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# Men bathe upstream, women bathe downstream: Gender, natural resource management and development in rural Solomon Islands



Thesis submitted by  
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July 2016

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts, Society and Education,  
James Cook University

*Cover page photograph: Ridos overlooking her spectacular garden in Vavanga village*

*All photo credits Michelle Dyer*

## Dedication

To my daughters, Bonnie Rain and Immara Dawn.

May you go forth with brave hearts.

## Acknowledgements

My sincere and heartfelt thanks to the people of Solomon Islands who participated in my research and offered me their friendship. In particular, I thank the women and men of Vavanga village who welcomed me to their community. I acknowledge your bravery and open heartedness in allowing me to live with you and conduct research in your community. Thank you for feeding me, looking after me and including me in your lives. Thank you for teaching me how to cry in public and slow down. Thank you for talking to me and listening to me.

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Thank you to my colleagues at James Cook University for your support and humour. Thank you Dr Daniela Ceccarelli and Janelle Veitch for reading drafts of my work throughout the course of the PhD and for always providing insightful and constructive criticism. Thank you Dr Sally Babidge for your support, wisdom and humour. Thank you Dr Liz Tynan for sharing your extensive writing knowledge and expertise. Thank you Nina Goldie for proofreading me over the finish line.

Thank you Professor Rosita Henry and Dr Simon Foale for being such a great supervisory team. I truly appreciate you accompanying and guiding me on this journey. Your consistent faith in me has been heartening.

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Finally, thank you Mum and Dad. Without you, nothing at all. Words cannot express my gratitude for your unwavering support of all my endeavours.

## Statement of Access to Thesis

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30 June 2016  
(Date)

## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a complete list of references is given.

The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H4561).

Michelle J. Dyer

30 June 2016

## Statement of the Contribution of Others

Academic guidance and thesis supervision was provided by Professor Rosita Henry and Dr Simon Foale.

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All errors remain the author's own.

## Included Publications

Chapter No.	Details of publication(s) on which chapter is based	Nature and extent of the intellectual input of each author, including candidate
4	Dyer, M. (2016). Eating Money: Narratives of equality on customary land in the context of natural resource extraction in Solomon Islands. <i>The Australian Journal of Anthropology</i> . doi: 10.1111/taja.12213	M. Dyer sole author.
5	Dyer, M. (2016). Ungrounded Cosmopolitanisms: Intersections of moral responsibility and gender in land issues in Solomon Islands. <i>Women's Studies International Forum</i> (Special Issue: The gendering of the cosmopolitan politics of recognition, belonging and difference).	M. Dyer sole author. Article under review.
6 and 9	Dyer, M. (2015). <i>Neoliberalism and the international development gender agenda: Escaping lyrical metaphorical seduction in Solomon Islands</i> . Refereed conference proceedings. The Australian Sociological Association: Neoliberalism and Contemporary Challenges for the Asia-Pacific, Cairns. <b>ISBN:</b> 978-0-646-94798-3	M. Dyer sole author.

## Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of women on Kolombangara Island in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. It works towards making village women visible and their voices audible. A blend of quantitative and qualitative data is used to describe what women are doing, when, where, and how, and thus make sense of the position from, and within which, rural women act. As a feminist political work the thesis aims to reframe articulations of gender equity with development and natural resource management in the Pacific through the lens of village women's perspectives.

This research was undertaken through approximately twelve months' fieldwork in villages in various parts of Solomon Islands with seven months' continuous residence in one village in the Western Province. Data was generated using a blend of participant observation, informal and semi-formal interviews, Focus Discussion Groups and collection of quantitative data related to women's livelihood strategies. The thesis combines evidence of rural women's analysis and perceptions of gender relations with critical review of the effect of such representations in international development discourse globally and in Solomon Islands.

Women's narrations of their lives are contextualised by quantitative data on their livelihood strategies. This reveals the creative dimensions of women's agency, as well as the different ways in which they perceive their capacity to act may be enabled or constrained. An analysis of quantitative data of mixed and single gender community meetings reveals how certain configurations of power relations are normalised, re-enacted and reinforced. Cultural valuations and gendered characterisations of rights to speak publicly are examined through analysis of gendered roles in community meetings. A novel method of data presentation is then used to visually illuminate the differences in men's and women's meeting styles. This data shows that public community meetings follow men's meeting styles, which are inimical to the validation of women's contributions. I argue for creating conceptual space for women's meeting and speech styles as publicly valid as a measure for enabling women's empowerment.

Women's activities and perspectives during a logging conflict in one village are explored. Women's resistance to logging on their customary land is examined in the light of social and

cultural norms which demarcate the boundaries of “good” women’s behaviour. I conclude that this resistance is not *women’s* resistance, but is part of a coordinated strategy by those who oppose logging which instrumentally utilises culturally determined gender categories, flavoured by the influence of sustainable development discourse. By contrast, I present the case of one woman who contravenes gendered social expectations of women’s behaviour in her fight for land rights. This comparison reveals some of the socially prescribed operating parameters of women’s public oppositional behaviour.

The thesis engages in critical analysis of discourse emanating from the international development paradigm. I argue against the instrumental imperatives of the international development agenda which decontextualise representations of women and also make gender *relations* invisible. I contend that it is necessary to resist seduction by stirring lyrical metaphors that promise change in lofty language. Instead the thesis strives to remain ethnographically grounded in order to reveal the pathways of empowerment that rural women are creating and walking. Such framing aims to understand a more generative theory of women’s agency and to push back against neoliberal claims to discursive authority that seek to legitimate specific “development” interventions.

This thesis shows how Solomon Islands village women exercise agency to negotiate the politics of gender identity, and the gender of the political economy in ways that may remain ambiguous and refuse to fit neatly into handy discursive categories. Gender norms and women’s ability to influence decision making at many levels are changing through a variety of messy factors: the influence of internationally generated gender equity discourse; gendered differential engagements with modernity; the creation of space and opportunities for women to engage in critical self-reflection; and control over material outcomes. I show that women employ creative strategies to effect change which occur at levels of both practical and strategic interests.

Finally, I argue for a culturally embedded understanding of agency which recognises different ways of transforming and utilising gender categories generated by village women. And that this model of change can be considered revolutionary in its own right. Ideologically, conceptually and materially it works towards changing ways of doing and validating different ways of being. Village

women's strategies allow them to maintain their understandings of integrity and affirm the lives of those around them.

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## A Note on Language and Translation

Nduke, (pronounced N–*do*-kay) is the native language of Kolombangara Island. Vernacular terms in this thesis are in Nduke and Solomon Islands *pijin*. I do not use many Nduke terms as my facility with the Nduke language was limited to basic everyday conversation. More often, in depth discussions, interviews, semi-formal interviews and Focus Discussion Groups took place in Solomon Islands *pijin*, in which I was fluent. I have used italics to indicate words rendered in *pijin*. Words in Nduke are rendered in italics followed by Nduke in brackets the first time the term is used and in italics only thereafter, for example, *paele* (*Nduke*). Unless otherwise indicated transcripts are my translations from Solomon Islands *pijin* to English. I have not provided original *pijin* transcriptions due to considerations of space.

## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AUD	Australian Dollars
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FDG	Focus Discussion Group
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
FTE	Fixed Term Estate
GAD	Gender and Development
HDI	Human Development Index
KFPL	Kolombangara Forest Products Limited
KIBCA	Kolombangara Island Biodiversity and Conservation Association
KICC	Kolombangara Island Council of Chiefs
LPPPL	Levers Pacific Plantation Proprietary Limited
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
SBD	Solomon Island Dollars
SDA	Seventh Day Adventist
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

## 1. Introduction

A coconut perspective: When one woman's livelihood is another's tropical view.

In 2013 I lived for seven months in Vavanga village, on Kolombangara Island, in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. My nearest neighbour, Lola, was the same age as me. She had seven children. At the time I lived in the village her oldest child was twenty one years old and her youngest one and a half. I was fortunate to have Lola as my neighbour. She was an excellent and patient teacher who responded with grace to my many requests, such as, "Can you please teach me how to husk a coconut?" This is an absolutely essential and utterly commonplace skill in Solomon Islands and most of the Pacific. She also taught me to make coconut milk. Making coconut milk is an activity that women (and others) do every day, often more than once a day, as it is a common ingredient in local cooking.

I was inordinately proud of myself the first time I made coconut milk. Lola was bemused when I told her that where I lived we usually got coconut milk in a tin, often from Thailand. She asked me if this was because we did not have coconuts. I live in North Queensland, Australia, so I said, we have coconuts, but the city council removes all the coconuts when they are green and takes them to the rubbish tip. She found this hard to believe and asked me why they would do such a thing. I felt foolish explaining that it is to prevent anyone being injured by falling coconuts.<sup>1</sup>

There are coconut trees in every inhabited area of Solomon Islands. Many coconut plantations are part of colonial legacy, either planted as money earning ventures to make the

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a widely quoted statistic that 150 people are killed by falling coconuts a year. According to *The Straight Dope*, (<http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/2405/are-150-people-killed-each-year-by-falling-coconuts>) this statistic originated with a press release from a British travel insurance firm. It stated "Falling coconuts kill 150 people worldwide each year, 15 times the number of fatalities attributable to sharks". While there doesn't seem to be any actual research to support this figure, this statistic has been used numerous times to prove the relative harmlessness of a variety of animals including sharks and bats. See also: <http://travelwireasia.com/2016/01/do-falling-coconuts-really-kill-150-people-each-year/>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_by\\_coconut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_by_coconut), <http://paradise.docastaway.com/falling-coconut-deaths/>

Solomon Islands Protectorate self-sufficient, or planted by local people to prove habitation, claim ownership and prevent alienation of land. People use every part of the coconut tree in the village. They drink the green coconuts; they milk the ripe coconuts; they eat the inside of the growing coconuts (which is kind of like coconut-flavoured Styrofoam); they make baskets, mats and brooms from the leaves; the husks and shells are used as fuel, mulch and otherwise in gardening; and they use the wood of the trunk if they cut one down. They also make copra when they need some money – copra is what coconut oil is made from and it is in many products (things like soap, shampoo, food products and cosmetics). Lola asked me what our coconut trees are for where I live in Australia. I told her they are to look at so as to invoke a “tropical” feel.<sup>2</sup> She laughed, in disbelief.



*Plate 1.1: Carlos climbing a coconut tree to pick green coconuts for drinking*

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<sup>2</sup> For example see, <http://www.cairnspost.com.au/news/cairns/cairns-regional-council-to-vote-on-giving-coconuts-the-chop-under-new-management-plan-today/story-fnjpusyw-1226824317231>

In the above story, *perspective* is the difference between what seems commonplace, what seems extraordinary and what is given value.<sup>3</sup> It is also a commentary on global inequality and concepts of development.

There are many scholars who have challenged, and continue to challenge, the premises on which designations, prescriptions and interventions in the name of development are built. The point of difference in this thesis is that I seek to view them from the perspective of Solomon Islands village women. My particular focus is on village women, as over 85% of Solomon Islanders live in villages. Villages are also the place at which material contests over natural resource extraction take place and at which many development interventions are supposedly directed, whether funds make it out of the national capital Honiara, or not. I use the term “village” women, rather than rural, as this is the word commonly used in *pijin* and English in Solomon Islands.

The sense of proportion offered by such a perspective shifts the parameters of discussions about development and the gender of development in particular. There are many assumptions built into the concept of “development” that reflect the knowledge base from which the idea of development springs and not the reality or perspectives of the people who are supposed to need it. Mukhopadhyay (2014) asserts, “...knowledge generation and production...are themselves projects of power” (p. 365). I set out in this thesis on a project of power, an assertion of the right of village women to be involved in knowledge generation and production about themselves, their lives and their aspirations. I argue that the international development paradigm’s promotion of gender equality has resulted in the emergence of women as a category of simultaneous victims and saviours. The net effect has been the disappearance of real women. Even reports which are full of statistics on the “poor” women of the Pacific call for more information on real women’s lives (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2010, p. 6). Additionally, focusing on a pre-constructed category of “poor women” leaves unchallenged “patriarchal institutional practices” and structural inequalities (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 364).

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<sup>3</sup> See also Foale and Macintyre (2005) who note that European visions of the South Pacific, both historical and current, based on a European world view have simultaneously “shaped and distorted the world that they encountered” (p. 1).

## Aims

This thesis is a feminist project with three related aims:

1. To understand village women's perspectives of their lives and make audible their voices.
2. To examine how village women exercise agency and contribute to changing gendered social norms.

And, through aims 1 and 2:

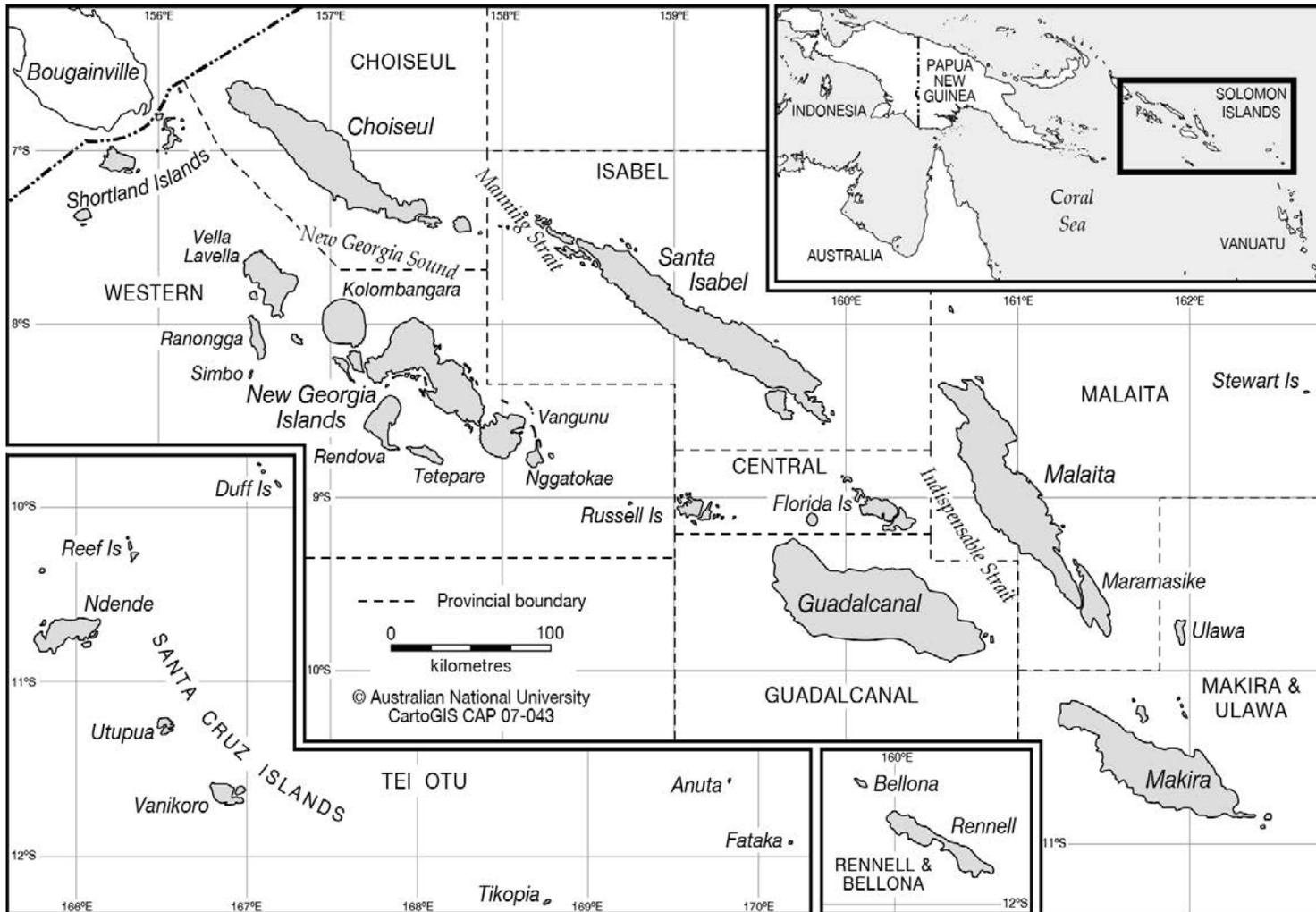
3. To challenge the hijacking of the concept of women's empowerment by neoliberal constructions within the international development paradigm.

## Key questions

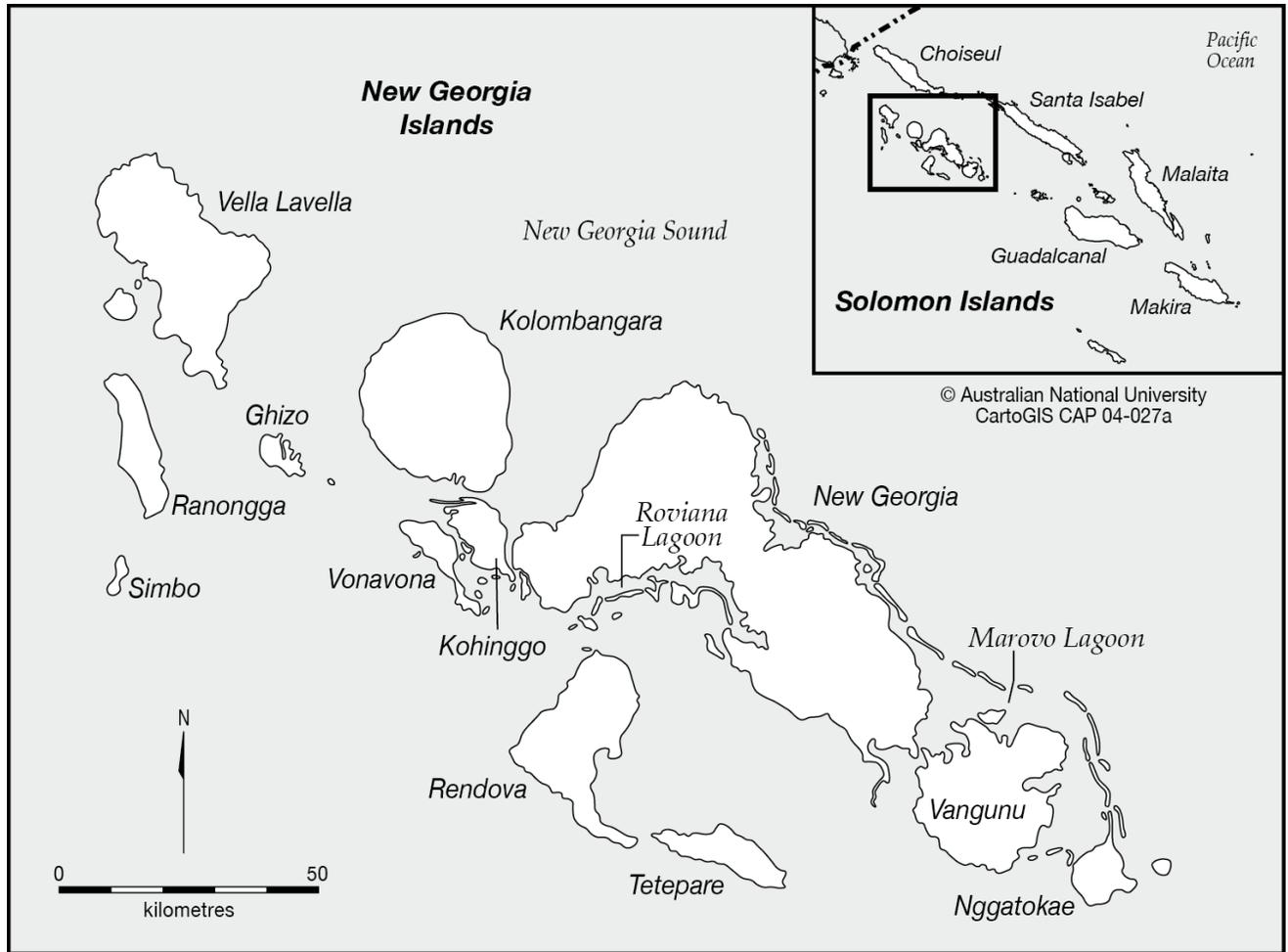
The thread that runs through this ethnography is an exploration of women's agency in a variety of settings.

The key questions I ask throughout the thesis are:

1. How and where do women exercise agency?
2. What affects their capacity to act?
3. How, if at all, are village women contributing to changing gender norms in rural Solomon Islands?



Map 1.1: Solomon Islands showing current provincial boundaries. (Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific, 2016)



Map 1.2: New Georgia Island group, Western Province. (Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific, 2016)

## Context of the study

### General introduction to Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands is a chain of islands in the Pacific Ocean, spread across two thousand kilometres of sea between Bougainville and Vanuatu. There are nine main island groups and nearly one thousand small islands and atolls comprising a land mass of 28,400 square kilometres. The sea area and exclusive economic zone is 1.34 million square kilometres. The nine main island groups are divided into nine provinces, with a capital territory of Honiara (see Map 1.1). Solomon Islands is a constitutional monarchy in the Commonwealth realm and was a British Protectorate from 1893 to 1978.

Solomon Islands has a young, fast growing population of just over half a million. The median age is twenty years old, with 38% of the population under fifteen years old. The population growth rate in 2009 was 2.3% (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2009). While Solomon Islands has low population density relative to other Pacific Island countries (twenty people per square kilometer), the population is expected to exceed nine hundred thousand by 2035 (UNFPA, 2014, p. 70).

An estimated 85% of people in Solomon Islands live in rural areas on customary owned land, deriving their livelihood predominantly from subsistence gardening and fishing (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2009). Subsistence livelihood practice, based on customary land tenure principles, underpins spiritual and identity dimensions of people's attachments to land and informs ways of articulating that attachment (Crocombe, 1994; Kuokkanen, 2011, pp. 217-218; Vigulu, 2011). It is also essential to food security throughout Solomon Islands. Customary land tenure rights are enshrined in the constitution such that communal ownership and control of resources is protected by law.

Solomon Islands has some of the highest forest cover in the world proportionate to land area. Approximately 80% of Solomon Islands is forested land (the REDD desk, 2016). In most of

Solomon Islands, forest ecosystems are integral to productive subsistence livelihoods. In the past, clearing of forests were mainly to establish food gardens, which operated on a slash and burn system (see Plate 1.2). Under the British Protectorate, until the late 1970s, copra was the country's principal export commodity and commercial forest clearing was mainly for the purpose of establishing coconut plantations (Bennett, 1987, 2000b). There was some attempt at logging during this era on Vanikoro Island which was largely unsuccessful, detailed by Bennett (2000a). Commodification of forests did not begin in earnest until the early 1980s. Large scale logging by foreign companies on customary owned land began at this time, and has been the country's largest export earner since (World Bank, 2015, p. 129).



*Plate 1.2: A site recently cleared for a food garden*

The regime of large scale logging by foreign companies on customary owned land has been marked by environmental destruction, political malfeasance, a failure of the state to regulate or control the logging industry and unethical practices by foreign logging companies,

including financial trickery. Kabutaulaka (2006) calculates loss of potential revenue in millions of Australian dollars in the period 1990-1997 due to practices such as underreporting of harvests and financial malpractice such as transfer pricing and tax evasion (p. 249).<sup>4</sup> There are no indications that such practices have abated or are being regulated in the current era.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, breaches of logging contract conditions are common; royalties to landowners may be underpaid and verbal promises by logging companies to village communities for infrastructural improvements - like building schools, clinics, or roads - are rarely kept (Gay, 2009, p. 218). The adverse environmental, social and economic effects of logging are well documented (For some examples see Barlow, 1997; Bennett, 2000b; Frazer, 1997; Gay, 2009; Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2000; Kabutaulaka, 2000, 2006; Oranje & Duff, 2006; Shearman, 2012).

Forestry experts have been lamenting the unsustainable rate of logging for at least the last decade and predicted an end to all natural forest by sometime around 2014/2015 (Oranje & Duff, 2006). Estimates on how far above “sustainable yields” the logging industry is operating have been available since the 1990s, at least. The figure quoted widely in earlier literature as sustainable harvest was 325,000 cubic metres per year, estimated by the *Solomon Islands Resource Inventory Project* in 1994 (Frazer, 1997, p. 46). Timber production reached over 700,000 cubic metres in 1995 (Frazer, 1997, p. 47). The sustainable yield figure was revised by the *National Forest Resource Assessment Update 2006* to 255,000 cubic metres per year for the period 2004 to 2049 (Oranje & Duff, 2006, p. 3). Such predictions notwithstanding, logging has continued apace for the last two decades. The average annual

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<sup>4</sup> “Financial trickery” includes practices such as underreporting of harvests and transfer pricing; described as: “Transfer pricing occurs when foreign logging companies sell to their parent companies at prices significantly lower than those paid domestically. Perhaps up to half of foreign loggers use such business arrangements. A parent company may appoint a buying house in Asia, often in Singapore or Malaysia, buying logs from Solomon Islands which it then exports to China. The buyer in China sends a letter of credit to the agent in Singapore with a price of, say, USD140 per m<sup>3</sup>. The agent then sends another ‘back to back’ letter of credit (where two transactions are involved) to the company in Solomon Islands with a price of USD80 per m<sup>3</sup>, the figure declared to Solomon Islands Government. Supporting documentation is designed in such a way that it cannot be cleared in Solomon Islands before Singapore. In most cases over half of the price is transferred, and some companies can capture a margin of up to 80%” (Gay, 2009, p. 217).

<sup>5</sup> For example see newspaper articles from The Solomon Star 14 – 17 June 2016  
<http://www.solomonstarnews.com/viewpoint/private-view/10550-strong-stuff-from-sfa>,  
<http://www.solomonstarnews.com/news/national/10507-sfa-govt-must-to-stop-illegal-logging-operations>,  
<http://www.solomonstarnews.com/news/national/10541-logging-dilemma>

cut between 2004 and 2005 reached over 1.2 million cubic metres (Oranje & Duff, 2006, p. v). Between 1997 and 2007 annual logging harvests increased by over 120% (Gay, 2009, p. 53). Timber production increased by 12% between 2013 and 2014, and by 15% from 2014 to the first half of 2015 (World Bank, 2015, p. 129). So, while sustainable yield estimates for natural forests have been going down, actual harvests have been going up. A revised forest resource assessment, carried out in 2011, calculated that half of all “primary commercial forest resources” have been logged with a possible 30% still available for extraction (the REDD desk, 2016). This same source claims that while actual deforestation rates remain low at 0.25% per year, forest *degradation* related to notions of biodiversity loss have been severe (the REDD desk, 2016).

During these decades of logging, power and money have been concentrated in the hands of a small number of men, most notably politicians and educated landowner representatives. Village residents, both resource owners and users, have gained the least in this situation. They have experienced increased levels of community conflict and degraded forests, rivers and reefs as a direct result of logging activity. Often the people most actively involved in instigating and negotiating logging projects, and ultimately capturing the greatest proportion of financial benefit, are not resident in the villages affected. Logging projects may be pushed ahead by powerful political figures in Honiara, including the Prime Minister in more than one instance (Fraenkel, 2004, p. 39; Kabutaulaka, 2000, p. 95).

The other industry that forms the backbone of national income in Solomon Islands is Official Development Assistance (ODA). In 2011 ODA comprised 50.5% of Gross National Income (GNI). The World Bank revised this figure to 18.1% in 2014 (World Bank, 2016). Solomon Islands Gross National Income per capita is the lowest in the Pacific (UNICEF, 2011, p. 12). In 2015 Solomon Islands ranked 156 of 188 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), placing it in the “low human development” category (UNDP, 2015). Aside from arguments about how such categorisations are formulated, which I return to in Chapter 6, these figures makes it seemingly self-evident that “development” is what Solomon Islands needs.

Solomon Islands ranked second worldwide between 2009 and 2011 of Aid-to-Gross National Income ratios of the top twenty aid dependent nations (Pryke, 2013b, p. 4). This ranking reflects a dramatic spike in aid to Solomon Islands since 2002 (Pryke, 2013b) which has occurred in the wake of a civil conflict known as the Ethnic Tensions and the subsequent intensified involvement of foreign government and non-government aid agencies in political, institutional and village level life. In particular the presence of the peacekeeping force, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), from 2003-2013 (Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, & Okole, 2014).

The Ethnic Tensions is the label commonly used to refer to a period of civil unrest and sporadic violence between 1998 and 2003 sparked (in part) by territorial issues between the Indigenous people on Guadalcanal and immigrant Malaitans. During this time two armed militias groups emerged, the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) (also known as the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army- GRA) and the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). Some 200 deaths and the displacement of an estimated 35,000 people resulted. An internal relocation occurred as many people living in Honiara or elsewhere on Guadalcanal, sometimes for generations, returned to their customary lands to escape the conflict. This was particularly the case for many Malaitan families. International investors fled the country, devastating the already beleaguered national economy (Fraenkel, 2004). According to Amnesty International, 75% of Solomon Islands women experienced “some form of direct personal trauma, including rape, armed violence, threats of armed violence and the death of family members” (UN Women, 2016). Rape of women was also used as a weapon of humiliation during the conflict (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012).

