programmes for women did not always share the same priorities as the women they were planning for. Thus there were some significant concerns which development agencies failed to address. As discussed in Chapter Two, need interpretation is a highly political issue and it is of concern when the views of 'experts' override any attempts to harness the views of those for whom development is being planned. While women may not use the language of Western academics in naming their subordination, by identifying concerns such as their lack of control over communally held lands, their safety in their own homes and the lack of women to represent their views in political spheres, women are identifying gender inequities as a key area of concern for them. Few development agencies, however, displayed great concern for gender-based inequities. Many had a narrow focus on assisting women in their roles as wives, mothers and producers of food rather than addressing the causes of women's subordination by concerning themselves with strategic gender interests.

Chapter Seven looked in detail at twelve diverse development initiatives which were directed at women. Agencies following a conservative approach to women's development were compared with others advocating more innovative approaches with the aim of determining which strategies were most effective in leading to the empowerment of rural women. It was discovered that agencies which adopted a transformatory perspective in that they were willing to challenge inequalities, and those which involved a strong input from grassroots women, were most likely to lead to their empowerment. It was also clear that because of the actions of a number of innovative women's organisations and development agencies, women were working for change in numerous, but subtle, ways, in the villages of the Solomon Islands.

## *Conclusions*

*A movement for change has emerged from below.*

Despite the fact that development initiatives in line with the welfare approach characterise women's development in the Solomon Islands, I have identified positive actions for change by a number of innovative women's organisations and institutions working with women. They have confronted gender inequalities while others continue to compound these inequalities. They have shown courage and fortitude in organising initiatives which will radically alter the life chances of rural women.

Chapter Seven provided the evidence to show that this movement for change has had a significant impact on the lives of rural women in the Solomon Islands. It may be somewhat small and disjointed but this movement has led to a growing acceptance among women for ideas which drastically challenge social institutions, including gender relations. Women have unequivocally demonstrated their willingness to make changes in order to gain more control over their lives and they have opened themselves to new knowledge and opportunities along the way. Women in a number of villages have benefited from new self-development opportunities such as literacy, self-defence and budgeting classes. Others were emboldened by their women's groups to stand for political posts, from the school council level to the national government, to negotiate conditions in projects to suit their interests and to assert their views when their clan's resources were being sold to foreigners.

Separate women's organisations were particularly important in enabling women to build bases of power from which to challenge spheres of male domination. In addition to teaching women skills and involving them in the administration of the organisation, which builds their confidence and contributes to psychological empowerment, women's groups also contributed to social or political empowerment by providing a safe environment in which women could articulate their concerns, develop solutions to their collective problems and explore their potential. Such discussions were an important step in increasing women's awareness of their strategic gender interests and in leading women to act collectively to change their situation.

In identifying organisations which have adopted innovative approaches to the extension of women's life chances I am not necessarily dismissing those which do not overtly challenge women's disadvantaged position in society. Even conservative women's organisations have contributed to a general movement for change in the Solomon Islands by building solidarity among women, increasing women's self-confidence, teaching them new skills and giving them unprecedented opportunities for networking. This is not where



the major contribution to facilitating women's empowerment and development is being made, however. The major contribution to women's empowerment is being made by women's organisations which are concerned with overcoming gender inequalities; those which are not afraid to continually challenge the power-brokers of society in order that a more equitable societies, under which women do not face structural disadvantages because of their gender, will emerge. If the impetus for change is to be maintained, support needs to be provided for such women's organisations.

The fact that women successfully initiated programmes for change at grassroots level with little outside assistance provides a challenge to the top-down logic which characterises the planning process. While the conventional planning process has been criticised for its lack of recognition of gender interests, the planning process is not stagnant and thus it can be revised. Women's visions and priorities should contribute to this revision.

### *Subtle strategies can be effective*

My concern, as my title indicated, was to draw attention to effective strategies for the empowerment and development of rural women in the Solomon Islands. It was apparent that women there were considerably disadvantaged and that change was needed. Based on the theoretical material discussed in the first three chapters I had assumed that initiatives which posed a direct challenge to the *status quo* would contribute the most to bringing about a long term transformation of society. As there are many ways in which change can come about, however, the strategies advocated by development planners and practitioners must be suited to particular contexts. While overtly confrontational strategies did work in some circumstances, in most cases women's organisations or development agencies which facilitated women's empowerment used subtle strategies which, nevertheless, encouraged quite dramatic changes in women's lives. Subtle strategies can be just as radical and just as likely to result in transformation, as can more overt strategies. By saying outwardly that its self-defence classes were to protect women when they were walking alone to their gardens, the Munda YWCA allayed potential opposition without compromising on their overall objective: to teach women skills to protect themselves in their own homes. Neither the Auki Diocesan Team, the Mothers' Union, Women's Agriculture Extension Services Programme or Munda YWCA were explicitly based on a recognition of gender subordination but because they were concerned with women's empowerment, they effectively challenged structures which were oppressing women.