According to analyst Pryke (2013a), who produced the above figures on aid dependency in the Pacific from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, this dataset does not count aid from “non-traditional donor” countries, most notably China. Arguably these figures still underestimate the proportion of aid to GDP and GNI in Solomon Islands. This extremely high level of foreign development aid in a country with such a relatively small population magnifies the power of development discourse and practice. Measurements of (sustainable) “development” and analysis of Solomon Islands

“development” *needs*, describe flows of money and power. The power of international development discourse is examined in detail in Chapter 6.

It is this macro political economic context, of aid dependency and rampant natural resource extraction, which frames my analysis of the lives and livelihood strategies of Solomon Island’s village women. While Macintyre (2011) extends gender analysis to modern Papua New Guinea women, living in towns and earning wages, I argue that subsistence farming, village dwelling women in Solomon Islands also negotiate similarly with the challenges of modernity, money and relationships.

### The position of women

The commodification of forests in Solomon Islands through large-scale logging has had a profound impact on social relationships, including between men and women. Increasing interaction with the cash economy has brought about greater economic and social inequality generally. For the most part women have been among the most disadvantaged from this change. At the time of writing, the quest for cash through natural resource extraction continues unabated, and continues to be the business of men. An increasing focus on mining business in the same mould as logging is also becoming apparent (Porter & Allen, 2015).

Opportunities to access possible wealth and resources on offer from involvement with international commercial and other Non-Government Organisation (NGO) projects are distinctly gendered. Customary land tenure principles in Solomon Islands, which in theory ensure the accessibility and inalienability of land for all members of a specified group, have been eroded by a narrowing of negotiations about land issues to a small group of elite men. The nature of commercial transactions has undermined women’s right to make decisions over land use and pushed their role as landowners to the background (Maetala, 2008). Commercial and legal imperatives encourage exclusive articulation of property rights in a way that is incompatible with the flexible nature of customary land rights and focusses on representation of *ownership* rights (Foale & Macintyre, 2000; Guo, 2011; Hviding, 1993; McDougall, 2005,

2011). Large scale logging on customary land requires representatives, “trustees”, on logging licenses; and these people are usually men (Kabutaulaka, 2000, p. 94).

In the past men almost always took the lead in land negotiations and acted as spokespeople, even within matrilineal land tenure systems (Bennett, 1987; Douglas, 2000; Foale & Macintyre, 2000; Maetala, 2008). In the modern era, formal processes with legal documentation, such as in logging licenses, enable certain individuals to claim authority in decisions about land. As a corollary, those in a position to negotiate logging operations are ultimately able to control the flow of financial benefits. For example, the documentary *Since the Company Came* portrays how the balance of power shifts from the traditional chief to an educated kinsman in a logging dispute on Rendova Island, Solomon Islands (Hawkins, 2000). Although Mary Bea is promoted as a woman active in stopping the logging project in the case in the documentary, she is not shown giving any commentary in the film and mostly appears sitting silently on the ground outside the meeting house in which most of the action takes place. I return to these issues throughout the thesis and seek to illuminate underlying social practices which reinforce gendered inequity, specifically women’s exclusion, in such processes.

Women’s organisations and women leaders in Solomon Islands are most commonly found within the various Christian denomination churches. Approximately 92% of Solomon Islands population is Christian. Extensive networks of women’s church groups operate within and across islands and provinces throughout the nation. For many village women church organisations may often be the main, or only, networks through which they can gain further training, leadership, solidarity and opportunities to widen their experiences and travel (Barnes, 2000; Boseto, 2000; Douglas, 2000, 2003; McDougall, 2003; Strachan, 2010).

Women church leaders, however, are usually ultimately subordinate to male authority within most (if not all) of the Christian denominations active in Solomon Islands. Women as leaders remain *women’s* leaders. Additionally, their power for public and political action resides largely within a construct of the “good woman” – moral, Christian, feminine, and related strongly to qualities associated with motherhood – caring and nurturing. This “good” woman

appears in international development discourse and at national and local levels in Solomon Islands, discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Women are poorly represented in politics at national, provincial and local levels. They are also a small minority in leadership positions in business and within government ministries and organisations (Quay, 2012, pp. 6-14). There are a number of non-government and government aid organisations devoted to Pacific women in leadership, which includes women in Solomon Islands. These programs, however, may not reach or be appropriate for village women with low levels of literacy and education generally (Maetala, 2010).<sup>6</sup> In his analysis of why women can't win elections in Solomon Islands, Wood (2014) finds three main obstacles: gendered expectations of moral standards of behaviour, access to funds for electoral campaigning, and the gender of networks of influence (p. 1). These issues are discussed in detail throughout the thesis.

### Kolombangara Island

Ethnographic research in the thesis predominantly took place on Kolombangara Island in the Western Province (see Map 1.2 and Plate 1.3). Kolombangara Island is a plio-pleistocene era extinct volcano roughly circular in shape, 30 kilometres in diameter, rising to a height of 1876 metres, with a central crater over 1000 metres deep (Whitmore, 1989, p. 469). The island experiences an average of eight metres rainfall a year at the caldera. The result is a profusion of streams and rivers throughout the island. The island is named in the Nduke language for its abundance of water; *kolo* means water and *bangara* means chief or king or god.

The population of Kolombangara is approximately 6000 people. Land ownership is reckoned matrilineally on customary owned land. The overall land tenure situation on the island is unique in Solomon Islands. Considering the island mostly unpopulated, and therefore free of

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, International Women's Development Association (<https://www.iwda.org.au/resource/4857-2/>), Ausaid (<http://www.pacificwomen.org/pacific-links/pacific-leadership-program/>), East-West Center (<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/education/pacific-islands-women-in-leadership-program-wil>), and International Labour Organization ([http://www.ilo.org/suva/WCMS\\_173603/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/suva/WCMS_173603/lang--en/index.htm)), to name just a few.

ownership claims, two thirds of the island was declared wasteland and alienated by the British Protectorate in the early 1900s under the *Queen's Regulation No.4 of 1896* (Bennett, 1987, pp. 127-138; Riogano, 1979, p. 245). This occurred as part of the British Protectorate's drive to be self-funded in an era when the Resident Commissioner, Charles Woodford, favoured a policy of alienation of "unoccupied" land in order to encourage foreign investment (Bennett, 1987; Foukona, 2007, p. 65; Ruthven, 1979, p. 242). J.B. Thurston reported in 1894:

The magnificent island of Kolombangara, some twenty five miles square, one of the most magnificent islands in the group, of great fertility and possessing excellent anchorages, has a population of only one hundred and fifty souls. This handful of people, moreover, have no regular dwelling places but move from cave to cave or hilltop to hilltop. (J.B. Thurston 1894 quoted in Ruthven, 1979, p. 243)

Depopulation at this time was due to warfare, disease, and movement of people from Kolombangara across to nearby Vonavona and Roviana Lagoons (Riogano, 1979, p. 245).

Between 1902 and 1919 Levers Pacific Plantation Proprietary Limited (LPPPL), a British company, acquired Certificates of Occupation (Wasteland) for large areas covering Kolombangara, parts of New Georgia and Isabel, and the Tenaru area of Guadalcanal. The holdings on Kolombangara were modified by the Philips Commission and in 1931 LPPPL were issued a certificate for 625 square kilometres on Kolombangara.<sup>7</sup> Between 1966 and the early 1980s the entire lowland forest of the island was logged. All trees of forty centimetre or more top bole diameter, on both customary and leased land up to 400 metres elevation, were removed and exported by Levers Pacific Timber, an incarnation of LPPPL (Bennett,

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<sup>7</sup> The Land Commissioner was appointed to deal with disputes and complaints over land. Captain Alexander was the first land commissioner appointed in 1914. His tenure was considered largely unsuccessful with many parties left dissatisfied by his decisions. In 1921 Sir F. Baumont Philips took over. He re-heard many claims already presented to Captain Alexander. In total he heard 55 claims against land alienation between 1921 and 1923. This body of claims and decisions is known as the Philips Commission. Validating legislation passed in 1923 gave the decisions of the Philips Commission force of law such that, "all decisions of the Commission were made final, and there is no way in which anyone can go back to reopen the disputes he decided" (Ruthven, 1979, p. 245). The commission is implicated in the evolution of judicial rulings and the power subsequently imparted to official or court documents concerning land rights. Many landowners on Kolombangara Island related to me how their ancestors gained title to blocks of land on parts of the coastal rim of the island already under lease to LPPPL by planting coconut trees and inhabiting the area during the Phillips Commission era.

1987, pp. 332-333; Whitmore, 1989, p. 470). This was one of the first large-scale logging operations in the Solomons.

At the time of writing approximately 390 square kilometres of land on Kolombangara are under a Fixed Term Estate (See Map 1.3).<sup>8</sup> This area was leased in 1989 for a 75 year period to Kolombangara Forest Products Limited (KFPL), who operate a forestry plantation. KFPL obtained Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification in 1998. FSC certification is an international certificate supposedly ensuring sustainability of operations, environmentally, socially and culturally, which allows timber to be sold for a higher price on the international market as “sustainable timber” (see [www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org)). KFPL was jointly owned by the Solomon Islands Government (40%) and the Commonwealth Development Corporation (60%), until April 2011, when Taiwanese company Nien Made Enterprise, bought the Commonwealth Development Corporation’s 60% of KFPL. Under this new management KFPL continues to advertise itself as sustainable plantation forestry, committed to retaining FSC certification (KIBCA, 2011). KFPL employs approximately 120 permanent staff and up to 600 contractors drawn from many parts of the Solomons. Only two of the full time staff are women; they do administrative work in KFPL offices in Rinngi town (pers. comm. Mayson Nesah, KFPL personnel manager).

KFPL have built extensive roads throughout the leased area. This is also quite unique in Solomon Islands where transport is more commonly by sea and roads are often poorly maintained or only intermittently usable depending on the weather. An access and use corridor exists around the rim of the island on the seaward side of the ‘ring road’ that circumnavigates the alienated (KFPL leased) land.

The remaining one third of the island is either under customary land tenure or is registered land (see Map 1.3 and Map 1.4). A patchwork of logging operations by large scale foreign logging companies continues to occur in these areas at the time of writing. Deals between customary or registered land owners and foreign logging companies are often contentious

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<sup>8</sup> Fixed Term Estates are allocated for particular purposes with specific conditions stated in the Deed of Grant (Sullivan, 2007, pp. 9-10).

and cause for community divisions and hostilities. Many of these disputes result in lengthy court cases.

There are villages and settlements around the entire coastal lowlands perimeter of the island, including on land in the alienated area (see Map 1.3). Complex, and sometimes conflictual negotiations, have taken place over land use in this area, as villagers attempt to find farming land and income to meet their needs (Vigulu, 2011). There are recent court cases in which landowners have challenged the boundaries of the KFPL lease. Such struggles are ongoing and often involve issues of trespass which may result in legal action.<sup>9</sup>

A conservation area of 200 square kilometres on land above 400 metres elevation was officially declared in June 2011 (see Map 1.5). This is the largest dedicated land conservation area in Solomon Islands. It was established by the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity and Conservation Association (KIBCA) in partnership with the different landowning groups, (customary and registered landowners), and KFPL. KIBCA is an indigenous organisation formed in 2008 to “protect Kolombangara Island’s rich marine and forest biodiversity and to educate, promote and encourage sustainable management of natural resources through viable economic and social ventures for our communities” (KIBCA, 2016). KIBCA explains its genesis from a greater understanding of the “scientific significance” of the forests of Kolombangara, particularly, an awareness of high plant and animal biodiversity, including several endemic bird and frog species (KIBCA, 2016).

More recently KIBCA has been attempting to gain *Protected Area* status for the conservation area above 400 metres (KIBCA, 2016). In 2012 the Solomon Islands government passed the *Protected Areas Act 2010* (no. 4 of 2010). The designation of a *Protected Area* under the act gives permanent legal protection for the area so that the “habitat, ecosystems and native species of the intended reserve are preserved in an undisturbed, dynamic and evolutionary state” (Part 2: 5 (2), *Protected Areas Act 2010* (no. 4 of 2010)). KIBCA hope to use this designation to set up Solomon Islands first National Park (pers. comm. Ferguson Vaghi,

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<sup>9</sup> For example see KFPL v Alezama, HC-SI CC: 329 of 2007, KFPL v Principal Magistrate (Western) [2013] SBHC 47; HCSI-CC No. 245 of 2012 (3 May 2013)

KIBCA coordinator). KIBCA has also taken an environmental protection role in recent logging cases both inside and outside the current conservation area.<sup>10</sup> They have been successful in enforcing legal protection of the area above 400 metres and have been acknowledged in at least two cases as having a legal right (*locus standi*) as a stakeholder in environmental protection to challenge logging company activity, both above and below the 400 metre conservation area (Dyer, 2016, pp. 12-13).<sup>11</sup>

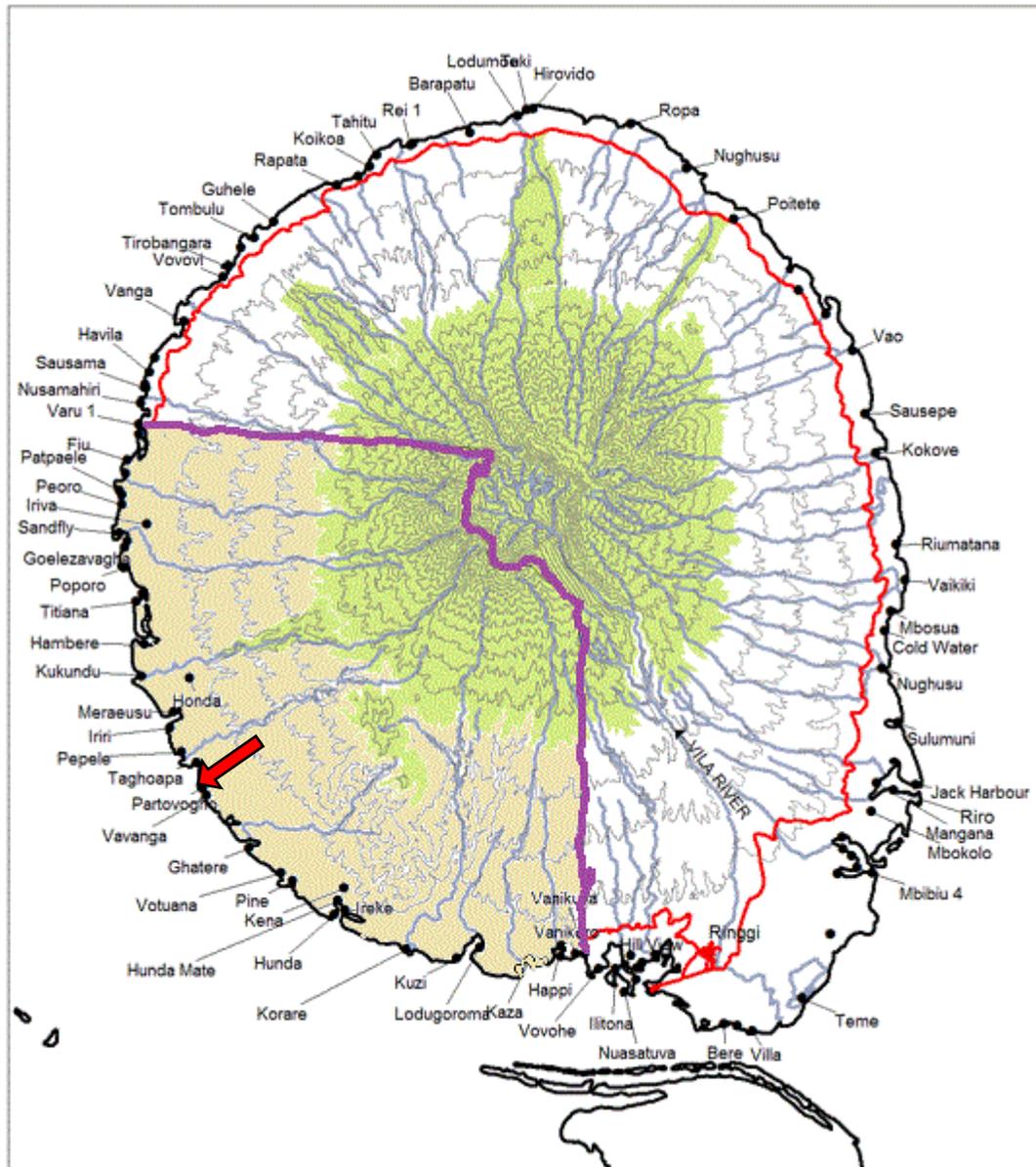
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<sup>10</sup> For example see [2010] SBHC 54; HCSI-CC 282 of 2010, HCSI Civil Case NO. 192 of 2012: 6

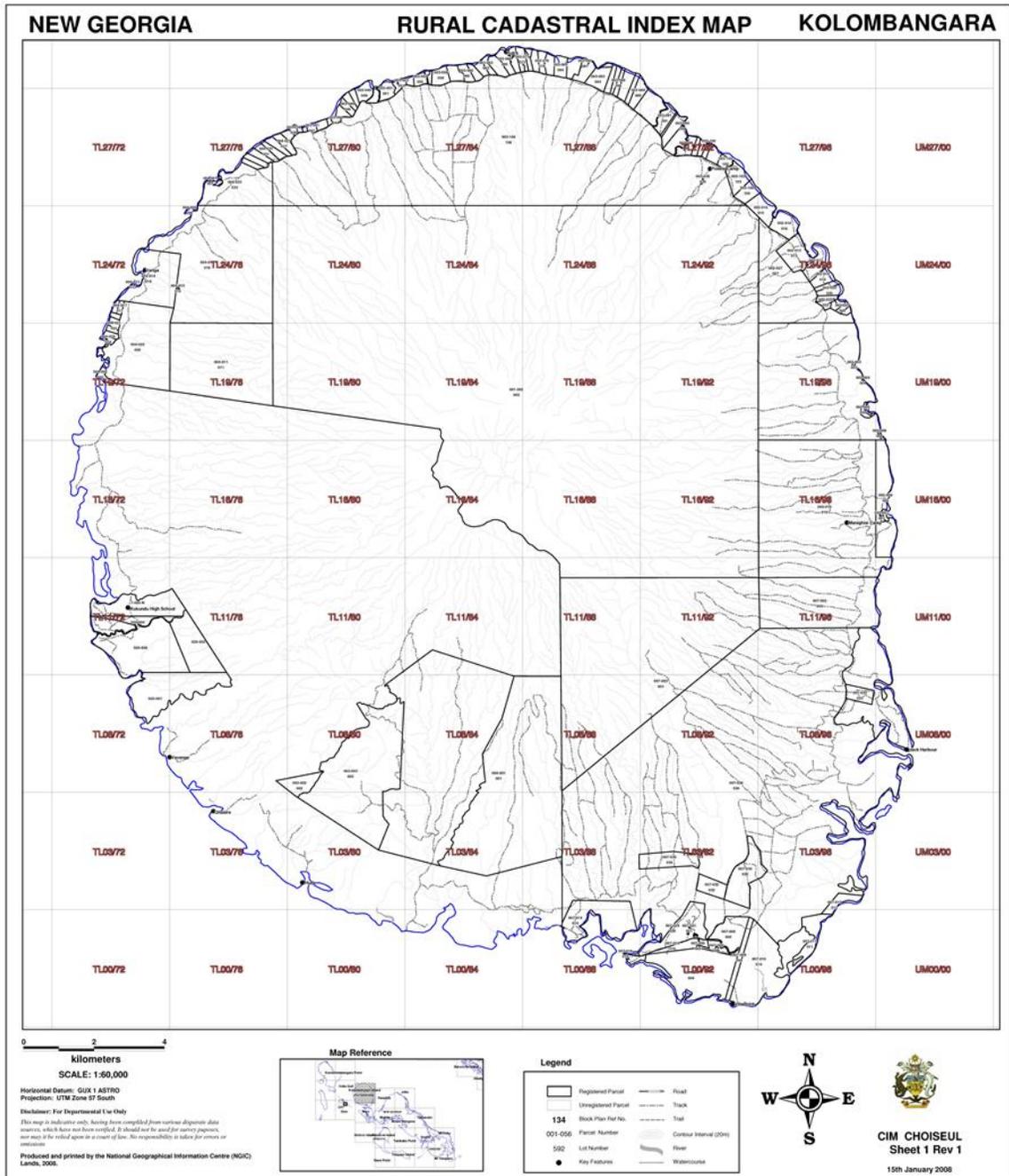
<sup>11</sup>For example see [2010] SBHC 54; HCSI-CC 282 of 2010 and HCSI Civil Case NO. 192 of 2012: 6.



*Plate 1.3: Kolombangara Island. The mountainous jagged volcano rim is evident in this photograph. Coconut plantations in the foreground.*

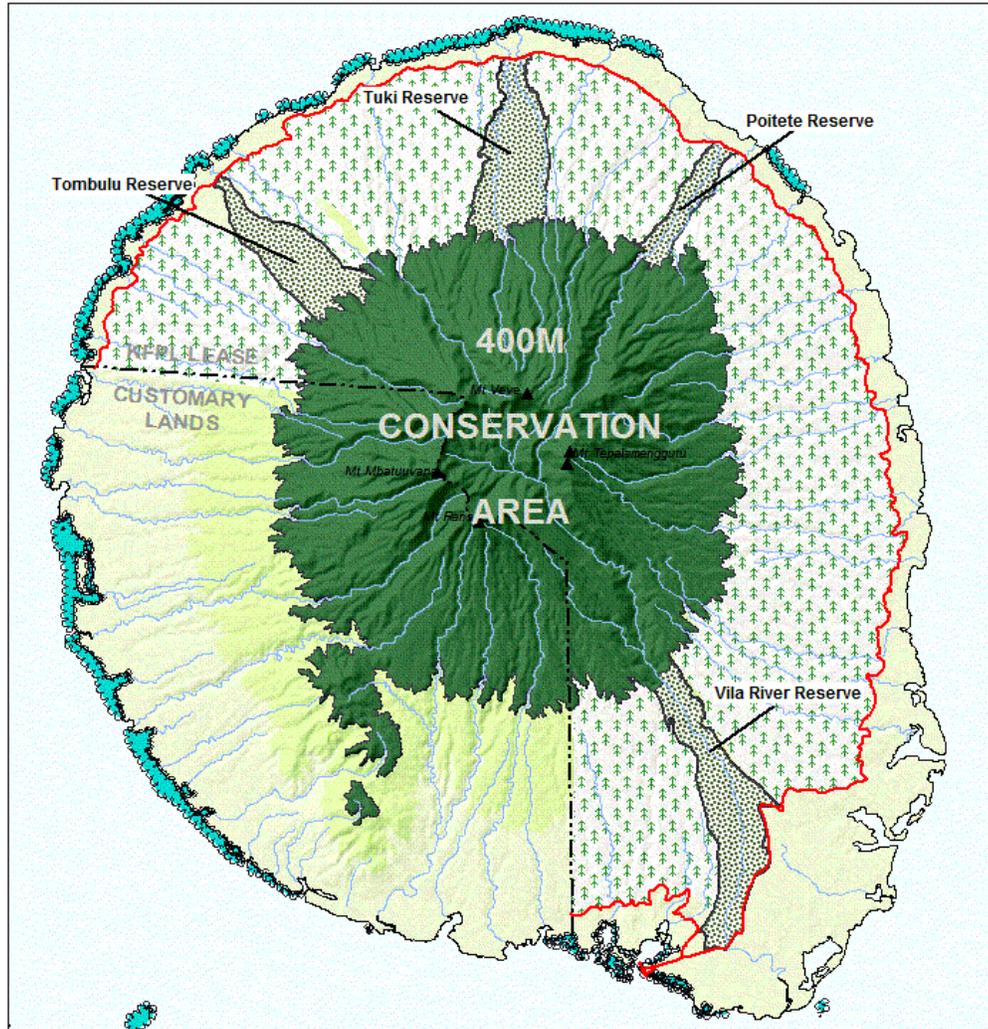


Map 1.3: Customary land tenure and land leased to KFPL. Vavanga Village indicated with red arrow.  
 Source: KIBCA (with permission), modified by M.Dyer 2016. This map is representational only and does not accurately reflect actual boundaries. It should not be used for legal purposes.



Map 1.4: Straight unbroken lines show the divisions of land on Kolombangara currently. Areas numbered in small black numbers represent registered parcels of land.

## KOLOMBANGARA ISLAND Conservation Reserves



Map by KIBCA 13 May 2011  
Scale: 1:172,000

Kolombangara Conservation Reserves - May 2011.WOR

Map 1.5: Map produced by KIBCA showing conservation reserves. Reproduced with permission from KIBCA.

## Vavanga Village

I was based in Vavanga village for seven months continuously, from February to August in 2013. The data presented in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 was generated there. I provide some demographic specifics about the village to contextualise these aspects of the thesis. Vavanga village is located on the south-west side of Kolombangara Island and is one of the original Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) mission villages (see Map 1.3, Vavanga village indicated with red arrow). During the time of research it had a population of approximately 200 people, most of whom were SDA with a small Baha'i faith contingent. The village is located approximately sixteen kilometres across the Blakett Strait from Gizo, the provincial capital of the Western Province. Inhabitants can reach Gizo by boat (using an outboard motor), a journey that can take anywhere from forty five minutes to an hour and a half depending on the boat being travelled in and the weather. Within a twenty minute boat ride or an hour and half walk was the large SDA high school of Kukundu to the North West and a health clinic at Kukundu permanently staffed by a nurse. Kaza Community High School was located to the south-east. There was an SDA-run primary school in Vavanga, and an SDA church.

Vavanga village is situated on customary owned land, part of the Viuru tribe descent group estate, under a matrilineal land tenure system. The term *bubutu* (*Nduke*) is often glossed as *tribe* and taken to mean cognatic descent category (see Scales, 2003, p. 162). Scheffler (2001), distinguishes between the cognatic descent category and a residential group living in the *bubutu* estate – a cognatic descent group (p. 170). This group are the residential landowners. Hviding (1996) refers to this as the “resident *butubutu*” (*Marovo*) – “those regarded as constituting the ‘core’ or ‘basis’ of the corporate group” (p. 133).

Cognatic descent categories on Kolombangara Island align to genealogies of founders said to have emerged out of different passes in the crater of the volcano, who subsequently settled on the mountain flanks (Scales, 2003, p. 106). During the early colonial period, settlements, sometimes Christian mission based, were established on the coastline. These villages stayed roughly coterminous with descent categories and subsequently often aligned with one Christian denomination.

The number and boundaries of descent categories are matter for some dispute. Scales' (2003) doctoral thesis cites Hocart's 1908 genealogies of Kolombangara Island which name ten descent categories. Scales (2003) describes the Kolombangara Island Council of Chiefs (KICC) recognising eighteen *bubutu* (p. 106). According to my informants, when the KICC formed in the early 1980s, they agreed upon five main descent categories with corresponding estates. Disputes about the number of descent categories and estate boundaries, however, resulted in the KICC recognising twenty-three descent groups (resident *bubutu*) but only as encompassed by the five main descent categories.

The cognatic descent category – the Viuru tribe - have authority over the more or less firmly demarcated land of the Viuru tribal estate, on the south-west corner of Kolombangara Island, which encompasses cognatic descent groups resident in different villages along the coast inside the larger tribal estate. Thus the cognatic descent group resident in Vavanga village are part of a larger cognatic descent category resident elsewhere in the tribal estate and in other places altogether. There have been ongoing disputes about the boundaries of Viuru tribal land particularly in regard to the boundaries of the KFPL lease (for example [2011] SBHC 4; CC329 of 2007 (24 February 2011)).

Geographically the village of Vavanga is divided into three named areas. The central village area of *Vavanga* is the most densely populated and houses the school, church and meeting house (Plate 1.4 to 1.7). To the north-west, separated from *Vavanga* by the river mouth, is a hamlet known as *Paratovogho (Nduke)*. *Para* means anchor and *tovogho* means wave. It was given this name as, before a log point was built in this area, the wave action and prevailing currents used to wash all manner of debris to rest on the shore. To the south-east, separated from the central Vavanga area by a coconut plantation, is *Pobuna (Nduke)*. *Pobuna* means hole, or depression in the land. I was told this area was named due to a bomb landing in this area and making a crater during World War II.

These three areas reflect religious and descent affiliations. The central part of the village, *Vavanga*, is the historical village and originally housed the central meeting house for all members of the Viuru tribe. The residents in this area are the resident *bubutu*, as defined

above. When describing their authority in relation to land matters this group refers to themselves as the Lakevu family, although this reference to “family” does not include affines. Lakevu was a Viuru tribal chief who founded the village. These families are all Seventh Day Adventist (SDA). The SDA church is located in this section of the village, as is the school which is also SDA affiliated. The village chief and chairman (who looks after village infrastructural development) have always in the past come from this group. Those resident in the *Pobuna* area are a mixture of descendants of Lakevu and others descended from other lineages in the Viuru *bubutu* descent category.



Plate 1.4: Vavanga Primary school. Students lining up at the beginning of the school day.



*Plate 1.5: Central Vavanga village area. The village meeting house in the centre of the picture and the village primary school principal's house on the right.*

The inhabitants of *Paratovogho* base their right to residence and tenure on a custom payment of *bakhia* (shell valuable) made by their ancestor, Timot Loi, some three generations ago. This ancestor was patrifiliated to the *bubutu* estate. He wished to continue residing locally and so made a custom payment to his maternal uncles (MB). He was allocated a parcel of land clearly demarcated, 0.8 kilometres across and 1.2 kilometres long, bounded by the Vavanga River to the south-east, the sea to the west and the south and the Kolakori River to the north-east. The majority of *Paratovogho* residents are of the Baha'i Faith. There is a Baha'i meeting house in this hamlet (Plate 1.8). When describing their authority to speak about matters relating to this parcel of land this group refers to themselves as the Timot Loi family. There is intermarriage and a wealth of other connections between the residents of the *Paratovogho* hamlet and *Vavanga* and *Pobuna*.

There were 47 households in Vavanga village at the time of this study. The permanent population of the village was comprised of 92 adults and 89 children. There was a transient population of approximately 125 villagers, including teenagers away at boarding school, and others who worked intermittently in towns or other places (Table 1.1). The population was 81% Seventh Day Adventists with the other 19% mostly Baha'i and a few Catholics (but no all-Catholic households) (Table 1.2). Some households had a toilet (21% - although not all functional) and 6% had a water tank. Most households did their cooking on a fire in a kitchen house constructed as a separate building from the sleeping area. Only 4% of households used gas for cooking (Table 1.2).

Vavanga village has a small hydroelectric plant initially installed by an Australian NGO.<sup>12</sup> From this source 55% of households had electricity and 40% of these had a television or video player. This plant was intermittently functional during my time in the village. Breakdown was usually due to insufficient water flow if rainfall had been sparse for some days or weeks consecutively. I was told the decreased river flow was due to logging activity that had taken place above the watershed during the last large scale logging operation on the land above the village from 2003 to 2005. No households in the *Paratovogho* hamlet had electricity from this source at the time of my research, as cabling infrastructure had been

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.apace.uts.edu.au/>

destroyed by the logging operation from 2003 to 2005 and had not been replaced. The village had a piped water supply in the past but infrastructure and water flow had been destroyed by large scale logging activity. The village community was rebuilding a piped water supply during my time of residence.

There were 48 adult women and 44 adult men resident in the village permanently during my stay there. I classified women as adult in this case if they met one of the following criteria: over the age of 15 and not at school; married; or had children. All the women classified as adult and permanently resident in the village had children. These women ranged in age from 21 to 91 (Figure 1.5). Women had 4.35 children on average. Country wide statistics show that birth rates in Solomon Islands have not substantially varied since 1999 (ADB, 2015).

Women in the village had an average of 6.7 years of formal schooling. Only one woman in the village had no formal schooling. She was ninety one years old. 73% of women had primary school education only. These rates are slightly higher than national averages (ADB, 2015, p. 29), which may be a reflection of my smaller dataset rather than any greater educational levels for women in Vavanga in particular. There is some correlation between age and years of schooling. Generally younger women had on average more years of schooling than older women (Figure 1.6). This reflects trends countrywide of steadily increasing school enrolments overall and increased secondary school enrolments for girls. Additionally, for women who attended primary school during the British Protectorate era and in the early years of independence it reflects a dearth of secondary schooling generally.

Of the 27% of women in the dataset that had attended high school, 46% of these had left high school due to pregnancy. Women consistently reported that once you had a child you could not return to school. There is some correlation in this dataset between years of schooling and number of children (Figure 1.7). This relationship, however, is weak and does not reflect data worldwide which shows a strong correlation between fertility and mean years of schooling.<sup>13</sup> A variety of international development organisations claim a strong connection between increased years of schooling and postponement of first birth, lower fertility rates overall, and

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<sup>13</sup> For example see <http://gapminder.org/world>

increased child and maternal health (UN, 2015; UN, 2010). More nuanced analysis, however, reveals that this correlation is strongest in more developed countries and is also differentiated in developing countries by rural or urban residence (for example see Zanin, 2015). I do not enter into these debates and do not have sufficient comparative data to draw strong conclusions or provide speculations about the lack of correlation here between fertility and years of schooling. Suffice to say that in Vavanga village women's education levels were not correlated with number of children. This is clear in Figure 1.7, which shows that women with four children span the lowest (zero years) to the highest (thirteen years) of education levels.

Residence patterns for women in Vavanga village were predominantly matrilineal. Vavanga was the natal village of 54% of the women. 10% identified as from other villages on Kolombangara Island. The other 36% of women identified as being from islands other than Kolombangara. 8% identified as being from Malaita, 8% from Rannonga, with the remaining 13% from Shortland Islands, Rendova, Choiseul, Simbo and Vella Lavella. For 6% of the women I had no data (Figure 1.3). The demographic information presented here shows that over half the women in Vavanga were resident on land to which they had primary land rights. Theoretically this gives them greater rights to make decisions over this land and to speak publicly about it. I discuss in more detail later in the thesis the significance of landed identities; in particular, the differential rights for men and women living on customary land to which they have primary rights.

Additionally, this high proportion of women resident matrilineally indicates strong kin ties between women; as mothers, daughters, sisters and cousins continue to reside for generations in the village with husbands marrying in from elsewhere. These residential patterns have implications firstly, for the amount of help available to women through using kinship obligations and secondly, for the differences in relative positional power between matrilineally resident women and women who have married in to the village (*roroto – Nduke*). I do not engage in extensive analysis on this point, but social power related to landed rights and residence is a theme that recurs throughout the thesis. In addition, matrilineal residence of women may affect how women are configured as a *group* of women. Depending on context, other social and cultural obligations, such as kin and landed identities, may take

precedence over gendered groupings (see also Jolly, 2003, pp. 134-135). I make this argument in Chapter 4 when analysing how women were positioned in an argument over a large scale logging project on customary land.

*Table 1.1: Vavanga village population*

<b>Type of residents</b>	<b>Number of people</b>	<b>%</b>
permanent	179	59
transient	125	41
adults (permanent)	92	50
children (permanent)	89	50

*Table 1.2: Vavanga village household characteristics*

<b>Household characteristics</b>		<b>Number of households</b>	<b>%</b>
	<i>no. of households</i>	47	100
	toilet	10	21
	water tank	3	6
<b>Cooking facilities</b>	gas	2	4
	fire	45	96
	electricity	26	55
	television and/or video	19	40
<b>Religious affiliation by household</b>	Seventh Day Adventist	38	81
	Baha'i	9	19

Table 1.3: Vavanga women's landed identity

Place of identity	%
Vavanga	54
Elsewhere on Kolombangara	10
Malaita	8
Ranonnga	8
Other	13
No data	6

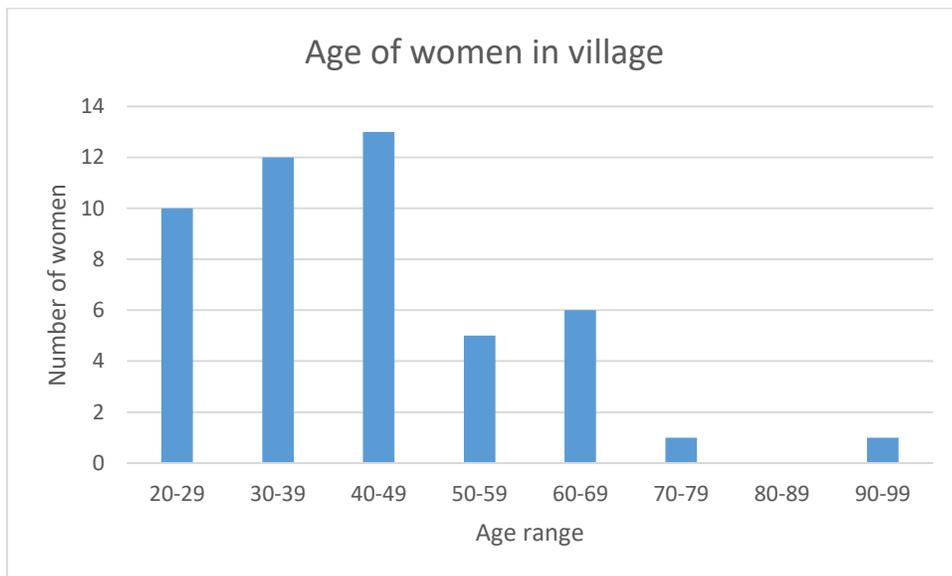


Figure 1.1: Vavanga women age range

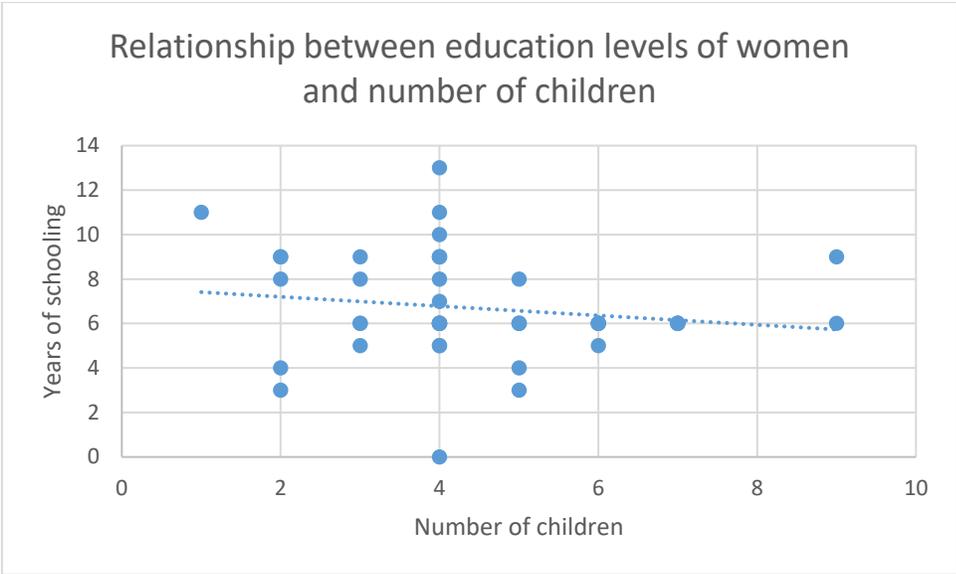


Figure 1.2: Relationship between education levels of women and number of children

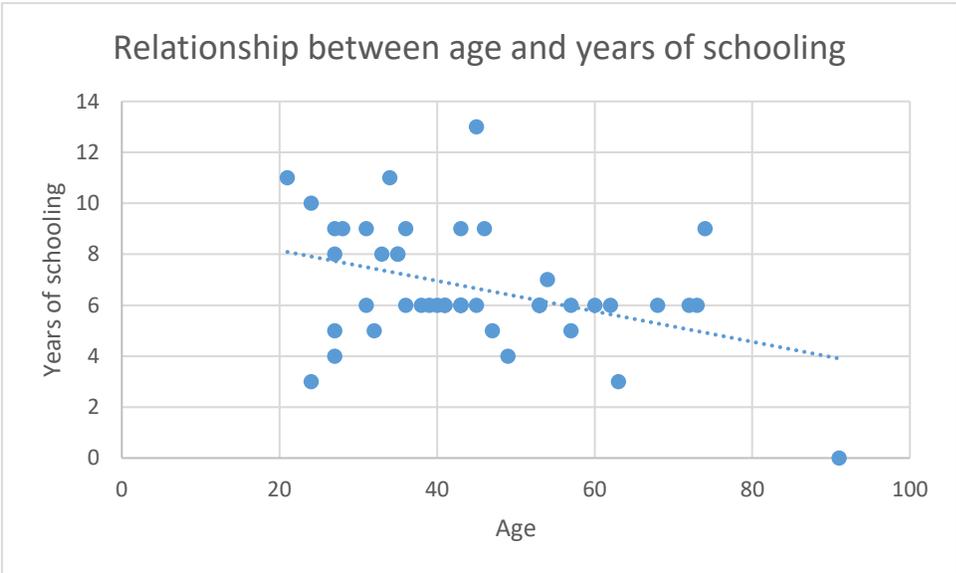


Figure 1.3: Relationship between age and years of schooling

## The role of religion

In Vavanga village, SDA proscriptions strongly affected people's daily lives. Seventh Day Adventism relies on literal reading of the Old Testament in the King James Bible and a belief in the second coming of Christ. SDA adherents rest and worship from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday – the beginning and end of the Sabbath as per the Book of Genesis in which God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. During this time people do no work, including business, gardening, and house work or cooking. Religious observance of a complete day of rest on Saturday is at odds with most other Christian denominations in Solomon Islands, which take Sunday as a day of religious observance, and sometimes then only partially.



*Plate 1.6: SDA Church Vavanga village*



*Plate 1.7: Inside the SDA Church Vavanga village*



*Plate 1.8: The Baha'i meeting house*

SDA adherents also follow dietary restrictions detailed in the Book of Leviticus which specifies “clean and unclean” animals (*The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, 1982: Leviticus 11). It prohibits eating fish without fins or scales (thus no crustaceans, sharks, eels, turtles, bivalves, etc.), and animals that do not have a divided hoof and chew the cud. While this restriction therefore includes rabbits and camels, for Solomon Islander Seventh Day Adventists its greatest significance is that they do not eat pigs, a major source of protein elsewhere in the Solomons and much of the Pacific. Animal protein intake in Vavanga village among SDA followers was limited to fish with fins and scales most of the time. Chickens are not prohibited and many people did keep chickens but they were killed for food only at special events. Other permitted animals, such as cows and sheep, were not husbanded by the Vavanga villagers and, while their meat was available in Gizo, was relatively expensive for villagers to buy. There was a village on Kolombangara that kept some cows. Their provenance was an Australian Government aid cattle project sometime in the past.<sup>14</sup> These cows were owned by certain individuals and whole villages might buy a cow for a special event or wealthy individuals would sponsor a special community event by buying a cow (for consumption). The Baha’i faith adherents in the village did not follow these dietary restrictions.

Additionally, SDA members practice temperance, which includes abstinence from alcohol as well as other narcotic substances. This proscription radically differentiates SDA adherents and villages from much of the Solomons because, strictly speaking, they do not chew betel nut. Vavanga village was conspicuously free from the distinctive red betel nuts stains ubiquitous in much of the Solomons. Smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol and chewing betel nut were not publicly acceptable in Vavanga village, regardless of various individuals’ private practices. While these dietary and drug prohibitions were not followed by the Baha’i faith contingent of Vavanga village, Baha’i followers did not engage in these practices in the central part of the village.

The centrally controlled global nature of the SDA church further distinguishes it from other Christian denominations in Solomon Islands. SDA headquarters are based in the United

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fao.org/docrep/004/w9676e/W9676E05.htm>

States with a Pacific regional office; but all readings, lessons, Sabbath schedules and religious celebrations are synchronised worldwide. The King James Bible is read in English, as are lessons and hymns.

While theoretically women are encouraged to contribute to lessons and discussions in church on a par with men, their participation is restricted by the fact that all teachings and the Bible are in English. When I asked visiting Pastor Jeddiss why women rarely contributed to Sabbath school discussions he said it was because they had limited understanding of the text due to their poor levels of English literacy. The women in Vavanga village confirmed this and stated that it was very difficult to understand the teachings in the English language Sabbath school work book, but added, that if one prayed God would give understanding. One woman suggested that reading the bible passages over and over and then praying would bring understanding. Several women offered the opinion that while many of the women couldn't read English they could read and understand the Bible because it was God's word and he gave them understanding.

Women do not take positions as Pastors or Elders within the SDA church. In North American divisions there has been some argument and controversy over this issue and some women have been ordained – apparently without the formal approval of the church (Damsteegt, 2005). Women may serve as Deaconesses, a role which involves cleaning the church, decorating it with flowers and preparing linen. On the other hand, in many cases the SDA church is less restrictive than other denominations on certain issues. Unlike the Catholic Church, the SDA church allows contraceptive use. I provide more detail on this issue in Chapter 2.

Denominational differences become less relevant when examining how the church functions for women as a group. The SDA church works for women in the same way as other Christian denominations throughout the Pacific in providing opportunities for training, leadership, networking and activity in the “public sphere”; what Dickson-Waiko (2003) calls the “missing rib” of Pacific Indigenous feminism. Historically, Christian missions instigated these groupings of women based purely on gender rather than traditional gendered social

organisation on the basis of kinship (Jolly, 2003, p. 135). Jolly (2003) argues that this creation of “women’s groups” by Christian missions in the Pacific further demarcated gendered boundaries and categories in segregated seating, “gendered church hierarchies, and ‘women’s groups’” (p. 135). Jolly further argues that the creation of Christian women’s groups exhibits Indigenous women’s agency, in that such groups were locally constituted (pp. 135-134).

Overall women’s Christian groups provide a sanctioned site in which women’s organisations and networks exist in a way that is uncontroversial and unchallenging to existing outside authorities. Operating within what might be seen by secular feminists as the constricting boundaries of the church, paradoxically allows women’s church organisations a great deal of independence, support and strength (Douglas, 2002; Douglas, 2003). Kabeer (2011) asks: “...how do we ensure a state that is more responsive to its less powerful citizens?” (p. 259). She advocates empowerment of women’s groups and their ability to link with other groups, organisations and movements to increase women’s “associational” power so as to “amplify their voice in the political domain” (Kabeer, 2011, p. 529). In the Solomons, although the church is one source of this associational power, Christian imaginings of gendered roles may limit the parameters of possible change. Examples that illustrate this point are provided throughout this thesis and discussed more generally through the framework of agency in Chapter 8.

Christian beliefs and values form a vital part of the lives of most Solomon Islanders. I do not include a separate chapter on the role of Christianity in women’s lives or gender relations in this thesis. I am mindful of the centrality of Christianity but the focus of this thesis is elsewhere. I treat Christianity as an integral part of Solomon Islander identity and everyday practice. As such I do not privilege it as an outside/external influence on a somehow discrete “indigenous” or traditional reality. In this I follow other scholars who emphasise the co-constitution of modern Christian Pacific identities (Douglas, 2002; McDougall, 2004; Mosko, 2015; Rio, 2014; Tomlinson, 2013). In her doctoral thesis<sup>15</sup> Debra McDougall explores how Christianity is central to community life on Ranongga Island, also in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. She concludes that “...the church is the ritual centre

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<sup>15</sup> And later work including (McDougall, 2003, 2005, 2011, 2016)

of social life and it is through the church that people perceive themselves as a community” (McDougall, 2004, p. 108). Consequently, while I do not explicitly focus on the large role of Christian beliefs and values on gender relations, its significance appears in many places woven throughout the thesis.

## Fieldwork Methodology

Between 2011 and 2015 I spent approximately twelve months in villages in Solomon Islands during nine separate trips, with seven months continuous residence in Vavanga village. During the nine trips I made to Solomon Islands, I spent time in villages: along the length of the south-west coast of Choiseul Island; on the northern tip of Malaita Island; on artificial islands in the Langa Langa lagoon area of Malaita, and on islands in Marovo and Roviana lagoon; as well as in villages around Kolombangara Island. My conclusions and observations in this thesis are derived from these experiences as a whole, which included work I undertook as a consultant during the course of my PhD candidature for two separate non-government research and development organisations.

I established my base in Vavanga village as the village was willing to host me and it provided an interesting case study for the mix of customary land tenure, the influence of development and conservation discourse and the variety of livelihood opportunities due to its proximity to the provincial capital and the forestry plantation company. My introduction to Vavanga village occurred through indirect connections with the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity and Conservation Association (KIBCA). Ferguson Vaghi, the co-ordinator of KIBCA, expressed enthusiasm for my project in the context of KIBCA’s mandate for sustainable land use and forest protection, which as I discuss in the thesis (Chapter 6) has become discursively tied to notions of gender equity. He suggested Vavanga village as a base for my fieldwork as it had electricity and was in close proximity to Gizo, the provincial capital, which had banking facilities, a hospital and communications infrastructure.

My fieldwork methodology consisted of collection of qualitative and quantitative data. I used participant observation, formal and semi-formal interviews, Focus Discussion Groups and recording of autobiographical narratives. While living in Vavanga village I participated in all aspects of community life, including community meetings, community work days, community contribution to regional commitments, funerals, birthdays, weddings, feasts, church and marketing. I collected quantitative data related to women's market earnings; daily workloads (distance and weight); and meeting attendance, participation and substantive contributions. I also undertook a series of visits to other villages around Kolombangara Island. In each village I visited I ran a women's Focus Discussion Group (FDG) and visited the women's gardens. The FDGs yielded rich data on village women's perceptions of their position in society and capacity to effect change. This data is described in more detail in Chapter 7.

For three months in 2013 my two daughters, aged four and seven years old at the time, and my partner (their father), joined me in Vavanga village. Aside from my status as a rich white foreigner, 'the wealthy and powerful visitor' (Foale, 2013, p. 21), this established my social position – as a mother and a wife. These are seen as the natural roles for women across Melanesia and determined my peer group in the village. A core of about twenty-five middle aged women, who were the most regular participants in community work and SDA church activities, became my regular companions and informants. I accompanied women on their daily rounds of work, to the garden, the river, to market and to church. And I positioned myself this way very deliberately. Part of my methodology was to understand the perspectives of these women free from expectations of what people might otherwise classify as "important" information that might be of interest to a foreign researcher.

I introduced myself in Vavanga village as a student of anthropology. I explained the basic methodology of an anthropologist is to use themselves, their actual physical body, as a research tool by living and working within the society and culture that they are researching; something akin to the idea of walking a mile in someone else's shoes to understand what it feels like to be in that person's life. This is an interesting metaphor in village Solomon Islands as many people don't wear shoes at all. How does one walk a mile in someone else's shoes

when they go barefoot? If you go barefoot yourself then surely you are walking a mile on your own feet?



*Plate 1.9: The author's foot and Ridos' foot on a visit to her garden*

Such philosophical questions foreground my personal presence throughout the thesis as part of a feminist methodology that shows where one's observations and conclusions come from; to leave the roots on, as it were, and make clear where one is positioned, so as to constantly question the underlying premises and paradigms from which conclusions and observations spring.

### Theoretical overview

In this thesis I explore “pathways of empowerment” that village women are walking and creating, rather than treating empowerment as a destination to be reached by a certain formula (Cornwall, 2014b, p. 1). This process involves dwelling almost perpetually and somewhat uncomfortably in ambiguity; accepting the contingency of gender identity and its mutually constitutive nature with structurally situated gender relations.

I use the concept of “agency” as an analytical tool for framing and contextualising changing gender norms at the village level. I draw on Lois McNay’s (2000, 2003, 2004) work on agency, in which she formulates a concept of “generative agency” grounded in “lived reality”. Accordingly, I combine women’s direct representations of themselves and their commentary and analysis of gender relations, with detailed quantitative data examining the particularities of mundane gendered sociality in the village community. I do not claim to speak for village women, or even to fully understand their perspectives, but I seek to bring an understanding of the intersectional and complex nature of village women’s lived reality (Gunnarsson, 2011, p. 24). My experience of sharing, however briefly, in the lives of these women refuted many of the oft-repeated characterisations of their lives within the international development paradigm.

I critique discourses on gender and development that continue to reify, separate and rigidify gender categories. The crystallisation of gender categories in development discourse results in an ethnographic unmooring in which imaginings of women’s agency becomes constricted. Subsequently, I am motivated to escape negative paradigms of agency for more creative and generative conceptions. This approach seeks to glimpse the ambiguity of power dynamics and the way in which axes of power intersect, including in the formation of subjects and gendered identities. In this way village women may be represented outside of culturally flattened statistical analysis or platitudinous depictions proving either their victim status or their capacity to change the world.

## Chapter outline

This thesis is divided into 9 chapters. Chapter 1 (this chapter) introduces the context of the study, outlines the methodology, aims, key questions and structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 explores village women’s lives through a combination of quantitative data on the physical aspect of women’s livelihood strategies and autobiographical narratives. This

chapter presents village women's perceptions of gender relations, in particular their role as mothers and wives and their relative agency within these roles.

Chapter 3 uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to examine in detail the gendered nature of village level meetings and extends investigation to men's and women's meeting styles in single gender meetings. An analysis of meeting styles reveals constraints and enabling factors for women's substantive participation in meetings.

Chapter 4 examines how women were situated in one case of conflict over natural resource management in Vavanga village. Building on data about the gendered nature of public speech presented in Chapter 3, this chapter qualitatively examines women's public voice in a logging conflict. I touch here on implications for women's land rights and role in decision making in natural resource management.

Chapter 5 draws on Chapters 2, 3 and 4 to examine how the category of "the good Solomon Island's woman" is constructed by social norms. Two contrasting case studies are presented. The first centres on women's anti-logging activity in Vavanga village within the limits of the "good woman". The second focusses on a woman who transgresses the boundaries of this construction and thus reveals, firstly where the boundaries are and secondly, possible social outcomes of contravening gender norms.

Chapter 6 examines where women are placed in the discursive context of the international development paradigm and natural resource management in Solomon Islands. This chapter traces the development of thinking about gender equality and women's empowerment in the international development paradigm and the circumstances of its application in Solomon Islands.

Chapter 7 explores how village women are changing gender norms. First this chapter presents village women's perceptions of the possibility of their taking a greater role in politics and public decision making from women's responses in FDGs from eight villages around Kolombangara Island. Their testimony shows how they see gender relations changing or

staying the same and their ideas on how change may occur. I then examine the case of the Vavanga women's savings club to explore the value of these women's only groups for women's autonomy and agency.

Chapters 8 and 9 conclude the thesis. Chapter 8 synthesises the case studies and data presented in Chapters 3 to 7 through a theoretical discussion of agency. I embark on a discussion about the concept of agency as a theoretical tool for understanding women's role in changing gender norms. Ethnographic material presented throughout the thesis is then used to explore existing pathways to women's empowerment and make clear the building blocks and materials of women's capacity to act at a village level.

Chapter 9 presents thesis conclusions and implications for understanding women's empowerment in development and natural resource management contexts.

### A note on identities

I have not tried to disguise the tribal, lineal and clan groups I discuss in this thesis. This is because many of the events I describe involving these groups are documented elsewhere and by others, for example in the court system, in Solomon Islands national newspapers and other international media outlets, and in Ian Scales' 2003 doctoral thesis.

I have tried to protect the identity of individuals. All names used in this thesis of village residents are pseudonyms unless otherwise stated. Given the small population size of the villages I worked in it is possible that, changed names notwithstanding, people I describe in this thesis may be recognisable to other village residents. In the interest of protecting these individuals from the repercussions of my representations I have changed small details about them to better disguise their identities. I have done this as sensitively as possible, with a view to minimising distortion of people's testimony and perspectives of their own lives as they presented them to me.

Real names are used for villagers identified in photographs. Explicit permission from all individuals involved was obtained in writing and verbally to include their images in this thesis.

## 2. This earthly life: Prosaic village women

Naomi got up at 5am on Thursday morning. She lit the fire, peeled cassava, husked and grated seven coconuts from which she made coconut milk and cooked a pot of coconut milk rice for her children. At 6.45am she walked up to her garden along a muddy track through other people's gardens and secondary forest, approximately 1.6 kilometres from her house. Her work that day was preparing for market in Gizo the following day. She harvested six bags (plastic 10 kilogram rice and flour bags) of cassava from her garden weighing on average 20 kilograms each. In the next few hours Naomi did three more trips to and from her garden carrying one bag of cassava back to her house each time. She stopped just before 11am and made cassava pudding. This is a staple dish made by mixing grated raw cassava with coconut milk, wrapped tightly in large leaves and then cooked in the *motu* (*Nduke*), an oven made from heated stones (Plates 2.1 and 2.3).