There appear to be several advantages in supporting subtle strategies. Subtle strategies can result in strong undercurrents of change without being confrontational and therefore, without attracting unnecessary attention, and opposition, to the change which is taking place. As long as people are not alerted to the degree of change occurring, women

are able to continue with their work largely undeterred by dissonant husbands, church leaders or village elders. Thus adopting subtle strategies for change can mean that women can get on with planning for their own development while facing a minimum of interference from those with power who may want to undermine their efforts. Certainly under circumstances when sensitive issues involving tradition and men's control over women are being addressed, overt strategies which are insensitive to local cultures and circumstances are inappropriate. They are much more likely to provoke widespread opposition which could eventually undermine the success of an initiative.

Subtle strategies were often small-scale and based at the grassroots level. By starting small and at grassroots level women are given the opportunity to learn to deal with local power structures and to counter gender biases inside their homes and communities before moving on to initiate wider action. By the time women start attempting to overcome wider forces which have been holding them back, they have had the opportunity to build up the strength, confidence and internal cohesion to resist attempts to stop their work. Subtle strategies are particularly appropriate, therefore, when dealing with women who are disempowered and who initially lack the skills to tackle powerful individuals and institutions.

Subtle strategies sometimes involved women making short term compromises in order to meet long term objectives. Many of the women's groups inspired by the Auki Diocesan Team began their activities with low-key initiatives such as community work, which could not be seen as contributing greatly to their personal development or empowerment. While women were earning the respect and trust of their communities, however, they had the opportunity to build up a sense of solidarity, to determine what their collective interests were and to devise strategies to meet these. Thus the women became personally empowered and moved on to social empowerment, a stage at which they were ready to take action together to bring about desired changes. The respect that women gained from doing community work also led to gains for them in that women were given the freedom to attend workshops away from home and some were asked to take on leadership roles in the wider community, thus giving them unprecedented access to political power. Making compromises without losing sight of a long term agenda to overcome subordination may, therefore, be an effective strategy, especially for women in societies undergoing rapid change but where they are still expected to conform to *kastom*.

It is apparent that women are working for change on their own terms in numerous subtle ways in the villages of the Solomon Islands. The agencies and organisations responsible for inspiring change often relied on local resources. This suggests that many other organisations in the Solomon Islands could have great potential for facilitating change and empowering women if there was a reorientation of their approach.

## *Implications*

### **How can women's empowerment be facilitated?**

#### *The need to focus on eliminating the causes of women's subordination*

The way in which women in the Solomon Islands were made the objects of attention by development agencies, including government bodies, was not always compatible with their best interests. Many initiatives discussed appeared to assist women in performing their traditional roles better rather than opening up new opportunities for them. While the emphasis was not solely on home economics projects, the welfare approach, whereby women were seen in terms of their maternal roles and as beneficiaries of the development process rather than active agents of change, was strong. The innovative examples of Chapter Seven which have contributed to a movement for change are the exception, rather than the rule, when it comes to initiatives directed at women in the Solomons.

By concentrating on a limited range of women's needs, especially those focusing on the domestic scene, development agencies have actually reinforced women's disadvantage. The *status quo* has been compounded because many development agencies have only been willing to deal with the symptoms of women's subordinate status such as their poor health, lack of education and lack of money earning opportunities. They have provided resources for women but on their own, resources cannot overcome women's disadvantage because this reflects power inequalities in society. These inequalities need to be addressed directly.

Gender subordination will persist unless more development agencies attempt to address strategic gender interests. While it may be difficult for those involved with hierarchical, male-dominated development institutions or planning structures to be able to identify, let alone to address, strategic gender interests (Kabeer, 1992a:34-35), there are a number of ways in which they can do this. As discussed above, there are ways to overcome women's subordination without stirring up too much dissent. For example, rather than channelling funds through government ministries which adopt a conservative stance to women's development, donors can support the activities of women's groups which have transformatory agendas (those referred to above as being part of a movement for change), they can assist alternative organisations such as trade unions which stand up for women's rights, or provide funds for networking and organisation-building within women's groups. Other options for such institutions include establishing a resource base to enable women to initiate their own forms of development rather than just reacting to policies and programmes

or, supporting awareness-raising work which aids women's understanding of how their country's legal and political systems work and how they can be utilised.

It is also important that any development institutions and women's organisations which wish to overcome the disadvantages women face in society, are prepared to encourage men to participate in a movement to destroy patriarchal relations. Men should be encouraged to share more equally the social reproduction roles which are often considered women's responsibility, particularly caring for children, the sick and the old, and housework (Mies, 1991:139). For example, rather than just getting access for girls to 'non-traditional' vocational training courses, training schools which support change could encourage boys to assume more responsibility for caring for and raising their families by giving boys and girls the same amount of domestic science classes. In the same way, rather than just sponsoring agricultural training for women, development agencies could sponsor retraining of men in the agriculture ministry so that they understand about food crops and the value of good nutrition. Men should also be encouraged to carry out unpaid community management tasks. For too long women have been left to clean the church, fundraise for the school and provide hospitality to visitors to their village.