Plate 2.1: Grating cassava to make cassava pudding. Note the grater is made from a World War II artefact – holes punched in an American army food tray, bent and fixed to a wooden frame

She did a few more trips to and from the garden during the afternoon carrying one bag of cassava back to the house each trip. On her final trip she also harvested some potatoes and stopped at the river to wash herself, her clothes and the potatoes. She arrived home at 5pm. She lit the fire again, peeled cassava, put a pot of cassava on to boil and then opened the *motu*. She cut up the pudding and took it down to the *paele (Nduke)* (the village meeting house) to sell. She made \$36.00 Solomon dollars from the sale of the pudding.<sup>16</sup> She returned home and smashed cooked cassava and ngali nut (from the *canarium indicum* tree) together, which she then rolled into golf ball sized portions to sell that evening to visitors in the village attending a workshop for the week. She was paid \$50.00 for this food.

In a total of eight trips to and from the garden, Naomi carried altogether 168 kilograms of cassava for a total 25 kilometres (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Weight and distance of Naomi's marketing items

Item	Weight kg	Distance carried km
Cassava	22	3.14
Cassava	14	3.14
Cassava	14	3.14
Cassava	23	3.14
Cassava	23	3.14
Cassava	23	3.14
Cassava	22	3.14
Cassava and potatoes	27	3.14
<b>Total</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>25.12</b>

At 7.30pm she went to church to do singing practice for the Sabbath church service which the SDA women's church group was running at the neighbouring village of Hambere on the coming Saturday. Singing practice finished at 10.30pm. She returned home, made some last minute preparations for market, and went to bed about 11.30pm.

<sup>16</sup> All amounts in Solomon dollars unless otherwise stated. At the time of research the exchange rate was SBD\$7.00 ~ AUD\$1.00.



*Plate 2.2: Iris carrying cassava from the garden in a "basket"*



*Plate 2.3: Iris preparing a motu using coconut shell as fuel*

## Marketing

On the following day, Friday morning at 4.30am, Naomi gathered in the dark at the river mouth with the other women going to market. The women loaded their market produce into the large wooden canoe the people refer to as the *kangui* (*Nduke*) (Plate 2.4).<sup>17</sup>



Plate 2.4: Vavanga villagers returning from the Gizo market in "kangui." Note how low in the water the canoe is, there is no produce in the canoe so it is relatively lightly laden at this point.

There were no lights on the canoe. The lights of Gizo twinkling in the distance ahead guided our course. We were eleven people in the canoe; the male driver, one other man, eight women and me. As usual the canoe was heavily laden with hundreds of kilograms of produce plus

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<sup>17</sup> *Kangui* means stones in *Nduke*. The canoe was named this as it was used to carry stones for shoring up the sea wall at one point in the past.

the people. The canoe had about ten centimetres of freeboard at the gunwales, but it was not raining and the sea was calm, so we were not getting wet.<sup>18</sup> We arrived at market at 6.30am.

After we arrived the women unloaded their produce and set up at their usual place under the market shelter. They placed thick black plastic on the ground in front of the market shelter and laid out *hip* (piles sold as a unit) of potatoes and cassava (Plates 2.5 and 2.6). Naomi made 104 *hip* of cassava. She also had sixty plastic bags to sell which she had purchased for 50 cents each (\$30). She charged \$5 per heap of cassava and sold plastic bags for \$1 each. In total on that day she made \$520 from selling cassava and \$60 from selling plastic bags. After she had sold all her produce she went shopping for rice and other store bought foods. She paid the canoe driver \$60 in boat fare and paid the Gizo market master a \$5 market fee. Including fare, fee, and store bought food she spent \$355.90 in Gizo of her earnings. She took home \$224.10.



Plate 2.5: Gizo market. "Hip" of cassava on the black plastic. Back left hand quadrant of the picture shows old flour and rice bags full of cassava.

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<sup>18</sup> On many other trips to market this was not the case. The sea would be rough, or it would be raining (or both) and we would arrive at market wet, cold, and in my case, feeling seasick. It was not uncommon for canoes coming to market in Gizo from islands further away, such as Rannonga, Simbo or Vella Lavella, to capsize in rough weather due to overloading.



*Plate 2.6: The Gizo market. Red plastic bags hanging up for sale.*

Over eight recorded market events Naomi made on average \$591 per event and spent \$281 in Gizo. She took home an average of \$310 (Figure 2.1). Her spending fell into 4 categories: (1) marketing expenses (boat fare, market fees, buying stock – such as plastic bags); (2) money spent on household items which included store bought food (rice, tinned fish, noodles), kerosene, soap etc.; (3) donations to the church and; (4) savings, which she deposited either in the Vavanga women’s savings club or in her personal account with the bank in Gizo (Figure 2.4). Large amounts represented as spending in Figure 2.1 as at market events 1, 6 and 8 were bank deposits. At market event 6 Naomi deposited \$550 in her bank account in Gizo.

These average amounts, however, are not a good indication of Naomi’s flow of money from marketing. Figure 2.1 shows the high variability of Naomi’s market income and spending over the course of eight separate marketing events in Gizo. Naomi’s main market item was cassava, so market earnings reflect the variability and timing of harvests.

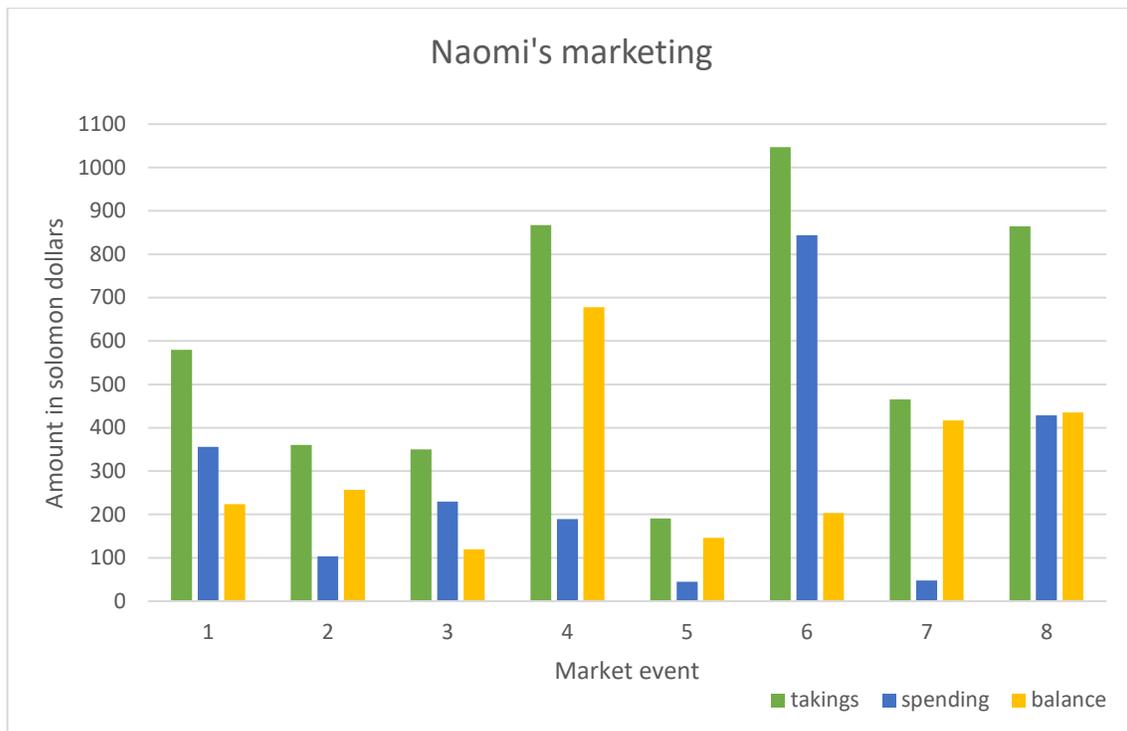


Figure 2.1: Naomi's weekly earnings and spending at Gizo market

Judy marketed nearly every Friday in Gizo. She was the most regular marketeer in the village (thus the larger dataset). On average Judy earned \$495 at market and spent \$372 of this in Gizo. Her average take home amount was \$122 (Figure 2.2). Figure 2.2 below also shows the high variability in Judy's earnings.

Judy's biggest money earning items at the market were collected wild foods and "flowers". She mostly marketed *petu* (*Nduke*), the scrapings from the inside of mangrove roots, and edible wild fern. She sometimes worked sago palm, pulverising the pith in the palm trunk and making a kind of flour from it, a standard item on her natal island (and much of PNG) which she had introduced to the village women. She marketed pot plants, snake beans from her garden and sometimes potatoes. Judy's work meant that she spent a great deal of time up in the bush and in the mangroves.

She undertook mangrove seed pod collection at least once a week, sometimes twice and might collect up to 40 kilograms of mangrove seeds.<sup>19</sup> She scraped the pods with the sharp edge of a bivalve shell into long ribbons. These were then washed and rinsed thoroughly several times until they looked like long white noodles. These mangrove seed noodles can be made into soup or cooked in the *motu* mixed with coconut milk (the result is something like a quiche). Judy charged \$10.00 each for a plastic bag of prepared *petu*, selling anywhere between 14 – 27 bags at market depending on how much she had collected, but always selling out. Variability in her market earnings reflect what other items she was able to market as well.

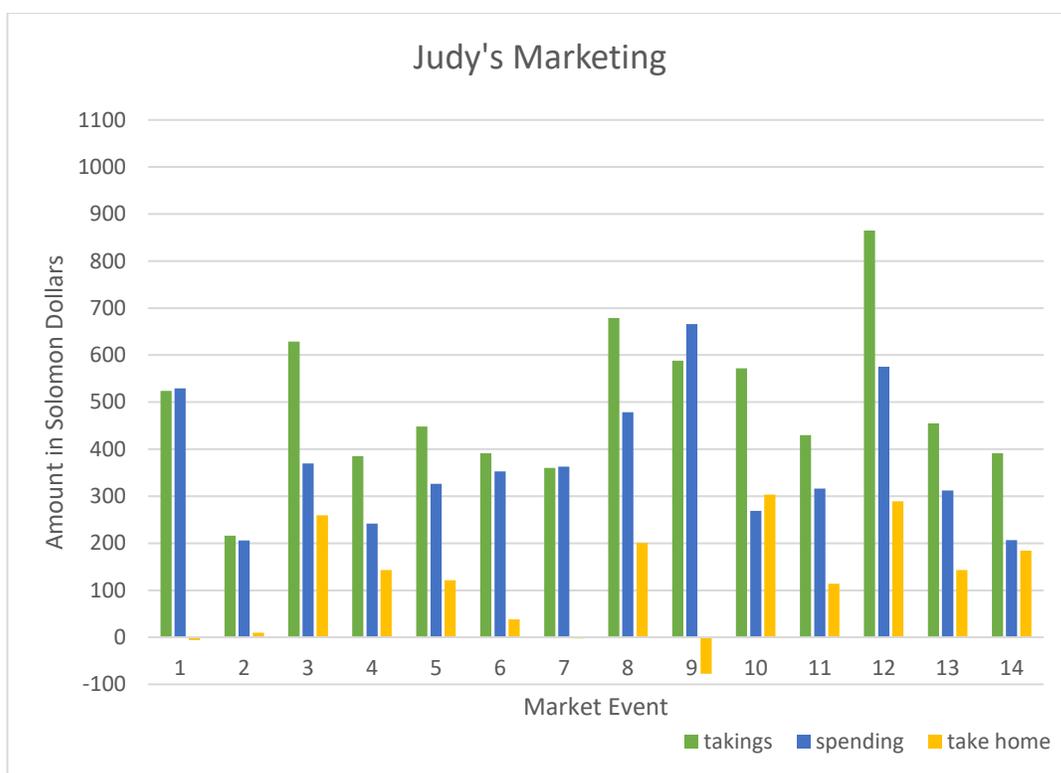


Figure 2.2: Judy's weekly earnings and spending at Gizo market

Many women in Vavanga village marketed, either in Gizo or by selling cooked food items in the village. Marketing in Gizo was usually of substantially larger amounts of produce and thus higher earnings than marketing in the village. But marketing in the village had lower overheads (such as boat fare, buying food to eat while in Gizo and market fee). 70% of the

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 1 for a story of collecting *petu*.

women in the village marketed in Gizo. Of these women, 26% of women marketed twice a month or more. 30% marketed at least once a month. 15% of women marketed less than once a month and 30% of women very rarely (or never) marketed.

The 30% of women that rarely marketed represented fourteen women. Of these fourteen, two did not market due to old age and decreased physical mobility. Eight of these women had husbands who earned money through more or less secure or formal employment, either as school teachers or using a trade qualification, like carpentry. One woman in this group worked full time as the village primary school principal, and so earned a salary. Four of the women that never marketed had either very young children or lots of children (one woman had nine children.) Three of these women had husbands who did not allow their wives to market and did not like them going out too much in public even within the confines of the village.

The motivations of, or restrictions on, women earning their own money through marketing, however, do not neatly align with the reasons why the fourteen women I identified in Vavanga rarely marketed. For example, some women whose husband's had salaried employment or employment in the formal sector, as in Naomi's case, still marketed. Number of children was also not an indicator of women's marketing activity. Two women who regularly marketed at least twice a month in Gizo during my time of data collection had seven and nine children respectively.

It is when examining how Judy and Naomi spent their earnings that marketing motivations become more apparent (Figures 2.3 and 2.4). Judy's marketing activity and spending are a direct reflection of the circumstances of her marriage. Her husband was not engaged in any formal employment but occasionally earned money by selling bush materials for building. He also assisted Judy in the garden sometimes. Judy was the main money earner in the family. Her spending patterns, of 27% and 33% of her income on her children and the household respectively, align with evidence from throughout the Pacific, and globally, on women's typical spending patterns. That is, that women spend money on their families rather than on personal consumption (Macintyre, 2011). Such data appears often in the context of "women

as smart economics” rationalisations used to promote investment in development programs for gender equity as a better return on aid spending. This issue is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

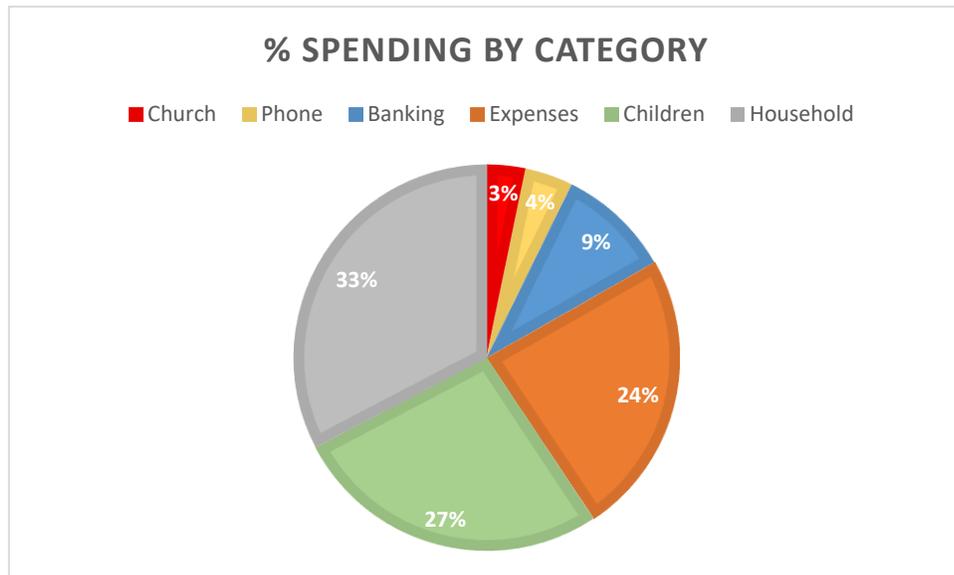


Figure 2.3: Judy's spending of market earnings by category

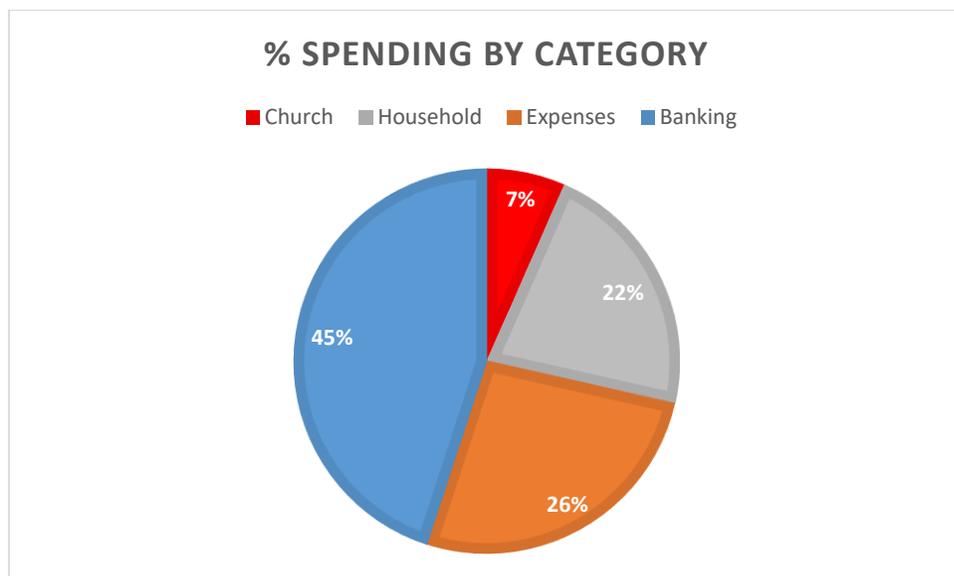


Figure 2.4: Naomi's spending of market earnings by category

Judy's market earnings paid for soap, kerosene, washing powder, rice, soya sauce, tinned fish and other store bought foods. She also put credit on her mobile phone and that of her eldest daughter, who was in Form 5 at boarding school. For this daughter, Judy paid school fees of \$5,800.00 per year and for her younger son in Form 2, boarding at a different high school, she paid \$900.00 per year. Judy regularly prepared packages of store bought food and posted them to her eldest daughter. Of the 27% of her earnings that she spent on her children (Figure 2.3), 65% was spent on her eldest daughter – sending food parcels and paying for mobile phone credit.

A breakdown of Naomi's spending by category presents a very different picture (Figure 2.4). Judy and Naomi have similar expenses and devote a proportion of their earnings to the Church. The largest difference is that Naomi's spending shows no expenditure on her children while she banks 45% of her earnings on average. This data makes sense when taken in conjunction with women's descriptions of their lives, which largely centre on their relationships with their husbands.

### [An idea of the gendered precariat versus control of livelihood strategies](#)

When I asked Naomi to tell me her life story she started with the details of her birth and childhood but increasingly talked about her relationship with her husband. From the start she characterised this relationship as troublesome and precarious. This sequence of storytelling was characteristic of how other women in the village talked to me about their lives. Marriage defines adult community membership. Before marriage one is still considered a “youth”, without heavy responsibilities or community obligations (McDougall, 2016, p. 4). The way women talked about their marriages though often centred on suspected infidelity and women's lack of autonomy in regards to their fertility.

Naomi's husband worked full time in formal employment that took him away from the village for long stretches of time (up to six months or more consecutively). At the time of data collection Naomi had three children at primary school and one at high school. Naomi's

talk about her marriage highlighted her husband's supply of money for the children. The motivation for her earning and her spending patterns are explained through her perception of the precarious nature of her marriage. When I asked her if her husband sent money to her she replied:

He sends us money. But I'm not really someone who spends a lot of money. It's hard too, to stay alone. We are women; we must control [ourselves]. Sometimes some rasta gang [men looking for a good time] come calling, it's you and me must answer. Sometimes some man can ask [for sex] but you must answer, no! Some of my friends say, "How do you let your husband go [away to] work? The girls in Isabel, Choiseul, Marovo, they will look at this man that has money, they will like to get involved with such a man." My husband has told me about this. When he was staying in Marovo he went working in the bush. A girl from Marovo came to his room and said, "Where are your clothes, I will wash them." My husband said he says to her; "I have hands, I can wash my own clothes." The girl just hung around inside the house. So my husband says, "This is a stupid girl so I shooed her out."

I said to him, "The organ of you men likes to steal a little bit". We women, when we are like this [feel like having sex] we don't do anything. But men aren't the same. He said lots of times when he is away lots of women come to him but he says he stands strong [doesn't have sex with them]. I said to him, "You must be careful, if I hear you do anything [have sex with other women] I will burn this house down and then I will run away back to ---- [her natal island]".

So this thinking stays with me. That's why I went home [to her natal island] and planted cocoa – not a small farm, a big one. I say, no good he goes and comes, goes and comes, and he divorces me. So no matter if he divorces me I must have some back up in my place, so I told him to build a house in my place and I planted cocoa so if he loses us [divorces / leaves] I will go back to my place and harvest my cocoa and stay in my place.

But I will tell you this story – at first my husband wasn't interested in me. It was hard for us to plan. It was hard for us to talk about anything. I tried to talk to him but he wouldn't engage with me. But husband and wife must plan together, yeh? The husband must contribute, then the wife must contribute. But my husband doesn't do this. He won't talk. The things that belong to him, are just his, he owns them, not me. If I talk about this he says, "This belongs to me not you and your things belong to you." So I just shut up and stay here. This is true yeh. So as time goes by some thinking comes to me; if we are husband and wife, something we have we must talk about yeh? But my husband doesn't want to plan with me. So I tell him, "One day you will find my answer, I will run away from you. I won't be worried about how much money you have." I have seen his way, it's different. So I have made my own [bank] account now. When he gives me money I just put aside money for the children and some for me. Because men don't know how to stay quiet [referring to marital fidelity]. So if he leaves us then I will say, okay, you're out. I'm not worried.

The narratives other women told me also indicated that sharing of intra-household income is not assured and that men and women have different financial priorities (see also Macintyre, 2011, p. 99). I had the following conversation with two village women, Catherine, a widow

with six children, and Frieda, a young woman with three children under five years old. I initiated the conversation by asking why marriage was important in Solomon Islands.

Catherine: If you're married you must leave your young life. You must look to your family. What do your children need? How can your children and wife benefit from your work? But some men don't do this; they just play around with marriage. It's a man's job to find money.

Frieda: A woman can help, if she's not busy she can help, but when the baby is small the man must find money. He's the head of the family. If he's lazy then there will be no kerosene for the lamp, no cake in the morning.

*Michelle: I see lots of women making money in this village.*

C: Yes some women are educated ones, they have work. Marketing by women now is the income of the family.

*Michelle: How is it usually with married couples? Do you usually share money or the money each person makes, is it just their own?*

C: My husband when he made money, he never told me how much money he made and we never sat down and figured out what the money was for in our budget. Friday when I knew it was payday [Catherine's husband had wage employment] he would take his money and go drink [alcohol] and give it to girls [prostitutes?]. When I made money I would tell him about it, "Here is the money I made", so I could "clear" his thinking because I think he doesn't understand this kind of living [budgeting as a husband and wife team], but I know.

But it was hard for him to tell me how much money he made. The leftover, behind, he would come and give me. So I thought I should leave him. I was close to leaving him but I thought about the children. Suppose I left him, I would leave him straight then I would find someone. After I was married with my husband I looked at some women with their husbands and how nice it was. Their husband would get money and take it and sit down together and budget and the woman would hold the money for buying food and some women would hold the pay check. Then I would feel regret that my husband didn't understand. He was educated but he still thought like a child like this.

Both Naomi and Catherine see joint financial management as an "ideal" and explain their "deviant" household financial arrangements as due to problems with their husband's thinking. Their version of marital finances though represent only two possibilities, as Catherine points out, other households she had observed budgeted together. There were many other configurations of intra-household financial management in the village that did not conform to the examples presented here, or Naomi and Catherine's imaginings of the ideal. Some husband and wives undertook gardening and marketing collaboratively on a regular

basis. Others marketed or worked copra together but only for specific purposes, such as when school fees were due.

The common salient point to Catherine and Naomi's explanations of their income earning motivations is the desire, or the necessity, of having money solely under their control. The proliferation of women's savings clubs in Solomon Islands, in both rural and urban areas over the last 10 years, is also indicative of women's desire to control their own funds. In Vavanga village the women started a savings club during my time of residence (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7). From the beginning the women stipulated that money that members banked with the club should be "their own money" - not money given to them by husbands. In this way, the women said, husbands would not be able to demand any of the women's savings.

While some researchers question the possibility of violence against women should they withhold money from their husband (Eves, 2014) by keeping the savings club funds in a box locked by three separate padlocks held separately by three members, funds could not be accessed without a gathering of at least some members of the club. Once personal savings in the locked box reached \$20,000 I encouraged and facilitated the women opening a club bank account with the ANZ bank in Gizo. Again, three signatures were needed to withdraw funds from the bank account. The women's money was physically unavailable in a way that allowed the women to save and meant that husbands could not immediately demand funds through violent means or otherwise. Control of income for women, therefore, includes not only earning income through sole efforts, but also the capacity to remove cash from the household environment where others can access it. Additionally, because the savings existed as a women's *group* initiative, the women in the village *collectively* gained a greater level of autonomy through saving's club activities.

Research in other parts of Melanesia and elsewhere have shown that women will divert their labour from subsistence to commodity production when the likelihood of co-operative household effort is higher, and when they are able to personally retain a portion of their income (for an example see Koczberski, 2007). One immediately noticeable outcome of the

establishment of the women's savings club in Vavanga village was women's increased marketing activity on banking weeks (fortnightly). This marketing occurred in Gizo and also in the village.

Data on Judy's and Naomi's marketing and spending points to something more than perceptions of precarity. It also highlights the high degree of control and independence women are able to exercise, over both livelihoods and income earning activity, based on subsistence rights on customary land. This is true whether the women are customary land holders in their village of residence or not. General subsistence principles which underlie customary land tenure dictate that land will be made available to everyone for subsistence purposes.<sup>20</sup> Catherine's story also highlights this potentially secure and independent base for women's livelihoods, as she is a widow continuing to reside on land in her husband's descent group estate. This picture must be tempered by an awareness that women's actual ability to secure livelihoods through gardening and marketing is solely dependent on the input of their physical labour. Ill health, weakness generally, and demands of children and other dependents, severely affect women's capacity to engage in such livelihood activities.

### Infidelity

When I asked Naomi if her husband sent her money she started to talk almost immediately about infidelity – of men and women. She indicated that her husband was attractive to other women because he earned money. While prevailing Christian doctrine in the Solomons dictates lifelong monogamy, marital infidelity is a constant theme in many conversations with women. In *pijin* people refer to extramarital affairs as *O 1, O 2, O 3* - the letter "O" and the number 1, 2, 3. This refers to the *pijin* colloquial term for husband or wife, *olo*, and then additional husbands or wives, meaning sexual affairs outside the marriage, numbered as 1, 2, 3. It is openly acknowledged that a man's ability to attract extra "wives" is based on his

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<sup>20</sup> There are qualifications to land use related to permanency of changes and commercial outputs. (Hviding, 1996, pp. 35-78).

financial and political position. Conversely, it is clear then that some women are also seeking access to wealth through becoming an *O 2* or *O 3*.

An article published in 2015 in national newspaper, *The Solomon Star*, reads:

MEMBERS of Parliament are told engaging in extra-marital affairs damages their reputation and lead to lack of public trust on their leadership. Former prime minister and three-term North East Guadalcanal MP Dr Derek Sikua reminded his colleagues of the issue this week during an induction programme for parliamentarians. “This *O2* business (having more than one wife) has to stop as parliamentarians are public figures who deserve respect from the people,” Dr Sikua said. It’s public knowledge that several MPs are engaging in this practice, while some left their wives since they became MPs and are living with younger women. (John, 2015)

This is a theme that recurs in this thesis, demonstrated in the Bolgaba Women’s role play which starts Chapter 4. Specifically, the concern is that when men get access to money they “spend” it on women (and alcohol). Lattas (2011) refers to this as “masculine binge culture”; part of conspicuous consumption of shared masculine commoditised pleasures (pp. 99-100). Women are classed as commodities then when they are available if one accumulates wealth of a certain kind. Extra “wives” become a marker of status and wealth.

When making reference to these extra wives the *pijin* term *gele* is used, literally “girls”. This does not mean female children but rather that these extra wives will be young, younger than the legal wife. The meaning surrounding designation of a person as an *O 2*, implies a relationship substantially longer term and more involved than a straight transaction of money for sex, which is classified as prostitution. *O 2* relationships are perceived as a threat to the stability of marriages. This is particularly the case if the *O 2* relationship results in children.

Rachel talks about her husband’s infidelity and how this affected her financial and emotional security:

Every money he [Rachel’s husband] had he paid for girls [other women]. Then he had how many children more? In the years we were married I think he had two or three children more with other women. Some of these children wanted to come here. I said don’t come here, hard for me to feed you [support these other children]. They [her husband’s children] see my

children and they love these other children. I say that's ok but I'm not giving you [husband's children] any money.

Last night another brother of my children rang them. My children said, "Does mum know about this brother?" I said "I'm not cross because that's your brother. It's your father that was wrong. I stayed with him but he was *alabaot* [unfaithful]". He hid those other children but I knew about them. That's why we fought when we were together.

In a conversation with a group of women about what makes a good husband the women stressed that a faithful husband is a good husband. One woman said:

If you are married you should stay faithful. *O 2, O 3*, spoils us. People say, "That man or woman doesn't satisfy me", then they *O 2, O 3, O 4*. What kind of satisfaction do they want? They have something itchy they want to scratch. But they go away and you don't know what they are doing unless you get some disease, then you will know [general laughter]. You should support each other. Trust must be there and your husband must trust you. Don't be itchy all about.

One older woman then spoke up. She said:

I have some advice for you young ones. If you love your husband, even if he takes an *O 2, O 3*, or *O 4*, you just keep him. If you have big love for him you just keep him, even if he's unfaithful. Secondly, even if he's selfish continue to love him. Even if he has *O 2* everywhere, continue to love him. Don't just love him if he gives you something.

Other women suggested that such admonitions were not unproblematic. One woman replied to this:

My husband goes around and I don't trust him because he gave me a [sexually transmitted] disease so there was a big problem in our home. You must go to the clinic first and check first. You might trust your husband but he must keep himself to himself too, then when you share love it's good but when he goes all about then the love at home is no good.

When our husbands don't go to church then we experience this. Church is the most important thing. It makes life straight. It lets you know what is right and wrong. You must find a church man.

Entangled in these issues that affect women's autonomy is the submissive role prescribed for women in Christian ideology which places the husband as the household head and scripts women as keepers of family and community harmony (for example see Hermkens, 2012; Liloqula & Pollard, 2000). The older woman speaker above advocates women's steadfastness

in marriage regardless of their husband's behaviour in a way that places women in a morally superior position. The second speaker shifts some of this moral responsibility back onto men – she says, “You must find a church man [for a husband]”, implying that husbands with Christian values will also adhere to a higher standard of moral behaviour. The role of Christian ideology in matters of gender justice in Solomon Islands is revealed here again as ambiguous, as indicated in Chapter 1.

### Controlling fertility

Motherhood and marriage are assumed as part of adulthood for women. Adult status in a community is not only achieved at marriage, but is confirmed by bearing children together as a sign that a marriage is properly established (Dureau, 2001, p. 245). In her research on Simbo Island, Dureau (1993, 2001) found that women had difficulty refusing intercourse with their husbands or obtaining contraception without their husband's permission. Additionally, it was very difficult for unmarried women to obtain contraceptives (p. 244). Dureau's research in 2001 found that, although there was no specific legislation on the matter, contraceptives were usually not supplied to unmarried women or to married women without their husband's consent (pp. 241-242).

Rachel and Naomi's stories touch upon women's precarious control of their fertility. Rachel tells how she stayed with her husband for the sake of her children, and continued to have children because she wasn't using any birth control and her husband would beat her if she didn't acquiesce to his demands for sex when he was drunk.

I wanted to leave him but I looked that I had lots of children so I couldn't run away from him. If I ran away what would happen to the children? Because I have eight children. I wanted four children only but my husband drank and would be cross if I didn't let him have sex with me, so I kept getting pregnant [laughs raucously].

I did not collect extensive data on birth control, although it was a topic that came up in my conversations with many women as they were always curious to know what method I used (also reported by Dureau (2001)). I had the following conversation with Ruby:

After this last child my husband says, “That’s enough children”. But I haven’t had an operation [tubal ligation] so I’m frightened I will get pregnant again. I would like to take Depo Provera [injected contraceptive], but how, is this any good?

*Michelle: I don’t really know. I have never taken it.*

Some women take pills or injection.

*M: I don’t know. I have never taken any of these. I just count the days.*

This is a nice way. My sister does that too. She writes it down on the calendar. Then she colours in the fertile days. I asked to her to make one for me. But she didn’t make one.

*M: But this is not really a 100% sure way because you are just counting the days and your cycle might change and you don’t know so you might get pregnant.*

My husband says enough children now. Four children is enough.

In Vavanga village the most common form of contraception for women was tubal ligation when they (and their husbands) decided they did not want any more children. To undergo this surgery in the Gizo hospital the women told me they must have signed permission from their husbands. One of my informants told how after the birth of her ninth child, at the age of 42, the Gizo hospital staff chased down her husband and “made” him come to the hospital to sign for her to have a tubal ligation. She said he was unwilling to do so as he wanted more children and also because he thought the operation might make her too weak to work. While most of the middle-aged women who had finished having children in the village reported they had had a tubal ligation, several of the younger married women in the village were using contraceptive injections.

A 2015 report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) found that fertility rates in Solomon Islands have hardly varied since 1999. Rural women bear five children on average. The report cites figures from a 2007 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) showing that 27% of married women and 16% of sexually active unmarried women use some type of modern contraceptive (ADB, 2015, p. 20).

This same survey found that main reasons for not using contraceptives were: fear of side effects (37%) and “general opposition to the use of contraceptives” (15%) (as cited in ADB,

2015, p. 21). The ADB report states that low use of contraceptives is not due to lack of knowledge or unaffordability. More than 90% of men and women respondents in the DHS 2007 survey were aware of at least one contraceptive method, and 90% of women using contraception obtained them free through government clinics.

Somewhat contrarily, the ADB report concludes, “There is an obvious need to do more awareness and education about contraception. Improved access to contraceptives would also have substantial benefits for the health of women and children” (ADB, 2015, p. 22). Aside from reaching a conclusion contradictory to the evidence they present, the study does consider women’s fertility and reproductive health as *gender* issues:

...women may not be able to make their own decisions about health care...only 28% of women make independent decisions about their health care while 17% reported that their husbands make decisions for them. This lack of decision making power coupled with lack of access to economic resources further reduces women’s ability to maintain their own health or ensure their children’s access to health services. (p. 25)

While recognising here that gender relations may detrimentally influence women’s health, the assumption that women’s fertility and children’s health is also the responsibility of fathers is not mentioned.

It also ignores the influence of religion. Church activities form a major part of people’s lives throughout Melanesia (for some examples see McDougall, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013). The data on Naomi and Judy’s marketing shows that the women routinely donated part of their earnings to the church. Seventh Day Adventist church members are expected to donate 10% of weekly earnings to the church, although sometimes this donation may also take the form of produce which is then sold to other members from a special “tithing house”, (a small structure next to the church), with the proceeds then donated to the church. Women described their financial contribution to the church from their own earnings as part of maintenance of the spiritual life of their families as well as some kind of individual contract with God which ensured their success in livelihood strategies. For example, when wild pigs destroyed Catherine’s sweet potato garden she told me it was because she hadn’t been donating a big enough proportion of her earnings to the church. When the same thing happened to another

woman she told me she was now sending money to her brother, an Anglican priest, to give to his church, because she felt God wasn't listening to the prayers of the church to which she usually gave money.

Religious denomination was an important factor in birth control methods readily available to women (Dureau, 1994; Jolly & Macintyre, 1989). One woman described the situation for her Catholic sister (not resident in Vavanga village):

Our religion [Catholicism] stops us from having an operation [tubal ligation] to stop having children. You look at my sister, she came to the Gizo hospital [from another island] to have her last child and she wanted to hide and get the operation. But her husband came and said, "No you can't. If you operate you will die. You must follow me, you can't disobey. You must follow the rules of the Catholic Church". So my sister was frightened and she didn't operate. So she has 11 children. She hasn't stopped yet, no! Every year I go [to see her] she is carrying a baby [pregnant]. I'm sorry for her. Some of her children don't have any clothes.

That's why some women get cross and comment. They say, 'So, you father [husband], are you going to get money to buy clothes for the children? How come you don't let me operate to stop having babies?'

Other research from Solomon Islands shows that a majority of men believe that husbands and wives should decide jointly on how many children to have (92%) and that women should be free to refuse sex with her husband (76%) (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2010, p. 3). This same report, however, cites conflicting research showing that women in Solomon Islands and Kiribati who believe they can refuse sex are more likely to experience intimate partner violence. And furthermore, that in the Western Province of Solomon Islands, (the same area as my study), less than 50% of men thought it was "justifiable for a wife to refuse sex or negotiate safer sex" when she knew her husband had a sexually transmitted disease (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2010, p. 3). The contradictions expressed in the research above appear partly to relate to social norms around violence against women and the effects of alcohol and drugs increasing violent behaviour.

## Reasonable violence

...a man and his wife have a close affectionate and sexual life, although extra-marital intercourse is rather usual. Even wife-beating, which may cause a temporary rift, serves at the same time to assert the unity of the family; a man never beats his mistress. (Powdermaker, 1971 (1933), p. 44)

I was sitting with Catherine one day when Frieda, a young woman who lived next door came walking past and stopped to chat with us. She sat down with her baby and started to breast feed. She had a cloth tied around one eye. We asked her to show it to us. Her eye was red and swollen with conjunctivitis. Frieda explained the bad condition of her eye:

Frieda: It's going redder because William [her husband] hit me last year. You see this scar, [she points to a scar high on her cheekbone under her eye] the bone cracked so when I have a boil or some problem with my eye it comes out worse and it's very painful. If it happens in the other eye it's okay, but in this eye it's so painful because he... [makes a fist and smacks it into her other hand]... like this with his hand.

*Michelle: Why did he hit you?*

Frieda: Marijuana [he had been smoking marijuana and was stoned]. So that's why I think my eye is so sore when it has a boil like this.

Catherine: On one side marriage is good. You sleep with your husband, you're happy kiss kiss yeh? [laughs] But when you fight then you think, why did I marry this man? Then your husband likes another woman and you feel like you want to die. So everything isn't straight.

Frieda: It's nice [marriage] to have children and a happy family. But when fighting comes, a lot of regret comes.

Catherine: Marriage is important because if you stay alone you'll be lonely. Adam was lonely so God made Eve so the two of them could stay together [referring to the Christian story of creation in the Book of Genesis]. If we stay alone we'll be lonely like Adam. But then Eve fell down [gave into the temptation of the serpent and ate from the tree of knowledge] and they were kicked out of the Garden of Eden. So marriage started in the bible to make us happy. Or how Frieda, fighting makes us no good?

Frieda: Fighting is no good.

*Michelle: Did your husband used to beat you when you were married? [asking Catherine]*

Catherine: Yes. But he wouldn't argue, but he would drink [alcohol]. He wouldn't get cross, but I would get cross, then he would get cross, and then he would hit me. If he hit me then I would hit him back. I couldn't leave him. I would beat him back. Especially if he'd been drinking when he came back we would fight. Because I shouldn't say anything but all the money he would spend on beer and then the children were poor. He worked and got lots of

money from his job, but he didn't pay anything good for the children. You look at this house [indicating poor condition of the building].

Here Catherine explains that her husband hit her because she “shouldn't say anything”. In other contexts women used this same “reason” to legitimate violence against women - that women shouldn't “speak out” (discussed in Chapters 4 and 6). Both Frieda and Catherine mention alcohol and drug use in relation to incidents of domestic violence.

The Pacific countries generally, especially PNG and Solomon Islands, are widely characterised as countries of typically high levels of violence and particularly gender based violence (Jolly, 2012, p. 3). Countrywide studies in Solomon Islands revealed that 64% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the last 12 months and that 73% of women believe a man is justified in beating his wife under some circumstances (SPC 2009 cited in DFAT 2014, p. 3). Speaking of a habit of non-interference by others in cases of domestic violence in Solomon Islands, Afu Billy (2000) says, “A common sentiment was that ‘it was the woman's fault, so she deserved to be beaten’” (p. 173).

Such statistics suggest that violence against women remains conceptually normalised (Jolly, 2012). The Fiji Speaker of Parliament, Dr Jiko Luveni, while speaking on issues of violence against women at a professional development program in Nasinu in May 2016, said, “Sometimes we women aggravate the situation; sometimes we know exactly what our husbands don't like and then we do it; what do you expect?” (Vakasuqawaka, 2016). Dr Luveni was widely condemned in social media and elsewhere for the comment. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre issued a statement demanding that she apologise. Dr Luveni, at the time of writing, had so far maintained that her comments were taken out of context by the media and she would not apologise (Penjueli, 2016). Dr Luveni's comment and the statistics quoted above reveal that women are still seen as partly responsible for precipitating violence inflicted upon them. Jolly (2012) points out studies from PNG that show how children are socialised to expect and accept violence, particularly “violence which accompanies hierarchies of power, of adults over children and of men over women” (p. 3) and how in this

way such violence is seen as “legitimate”. This attitude was confirmed in the way women in the village narrated their experiences of violence inside marriage.

## Conclusions

Data on women’s marketing in conjunction with accompanying narration of their lives shows the precarious nature of women’s livelihood strategies. I make two links in this chapter: first that the precariousness of women’s livelihood strategies is related more broadly to the normalisation of male control over women’s bodies and second, how this affects and *drives* women’s ability to act autonomously.

Women’s control over their bodies and fertility is revealed as limited by gender norms which normalise violence against women and emphasise women’s primary responsibility for children. Marriage and childbirth, while seen as the normal life course for women, are nonetheless narrated as loss of freedom. Macintyre (n.d.) reports the same findings from her research with women in Lihir in PNG, “Marriage was...represented as a time when a woman lost control over her own life” (p. 282). I asked one informant who was a widow if she would marry again. She said:

No, I don’t want to. I like it like this. When I want to go somewhere, I go. When I want to come back, I come back. I like going where I want, when I want and when I come back no-one tells me off. No fighting.

Data on women’s marketing and their testimony presented here shows that women’s agency in livelihood strategies is driven by the desire to gain control of their lives, linked to issues of fidelity and fertility. The precarious nature of women’s livelihoods is revealed in this chapter as related to issues of bodily integrity. Nussbaum (2006) defines bodily integrity as:

Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction. (p. 59)

She argues that bodily integrity should be considered one of ten capabilities central to the requirements of “a life with dignity” which form a blueprint for social justice and are central to conceptualising human development (Nussbaum, 2006).

The narratives in this chapter reveal compromises to women’s bodily integrity on two counts. First, women experience a lack of control over how many children they have and when they have them. Second, the commonplace nature of domestic violence demonstrates a basic violation of human freedoms. Bina Agarwal (2007) argues that freedom from physical and mental abuse is an essential element of development which expands human capabilities (p. 360).

Macintyre (2011) and Jolly (2012) report that in the Pacific women’s increased physical mobility, levels of education and ability to independently earn and manage money challenge male assumptions and perceived rights to control women’s sexuality and movements generally. Jolly (2012) links gender based violence in the Pacific to a male “sense of diminished power in the world at large” (p. 11) for which women’s increasing autonomy provides a focus. Macintyre (2012) points out, “for women to gain the control over their own lives and bodies that ‘eliminating violence’ entails, men are going to have to lose it” (p. 239). There is a sense of circularity to this situation; that women respond to their precarious position by seeking autonomy and men respond to women’s autonomy by further infringements upon women’s “bodily integrity”. I do not engage with the literature on masculinities here but note that in seeking gender justice we must understand and address “hegemonic masculinity” as part of “oppressive gender orders and relations” (Edstrom, Das, & Dolan, 2014, p. 1). I critique the invisibility of men in development discourse about gender in more detail in Chapter 6.

Issues of the body and physicality are also highlighted by women’s reliance on marketing of garden produce which requires strong bodies capable of hard work, epitomised by the story of Naomi’s day preparing for market with which I started this chapter. Yet women’s increased economic independence in these circumstances has not been causal in changing gender norms. This finding has been widely reported on elsewhere (Caron, 2015; Chant &

Sweetman, 2012; Kabeer, 1996, 2011). On a structural level women's economic activity takes place in an already demarcated female space; gardening and marketing, which is a low income space. Women are specifically excluded from high income earning activities and access to resource rent capture of logging, case studies I discuss in detail in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Additionally, while women's access to income earning activities remains precarious, their actual livelihood strategies have no insurance or regularity. The variability of Naomi and Judy's earnings at market point to the lack of security offered by this type of economic activity. Limits to women's mobility are also apparent in their lack of control over forms of transport. An ongoing issue reported by women I spoke to in many places in Solomon Islands was problems with transport to market (also reported in Chapter 5 of ADB, 2015). No women in Vavanga village or in the eight other villages in which I conducted Focus Discussion Groups on Kolombangara Island (reported on in Chapter 7) owned means of transport or drove them. They were always reliant on male drivers and the use of boats and other vehicles which they did not own.

The way women emphasised their social position and their control over their lives in this chapter was intimately related to their marital relationships. While women idealised sharing of intra-household income, they exhibit autonomy to the degree that they are able to earn money independently even if they are not financially supported by their husbands. Women rarely suggested leaving their husbands. As Rachel testified, she stayed with her husband even though he beat her, never gave her any money and had children with other women. She did this for the sake of her children; not for the sake of their financial well-being, as she mostly supplied their financial needs, but for social reasons.

Writing about domestic violence in Solomon Islands Afu Billy (2000) reproduces a poem called "Wife Bashing" by Solomon Island's female poet Jully Sipolo (known as Makini). In the poem the beaten woman tries to run away from her husband to her brother, her father, the police and the pastor, all of whom turn her away. Eventually she returns to her husband, she says, "I don't want this cruel treatment from hubby. But where can I go?" (pp. 172-173). In

the poem all the figures the woman goes to for succour turn her away because socially she belongs with her husband. I cite this poem as it points to problems for women's autonomy that are about social embeddedness not financial control. Naomi's strategising for the future by independently saving point to a less trodden path for village women. While other women's testimony in this chapter clearly shows their ability to be financially independent, Naomi has made an ideological break – she is preparing for a future as a socially independent woman should her husband leave her.

Many measures for women's empowerment in international development projects place heavy emphasis on women's ability to be financially independent (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). In this chapter I have tried to show that while women may have some measure of control over livelihood strategies and income generation their autonomy is circumscribed by issues of bodily integrity that are tied in complicated ways to women's identities as wives, mothers and "good" Christian women.

In the next chapter I explore more fully how public silence and self-effacing behaviour are promoted as characteristics of "good" village women that are also part of a loss of bodily integrity inflicted on women by gendered social norms. Through examining the gendered nature of community meetings in Chapter 3 I seek to unpick the threads woven into social norms that silence women and restrict their autonomy.

### 3. Meeting gender and style

#### The significance of meetings

Meetings as formal speech events are a public re-enactment of political and social hierarchy (Lederman, 1980). Who may speak, how, and when they speak, are deliberate acts. All types of meetings reflect the distribution of authority and reinforce or challenge it. As Brison (1992) states:

...the distribution of authority in a community will prompt a certain style of public debate; at the same time, when people conform to the rules that reflect a particular configuration of authority they reinforce the status quo by displaying and enacting it. (p. 16)

In Melanesian societies the right to speak in formal settings is a marker of status and establishes a social hierarchy (for example Brison, 1992; Lederman, 1980; Monson, 2012; White, 1990). Social norms around gendered roles in formal public meetings are political assertions which privilege men's oratorical style above those of women and affirm the rightness of women's subordinate position in a conscious way. I argue that gendered social norms around public speaking are pertinent to understanding male domination of business, politics at all levels, and the difficulty women have in entering these arenas. And thus, that it is not a measure of women's political power to assert that they have influence through their male representatives at formal public meetings (Maetala, 2010; Pollard, 2000).

This chapter explores cultural valuations and gendered characterisations of rights to speak publicly through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data on community meetings. The focus in this chapter shifts to gendered characterisations in public meetings, such as in Lederman (1980), while extending analysis to differences in meeting practice in single gender spaces. The aim of this focal shift is to create conceptual space for the possibility of specifically women's ways of meeting.

Reversion to strict gender hierarchies at the village level is often excused by both men and women as being due to the *local* (backward, traditional) nature of the village seen in contrast to the educated, urban dwelling elite, in either Honiara or nearby Gizo, where people's lives are less focused on subsistence activities. At two separate meetings, however, which I attended in Vavanga village, participants used the words, "gender balance", in English while otherwise speaking *pijin*, to call for greater contribution by women. This evidence of the penetration of international NGO development discourse on gender equity implies awareness of the enactment of gendered hierarchies in these public meetings and their socially unjust connotations.

Meetings were a ubiquitous part of village life in Vavanga during my time of residence. I define meetings as formal events that called together participants to discuss certain topics. The term "discussion" here is used loosely, as at some meetings direct transmission of information by one person to the group would constitute the meeting. At others, plans and logistical arrangements were made for communal work or community obligations. Some meetings were information sessions at which new ideas were shared. Yet other meetings had the nature of public presentation of community or tribal issues.

In their research into women's empowerment in Samoa, Meleisea et al (2015) state:

...our hypothesis was that the system of traditional village government in Samoa presents significant barriers that limit women's access to and participation in decision-making forums in local government councils, church leadership, school management and community-based organisations. Without significant participation in leadership decision-making at the village level, it is difficult for women to become – or to be seen – as national leaders. The focus of the research was therefore on local government in villages. (p. 12)

I turn therefore to everyday practice in the village as a basis for understanding the larger structures upon which gendered power rests. The meetings analysed in this chapter are mostly of the mundane, everyday sort. They lack the ritualistic elements that may mark them as culturally specific socio-political mechanisms for the exercise of power. Many studies on Melanesian oratory or formal public speaking events centre on social reproduction in a general sense, that is, "the relationship between political structure and forms of speaking" (Myers, 1984, p. 2). Some gendered studies of meetings focus on ways to increase women's

meaningful participation (Agarwal, 2010; Kameswari, 2002). These types of studies, as well as measures such as reserved seats for women in parliament, emphasise how women may be inserted into male forms of practice. In this chapter I explore how some *styles* of meeting are considered more valid than others and how these considerations are gendered. I therefore take a broad view of what is political, concerned with not only “*exercising* power but also with reproducing the mechanisms that make that power possible” (Myers, 1984, p. 4, emphasis in original).

### Chapter Outline

This chapter is divided into four sections. This section (1) introduces the topic. In section two I present quantitative data on gendered attendance and contributions to community meetings. The data reveals that while women were present in greater numbers than men at most meetings this did not affect their contributions to the meeting, which were almost always lower. Rather, women’s contributions to meetings were correlated with topic; women’s business was narrowly defined as about food or children.

In section three I explore women’s and men’s meeting styles through visual presentation of the gendered rhythms of meetings in a series of Gantt charts. Stark differences emerge between women’s and men’s styles of meeting. These charts also support the conclusion that information sharing and knowledge acquisition were a major component of women’s meetings, while men’s meetings were based on presentation of predetermined individuals’ views. That is, the discussion element so prevalent in women’s meetings was lacking in men’s.

In section four I examine the implications of the data presented in sections two and three. I explore the consequences of these differences for women’s ability to contribute meaningfully to community meetings and influence decision making processes in formal settings. Finally I speculate about the possibility of making space for, and making valid, women’s ways of meeting.

## Gendered attendance and contribution at community meetings

The village chairman and church elders extended an open invitation to me to attend all community meetings during my residence in Vavanga village. My quantitative dataset includes community meetings defined as meetings of the village community of Vavanga and sometimes involvement with outside organisations or parties (such as government and non-government organisations). I attended many village level meetings, in Vavanga and elsewhere in the Solomons, not included in my quantitative dataset (but captured in my qualitative data), including: SDA church, women's savings club, Kastom Garden Association, Baha'i faith, KIBCA executive and community awareness, World Wildlife Fund projects, Live and Learn projects, and meetings that I called to discuss my research activities with women only, and communities as a whole.

Information presented in the first part of section 2 is drawn from data collected at eighteen village level community meetings. Community meetings are defined here as about topics relevant to all community residents, male and female, and regardless of land affiliations. All of these meetings were held in the *paele* – the village meeting house. These meetings were predominantly about practical matters to do with village infrastructure, village primary school matters, or organisation of public community events such as funerals. The meetings were (informally) restricted to village residents and attendance at them reflected adult membership of the village community as well as willingness of individuals to contribute to the well-being of the community as a whole. This was the most frequent and common type of meeting to occur in the village. Church meetings were also very frequent, possibly more frequent than community meetings. I have not included these meetings in the dataset as specific denominational church meetings were not usually open to members of the community of other denominations. Church meetings were also governed by slightly different etiquette and organisational agendas.

Each meeting in the dataset has the following characteristics:

- The meeting was open to all community members.
- The meeting was announced by blowing the conch shell.

- The meeting was held in the *paele*.
- Both men and women attended the meeting.
- The meeting topic concerned the village community generally.
- The meeting was called by the village chairman.
- The meeting was internal to the village (i.e. no outside organisations were involved).
- I had complete data for each meeting on attendance and contribution of men and women.

During the period of data collection the village community was building new water supply infrastructure. Half of the meetings in the dataset (9) were concerned with the logistics of building the water supply. Three of the meetings concerned the village's hydroelectricity scheme. Three meetings concerned Vavanga village contributions to Ward projects; the community high school in Kaza; and feeding the workers at the health clinic infrastructure upgrade at Kukundu. Two meetings concerned the village primary school. One meeting was a presentation by a community member on the possibility of community saw milling of remaining forest stands as opposed to contracting with a large scale logging company.

I use indicators of *attendance* and *contribution* to disentangle degrees of participation, namely, mere presence at meetings as compared with substantive voice (Cornwall, 2008a). *Attendance* was defined as people present at the meeting for 80% or more of the total meeting time. If people came very late to meetings, only stayed a short time, or came and went from the meeting several times, their attendance was not counted. This definition of *attendance* aligns to Agarwal's (2010) "passive participation" typology – attending meetings, listening, not speaking up, as distinct from contribution (p. 101).

*Contribution* was defined by spoken input to the meeting. Frequency of contribution was counted by separate input at different times. For example if speaker A contributed input to the meeting and was asked to clarify this input by speaker B and thus spoke again but on the same point, contribution from speaker A was counted as one, and from speaker B as one. If speaker A spoke again on a different point this was counted as a separate contribution. If

speaker B, after asking for clarification from speaker A, then made a point, this would be counted as a separate contribution, resulting in two contributions from speaker B. Agarwal (2010) classifies this definition of *contribution* as “active participation” – “expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other sorts” (p. 101).

## Results

On average, women were proportionally dominant in meetings but made fewer contributions. Women’s attendance was more than 50% at every meeting event, while their contribution ranged from zero to 91%. For 33% of meetings women made no contributions. While men were always fewer in number at meetings, they contributed more often. Men’s attendance was never more than 44% at meetings while their contribution ranged from 9% to 100%. Variance for attendance was lower than variance for contributions for both men and women. Women’s percentage contributions occupy a large range from 0% to 91% (standard deviation = 25) while their range of attendance was relatively stable from 56% to 74% (standard deviation = 6; Figure 3.1). There was no correlation between proportional representation of women at meetings and women’s contributions (Figure 3.1). For men, attendance range was also relatively consistent, from 26% - 44% (standard deviation = 5.5), with a greater range for percentage of contributions (9% - 100%, standard deviation = 25; Figure 3.2).

Typically for a small dataset with large data range values, the data are noisy. For instance, meeting events numbers 2 and 3 show women’s contributions at 50%, but for both these meetings a total of only two contributions was made. Meeting events 1, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 17 show zero contributions from women, but overall contributions were in the range 1 – 3. These contributions were made by the community chairman and one or two other elders (all men) relaying information to the village community at large which required or elicited no discussion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 2: Data for 18 community meetings, for full details.