#### *The need for better consultation*

Chapter Six showed that the interests of rural women rarely shape development initiatives. Too many development agencies and women's organisations still try to impose development on grassroots women, interpreting needs and interests on their behalf and devising projects for them without good consultation. Much is assumed about what is 'best for women'. As development institutions often have specific class and gender interests, it may be impossible for them to interpret or address strategic interests (Kabeer, 1992a:32-3). Thus development which reaches rural women from the national level is often not what the women most desire or require. Many women fail to speak out about this simply because they do not know all the options available to them. They have been sold a definition of development which has seen only a limited number of their needs dealt with. Rural women's disappointment in failed development efforts and in the lack of development initiatives which touch upon their lives sometimes turns to apathy because they feel there is nothing they can do to improve their situation.

As Figure Nine revealed, however, there are effective ways in which national level organisations can facilitate the empowerment of grassroots women. Under the model of cooperative development it was suggested that as long as national level agencies have a commitment to harnessing the views of grassroots women and incorporating these into their projects or programmes, they can empower women. When care is taken and sensitivity is shown, women in rural areas are willing to discuss their ideas and their problems with



outsiders. Alternatively, development agencies can support the work of women's organisations which are involved in running their own development initiatives, as in the model of grassroots development, by providing expertise or other resources.

While the most crucial concern is for women to decide for themselves what form of development they would like to pursue and for national level agencies to support them in working towards this, conscientisation of women may have to occur first, or concurrently. Women cannot be expected to decide on their priorities regarding development when they are unaware of the options available to them. Women may not be so enthusiastic about sewing and cooking demonstrations if they realised that they could, alternatively, learn skills in literacy, budgeting, leadership or building water tanks. Also, it is only when women understand how systems of power and privilege operate in their society that they will be able to devise strategies to gain greater control over their lives and influence the future direction of change.

### *The importance of building women's self-esteem and dignity*

Grassroots women need to experience a growth of confidence and knowledge so they do not feel so bewildered and powerless in their changing society. While practical skills are important for women, it is equally important that development initiatives should inspire a change of consciousness in women, reassuring them of their worth, the importance of their contribution to society and what they can do to change their situation if they are unhappy with it. One of the most dramatic changes which those national level agencies with a commitment to women's empowerment will have to make is to recognise, in any programmes which are devised, that material projects are not always the most appropriate form of development.

Women's chances to take up new opportunities and reach positions of power are often thwarted by the attitudes of their families, communities or those designing development projects. Thus women need a strong sense of self-esteem before they will pursue challenging objectives and become involved in a movement for change. As discussed in Chapter Five, without self-esteem most women would not be willing to speak out against injustice or poorly planned development; rather, they would remain silent. Neither would some women consider enrolling in a course to improve their skills, as was the case with women in Honiara who thought the WDD only ran courses for 'big women'. Without a sense of dignity women simply would not be prepared to stand for political office and risk being the subject of much speculation and criticism.

Indeed, for women to gain greater control over their social, economic and political lives, they must be empowered. It is encouraging that when women at grassroots level do

receive attention in the form of efforts to empower them, the results are dramatic and wide ranging. Some women spoke out in public for the first time while others stood up to leaders and logging companies. This is a powerful tribute to the fact that a little attention paid to women at grassroots level, especially if this involves consciousness-raising and the building of self-esteem, can have very positive effects on women's lives.

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It is clear that development agencies and women's organisations can use subtle, non-confrontational means to inspire change. Many women's organisations addressed gender subordination by negotiation, addressing issues such as women's roles as leaders in the community, women's employment rights and the role of women in politics. Through such means these organisations were responsible for facilitating the growth of a feminist consciousness in the villages. Subtle strategies can be used to effectively challenge the existing ordering of society or to work for future transformation. It is crucial that everyone concerned with promoting women's development realises that there will be diverse interpretations of an alternative vision for gender equality to suit women's situations in different parts of the world (Clarke, 1986:150). While the significance of isolated cases whereby a woman has been voted onto the village school council, or women have enthusiastically enrolled for self-defence classes, or a woman with a basic education is teaching literacy to others in her village, may not be immediately apparent, these are all unprecedented actions for many Solomon Islands women and thus indicate that women are attempting to take control of their own lives and influence the direction of future change.

Rural women have proved that they can make changes in their lives, even when this means opposing some of the major forces at work in their society. These women may provide the hand that rocks the cradle, as well as the hand which tills the soil and prepares the feast and harvests the crops and cares for the extended family, but this thesis has shown that they may also provide the hand which is raised proudly to say 'yes' to further education for themselves, 'yes' to taking on leadership roles in the wider community, 'yes' to influencing the future direction of change and 'no' to husbands who try to beat them, 'no' to logging companies which come to destroy their land and 'no' to anyone who tries to undermine their dignity and the importance of their contribution to society. If donors, NGOs and government agencies really wish to facilitate an equitable process of development in the Solomon Islands, they would do well to listen and learn from these women.