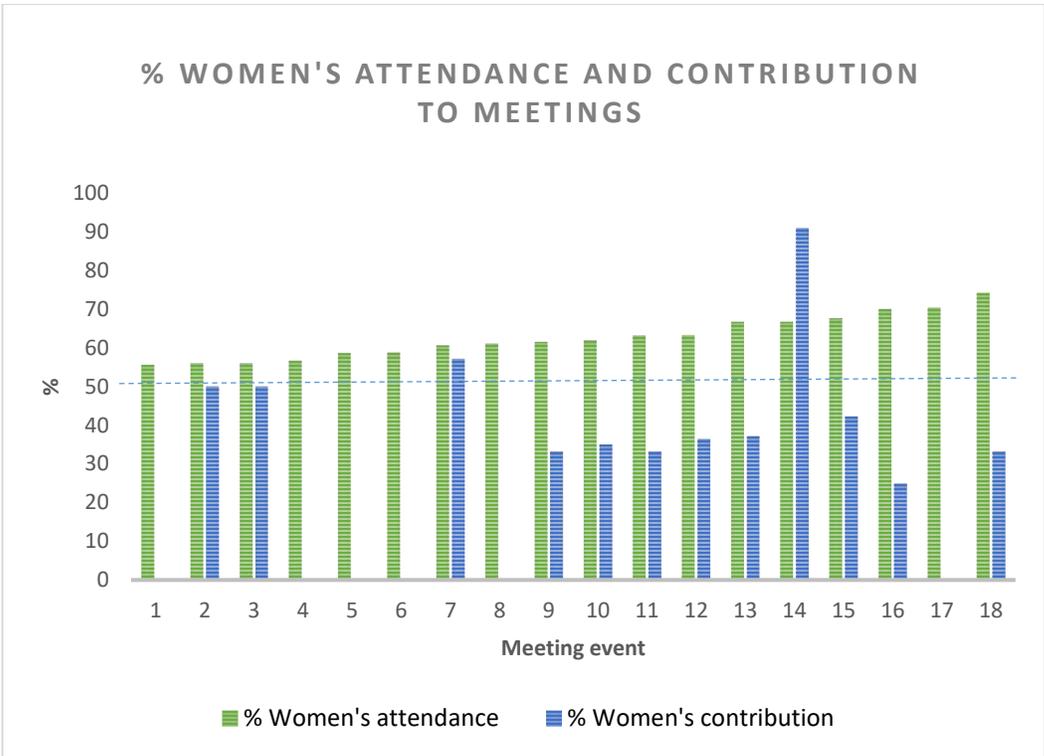


Figure 3.1: % Women's attendance and contribution to meetings

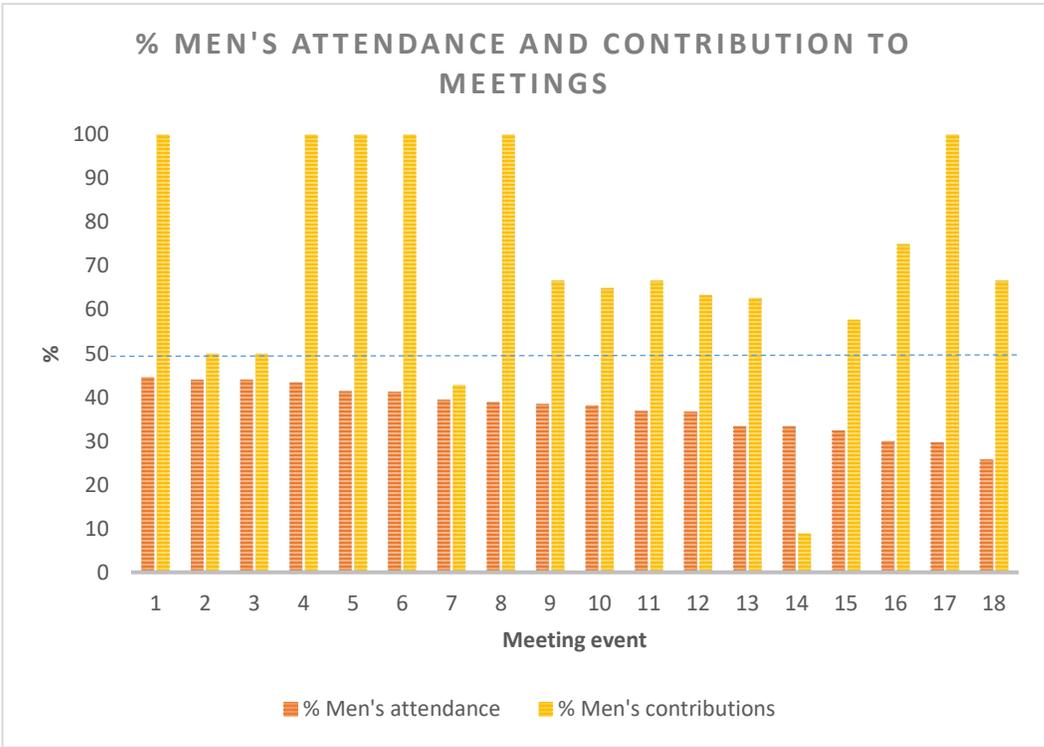


Figure 3.2: % Men's attendance and contribution to meetings

The large variation in gendered contributions to meetings correlates to specific meeting topics. Meetings which show women's contributions at over 40% were about organising communal feeding and cooking efforts for various events (women exclusively did the cooking), and at the Parent and Teacher Association (PTA) meeting for the village primary school. The outlier of 91% women's contribution was a meeting with three agenda items that required the women to undertake large amounts of cooking for each task: a funeral feast, a school fundraising event which involved selling cooked food, and cooking and transporting food to workers at the Kukundu health clinic infrastructure upgrade. Women were exclusively responsible for the cooking at these three events, and much discussion between the women took place to coordinate who was doing what and when.

To summarise; there was no correlation between proportional attendance by women and proportional contribution. Rather, women's contributions to meetings reflected specific meeting topics. Meeting topic at this community level, however, did not influence women's attendance at meetings. This is not the case for other types of meetings, which will be discussed below. The key point for this dataset is that women spoke on some issues (primarily cooking and school children) and not about others (e.g. infrastructure) at village community meetings.

### Gendered meeting styles

The data above speaks to concerns with time and critical mass and finds that women are overrepresented numerically at meetings and underrepresented in terms of contributions and influence. To understand the factors that affect substantive contribution to meetings by women I examine below difference in meetings styles when a meeting can be classified as a women's or men's meeting – a meeting substantially about a topic deemed the business of one gender or attended by one gender only.

## The beat of the meeting: Different rhythms in men's and women's meetings

In Alice Pollard's (2000) ethnographic study of women in Are'Are society on Malaita Island she says:

...despite the indispensable contribution that women make to community life, their social status is quite low in comparison to that of their menfolk. Women are conditioned to be submissive and silent, while men are taught to be outspoken, aggressive, strong and authoritative...During community meetings, women are on the periphery, men at the centre of the decision-making process. (p. 38)

This is also true of women in Vavanga village at mixed sex community meetings. Women attended in large numbers but often stayed relatively silent.<sup>22</sup> The contrast I experienced between women's behaviour in mixed sex meetings and in all-female meetings was stark. All women's meetings were often very loud, full of laughter and, on occasion, ribald humour. I attended many all-female meetings, some as observer and some which I called as focus groups both in Vavanga and in other villages around Kolombangara and in Malaita and Choiseul provinces. Qualitative observations and insights here are drawn from these experiences and complement the quantitative data below.

In order to capture gendered difference in meeting rhythm I compared the timing of speaking and frequency and pattern of contributions in recordings of four meetings I attended.<sup>23</sup> Meetings were chosen for three comparable characteristics and opposite gendered attendance and contribution (Table 3.1):

### 1. Gendered dominance of attendance and contribution:

- (a) Meetings 1 and 3 were meetings of predominantly men. At meeting 1 no women were present. At meeting 3 women were present but made no contributions.

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<sup>22</sup> Michelle Redman-MacLaren, who has worked extensively with communities on Malaita Island, particularly Kwaio traditionalists, related her surprise at how forthcoming women in the Western Province were at mixed sex meetings compared to those in Malaita (pers. comm. 2015).

<sup>23</sup> These meetings were recorded using a Zoom digital voice recorder placed in the centre of the area in which the meeting was taking place. Permission to record meetings was obtained in writing and by verbal consent prior to each meeting.

(b) Meetings 2 and 4 were predominantly meetings of women. At meeting 2 men were present but made no contributions. At meeting 4 no men were present.

2. Origin of meeting:

(a) Meetings 1 and 2 were called by non-government organisations. Meeting 1 was called by KIBCA, a conservation NGO based on Kolombangara Island. Meeting 2 was run by Live and Learn, an international non-government organisation with offices in Honiara and very active throughout Solomon Islands.

(b) Meetings 3 and 4 were community based meetings not involving any outside organisation.

3. Purpose of meeting:

(a) Meetings 1 and 2 were for the purpose of information sharing.

(b) Meetings 3 and 4 were for the purpose of resolving conflicts; in meeting 3 conflict inside the Viuru tribal group about a proposed logging project and in meeting 4 a conflict inside the women's savings club in Vavanga.

Meetings 3 and 4 took place in Vavanga village. Meetings 1 and 2 took place in other villages on Kolombangara Island.

Table 3.1: Meeting characteristics

Meeting number	1 gender only present	1 gender only contributing	Dispute resolution	Information sharing	Externally organised (NGO)	Community/tribal
1	Men	Men				
2		Women				
3		Men				
4	Women	Women				

For each meeting recording a Gantt chart was constructed (Figures 3.3 to 3.7). The vertical axis of each chart shows each speaker and the horizontal axis shows speaking time in each recording noted at thirty second intervals and for thirty minutes of total meeting time. In each case the thirty minute period represented in the charts starts when the business proper of the meeting started. For example, in one meeting a village elder said a prayer for five minutes at the start of the meeting before the business of the meeting started, so the thirty minute period of data presented begins after this prayer. At another meeting each attendee at the meeting briefly introduced him or herself at the start of the meeting so the thirty minute counting period starts after these introductions. If speaker's contributions did not fit neatly into thirty second intervals their contributions are placed in the interval in which the majority of the contribution took place.

The charts show

- how many people contributed during the recorded thirty minute interval;
- the role of the chair in the meeting;
- frequency of individual speaker contributions;
- length of individual speaker contributions;
- overlapping speaker contributions; and
- the general volume level of the meeting overall.

The two final rows of chart show “whispering/side murmurings” and “laughter”. “Whispering/side murmurings” were defined as speaking between attendees at the meetings that was not addressed to the meeting at large but was still about the meeting topic. “Laughter” was defined as laughter by more than one person. Individuals laughing alone were not counted on the laughter scale. The addition of these rows was necessary to capture the texture of women's meetings.

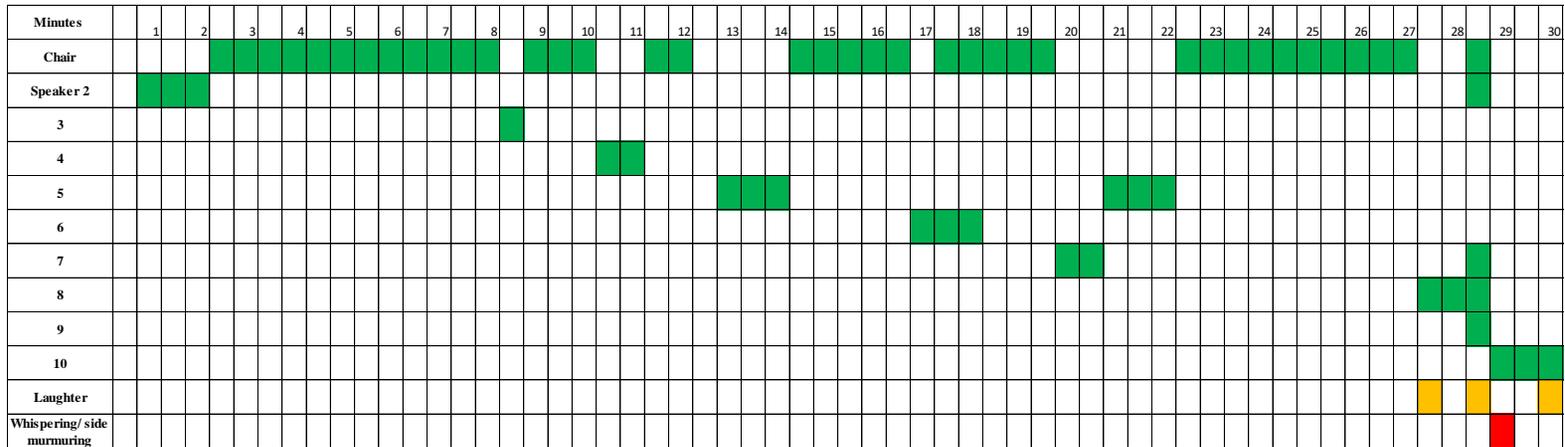


Figure 3.3: Meeting 1: Men's information sharing meeting

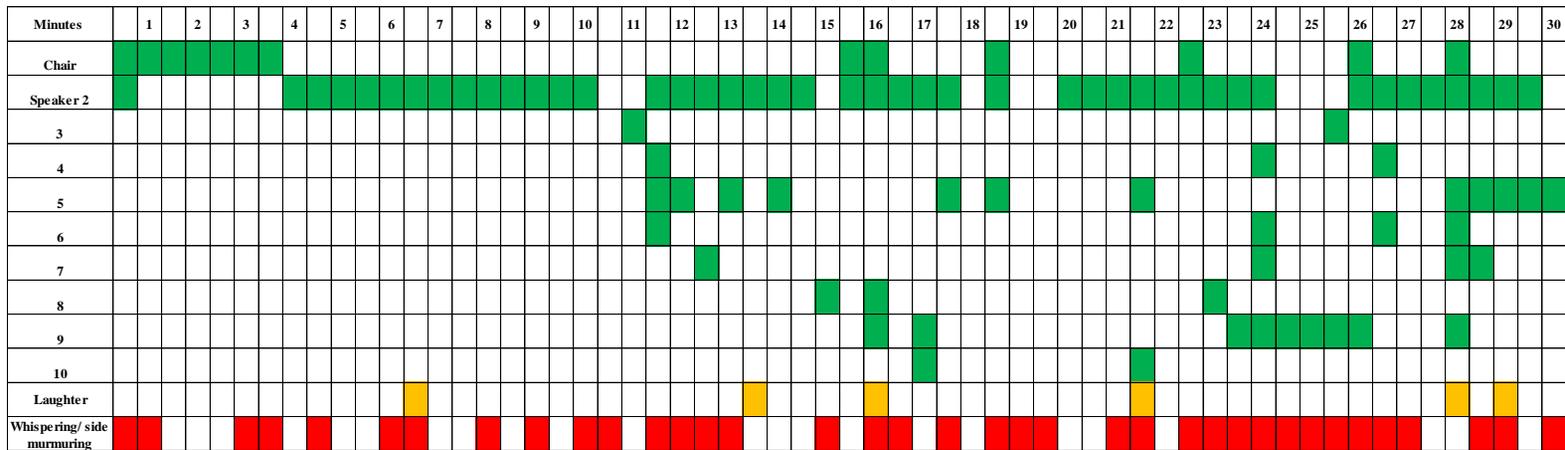


Figure 3.4: Meeting 2: Women's information sharing meeting

Minutes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
Chair																															
Speaker 2																															
3																															
4																															
5																															
6																															
7																															
8																															
9																															
10																															
Laughter																															
Whispering/ side murmuring																															

Figure 3.5: Meeting 3: Men's dispute resolution meeting

Minutes	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	
Chair																															
Speaker 2																															
3																															
4																															
5																															
6																															
7																															
8																															
9																															
10																															
Laughter																															
Whispering/ side murmuring																															

Figure 3.6: Second thirty minutes of meeting 3: Men's dispute resolution meeting

Minutes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Chair	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Speaker 2			█		█	█	█	█	█		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
3			█		█	█	█	█	█		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
4				█		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
5					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
6			█	█		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
7			█	█		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
8			█		█		█			█					█		█	█	█	█			█			█				
9			█		█					█					█		█	█	█	█										
10					█										█		█	█	█	█										
Laughter			█	█		█					█				█	█	█	█	█	█			█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Whispering/ side murmuring	█	█		█	█	█															█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█

Figure 3.7: Meeting 4: Women's dispute resolution meeting

## Results

The different characteristics of the two different types of meetings, information sharing and dispute resolution, are revealed by the charts. In information sharing meetings 1 and 2, shown at Figures 3.3 and 3.4, the chair or one speaker plays a major role in the meeting, contributing more often and for relatively longer periods of time compared to other speakers. This reflects the nature of the meeting; one person presenting information to the group. For both male and female dominated meetings this pattern holds true, albeit with greater variation for women. Stark differences, however, emerge between men's and women's dispute resolution meetings 3 and 4 shown at Figures 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7. While in the men's meeting speakers continued to take turns to speak moderated by the chair, the women's meeting shows a loud meeting full of simultaneous talk, laughter and side discussions.

The busy visual picture of Figures 3.4 and 3.7 represent the louder and looser style of women's meetings. Women often spoke rapidly one after another, sometimes at the same time as one another and often engaged in side discussions while other speakers were addressing the meeting. In the two women's meetings presented here there was group laughter on several occasions. In both meetings the chair contributed frequently to the meeting but there is scant evidence that the chair controlled the contribution of other meeting attendees.

Men's meetings presented at Figures 3.3, 3.5 and 3.6 present a starkly different picture. The chair is clearly in control of meeting contributions. Individual contributions to the meeting by attendees are generally longer than in the women's meetings and each attendee at the meeting takes a turn at contributing. Figure 3.6, the second thirty minutes of meeting 3, has been included in this dataset to show how each man at the meeting takes a turn to contribute. As Figure 3.5 only recorded thirty minutes of the meeting the very distinct pattern of the meeting could not be accurately presented in this time limit given the length of each man's contribution. The uncluttered visual picture of Figures 3.3, 3.5 and 3.6 reflects the relatively low volume of sound in men's meetings. Whispering and side murmurings are also almost entirely absent, as is laughter.

The charts reveal the following characteristics of women's versus men's meeting styles in the context of men's only and women's only meetings:

- Women talk at the same time as other women; men take turns to talk.
- Women's talk will take place as an aside to the main speaker focus of the meeting; men's talk will be addressed to the chair.
- Women will talk amongst themselves while another woman is addressing the meeting at large; men will remain silent while another man is addressing the full meeting.
- Women contribute more frequently and at shorter intervals than men.
- Women laugh during meetings more often than men.

## Discussion

Agarwal (1997) lists barriers to women's participation in meetings as: logistical constraints (time), official male bias, social constraints based on gender norms, the absence of a "critical mass" of women, lack of public speaking experience, and apathy due to their opinions being disregarded (pp. 1374-1375). The results here comparing gendered attendance and contribution to meetings (section 2) speak to findings about the need for a "critical mass" for women to feel empowered to contribute to decision making in public fora. Kameswari (2002), in speaking of Joint Forest Management committees in India states:

Due to socio-cultural reasons, women often shy away from participating actively in public life. This is compounded by situations where their presence is reduced to a token gesture to fulfil administrative formalities. Since, it takes a minimum number of people, i.e., a 'critical mass' to feel empowered enough to express their views, such manipulations effectively reduce women to the role of passive receivers of information during the decision-making process. (p. 799)

Agarwal (2010) concludes that "the likelihood of at least some women speaking up...becomes significantly greater at a somewhat higher level of women's presence, namely...with a third or more of women members" (p. 108). Agarwal (2010) also acknowledges, however, that factors other than proportional representation at meetings will affect women's substantive contributions. She points out that women will speak up when they have a "personal" stake in the issue. Agarwal draws

on a much larger dataset than in my study but her examples indicate the same phenomena revealed by my data; that certain topics relate directly to gendered division of labour and are seen as women's areas of concern. In my study these topics were food and children. Women's contribution to meetings may therefore be constrained when meeting topics enter areas not normally associated with women's social roles, which is not the same thing as issues that substantially affect women's lives.

In my data while women always made up more than 50% of community meetings this did not empower them to contribute more frequently (except, as stated, on very specific topics). My results show that it is male presence at a meeting rather than women's proportional attendance that affects women's contributions. This may be explained by social norms around correct gendered etiquette for public speaking and women showing "respect" to men by remaining silent. Meeting 2, (Figure 3.4), in the dataset was a meeting run by NGO Live and Learn of three different village women's saving's clubs; Peoro, West Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association (WARA) and Vavanga. Live and Learn were touring with members of the highly successful WARA club from Malaita for the purposes of information sharing with women's saving's clubs in villages in the Western Province which they had helped established. While Vavanga women's savings club was not facilitated by Live and Learn, I had heard about the trip from my contacts with Live and Learn and so we arranged for representatives of the Vavanga Women's Saving's Club to attend the meeting. There were seven men at the meeting. The community facilitator for Live and Learn for all the villages in South Kolombangara involved with the Live and Learn Women's Savings Club program was a man. Two men had come with the NGO and one had come with the group of women from Vavanga as their boat drivers. The four other men present were members of the Peoro community where the meeting was being hosted.

The female facilitator from Live and Learn in Honiara addressed the meeting at the beginning:

Thank you to the men who have shown an interest and come. I see lots of men's faces here. They always come and support their wives, they come and sit down behind, listen, like to ask questions. You [men present] can ask questions too, thank you very much for leaving your work and coming. You women don't be frightened, even though there are men here, if you would like to say something, you say it. Say what you think.

The facilitator felt it necessary to encourage the women to speak up specifically in the presence of men even though this meeting was a *women's* savings club meeting (men cannot join) and even though there were only seven men at the meeting and fifteen women. The presence of men at the meeting was explicitly acknowledged as an inhibitor to women's contributions. Given the high proportional representation of women at the community meetings, in this context this explanation makes more sense than the idea of "critical mass".

### Gendered differences in meeting rhythms

The rhythm of women's only meetings reflects high and frequent levels of contribution to meetings, as well as a high level of talk among meeting attendees. This kind of discussion often took place as "side discussions" (which I have labelled "whispering and side murmurings") between participants at the meeting and in all women's meetings this kind of side discussion was accepted. I never once saw any attempt to "call the meeting to order" when women were talking amongst themselves at a women's meeting. Figure 3.7 particularly, reflects accurately the noisy place that a women's meeting can be. Aside from what I have labelled "side discussions" which only relate to meeting topic, women may also be attending to children, or organising household affairs from afar by ordering older children to attend to certain tasks. In some recordings of women's only meetings it is difficult to hear what the main speaker is saying due to the volume of noise being generated by children present at the meeting or because women near the voice recorder are talking amongst themselves about what is being discussed.

By contrast all men's meetings show a pattern of each meeting attendee taking turns to speak, moderated by the chair. The all-male meeting 3, I labelled "dispute resolution", (figures 3.5 and 3.6), was a meeting among Viuru tribal members to decide on the official position these meeting attendees wished to take in relations to a proposed logging operation that was, at the time, hotly disputed in the village. The rhythm of this meeting does not reflect robust discussion, but rather formal presentation by each man present. Additionally, children rarely interrupted or were present at all men's meetings.

Formal mixed sex meetings and men's only meetings may serve a function related more to corporate group or individual political positioning for men. This is akin to Lederman's (1980) claim that among the Mendi in PNG "effective decisions (that is, ones that make a difference to the people involved) appear to be made in informal contexts, and not at formal public meetings" (p. 480). Rather, formal public meetings are a means by which already established positions are presented and subtle political manoeuvring may take place.

Brison (1992) found that public debates in formal meetings among the Kwanga in the East Sepik province of Papua New Guinea "were but the most visible moment in a continual process of interpreting events and building reputations" (p. xvi). On Ranongga Island in the Western Province in Solomon Islands McDougall (2005) states that in matters to do with assertion of land ownership "Ranonngans implicitly articulate differential property rights through the transaction of material objects at the same time that they explicitly deny the significance of such differences in speeches made at these exchange events" (p. 83). In these cases the formal mechanisms of the community meeting exist in the space created by the tension between assertions of individual rights (and power brokering) and maintenance of social cohesion and collective identity.<sup>24</sup>

Formal meetings, particularly those to do with land issues, rather than opportunities for discussion and decision making are often a stage for the enactment of drama for certain purposes (for some examples of this kind of politics in meetings generally see Babidge, 2004; Brison, 1992; Lederman, 1980; McDougall, 2005; Myers, 1986). The way each man took a turn to speak in the meetings analysed for rhythm here reflects the fact that they came to the meeting with an already established position.

I did not collect the data analysed in this chapter with the specific purpose of undertaking a comparison of the rhythm of men's and women's meetings. Rather these styles became more

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<sup>24</sup> In an Aboriginal Australian context Myers (1986) claims that "...speech at meetings mediates between two dialectically related values that are central to any political identity for Pintupi: relatedness and autonomy. The social form of language – minimally including speaker, hearer, messages, and the capacity to be coordinated and shared – facilitates the process of mediation through which the polity is continually renegotiated" (p. 432).

distinctly apparent during the course of fieldwork. The analysis I present here is an attempt to visually convey my qualitative observations. This dataset would be completed by a Gantt chart showing the rhythm of a mixed sex community meeting. Such a chart could be compared to the styles revealed in what I have differentiated as men's and women's meetings. At the time I was collecting data I only took notes and not audio recording of these mundane community meetings, so I do not have such a recording to analyse. Lack of quantitative data on this point notwithstanding, qualitative observations of the eighteen meetings in the community meeting dataset presented to show gendered contribution and attendance in section two of this chapter, as well as many other meetings attended throughout Solomon Islands, reveal that mixed sex community meetings follow a rhythm more similar to men's meetings styles than women's. The structure of men's meetings and mixed sex community meetings signal formal and "official" behaviour. By comparison then, women's only meeting styles, as analysed here, appear informal and "unofficial".<sup>25</sup>

It is in the details of everyday life that relations and processes of power are created, re-enacted and reinforced; mundane community meetings are also political speech events. Formal explicit political ideology and informal powers are all part of a "single social experience and have to be examined in relation to one another" (Lederman, 1980, p. 496). Myers (1986) found that in Aboriginal Australia in Pintupi meetings, "Who can perform is a vital element" (p. 440). It is in "demonstrating the right to be heard" that participants protect and confirm their status (Myers, 1986, p. 440). He also presents meetings as a stage and stresses the importance of recognising who is on and who is off the stage, as much as analysing the content of the meeting itself. In this context a key finding of this chapter is that community meetings that follow men's meetings styles not only place constraints on women's rights to speak but are actually inimical to women's meeting styles. Women are "ruled off the stage" (Lederman, 1980, p. 492).

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<sup>25</sup> The provenance of current meeting format at the community level may be pertinent to understanding constructions of valid and "official" meeting styles. I merely speculate as an aside that "officialdom", as well as having traditional cultural roots, is possibly a legacy of colonial judicial and other rulings, as well as considerations of "formal" behavior within various churches or by missionaries.

### Access to information prior to meetings

Opportunity for discussion and knowledge acquisition may be generally unavailable to women in mixed sex meetings where first, they perceive that they do not have a right to ask questions and second, where asking for clarification may be a matter of shame as it reveals the questioner's lack of knowledge. This issue is related not only to men's and women's specific meeting styles but also to the wider issue of access to information discussed earlier in this chapter, namely that men act as gatekeepers to information. As one woman said of women's participation in community meetings, "We women just sit at the meeting and wait to say yes".

Women may come to a formal mixed sex meeting with only vague knowledge of the meeting agenda where her male counterparts have been involved in informal discussions about the position they will take in relation to certain issues prior to the meeting. Kameswari (2002) calls the processes by which such instances occur "degenerate communication, meaning communication that has lost its desired qualities" (p. 800). She gives an example from a case study in India where one female member of a Joint Forest Management committee was not given notice of a meeting scheduled for the evening while her husband had already worked on "an elaborate list of issues to be discussed" with a neighbour (p. 799). Similar processes are described in detail in Chapter 4 concerning women's position and contribution to meetings during a dispute over a proposed large scale logging project in Vavanga village.

### Conclusions

Formal meetings continue to be an integral part of establishing and maintaining influence and status at all levels, from village to national politics, as part of a Melanesian "big man" tradition. While it was men with oratorical forms of leadership that were historically recognised (Monson, 2012, p. 325), in post-independence Solomon Islands, influence in decisions around large scale natural resource extraction is manifest in what Porter and Allen (2015) call the "'habitus' of the logging political economy" (p. 3). This "habitus" rests on political influence linked to ability to access and

control resources, a position occupied by politicians, “middle-men”, and those more educated and business savvy at a village level with connections to the powerful political elite.

A key conclusion from a comparison of men and women’s meetings styles is that women only meetings contain a large element of acquiring information about the topic at hand before discussion and decision making can take place. In many cases this comes back again to the control that men exercise over information – in their position as leaders, middle men, business people and spokesmen on customary land matters. Women also express the traditional view that men are their political spokespeople and whatever position men take is representative of the household position (Pollard, 2000). In a self-reinforcing cycle women’s contributions to public meetings clearly reflect social perceptions of women’s sphere of primary influence; children, food and household matters.

Higher education levels of men generally may also play a role, as for many village women written information is largely inaccessible due to low levels of literacy. The 2009 census (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2009) claims that literacy rates for the overall population 15 years and older is 84.1%. The rate for men at 88.9% is higher than women at 79.2%. At 93.6%, literacy rates for the urban population are higher than the rural at 81.4%. And rural women are listed at lower literacy rates (76.2%) than rural men (86.7%). These figures, however, may be optimistic and not a true indicator of ability to read and understand written material at any level of complexity, as the census defines literacy as “able to read and write a simple sentence in any language” (p. 2). This definition also says nothing about literacy rates in English language – which is the business and official language of Solomon Islands.