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# Appendix One

## FIELD RESEARCH CONTROL PLAN

April 1992

**TITLE:** Women's development and empowerment in the Solomon Islands: how can this most effectively be facilitated?

### REASON FOR ENQUIRY:

In most countries of the Third World considerable resources have been devoted specifically to women's development since the 1970s. Theorists have suggested, however, that unless efforts are made to challenge the power inequalities which see women allocated secondary status in society, these resources will have only a limited benefit.

Preliminary reading about the Solomon Islands indicated that a number of development agencies were attempting to facilitate women's development but it was unclear whether they were having a positive effect on women's lives. Women's status in society was low, they gained little recognition for the work they did and they lacked sufficient confidence and opportunities to try and change this situation.

The reason for my enquiry, therefore, is to discover reasons for the lack of success of many projects focusing on women and to ascertain whether there is any evidence of initiatives which are empowering women. If so, I want to see what strategies they are using and what factors contribute to their success.

**AIM:** To analyse development initiatives aimed at women and the activities of women's organisations in order to determine how well gender needs and interests are being addressed and what strategies are best in terms of facilitating women's development and empowerment.

**TIME FRAME:** 3-4 months in the Solomon Islands with two-thirds of this time to be spent in rural areas and the remainder in the main town, Honiara.

**GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE:** I gained permission to conduct research in the provinces of Guadalcanal, Malaita and Western Province.

### RECORDING MECHANISMS:

- \* Diaries - to record incidental information about my experience of the fieldwork process
- \* Notepads - for interviews and to use as journals
- \* Tape recorder - mainly for recording interactions among community members (e.g. at women's group meetings) and to record stories
- \* Camera - colour slides, black and white photos



## ETHODOLOGY:

My basic philosophy is that as a researcher in a less developed country I have a responsibility to use my power and privilege to make a space for those not in the centre to speak for themselves and to define their situation (Johnson, 1991). In the context of this study this means seeking out the opinions of Solomon Islands women, especially those marginalised because they live in rural areas and lack opportunities to gain positions of power, on subjects such as how development programmes and women's organisations have affected their lives and in what ways they feel their gender needs and interests have been neglected.

My research will be based on qualitative techniques, with direct observation, guided interviews and informal discussions being major means of gathering information. These techniques are mainly derived from the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) school of research. Strict methods of random sampling are not seen as suitable in all situations so PRAs employ *triangulation* as a key method to cross check information. This involves gathering information about a particular topic from a variety of different sources using several different data-gathering techniques. For example, this could involve interviewing the leader of a women's group as a key informant on the subject of effectiveness of the group's programmes and then going with a group of women to their gardens and casually talking about what benefits the women's group has had for them. Other suggestions are offered by the PRA school to help avoid bias also, for example, selecting some individuals for interviewing unexpectedly by walking off in just one direction in a village and talking to everyone you come across.

I anticipate that less structured situations for interviewing and observation will occur in rural areas. Here participant observation will play a key role. I will not, however, conduct an extensive study of just one particular society. To gather the required information on how development initiatives impact on women's lives in different parts of the country it will be necessary for me to travel and visit perhaps 4-7 villages in each of my case study provinces. These villages can not be chosen at random as I will have to meet contact people before I can gain access to villages in some areas.

While in Honiara I will need to talk to government officials, members of non-government organisations and those involved with teaching institutions. Times will need to be arranged for interviews although some more casual situations for learning will probably also arise. I will also spend some time searching for secondary information in libraries and reading government reports and files.

Contacts have been made prior to my arrival in the Solomon Islands through, for example, the WCA, the Catholic Church, the Women's Development Division of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the New Zealand High Commission and personal acquaintances, but others will need to be made once in the Solomons in order to ensure that a variety of different organisations are included for comparison in my study.

Translators may be necessary in some areas as women do not always speak the *lingua franca*, Pijin, which I have already been learning) and there are around 64 indigenous languages in the Solomon Islands.

## TECHNIQUES:

**PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION:** includes taking part in normal village life, attending gatherings, and holding casual conversations. This technique '...seeks to go beyond external patterns of behaviour and to explore the perceptions, motives, aspirations and beliefs of the population concerned' (Gabriel, 1991). This will be especially useful in the village context.

**SECONDARY DATA REVIEW:** involves collecting material from libraries, newspapers, recordings of radio programmes and gaining access to government reports. This technique will be used mainly in Honiara.

**STORIES AND PORTRAITS:** Short, colourful descriptions of situations encountered or stories recounted by the people. The purpose is to help bring situations and conditions to life and draw

attention to the ways rural people perceive problems and opportunities. This may be especially useful in understanding situations in rural settings where traditions are very strong.

**WORKSHOP:** A workshop brings skilled or experienced people together to review, analyse and evaluate the information gathered. It is also a means of immediately sharing this information with people in a position to act upon it. I plan to hold a brief workshop in Honiara before returning to New Zealand.