This chapter shows that women are scripted only bit parts, narrowly typecast, in formal meetings events seen as relevant to the community or tribal group as a whole. Their exclusion from meetings about land and their silence at community meetings reinforces the notion that it is right for women to be silent. By contrast, the noisy visual picture of women’s only meetings shows that women are capable of speech. The visual presentation of women’s and men’s different meeting style reveals the contrast between what is considered “formal”, and therefore publicly valid, as opposed to the “informal” style of women’s meetings. This points to the need to make space for alternate ways of

meeting and discussing that are publicly recognised as valid, rather than insisting on a version of gender equity that merely slots women into existing male communication structures. I continue this theme in Chapter 4 which examines in detail women's voice in a logging conflict that occurred in Vavanga village. Analysis on men's and women's meeting styles presented in this chapter is extended to understanding the context in which women's voices are publicly heard and characterised.

## 4. In/Visible women in/Valid conflict

To have a ‘feminist’ consciousness means that one *notices* the ‘invisibility’ of women. It means one *wonders* where the women are – in life and in print. (Van Allen, 1975, p. 28, emphasis in original)

Commentary on gender relations in large scale logging projects in Solomon Islands often merely notes women’s absence and exclusion. What women were actually doing while conflict about such projects was occurring remains obscure. This chapter examines women’s perspectives and activities inside the logging process using two events: a women’s role play about logging, and thick ethnography of a violent conflict about logging. This chapter continues the theme of analysis presented in Chapter 3 about gendered meetings, and looks in more detail at the construction of women’s voice. I examine where women became in/visible in a logging conflict that occurred in Vavanga village and why.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First I present the script of a six scene role play about logging performed by the Bolgabe Women’s Saving Club based in Kena village, on Kolombangara Island. I use the script as an alternative to reviewing the scholarly literature largely dominated by androcentric perspectives, a brief summary of which is referenced in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

The second section examines in detail a logging conflict that occurred in the village of Vavanga while I was resident there. This section presents specific ethnographic detail to complement the Bolgabe Women’s role play by examining where the women actually were and what they were doing during the logging conflict. The focus of this section is on the women’s role, position and activity within the dispute and the community. I do not focus on the legal aspects of the dispute nor arguments about genealogy and land rights generally.

The final section is a discussion of the forms that women’s agency took in the logging dispute and how this is related to the “good woman” category, which is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

## Logging role play by the Bolgabe Women's Savings Club

This script was produced as part of a workshop in 2013 with international NGO Live and Learn, dealing with social issues identified by the women as important to them. It is a valuable artefact of the women's perspective of the logging process.<sup>26</sup> The women's portrayal of issues brings into sharp relief typical characteristics of the various players in large scale logging operations, imaginings of development and their inequitable outcomes. The role play presents a caricature of dominant narratives of logging and development; the same plot line but with the flavour of the women's outrage and humour.

This transcript is my translation from Solomon Island's *pijin*, from a video recording of the role play performance which included more than the six scenes presented here. I have edited out several scenes that were to do with transport of various characters (no dialogue) and a conversation by telephone between the middleman and the Asian logger. The substance of this conversation is conveyed in the scenes in the transcript presented here. The role play is presented following standard stage play formatting as per King (2016).

### Scene 1

SETTING:

An Asian<sup>27</sup> logging company representative meets with a Solomon Islander middleman. The Asian logging company representative is dressed in overalls, wraparound sunglasses and carries a backpack. The Solomon Islander middleman is wearing wraparound sunglasses, has a mobile phone around his neck on a cord and carries a backpack [material signs of modernity and wealth].

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.livelearn.org/locations/solomon-islands>

<sup>27</sup> I use the term "Asian" here as a direct translation from the *pijin* word *Waku* – used to refer to anyone of Chinese or putative Chinese descent excepting Japanese, or Indians from East Asia.

ASIAN LOGGER

I am a man from Malaysia. I'm an Asian. I'm a millionaire.

(Pats his back pocket)

MIDDLEMAN

(Laughs)

ASIAN LOGGER

I heard news in my place, Malaysia, that Kolombangara has lots and lots of trees.

MIDDLEMAN

Loads!

ASIAN LOGGER

So I've come to find out if you can negotiate with some landowners to give me some trees.

MIDDLEMAN

Don't you worry. You just give some money to the middleman and I'll go see the chief.

(ASIAN LOGGER pulls a wad of cash from his back pocket. The  
MIDDLEMAN laughs into his hand as he watches.)

ASIAN LOGGER

Millionaire Asian!

(Pats his back pocket again.)

If the chief wants to give the area that belongs to him...

(Smacks the wad of cash in his hand, and hands it to the  
middleman.)

MIDDLEMAN

Don't you worry. \$10,000 you give me now, \$500 I will give to the chief and I'll pocket the rest.

(ASIAN LOGGER opens his back pack and hands the middleman a packet of cigarettes and a can of beer.)

MIDDLEMAN

Ah... Refreshment for the middleman first.

(Drinks the beer.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 2

SETTING

The middleman meets with the village chief. The village chief is seated on a chair. He wears a straw hat and a *lava lava* [sarong]. He is chewing betelnut and pounding betel nut and lime in a mortar and pestle [material signs of village localism]. Throughout the conversation the chief continues to pound the betel nut and acts absentmindedly, agreeing to everything.

MIDDLEMAN

Okay, cigarettes for you here.

(Hands the chief a packet of cigarettes.)

I think your back must be sore, I think you'll need to freshen it up a little bit.

(Hands the chief a can of beer.)

CHIEF

Oh thank you very much. This time the chief is going to drink now, yeh.

(Opens the can of beer and starts drinking.)

MIDDLEMAN

One Asian man has come to see me. I know you've got lots of land here and lots of trees. I've seen them already. You know, that Asian man, he's a millionaire Asian man. He will give you lots of money and then all the girls will like you, yeh.

CHIEF

Okay. Thank you thank you. You look there.

(Stands up and points out to the land)

Every bush there, all that land belongs to me. To me only, I'm the chief here. Every tree there that you can see. Don't worry. Me, only, I'm the landowner here. No man can come dispute my ownership. Me, I am the landowner of this place, so don't you worry.

MIDDLEMAN

Here, \$500 no more, he gave me. When he comes back he will give you \$500 more. I will ring him [the Asian logger]. Then every machine will arrive here tomorrow. Is that alright?

CHIEF

Yes. That's good. Tomorrow your company will come.

MIDDLEMAN

You call all your community to come together then you can discuss this. If they say it's alright, you give the information to me then I will call the Asian. Don't you worry. He's a millionaire. Lots of money. He will give you and me lots of money. For your community he will pay roofing iron, solar, your children's school fees. Don't you people worry. You and I will operate like that.

CHIEF

Okay.

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

SETTING

The Chief calls a community meeting. The Chief mimes blowing the conch shell [traditional call for community meeting]. The chief is sitting on a chair. Villagers come and sit down on the ground in front of the chief.

CHIEF

Okay. We're going to have a meeting now. Tomorrow a logging company will be arriving here. I will pay for solar panels for you, I will pay for roofing iron for your house, and I will buy you an outboard motor. You and I, we will let the logging company come to our village so that we will be rich now. So what do you think? Do you like this idea?

VILLAGERS

Let them come.

CHIEF

We'll let them come. You people are tired of selling at the market, so now royalties will come, millions. Don't you worry my people, I will pay you all royalties.

VILLAGERS

Thank you chief, that's what we like chief.

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 4

SETTING

The Asian logging company representative comes to the village to meet with the chief. The middleman brings the Asian logger to the chief.

MIDDLEMAN

(Addresses the chief)

Okay the Asian has come now. He's come for you to sign the agreement.

(CHIEF and ASIAN LOGGER shake hands)

ASIAN LOGGER

Okay, okay, it's all settled now. Is everything organised?

CHIEF

It's all organised. We've had a meeting already, everyone agrees, this time we're ready to sign.

(ASIAN LOGGER pulls out a wad of cash from his back pocket  
and presents it to the chief)

CHIEF

Thank you. Okay this time I'll sign now and then all the work men can come.

ASIAN LOGGER

Where is your area here?

CHIEF

(Stands up and points out to the bush.)

Hey, you look there, that's a big area there that belongs to me with lots and lots of trees. You know Kolombangara Island is a big land. So all my people are happy now, we have all agreed already.

(ASIAN LOGGER hands the chief a packet of cigarettes and a can  
of beer. CHIEF opens the beer and drinks it immediately.)

ASIAN LOGGER

So now I will give him [chief] the paper to sign.

MIDDLEMAN

(Parodying Asian accent addresses the Asian logger and gestures  
to the chief)

You give him the paper to sign.

CHIEF

Don't you worry Asian. I'm ready to sign.

MIDDLEMAN

You chief, you're happy now, you're going all the way now.

CHIEF

Time for me to go find girls.

ASIAN LOGGER

(Hands a paper to the Chief)

You sign this one here.

(CHIEF signs)

CHIEF

Okay. It's finished now. Tomorrow the logging company will be here. Don't you worry Asian.

ASIAN LOGGER

Tomorrow all the logging machinery will arrive on the barge.

CHIEF

(Laughs)

The chief is happy now. Ha! Lots of money!

(ASIAN LOGGER hands the chief another wad of cash)

CHIEF

I'm going to go find some girls, and go get drunk in a hotel.

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 5

SETTING

The stage is set up to represent a forest with branches used as props for trees. The logging is beginning. Logging company employees have props representing chainsaws and are chopping down the trees.

COMMENTATOR

Every local man that did work for the logging company comes to take their payment now. A lot of social problems happen in the village; drinking, gambling, fighting, lots of problems come to the village.

(Local drunk man reels around the stage drinking beer and singing out of key. Other men sit in a group and play cards and gamble. Someone comes and leads the drunk man away. The gambling group start to quarrel, there is a lot of shouting. Someone breaks up the group. They exit the stage. The drunk man reappears singing and stumbling about, he is also led away.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 6

SETTING                      The chief is sitting on a chair in the middle of the stage pounding betel nut and chewing.

COMMENTATOR

The logging company has left, none of the promised benefits have been forthcoming and adverse environmental effects are being felt. Angry villagers confront the chief.

VILLAGER 1

(Stands in front of the chief and points at his face, shouting)

You are one man who is a liar. You are such a liar. We are dying trying to find water, our river is dirty now.

(Whirls away angrily and leaves the stage. CHIEF sits calmly and does not respond.)

VILLAGER 2

Chief, for us to go hunting it's too far away now. Why did you let this logging company come?

(Whirls away angrily and leaves the stage. CHIEF sits calmly and does not respond.)

VILLAGER 3

(Storms onto the stage and stops in front of the chief with hands on hips and starts to yell at the chief)

Chief you are a liar. You said if the logging company came that you would pay iron roofing and solar panels you said, but you lied. You are a liar and a con man.

(Whirls away angrily and leaves the stage. CHIEF sits calmly and does not respond.)

VILLAGER 4

Chief I know now that you are a con man. I am a custom doctor but I can't find the plants I need to make my medicine anymore. This time we don't want this logging company to come back to our place.

(Whirls away angrily and leaves the stage. CHIEF sits calmly and does not respond.)

VILLAGER 5

(Yelling)

Chief you let this company come inside our place. This time the river is dirty. We have to walk far away to get water. You are a rubbish<sup>28</sup> chief!

(Whirls away angrily and leaves the stage. CHIEF sits calmly and does not respond.)

(END OF SCENE)

(END OF ROLE PLAY)

The role play is valuable as a presentation of the women's perspectives and analysis of the logging process. What they choose to represent in the role play highlights their concerns and their perceived control, or lack of, in the process. The play highlights the following points: exchanges of cash, male spending habits, lack of consultation and information sharing, claims to land as individualised property, default on promises of material benefit, environmental degradation, and finally, the failure of the chief to look after the interests of the people. In this way the women protest their exclusion and assert their right to financial benefits and participation in decision making. In the same way Sexton (1982) states that women's complaints in PNG about men's use of money was a way of asserting their rights to that money, "By their complaints, women stake their claim to a say in the disposition of cash" (p. 169).

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<sup>28</sup> This is quite a serious accusation in *pijin*. Calling someone *rubbish* is tantamount to swearing at them.

The women show that they are aware of the crooked financial dealings that accompany logging operations, and condemn them. The Asian logger is presented as a supplier of cash, which is subsequently mishandled. The middle man is regarded as a spurious character who is cheating the Asian logger and the Chief. The Chief emerges as a largely impotent figure in dealings with the logging company, where he is being cheated by the middleman. Additionally, he is shown failing as a leader on several counts. First he claims initially that all the land is his, that no-one can dispute his land ownership. Such statements are clearly contrary to customary land tenure principles. They are also common in large scale logging deals with foreign companies. Kabutaulaka (2000) comments that logging companies have “created” individual landowners simply because they are easier to deal with than a clan or tribe (p. 93). The position of land or village chief, or indeed of trustee, does not imply the level of control or right to distribute benefits arising from land use that have subsequently been handed to the trustees on logging licences.

Second, the Chief fails to keep promises of material benefits (roofing iron, solar panels, outboard motors), supposed to result from the logging. The villagers feel cheated of the promised benefits while feeling the adverse effects of the logging operation in their daily lives. Included in the villagers’ list of complaints at the end of the play are the results of environmental degradation from the logging activity. These are very real concerns in most villages in Solomon Islands that have experienced logging. High rainfall combined with reliance on rivers as direct water sources and reefs for the majority of protein intake, mean that erosion, landslides, silted waterways and reefs, as well as loss of non-timber forest products, radically affect villager well-being.

Third, the Chief is presented as morally degenerate in a particularly male way. His dialogue when accepting cash revolves around personal consumption, not the needs of the community. A feature of all the cash handovers in the play is a simultaneous gifting of beer and cigarettes and references to “girls”. As discussed in Chapter 2, this may be a reference to prostitutes (not necessarily female children) and also the idea that men are able to attract mistresses when they have a supply of money. The picture that emerges is of male spending on personal consumption. The expression commonly used in *pijin* of such spending is *kai kai selen* – eat money. This expression is often used in

reference to a perception that money is being wasted on personal consumption, or about people who have misused funds intended to be shared. Scene 5 shows the local men working for the logging company spending their money in this way, on alcohol and gambling.

It was extraordinary to see village women publicly criticising the actions of men, particularly male authority figures. Male characters are lampooned in the role play. There were men present at the performance of the role play and before the performance the women publicly paid a “fine” to the chief’s representative (the chief was away at the time). This fine was explained as giving permission to the women to speak and act in ways during the role play not normally culturally acceptable. This included dressing as men (wearing trousers) and speaking harshly to authority figures – which is considered “swearing” and would usually be cause for a compensation demand. In this way a culturally negotiated space was created for contestation of dominant social narratives.

The women’s ebullient performances during the role play allowed the community at large, as the audience, to participate through their enthusiastic laughter and applause. Role play as a form of communication is common in other forums, particularly in Church settings where it is used to present religious teachings and stories with a moral purpose (see also Monson, 2012, pp. 95-98). In the village environment of low literacy and general lack of access to forms of media, the role plays are a powerful means of generating awareness and influencing community opinion about controversial issues. The women here are taking a stand, *as a group of women*. While they powerfully and coherently present their concerns, I argue that they remain culturally embedded. I discuss this issue in more detail and with reference to constructions of agency in Chapter 8.

In Section 2 I turn to women’s role in a logging conflict that occurred in Vavanga village while I was resident there. The Bolgabe women’s role play is an accurate summary of Vavanga village’s previous experiences with logging, in particular a logging operation that occurred from 2003 to 2005. Here I analyse another proposed logging operation of the same kind.

## Women in the logging conflict in Vavanga village

In March 2013 the village of Vavanga was abuzz with gossip about the imminent arrival of a large scale logging operation. To follow the details of the dispute, which involved past logging licenses, changing factional loyalties and obviously irregular dealings with various government departments, is not the point of this chapter. These kinds of disputes, which often have a wearying sameness about them, have been documented thoroughly by others. I give only enough context to make sense of women's role in this matter, the gendered nature of the process, and its outcome.

I became aware of the proposed logging operation in everyday conversations with women. The way the Bolgabe women presented their view of the logging process in their role play reflects the kind of information the women in Vavanga village gave me about the proposed logging operation. Basically, they knew a logging operation was proposed and the main actors involved in bringing the company to the village. They had little or no knowledge of legal issues, except that possibly there might be some. To get information on the details of the proposed project and the various legal activities taking place I had to talk to the men in the village.

Vavanga village had twice previously experienced large scale logging operations by foreign companies. In the early 1970s Levers Pacific Plantation Proprietary Limited (LPPPL) logged almost the entire lowland forest of Kolombangara Island (Whitmore, 1989, p. 470). Between 2003 and 2005 Delta Timber Company Ltd, a Malaysian company, logged much of the Viuru tribal estate. In the current case Viuru Forest Enterprises Limited, a Solomon Islands company, and Xiang Lin (SI) Timber Ltd were the parties seeking to log forest which included an area adjacent to Vavanga village. Details on acquisition of logging licenses in Solomon Islands are in Appendix 3. A schematic summary is provided at Figure 4.1.

Viuru Forest Enterprises Ltd, a company directed by Gordon Darcy Lilo, who was Prime Minister at the time, had entered a Technology and Management Agreement with Xiang Lin (SI) Timber Ltd to log within the Viuru tribe cognatic descent group estates, which included forest above

Vavanga village. There had been no public or tribal meetings about this proposed operation, as required in the process of acquiring a logging license.

Viuru Forest Enterprises claimed they did not have to go through this consultative process (Form 1) as they were merely renewing the old timber rights license from a previous logging operation in 2003, for which they had been the licensee. Although there had been a Certificate of Completion issued for this license, which effectively means the rights in the license are finished, the proponents of the logging operation claimed this Certificate of Completion was invalid because the right people hadn't signed it.

While Viuru Forest Enterprises claimed they were renewing the previous timber rights license on Viuru lands, three trustees on this original license were replaced, seemingly without the consultation or the knowledge of the trustees being replaced, or the wider Viuru tribe. A recognised Viuru tribal land chief, whose name as trustee was taken off the timber license in question without his knowledge, made a sworn statement in an application for an injunction against the operation in which he said:

I have been informed that there is a new timber rights agreement but I have not seen a copy of it. I was not informed of any new timber rights hearing and I was not involved in any negotiations for a new timber rights agreement. I understand the new trustees are ... [names listed]

I note that three (3) of the new trustees, namely [names of 3 trustees]... were not part of the previous timber rights hearing and were not listed as landowners in the 17 May 2002 Timber Rights agreement...

Paradoxically, although Viuru Forest Enterprises claimed that they did not need a new Logging License because they were merely renewing an old license, they held a Timber Rights Meeting, but did not publicise it or ensure that the appropriate people could attend. The same land chief quoted above also said in his statement:

I have been shown a copy of the minutes of the meeting referred to in this letter [Timber Rights Meeting]. I note that most of the signatures attached were signed by children.

## Logging License Process

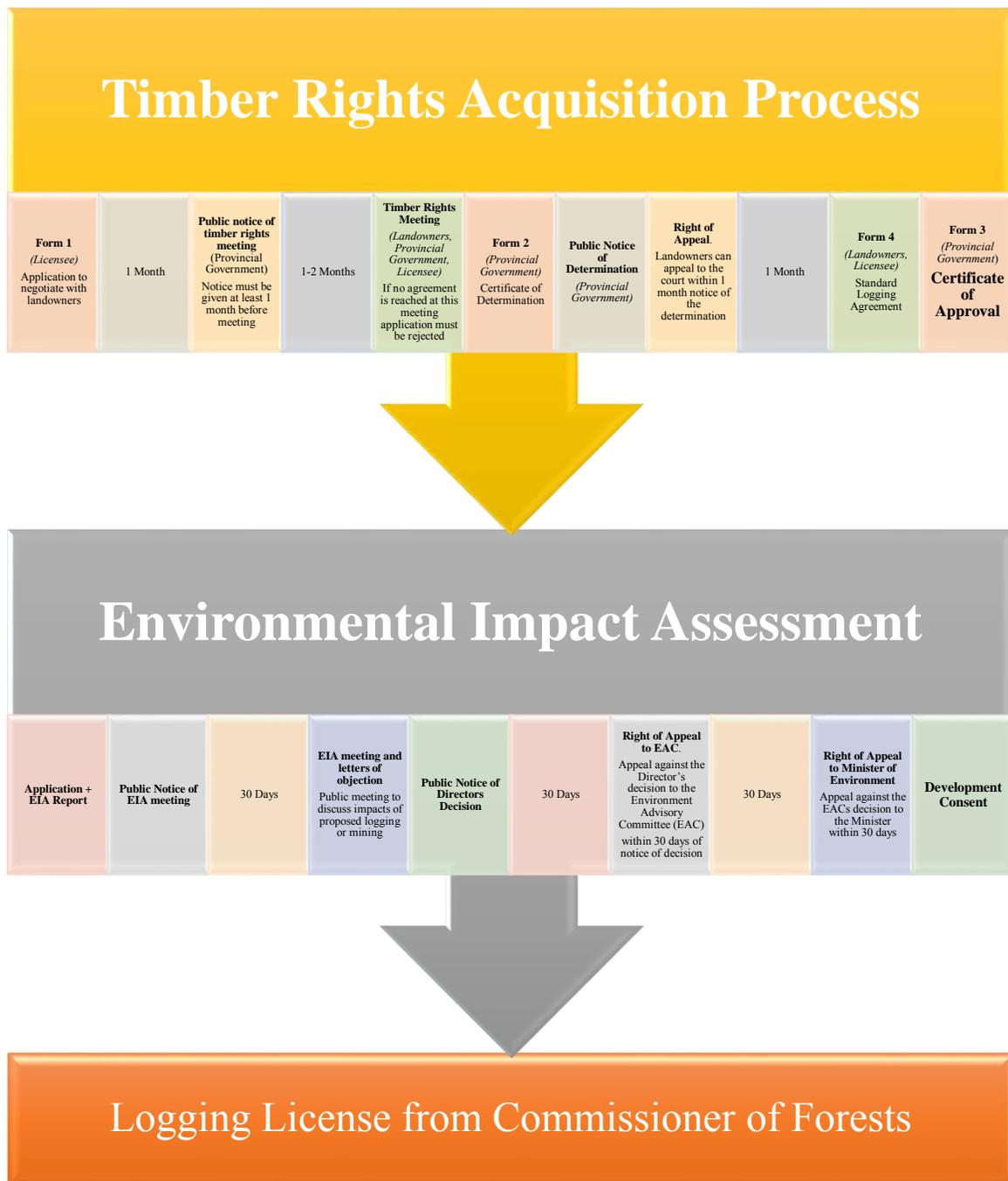


Figure 4.1: Process to obtain a logging license

(Summarised and modified from Landowners' Advocacy and Legal Support Unit, nd)

And secondly that no EIA had been carried out and no Development Consent had been granted:

I am not aware of any notice being given, or Development Consent meeting having taken place in relation to the Defendants' proposed logging operations. If any such Development Consent meeting occurred it was without my presence and input, and any resolution or decision was without my consent and that of tribal members from [village name] to [river name] who will be affected by the logging operations.

Dealings as described above are symptomatic of logging disputes throughout the Solomons. In the case of the current dispute in Vavanga the heart of the matter was also the same as in many other logging disputes that have fractured communities throughout the Solomons; control of the right to bring in the logging operation had serious implications for land rights. Namely, those able to claim authority in decisions about land, particularly in formal processes with legal documentation, such as in a logging license, have, de facto, established their authority over the land in question. They are also positioned to control the flow of financial benefits. Many times those opposing a logging operation are not necessarily opposed to logging per se but are struggling to be in control of the negotiations and flow of benefits (for example see Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2000, pp. 41-42). In the current case it seemed that those opposed to logging were opposed to the type of logging that would result from the large scale logging operation. At the time of writing, however, this case is still not settled, so imputation of such motivations is merely speculation.

Heading the opposition to the logging within the village were three male members of the Lakevu clan: the village chairman, the most successful village entrepreneur, and a prominent educated village elder. Since January 2013 they had been sending letters to the Commissioner of Forests, the Ministry of Forestry, and the Provincial Government, registering their objections to the proposed project and the lack of correct process in obtaining the Logging License. No women were signatories or involved in the writing of these letters.

The majority of the Lakevu sub lineage members in the village were opposed to the logging operation. Sub lineages, however, were also divided due to the naming of three male members of the Lakevu clan as trustees on the allegedly "renewed" license. Trustees become

the individuals that deal directly with the logging company and often times payments from the logging may be deposited into bank accounts with their names. There had been no public meeting to appoint these three men as trustees.

Between February and June 2013, talk about the proposed logging operation intensified in the village. There were many informal and formal meetings about the issue. I had only peripheral knowledge of the informal meetings. They were invariably small meetings of men only, to which I was not invited. I knew these meetings were taking place because women told me about them, and in one case, because an elder man had discussed it with my partner, Andy, who subsequently told me about it. When I asked the women why they were not also attending they told me, “This is men’s business, they will sort it out”.

Other formal meetings took place. On the 31 March 2013 the Lakevu clan met in Vavanga to discuss the proposed logging project. Both men and women attended the meeting but affines were not present. On the 7 April 2013 members of the Viuru tribe Council of Chiefs and Elders met to discuss the issue of the proposed logging project. Those present, all men, were opposed to the logging operation and agreed to give authority to KIBCA to take legal action to stop the logging company. KIBCA were questioning the legality of the logging license on several points, including, failure to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and obtain Development Consent. KIBCA was using the legal services of the Landowners’ Advocacy and Legal Support Unit (LALSU) through the Public Solicitors Office in Gizo (HCSI Civil Case NO. 192 of 2012). No women from the village or Viuru tribe were personally involved in this legal challenge or were signatories on documents.

On the 30 May 2013 a general meeting of members of the Viuru tribe was held with some Viuru tribal chiefs and elders present. The meeting attendees agreed to oppose any logging of forests adjacent to Vavanga. Women attended this meeting in small numbers but made no contributions to the discussion. This meeting is the subject of analysis in Chapter 3, listed as meeting 4. On the 4 June 2013 Frederick, one of the trustees, on the allegedly renewed logging license, arrived in the village for a meeting to discuss the project. There had been no formal public meeting of opposing parties in the conflict prior to this meeting.

Rumour of the meeting had been circulating approximately a week prior to Frederick's arrival in the village. My ears were filled in that preceding week with narratives from both parties arguing their authority to make decisions about the proposed logging project. I heard these stories from both men and women. These narratives were of two kinds. Firstly, historical narratives of connectedness to place emphasising the rights to speak for the narrator's land which simultaneously discredited the rights of those on the other side of the conflict. Secondly, narratives sometimes also historically based on rights to receive benefits: from previous logging operations, from the current proposed operation and from a variety of projects from the past that had taken place, or allegedly taken place, in the village.

This second set of narratives was used by people on both sides of the conflict to justify their current position. For example, those against the current proposed logging operation would say, "I don't want logging because the big men at the top take the money and all we get is a river like Milo [dirty water]". From those supporting the current proposed logging operation I heard narratives such as:

Other development projects have come to this village before but it's only some people that get the benefit and if there's money I don't know where it went, I didn't get any. We should all get equal shares but it's only some people that get benefit. That's why I support the company [proposed logging by foreign company] because then everyone will get something. I don't like logging, it's no good really, but this way it's equal. If we had good leaders it wouldn't have to be like this.

On the morning of 4 June 2013 the women's church group, Dorcas, had their regular Tuesday meeting. The plan for Dorcas that morning, after spiritual activities, was to fundraise by working in three different women's gardens. The women in whose gardens they worked would pay \$20 each to Dorcas. The women knew there was supposed to be a meeting about logging that day with Frederick but were unsure of the meeting time. They had been asked to make food for the meeting attendees, a normal practice and sometimes the only role the women played in these meetings, but again, had not been given a time. They decided to go ahead with their communal work fundraising plan.

It wasn't until 2pm however that the conch shell was blown and people started to gather for the meeting. By 3pm there was a tense and silent group of people sitting inside the *paele*. The women had still not returned from the gardens. Attendance at this meeting was tantamount to a decision to bring the matter to a fight. It was clear prior to the meeting that all parties had a predetermined position. In agreeing to meet they had agreed to the challenge. In his analysis of meetings among the Pintupi, Myers (1986) says:

Severe opposition and debate would deny the very basis on which resolution could take place at all. Recognizing this, the Pintupi would rather not have a meeting until some of the opposition has diminished. To do otherwise is an invitation to violence, what they call 'setting up' a fight. (Myers, 1986, p. 439)

Those that attended this meeting told me they came knowing that it would result in a fight. Certain community members made deliberate decisions to be absent from the village when the meeting took place so they could avoid participating in, or witnessing, the impending conflict. The principal of the village primary school, not related to the Viuru tribal group, told me before the meeting started, "I am going up to the river with my daughter. We are going to bathe and wash our clothes and stay there until the meeting is over".