**INTERVIEWS:** An interview guide consisting of checklists will be devised rather than using formal questionnaires. This is called semi-structured interviewing. Target information is set within a larger context as this provides the opportunity for new and unexpected information to be obtained by chance. This style of interviewing also encourages two-way communication and can provide explanations, not just answers.

#### **Types of interviews:**

**Key informants:** to yield specialist information regarding women's status, roles and women's organisations e.g. church leaders

**Community groups:** group interviews are an important way of gaining knowledge of community interactions and community-wide views. They allow access to a wider body of knowledge than do individual interviews, they provide more accurate information as people tend to correct each other in a group setting and a group situation may reduce inhibitions. Group interviews can generate discussion of relevant problems, issues and optional solutions.

**Focus group interviews:** a focus group is a small, relatively homogenous group of people. Questions for them can be highly focused on a few key issues and can reveal how a 'type' of person views a situation e.g. husbands of women involved in a women's group

#### ***Before each interview:***

- \* Explain why I am there and what I am doing
- \* Make it clear that I have come to learn and that the interviewee's input is valuable

#### ***After each interview:***

- \* Ask if there is any other information they would like to share with me
- \* Ask if they have any questions for me

#### ***Before leaving the village/town:***

- \* Discuss results or ideas with community members/informants so they can challenge my perceptions

## ASKS TO BE COMPLETED / CHECKLISTS FOR INTERVIEWS:

### *HONIARA*

#### *tasks*

interview representatives of women's organisations, development agencies, donors and government divisions which have a stated interest in women's development

analyse all development plans since Independence with reference to women's issues

collect information tracing the roles and status of women in the country and growth of concern for women's issues

personal interviews or 4-5 person focus group interviews with:

- \* present and past staff of national women's organisations
- \* staff or members of NGOs with a concern for women
- \* key personnel from the planning and other important functional ministries (e.g. Agriculture and Lands; Education; Health; Statistics)
- \* persons involved with research and statistical organisations
- \* church leaders
- \* academics

**checklists for interviews (not all questions will apply to every interview)**

#### *Personal Background*

Occupation/title

Work experience

Marital status

Ethnicity

Educational background

Involvement in women's activities

#### *Internal dynamics (of their organisation)*

Origins

General goals

Philosophy

Establishment of priorities among their projects

Fields of activity

Decision making structures

Budget, staffing and salaries

#### *Programmes/projects*

Where location, size, number, and extent of outreach

Who benefits?

Growth and continuity

#### *Linkages*

Network to communicate with beneficiaries at grassroots?

Institutional relationship with other potential agents of change e.g. churches, government, political parties, NGOs, academic institutions

### *Beliefs and Opinions*

- what do you think are women's greatest needs...are these being addressed by development agencies or women's organisations?
- what is a women's role in Solomon Islands society? Do women get sufficient recognition for the work they do?
- do you think existing programmes for women are sufficient? Why/why not?
- does there need to be better communications with women at grassroots level?

### **IN RURAL AREAS**

#### **Tasks**

- check out all development projects in the area which have some component which focuses on women
- attend workshops/meetings/training days organised for women
- visit as many different women's groups as possible
- visit vocational training centres
- hold personal or small group interviews with:
  - \*those managing development projects or programmes
  - \*those participating in these projects or programmes
  - \*those in charge of women's organisations
  - \*those participating in women's organisations
  - \*husbands of women participating in women's organisations
  - \*bigmen
  - \*school teachers
  - \*religious leaders
  - \*health workers
  - \*expatriates living in the area
  - \*extension officers
  - \*provincial officials

#### **Checklist for interviews: (not all questions will apply to every interview)**

##### *Personal Background*

- marital status
- occupation/work experience
- ethnicity
- educational background
- involvement in women's activities

##### *Nature of women's groups and their programmes*

- women's group meetings - how often, who attends?
- activities and functions of the groups
- how do women benefit from involvement in women's groups?

##### *Nature of development agencies and their programmes*

- what programmes or projects do they run?
- how are women involved?
- what effect do they have on the lives of women, compared to men?
- what have participants gained/lost from involvement in these projects, programmes or activities?
- what are the long term effects of their work?



### *Beliefs and Opinions*

- support of men/the community for women's group or development agency activities?
- major problems/threats that women's groups and women's programmes and projects face?
- should local women's groups and development agencies which visit them be doing more to help women?
- what are their major needs and interests and are these being addressed?
- should the government be doing more to assist women in villages?

### IMPORTANT TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING:

- \* Use the six helpers to probe: what? why? when? where? how? who?
- \* Observe local protocol
- \* Remember S.W.O.T. - discuss Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats surrounding a situation - allows for all ideas around a specific issue to be discussed
- \* Annotate notes nightly

## Appendix Two

### *Is family planning a priority for Solomon Islands women?*

The level of contraceptive practice is low. It is estimated that only eight percent of women are actively practising family planning (*Solomon Star*, 8 February 1991:8) but some cite figures stating that as few as 2.8 percent of married women are family planning acceptors (Bage et al., 1992:61). The prevalence rate of contraceptive use for women in other countries in the same income group as the Solomon Islands is 56.2 percent (AIDAB, 1991:29). Does the high population growth rate occur because people are not interested in controlling their fertility or is it because of some other reason?

Results of a survey on family planning in Guadalcanal<sup>1</sup> indicate a strong awareness amongst Solomon Islanders of the need for family planning. Ninety eight percent of respondents approved of family planning in principle. Of all non-users of contraceptives interviewed, almost three quarters wanted to practice family planning (Bage et al., 1992:124). Their primary motivation for wishing to have smaller families was financial constraints. It is apparent that the predominant message of SIPPA and SIDT, who ask parents to consider how many children they can 'afford' now that various goods and services must be paid for, is getting through to many:

*...financial constraints such as the need to provide food, clothing and education for families are a determining factor in peoples' decisions...[about] the ideal family size. Lack of land, inheritance of land and economic benefits of children were not seen as being important (Bage et al., 1992:141).*

Women's actions at Guadalcanal's Women's Week in 1992 also suggest that there is a definite wish for wider availability of family planning services and information. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the participants had paid intermittent attention to talks on health and nutrition and the election of Provincial Council of Women representatives but as soon as the SIPPA people came to the stage to commence their talk on family planning, a change came over the audience. The women all pushed their chairs into a huddle at the front of the hall and told each other to be quiet so that could hear the information being provided. Questions raised afterwards revealed misconceptions about contraceptive use, confusion over traditional explanations of miscarriage and stillborn babies (typically this has been blamed on the mother), as well as health problems associated with pregnant women. Most women were keen for the session to continue

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<sup>1</sup> Organised by Masters students from the Tropical Health Program, University of Queensland, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Honiara. This survey covered both rural and urban areas.

g after its set finishing time. It would appear that women, at least, desperately want re information on family planning options and how contraceptives work.

A complex intermeshing of social, cultural, economic and logistical factors explain why so few people accept family planning methods in practice. Firstly, there are pressures on women to bear many children, as the following quote from a woman working as a labourer in Honiara shows:

*Some women produce up to ten children because they want their inlaws happy with them....Also, children eventually find work and help their parents. Another reason for having lots of children is that it is our custom way for the woman to repay the bride price paid for her (Link, November/December 1989:9).*

In addition, children are still expected to provide security for parents in old age. There is a saying that it is better to have your coffin surrounded by children than to have it carried by strangers. The tradition of women gaining status from bearing large numbers of children is entrenched. Other factors influencing the low number of family planning acceptors include,

*Religion, education and income levels, the desire for more children, gender preference of the child, (usually male),<sup>2</sup> and the sociocultural, economic and political status of women....Other important determinants are side effects to contraceptive methods, directly experienced or perceived by acceptors and non-acceptors due to rumours or 'stories' ....[also] lack of co-operation from the spouse, method failure, lack of motivation by health-workers, program service dissatisfaction and difficulty in obtaining a method due to distance, money or lack of a continuous supply of contraceptives (Bage et al., 1992:39).*

Because of my concern with women's empowerment, I have chosen to focus on one of the reasons why women are unhappy with the family planning options they have been offered. Dureau's (n.d.) research on women in Simbo in the Western Solomons<sup>3</sup> in the 1990s backs up my own research which indicated that the problem is not a lack of desire on the part of women to control their fertility. Women are particularly aware of the demands of having many children because of their integral role in child care. Men generally experience child care indirectly and many believe that they have paid bride price in order that their wife will bear them many children. It is not surprising, therefore, that male-focused methods of contraception are largely unsupported with men often refusing to wear condoms, fearing vasectomies and being unwilling to cooperate with either the withdrawal method or the rhythm method of natural family planning.

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In those areas where many traditions still thrive, however, there may be a preference for girls because of their potential in bringing wealth to the family through bride price payments. In this way a man's family can be repaid for their contribution to the bride price paid for his wife (Bage, 1992:47). Also, there is often a desire to have at least one or two daughters because they can assist the mother in providing for the needs of the family.

While some of the points she makes may be specific to Simbo society, others are more likely to be experienced by rural women across the country because of the similar roles and obligations they share.

Men on Simbo did not support the use of contraception by their wives either. Dureau (n.d.:8) argues that because the churches have encouraged wifely obedience and men's control over their wives' bodies, men feel they have the right to refuse to allow their wives to practice family planning. Many of them fear that, without the risk of getting pregnant, their wives will become promiscuous. Contraceptives are seen as taking away some of the control which men have over their wives. Consequently women struggle to get their husbands to attend clinics, or even to gain permission from their husbands to attend clinics themselves<sup>4</sup>. Legally husbands must give their consent before any procedure which may sterilise a woman takes place and technically they must also approve contraceptive treatment dispensed to their wives<sup>5</sup>. Thus many women in the Solomon Islands effectively have limited control over their own fertility.

Another problem which Dureau discovered focused on women's dissatisfaction with the range and effectiveness of available methods of contraception. Firstly, although clinics favour the use of Depo Provera, which places relatively small demands on staff time and expertise, women do not find Depo Provera injections appropriate because of perceived side effects including hot and cold flushes, bodily weakness, headaches, abdominal pain and pregnancy. Secondly, oral contraceptives have been unsuccessful because women do not comply with the time component, taking them sporadically and in uneven dosages. Further, because of this inconsistency, pills with high hormone dosages are issued and they have greater side effects than the low dosage pills typically dispensed in western countries. Thirdly, while IUCDs<sup>6</sup> are readily available for insertion in hospitals, many women are reluctant to use them because all seem to know of someone who has experienced either severe abdominal pain, sometimes requiring surgery, or abdominal infections related to use of IUCDs<sup>7</sup>. Fourthly, tubal ligations are not highly regarded because women feel that they weaken their bodies, preventing them from working until some time after the operation. Women who undergo tubal ligations typically do so as a last resort, often after they have already had six or more children. Younger women will not undergo the operation because if their husband was to die or divorce them, they fear no other man would want to marry an infertile woman.

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<sup>4</sup> A typical example is that of a 34 year old woman who went to see a health educator at the nearest hospital. She was the mother of nine healthy children and had decided that was all she wanted but her husband would not agree to her using contraceptives. The health educator from Helena Goldie Hospital suggested that the woman tell her husband that several of the children were sick so that he would come in to the clinic with his wife and then they could both receive some education on family planning.

<sup>5</sup> As long as a woman is married, however, she can sometimes forego this last requirement.

<sup>6</sup> Inter-uterine contraceptive device.

<sup>7</sup> Safety of IUCDs is a major issue for women, many of whom feel that conditions in provincial hospitals and clinics and techniques of staff are not as hygienic as they would be in Honiara.



Frustration with the available range of contraceptives and with backup advice is limited to Simbo women. During the provincial tours, women from Vurangoo and Irovanga villages commented that:

*The loop [IUCD] which is inserted into the women is not good. It is very humiliating for us, when we have to be inspected every now and again. There are times when we are so ashamed that we do not go and then something goes wrong and we are sick' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:103).*

Of concern is that the government health services and SIPPA do not inform men of all of their options. The Guadalcanal family planning survey revealed that natural family planning was the preferred method of fertility control amongst Solomon Islanders. There were religious, cultural and personal health reasons for them making this choice (Bage et al., 1992). However, despite women's keen interest in this method clinic staff are not supposed to encourage use of natural family planning and neither is SIPPA. SIPPA has previously referred those interested in this method to the 'O' clinic as they feel it is a difficult and time consuming method to teach. There is a general perception of natural family planning being an unreliable method as well<sup>6</sup>: 'The more naturalistic means of birth control which women seek are not advocated by the health services on the grounds of their unreliability, thus rendering them more unreliable when they are attempted' (Bage et al., 1992:27). Because of the lack of trained instructors in natural family planning, many couples use books, pamphlets or advice from friends to teach themselves but this is inadequate if this method is to be effective. One quarter of acceptors of family planning services in the Guadalcanal survey were 'self-taught' users of the ovulation method (Bage et al., 1992:91).

#### *What hinders the spread of information?*

There are logistical and cultural factors which hinder the spread of family planning information. For example, taboos inhibit discussion of topics related to sex between male and female relatives, especially if there are young, single persons present (Bage et al., 1992:47). In some languages there are no words for a person's genitals, making family planning messages difficult to get across (Link, November/December 1989:8-9). It is not surprising then that 'shyness' and 'dislike of approaching clinic staff of the opposite sex' were given by respondents in the Guadalcanal family planning survey as

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A recent World Health Organization study of natural family planning has concluded that it should be considered an effective method of birth control. In Calcutta, almost 20,000 women used natural family planning to control their fertility and it was found that there were only 0.2 pregnancies per 100 women users yearly, a success rate similar to that of the contraceptive pill. In Germany and Britain studies have found failure rates for natural family planning of 0.8 and 2.7 respectively, which means natural family planning has a greater success rate than condoms and is comparable with diaphragms and coils (Marlborough Express, 1993:27). This leads one to question why the International Planned Parenthood Association and numerous birth control agencies in the Third World have failed to promote natural family planning.

the two main reasons why they found it difficult to talk to health personnel about contraception (Bage et al., 1992:11).

Many people do not practice family planning simply because there are no skilled and trusted medical personnel close at hand. Once information is made available to villagers, however, both male and female, choices to limit the size of families are more likely to be made and supported by both partners. For example, a registered nurse living in Bellona for many years convinced local women to have less children, for reasons of their own and their children's health. Consequently the average number of children dropped from over ten to around five (*Solomon Toktok*, 9 June 1983:5).

How and when information is presented are crucial factors in determining whether women or men will participate in village workshops on family planning. When a health workshop was held on the island of Simbo, with a major session on family planning, few women attended because they were either too busy with domestic duties, they did not feel it was their place to speak in public forums or they felt it would be inappropriate for them to discuss issues related to their sexuality in front of certain male relatives (Dureau, n.d.). In such cases, family planning advice is not provided in an environment in which women feel safe or comfortable. Their gender interests are therefore not being addressed.

Women in Parara village, Western Province, indicate that they are unhappy with the way family planning information is delivered to them. They suggest that they are coerced into using particular methods: 'We should be given the education and left to choose on our own which one we wish to practise other than just having it forced on us' (National Women's Policy Review Committee, 1988:75). As discussed in Chapter Two, there has been concern that many programmes supposedly established to assist women are in fact using women to control the population growth rate. While there is nothing wrong with controlling the growth rate as such, there is a problem when this may jeopardise the health and well-being of family planning acceptors.

Church resistance to family planning programmes still influences people's attitudes as well. The five main churches have a conservative stance on family planning. In fact, three of the five church leaders interviewed during the Guadalcanal family planning survey were concerned that better availability of family planning information would increase promiscuity (Bage et al., 1992:Appendix 9). Such attitudes hinder women and men from taking advantage of family planning services which are available to them.

## Appendix Three

### *Factors hindering access of girls to education*

Girls are hindered from participating in formal education for a number of reasons: '...complex cultural and economic factors...converge to reinforce gender inequities' (UNICEF, 1993:47). Firstly, if the family does not have enough resources to send all of its children to school boys are given preference because it is they who will be expected to contribute to the family through cash employment. Parents generally regard the education of boys as a better investment in their future. Secondly, boys are more dispensable in the village. Girls are valued at home for the assistance they give their mothers in caring for younger siblings, working in the garden, cooking and cleaning. Thirdly, as girls approach puberty they are increasingly protected by their families: '...parents are generally reluctant to send daughters away from home for fear that they will not be well-supervised, suffer sexual harassment, or become pregnant' (Lateef, 1990:19).

In addition, girls have fewer opportunities to enter secondary school, or complete, their secondary education. All secondary schools are boarding schools and yet logistically, there are fewer boarding facilities for girls. There is one girl's hostel at the renowned 'King George VI' school in Honiara and six hostels for boys. Lack of places for girls in secondary schools has been a well known concern throughout the 1980s (People's Action Party, 1989:25) but the failure by successive governments to remedy this situation points to a deeper problem with official attitudes to the importance of education for girls. There are also factors which deter girls from moving into higher grades in school, not least of which involves harassment by boys. For example, the first girls who attended King George VI school in Honiara in 1982 were 'teased unmercifully' by the boys and 'bombarded with stones' (*Solomon Toktok*, 23 September 1982:9). Although the situation may have improved several girls indicated to me that this sort of harassment has not ceased altogether. They said that, when in the same classroom, boys make fun of, and intimidate, girls. Many girls would prefer separate classes so they did not have to feel afraid to speak out.

At the tertiary level, women on overseas scholarships have had their scholarships terminated if they became pregnant while overseas. There was a lot of media attention and criticism focused on such cases in the early 1980s, leading to the suggestion that women are purposely not chosen for overseas scholarships:

*The age-old myths that women will only get married or pregnant are often invoked to deny women the opportunities to study overseas...The accusation of male bias was expressed by numerous women in the Solomon Islands who all agreed that male bureaucrats must change their attitudes and there must be greater representation of women on the Scholarship Board if women are to achieve higher qualifications (Lateef, 1990:19-20).*

In the 1990s, at least, the scholarships board is starting to consider ways of allowing the young women in this situation to continue their studies.



## Amendments

p.xiii	'77' > '76'
p.xv	'Defficiency' > 'Deficiency'
p.2	'male and female' > 'males and females'
p.5	'income is' > 'incomes are'
p.8	'a woman' > 'women'
p.11	'project nor its' > 'projects nor their'
p.12	'providing them' > 'providing it'
p.17	'has not' > 'have not'
p.24	'same interest' > 'same interests'
p.27	'most affected' > 'most effected'
p.33	'way it which' > 'way in which'
p.78	Source for Table One: Structure based on Sen and Grown (1987)
p.85	'will every' > 'will ever'
p.95	'results which' > 'results while'
p.118	'developments agencies' > 'development agencies'
p.119	'position' > 'position.'
p.142	'role models to' > 'role models for'
p.144	'their husband' > 'their husbands'
p. 148	'it is often' > 'it is of'
p.166	Footnote 10: 'effected' > 'affected'
p.168	'to them being' > 'to their being'
p.181	'A women from' > 'A woman from'
p.210	'Chapter Three concluded' > 'Chapter Two concluded'
p.211	'groups who have' > 'groups which have'
p.259	'pages 266-67' > 'pages 262-63'
p.266	'there will different' > 'there will be different'
p.276	'equitable societies' > 'equitable society'
p.285	'ciey' > 'city'
p.287	Add to bibliography: Foanaota, L (1989) Social Change pp68-72 in <i>Ples Blong lumi: Solomon Islands, the past four thousand years</i> Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, Suva
p.290	'1:43-4, H T' > '1:34-48'