The meeting was mostly attended by men at this point with a few women that had not joined the Dorcas working group seated on the periphery. Lola, the wife of one of the trustees, was one of the few women inside the *paele*. The other women in the *paele* at this time were members of the Timot Loi clan who supported the logging project and had agreed to rent the log point to the logging company.

The usual procedure at meetings was for the village chairman or other elder to welcome everybody, say a prayer and begin the meeting. At this meeting, however, the village chairman remained silent and no-one stepped forward to open the meeting. This was a deliberate tactic on behalf of the chairman and other elders at the meeting who were opposed to the logging project. Their lack of action was a form of resistance to suggestions of Frederick's authority or right to speak; what Myers (1986) frames as, "...not so much an attempt at dominance as an assertion of autonomy" (p. 434).

Eventually Frederick stood up and announced that since the chairman had not opened the meeting he would begin it. The normal meeting procedure of welcomes and acknowledgements was not followed and no prayer was said to open the meeting. This remains the only meeting I have attended anywhere in Solomon Islands that did not begin with a prayer. Frederick began the meeting thus:

I am just here to let you know what's going on. That's all. Everything is finalised now with the government and with Forestry [department]. Every executive meeting is finished and everything is finalised. So we have now in black and white that the logging operation will start in this old concession area [of the license from 2003-2005].

What we would like is that when the [logging] company comes down that you people don't disturb them. The law is there I tell you. We have the [Logging] License. I want to declare this out. We know you have some questions about the forms 1, 2, 3, and 4. We have renewed the old license because when they issued that closing certificate [Certificate of Completion of the old license] we trustees were not aware of that, someone else, not the trustees, signed that Certificate of Completion. So that Certificate of Completion was not valid so we are renewing the old license.

Frederick's talk at this meeting represents a third narrative which emphasised the purportedly unchangeable legal aspects of the current proposed operation; that the documents were all signed and that legally things were settled for the logging company to come despite any village opposition. Additionally Frederick's narrative emphasised the powerlessness and poverty of the villagers in a way that suggested villagers should accept the proposed logging operation with a view to taking whatever benefit they could from it. He said:

We people in Honiara, we want to include everyone in the tribe, in the *butubutu*.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore because before [referring to previous logging operations] people more educated than us took the money and we ended up with nothing. Look, there's no housing scheme here. It was promised but nothing happened. We are very poor now. Everyone comes here and tells us lies, they say we will do this, do that, do this, but we don't know [what's really true]. So we want benefit now from inside the land where we sit down [from our own land].

When the royalty comes, you will know; we will put the money in the [bank] account. You can be sure it won't be hidden, you can go to the forestry department and you will be able to take your money. You will be able to go to the customs department and take [your money], you will be able to go to the [logging] company and take [your money]. You'll find out where the money is going. This isn't a hard one. It's easy. Other times it's been difficult to see

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<sup>29</sup> People in this village interchangeably use the term *butubutu* and *bubutu*. The former is the Roviana / Marovo language term, while the latter is the Nduke term.

[where the money has gone]. But this one will be very easy because it's in black and white. The government knows so it cannot be hidden.

After Frederick finished speaking the village chairman asked, "Who are the trustees of this renewed license?" Everybody at the meeting was aware of the named trustees and the chairman's question was tantamount to the opening of the fight. Suddenly many people were speaking at once and Lola, the only woman to speak at the meeting thus far, suggested that her husband's nephew, another member of the Lakevu clan opposed to logging, should replace her husband as trustee and maybe then everyone would be happy. By suggesting this Lola implies that the conflict is about control of the logging project rather than a desire to not have the project at all.

At this point the meeting erupted into violence. The violence was limited to two brothers and a first cousin on opposite sides of the conflict with other men becoming involved to break up the fighting. Lola was the only woman to be hit. The nephew she suggested should take her husband's position as trustee slapped her across the face and told her to shut up. The fighting subsided quickly and men retreated to various parts of the clearing. Lola was one of the few people still sitting in the *paele*. She continued to declaim her views loudly despite people calling out to her to be quiet. She would not be silenced and continued in this vein for some ten to fifteen minutes.

When the violence erupted I had been sitting in the meeting house with six year old Jasmine on my lap. As soon as the violence started she began to wail and cry. I jumped up with Jasmine and ran out of the meeting house to the closest house. Several other women were gathered there already. The women around me commented that the fight was Lola's fault. They said she should have kept her mouth shut. One woman said, "Women shouldn't be involved in these issues, they should just let the men sort it out". Another added, "Women should stay out of these meetings because they don't understand the issues involved". Twelve year old Bella, who was standing with us holding her three year old sister on her hip, said, "Women should be quiet. It's not their place to talk". During this conversation Lola was still seated in the *paele* maintaining a loud monologue, despite several people's attempts to quiet

her down. One woman commented, “That’s why her husband had to beat her last week, because she can’t shut her mouth”.

After about fifteen minutes the men involved in the fighting, brothers and first cousins, gathered together just outside the meeting house and had a private discussion which ended with hand shaking all round. After this, the meeting resumed with great attention to polite meeting protocol by the men; carefully modulated voices and turn taking at speaking, aligning with men’s meeting style described in Chapter 3. By this time the women’s Dorcas working group had returned from the gardens and joined the meeting. There were many women seated inside the *paele* now. They were aware that there had been fisticuffs between the men and the tension in the air was palpable.

The woman sitting next to me, Beatrice, who was opposed to the logging operation, started muttering loudly. I commented that there had already been one fight and she should be careful or there would be another one. She replied, “I’m ready for a fight. I’m not afraid”. No women had addressed the meeting at this point aside from Lola in the first half of the meeting, but there was a lot of discussion among the women themselves now not addressed to the meeting at large. This is a feature of women’s meetings noticeably absent from men’s and mixed sex formal meetings described in detail in Chapter 3 – what I label “whispering and side murmuring”. The men had continued with the meeting while this occurred, still following formal meeting protocol. Beatrice’s mutterings increased in intensity until finally she stood up and addressed the meeting at large, saying, “This issue is not about logging, it’s about rights. We’ve got to fight for our rights”.

Beatrice’s brother-in-law addressed the meeting next – he was opposed to the logging project. One of the woman from the Timot Loi clan, who was supporting the project, started to talk loudly over the top of him, saying that his talk was “all blah blah” and it’s time for action. A verbal altercation then began between Beatrice and this woman which escalated quickly into physical violence, with the sisters of each woman joining the fray. No men joined in the fighting. Quite quickly after the fighting started many other people became involved

separating the fighting women. The women continued to yell at each other, struggling against their relatives who were keeping them separated.

I once again ran out of the fray to stand with a group of people not involved in the fighting. The women around me commented that women should not be at the meeting. They said, “Women don’t understand, they just talk all about”. At this point a male elder attempted to restore order and resume the meeting. While actual fisticuffs had ceased, some women, particularly Beatrice, would not be calmed down and continued to yell abuse at the opposing party. Eventually the elder gave up attempting to restore order, said a closing prayer mostly inaudible due to the high volume of women’s shouting still occurring, and the meeting ended in disarray.

### A gendered analysis of the fighting meeting

While the conflict became open and resulted in violence between the men in this meeting, they were able, after a break, to return to the meeting and speak together again. Aside from the fisticuffs, the men did not deviate from the men’s style of meeting described in Chapter 3. When the women joined the meeting and began “whispering and side murmuring”, the meeting quickly progressed to loud confusion again. Once the women started fighting they would not be calmed and would not allow the meeting to continue. They could not stay in the same place after the outbreak of violence and the meeting eventually had to end in confusion with a great deal of shouting still going on between various women at the meeting, being forcibly held apart by their closest relatives. What are the different modes of men’s and women’s public speech being enacted here? All parties concerned were aware of the position of all other parties before the meeting, both men and women. There are two main aspects to the gendered behaviour at this meeting. The first concerns content, and the second, style.

While in private many people, both men and women, on either side of the conflict cast aspersions on the genealogical connections of the other parties – comments along the lines

of: “Those people are really from [another island], they should go back there” - in the actual meeting at which violence erupted the men did not engage in talk with this kind of content. Rather, their focus was on the processes by which certain representatives got chosen from the tribal group, the details of the relevant forms which required consultation with the wider tribal group which had not occurred, and other legal details. The male opposition and answers to these questions came in the form of assuring everyone that things were “legal” and “finalised” and there was nothing they could do about it so they might as well just take whatever benefit they could.

Brison (1992) argues that “people change their social world when they talk about it”, and that in small communities talking may be the preferred form of political action as it forestalls conflict that may be precipitated by more direct strategies (p. 23). In the case of the fighting meeting, the event of the meeting was a declaration of preparedness to bring the conflict into the open. The men’s talk, however, remained circumspect to a degree. Additionally, their reversion to strict formal male meeting protocols after the first outbreak of violence (between the men) signals their enactment of the meeting as a mechanism to preserve social functionality (Kulick, 1993, p. 531).

By contrast, the content of the women’s talk consisted of accusations of speaking out of turn and not having the right to the resources in question. The women’s talk was explicit about issues the men’s talk avoided. Kulick (1993) turns his analysis to actual conflict talk rather than talk about conflict (p. 510). He states that conflict studies are influenced by a structural functionalist attitude that views conflict as socially dysfunctional – as an “anathema to social order” (p. 511) which he says led in the past to an overemphasis on “the extent to which conflict talk ends in or leads to resolution” (p. 511). He claims that this in turn has affected *who* we choose to study, as conflict settlement meetings tend to be the province of men.

He gives an example of “disentangling” meetings described by White (1990) in Solomon Islands. This evidence is corroborated by a variety of compensation events held in the wake of the Ethnic Tensions – led and performed by men (Fraenkel, 2004) - and also the fact that even though women played central roles in peacebuilding during the Ethnic Tensions, they

were subsequently completely excluded from the peace talks that took place in Townsville, Queensland in October 2000 (Webber & Johnson, 2008). There are no women signatories or witnesses to this agreement (Solomon Islands Government, 2000).

Kulick (1993) concludes that:

...insofar as our analyses of conflict talk focus on conflict settlement, the language we analyse will tend to be language produced by males. Women, who are often portrayed in ethnographic accounts as instrumental in provoking the conflicts that the men find themselves compelled to settle, are almost never represented in the ethnographic socio-linguistic data. Not only do women remain silent during public meetings in the New Guinea highlands or during Samoan *fono*, but they are also rendered mute by the types of talk we choose to analyse. (pp. 511-512)

One consequence of such a focus, according to Kulick (1993), is a conclusion that women are not “prone” to conflict talk (p. 512). He cites Carol Gilligan (1982) saying that “females are less likely to dominate and more likely to negotiate than males” (p. 512). Such characterisations are contradicted by the evidence presented here. Of note in the women’s conflict talk, compared to men’s, was women’s unwillingness to negotiate, change their position, or end the conflict. Women’s conflict talk here, while ostensibly being about logging, tended to veer towards personal attacks on character and family members. This aligns with Kulick’s (1993) PNG study examining the discursive construction of male and female voices.<sup>30</sup> He says:

In the small Papua New Guinean community that I will be discussing here, women are forceful and belligerent in provoking and sustaining verbal conflict. This is recognized within the community, and conflict talk is spoken about in village rhetoric as arising from and characteristic of the female voice. Women in Gapun are stereotyped by men and other women as disruptive, divisive, begrudging, antisocial and emotionally excessive. (p. 512)

Kulick’s (1993) analysis of the *kros* shows that speakers sequence their talk to prolong, not resolve conflict (p. 521). He argues that this is because the aim of a *kros* is not to resolve

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<sup>30</sup> While Kulick graphically describes the obscenities shouted during Sake’s *kros* (Kulick counts 119 obscenities in a 45 minute *kros*, p. 517) this type of language is much more cautiously used in Solomon Islands. Using obscenities is considered “swearing” and cause for formal compensation payments and ceremonies. This takes interpersonal conflicts to a new level which then involves the pride of the sworn at person and their immediate kin.

conflict but to assert the right “self-display and public voice” (p. 526). This description is reminiscent of Lola in the fighting meeting as is her characterisation as a *kros* woman – although this term and this particular form of speech in domestic disputes is not used or documented in Solomon Islands. In discussing her actions in a dispute about her participation (or rather withdrawal) from the women’s saving’s club,<sup>31</sup> the other women in the club characterised Lola as having “no punctuation”. They said of her style of speech in an argument:

Woman 1: She doesn’t have any comma, or any full stop.

Woman 2: There’s no questions mark or commas.

Woman 3: No exclamation marks.

Woman 1: She doesn’t have any full stops, her talk just continues on.

Woman 3: She doesn’t have any brackets either.

Woman 2: It is too difficult to beat her talk. One time I had an argument with her...ooo man, she doesn’t have any commas. She talks on top, on top more, on top more, right until the end.

During the fighting meeting Lola sat at the front end of the *paele*. She sat up straight and looked straight ahead – not meeting the eye of any meeting participants - and started declaiming loudly, talking over the top of everyone else. On the gendered nature of *kroses* Kulick says such talk during the *kros* portrays men “as cooperative and socially supportive in the face of female destructive assertiveness” (p. 530). This same narrative of male and female talk is perpetrated by the village men and women in Vavanga also – that men’s talk is reasoned, logical and informed while women’s talk is ignorant, illogical and disordered – that women “*tok alaboat*” (talk all about/ talk without order/structure).

## Conclusions

During the conflict about logging, women suffered from a lack of access to information. They were excluded from informal meetings about the logging conflict at which men formulated

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<sup>31</sup> Analysed in chapter 3 as meeting 2.

their political positions. It was acknowledged, however, by both men and women that it was not women's place to talk out about these issues, this was men's business and it was the business of men to be spokespeople. When women did publicly enter the conflict at the "fighting meeting" their talk was commentated as unsuitable in a way that justified their exclusion on the basis of their gender. That is; women as a gendered category were constructed as unable to participate in formal and legal procedures around logging because of their character *as women*.

When they did become involved, as did Lola and the women who subsequently fought at the meeting, their behaviour was viewed as inimical to conflict resolution or continued social functionality. Such characterisations stand in contrast to idealised representations of women as natural peacemakers; a portrayal found during the Ethnic Tensions and in their aftermath which is somehow ignored when it comes to formal peace negotiations. In the meeting described in this chapter, the style of women's participation in the meeting is characterised as disordered. This style, however, aligns with women's particular style of meeting in contrast to men's as analysed in Chapter 3.

It is worth noting that it was men *and women* who asserted women's unsuitability for involvement in the formal processes of negotiation about logging, as well as the village level meeting. How then do we frame women's assertion of their right to be involved in negotiations? Can it be framed as "resistance"? Specifically, as resistance to what? If we wish to frame this as *women's* resistance, then we need to ask, how is their resistance gendered? Or, what aspects of their gender category are relevant to their resistance? While the Bolgaba women's role play, with which this chapter started, represents women's condemnation of a process which excludes them, it does so within a culturally approved framework, including the payment of a fine for gender inappropriate behaviour.

There is another possible aspect to women's role in these disputes. Because women's talk is characterised as aberrant, illogical and disordered, women are able to bring issues that cause conflict out into the open in a way that contravenes conventions of cultural diplomacy. This allows men then to engage in power brokering scripted as conflict resolution. In this way do

women play a role in reducing the violence of conflictual confrontations? In the same way that Brison (1992) found gossip had a role in negotiating power relations, creating versions of reality *and* maintaining community harmony, perhaps women's role in the conflict described here makes way for new versions of events and negotiations.

In the next chapter I examine how women became involved in physical resistance to the logging company. I focus on their resistance as a coordinated strategy by both men and women in the village opposed to logging. I explore how the power inherent in women's embodied morality is constructed and may be mobilised. Additionally, I examine the social outcomes of a case in which the boundaries of "good" women's behaviour were transgressed.

## 5. Good women, bad women and moral righteousness

In this chapter I explore local constructions of “good” Melanesian women to test the parameters of gender categories at the village level. I present two case studies of what appear on the surface to be women’s environmental activism. The first is from the logging dispute that occurred in Vavanga village described in the previous chapter (4). I examine how framing women’s action in this incident as “women’s resistance” fulfils neoliberal visions of women’s role in sustainable development, within the boundaries of “good women’s” behaviour, but fails to capture the reality of gender relations. The second case presents a character portrait of a woman I name Mavis, who transgresses the moral boundaries of the “good woman” in her fight against logging companies and for land rights. Her case shows some consequences for women of transgressing gendered social norms.

In this chapter I touch briefly on a construction of agency in neoliberal discourse about women’s empowerment that is based on individual free will and is structurally dislocated. I argue that escaping seductive lyrical metaphors is necessary for an understanding of gender relations grounded in indigenous epistemologies and an expanded conceptualisation of agency. These issues are elaborated on in Chapters 6 and 8 respectively.

### “Good women” fighting for rights

The second part of Chapter 4 established that women were excluded from legal proceedings and most formal meetings concerning the proposed logging project in Vavanga village. They lacked a detailed knowledge of the actual procedures and processes that were determining the status of the logging project and were not in a position to control negotiations. Their public entry into the conflict took place at a meeting at which fighting erupted (which I refer to as the “fighting meeting”), both times directly after comments by women. Women’s comments took the form of explicitly declaring issues the men avoided. In the case of Lola, her comment to the meeting implied that the conflict in the village was about control of the logging rather than alternatives to

logging. Similarly, in the case of Beatrice, her comments directed attention to the implications for land rights depending on who controlled the logging operation. Men's discussion in the meeting, by contrast, was more circumspect, centred on the legal aspects of the logging license.

Two days after the fighting meeting the village chairman called a *makepeace* meeting of the women (this was the term used in *pijin*). He called upon the women to take turns asking and giving forgiveness to all the women involved in the altercation. This meeting was extremely formal, following the rhythm of men's formal meetings as presented in Chapter 3. Each woman at the meeting took turns speaking. There were no side discussions or simultaneous contributions. In fact, the *makepeace* meeting did little to ameliorate strained relations between women on opposite sides of the conflict. That resentments were still alive was reflected in the way women on opposite sides of the conflict arranged separate transport to market in Gizo on Fridays, and set up as far from each other as possible at the market.

After the "fighting meeting", KIBCA continued with legal proceedings to gain an injunction against the logging company and an investigation into the legality of the Logging License. Meanwhile, on 30 July 2013, the logging company barge arrived in the village, landed at the log point, and unloaded equipment and temporary accommodation for the logging company staff. The logging company immediately started to clear a path to the forest following a logging road cleared during two previous logging operations, one in the early 1980s by Levers Pacific Plantation Proprietary Limited and one in 2003-2005 by Omex.

On the day that the barge arrived most of the villagers, both for and against the project, gathered on the log point. Police from Gizo were present and the logging company had employed "security" – mostly men from a neighboring village. As the barge came in to land on the log point three women of the Lakevu clan stepped forward and began to verbally harangue the logging company employees. The activity of these women met with no reply from the pro-logging group or the "security men" and ultimately did not prevent the machinery from being unloaded. For the next two weeks the logging company continued clearing the log point until it resembled a giant mud pond and also continued clearing the old logging road.



*Plate 5.1: Villagers gathered on the log point waiting for the barge to arrive. The barge can be seen approaching the log point in the background.*



*Plate 5.2: A view of the log point after clearing. The logging company camp buildings are the two on the right of the cluster of buildings.*

The “security” men stayed at the logging camp and accompanied equipment into the forest. The employment of security was deemed necessary as there is a history in Solomon Islands of disgruntled landowners sabotaging logging equipment (for example see Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2000, p. 41). Despite the tense atmosphere, however, the opposition camp within the village remained quiet until the logging machinery reached the river about two weeks later. The river marked the boundary between the land recognised as under the control of the Timot Loi clan (who supported the logging project and were renting out the log point to the logging company) and the Lakevu clan land (part of the Viuru tribe estate).

At this time, a group of village men opposed to the logging stationed themselves on the road between the machinery and the river. Some scuffles with the security men and a lot of shouting ensued until the machinery turned back, progressing no further up the road that day. The following morning a contingent of policeman arrived from Gizo and arrested the men involved in the resistance. The men were handcuffed and taken to jail in Gizo for the day. They were released in the afternoon with no further legal action taken against them by the logging company.



*Plate 5.3: Clearing the old logging road into the forest.*

Two days after the men’s arrest, the logging company machinery started up the road again and crossed the river. Aside from the issues of land ownership and control, crossing the river with machinery was a particular point of contention as this dirtied the river water supply downstream of the crossing. They were met on the opposite side of the river by four older landowning women

from the village and a large mob of children. The women verbally harangued the foreign machine operators and the local security men from the neighboring village:

You people are spoiling our water. The water that we drink. What now? Are you going to fetch water for us now? What are we going to drink now? Are we going to drink your piss? You've made our water shitty now.

Reference to bodily functions by the women here is intended to be insulting – it is taboo for women to talk about their bodies, particularly bodily secretions, in front of men. Eventually the machines turned around and went back to their camp at the log point. The women revealed to me later that their men (husbands and kin) had been waiting hidden nearby in the forest with their bush knives (machetes used for gardening and forest work) ready to enter the fray should any force be used against the women.

Christina, one of the women involved in this action said:

I think if the men were there, there would have been a fight. But the [anti-logging] men weren't there, just the security men from Ghatere, so there was no fight. Just we women fought with our talk. We just "threw away" any kind of talk. We didn't even know what we were saying, because of the pressure we were under, you know? If you saw a different man's face you just fired away with your talk, you saw a different face you fired away. Out of topic talk too, not on the topic of logging, but we just went ahead like that.

That's what happened. It was really a big story. We stopped the machinery from moving on. The machines had to go back to the log point. We are ready now. If we hear the machines we will come up [to stop them on the road].

After this initial resistance from the women, and while waiting for the result of the injunction application lodged by KIBCA, the logging company machinery remained at the log point. These four women stayed in a state of constant alert – on standby to physically oppose the machinery should it start back up the road to the river.

The women's resistance in this instance was part of a coordinated strategy by the men and women in the village opposed to logging. When I asked about how the women had formulated this strategy Christina told me:

The men [kin] said to us, “You four, [women of the Lakevu clan] you go up with the children and stand on the road. You go up and talk and shut the road [so the machines can’t get through]. We men will come and hide in the bush. We’ll stay hidden. We’ll come and sit down and watch you”.

In the aftermath of the village men’s arrest, the anti-logging group decided that a solely female opposition to the machinery’s progression had more chance of success and less chance of a violent outcome. Physical resistance by the men was likely to be met with force, while the embodied morality inherent in these women’s status prevented the use of force against them. This evidence speaks to speculations I make at the end of Chapter 4, about the gender relations of conflict and conflict resolution. While it is possible to frame the incident as “women” defending the environment, it was actually a case of people defending their land rights using a culturally specific strategy that deliberately invoked sites of power located in gendered bodies.

Other examples of this use of bodily power also occurred, specifically the threat of female public nudity. On the day that the logging company barge was to arrive in the village to unload equipment, one woman opposed to logging told me she was going to run naked onto the barge to welcome the logging company. In fact she did not carry out this threat, but she told me she had come prepared and was not wearing underwear. When discussing the possibility of arrest by the police for obstructing the passage of logging machinery into the forest, Christina recounted a conversation with her husband (who was supportive of her anti-logging activism):

My husband said to me, “You better watch out or the police will come and arrest you and put you in handcuffs”. So I said, “I will take off all my clothes and I will sleep naked. I won’t wear any clothes, then if they come to arrest me and handcuff me, I will just stand up and go with them [naked]”. He said, “Well the police [all male] will like that. You’ll make them happy!” I said, “So if that’s what they like, that’s what I’m going to do”.

Threats of public nudity invoke consequences of shaming and humiliation for those before whom the women go naked, as an expression of the complete failure of social relations. Additionally, women’s public nudity threatens to let loose female genital power (Stevens, 2006). Some villages in Solomon Islands impose “fines” for women wearing trousers. Dress codes demanding no visible bifurcation of the legs for women (that is, compulsory wearing of skirts), may be couched in Christian terms of maintaining decorum, but are also about “containment of genital power” (or “pollution”) (Stevens, 2006, pp. 593-594).

Nigerian women exhibited this same cultural principle in their threat to “go naked”, literally strip naked in public, in order to force Shell Oil Company to negotiate with them about access to gas flares for drying tapioca (Schermerhorn, 2011). The documentary *The Naked Option* shows how six hundred women between the ages of twenty and ninety occupied the largest oil producing facility in Nigeria for ten days in July 2002. They did this without the use of weapons and, without violent retaliation from those they opposed. They declared that “our weapon is our nakedness”. One male commentator in the film says, “It is taboo in our land for our mothers to say they will go naked. That means that every means of protest has failed” (Schermerhorn, 2011). The Nigerian women’s protest builds on a long history of activism by women’s political institutions in Africa described, for example, by Van Allen (1975) in the case of the Igbo Women’s War in the 1920s in Nigeria under British colonialism.

In my case example, women used references to their bodily fluids in front of men as a way to insult and possibly threaten them. Such power relates to women’s sexuality and reproduction. In Solomon Islands, particularly on parts of Malaita Island, there are complicated taboos aimed at containing women’s “pollution”, specifically blood associated with menstruation and childbirth and women’s bodily fluids in general, which are seen as inimical and dangerous to men (Keesing, 1985,1987). I would argue that in the case of Vavanga village, there does not exist the same relationship to taboos and ancestors as exercised by the Kwaio (Akin, 2003). Rather, women’s reference to their bodies in front of men contravenes notions of respect by which right relations are maintained, including incest taboos.

The Vavanga women’s resistance to the logging was not based on a discourse of *women’s rights*, but rather on rights, as landholders, to protect interests in their tribal land. Their resistance took place within local parameters and conceptualisations of moral Christian womanhood, commensurate with idealised archetypal versions of “good” Solomon Islands women. Christina’s characterisation of the women’s “talk” when they confronted the machines is once again aberrant and fierce – much like Kulick’s (1993) descriptions of the *kros* discussed in Chapter 4. The women’s “talk” occurs within a cultural and gendered framework. The women managed to stop the logging machinery by “shutting the road” with their “talk”. While the men were arrested for the same activity, the women could talk “out of topic” and yet were successful in turning the

machinery back. The women's references to bodily fluids is deliberately shaming in this context and is used as a weapon.

In the context of promoting women's capacity to act, or finding instances of such agency, it is tempting to employ lyrically seductive metaphors; to frame this incident as *women's* resistance – women, as a group, as environmental champions. Nike, masters of marketing, realise with their *Girl Effect Project* that a narrative of women and girls rising up to take back power, save the environment and improve their lives is inspiring and uplifting (Nike Foundation, 2015). I argue that employing morally uplifting metaphors of women's empowerment, such as presented in international paradigm discourse about third world women, obscures contextual nuance and actual gender relations in this case.

In 2007 a similar case occurred on the island of Vella Lavella, where a group of women blockaded logging machinery. A newspaper report of the incident carries the headline, "Solomons women injured in clash with logging company guards" (Australian Associated Press, 2007). The article reports:

The women were disputing the logging company's right to log on land they claimed as theirs.

Islander, Marlon Kuve told Solomon Star newspaper... "Company workers and security personnel armed with knives, sticks, bow and arrows and stones attacked the defenceless group of women," he said.

...

A spokesman from Leona village said the community was shocked by the attack on the women.

"These women are mothers of our children, trying to protect their rights and resources," the village elder said. (Australian Associated Press, 2007)

The women are characterised here as defenceless mothers. Their action is constructed as being specifically women's resistance. The response of the logging company and security workers are portrayed as particularly reprehensible in this light; they are attacking the foundations of society, "the mothers of our children". An unpublished report on the incident by a local NGO, one of whose members was also a leader of the community involved in the dispute, reported that the resistance to the logging company was a tribal action. Prior to the women blockading the machinery, villagers

from Leona on Vella Lavella Island had prevented the company landing equipment. The matter also went to court and a determination in favour of the tribe was made (Vaitala, n.d.). Given this context, it is clear that the women blockaders were part of a larger strategy by the tribal group.

Similarly, in the ethnographic incident I describe, the women's action was part of a coordinated strategy by those people with primary land rights, men and women, opposed to the logging project. It was not all or any village women who stood on the road and stopped the machines. It was four women of the matrilineal land holding group who resided matrilocally. All four were grandmothers and active members of the SDA church. The effectiveness of their action was grounded not only in their status as women but also in their social and moral standing determined by age, land rights and religious moral force. By such definition these women operated within the bounds of "good women" and thus could invoke culturally determined feelings of moral and social shame in the men they opposed.

In both cases the women's actions do not work to promote women's equal rights to decision making and influence in logging negotiations, nor do they push against culturally constructed gender restrictions to behaviour, speech, public activity or rights to occupy space. Rather gendered bodies are strategically employed. Gender categories, rather than being challenged by this deployment, are in fact strengthened. I return to this point in the next chapter. By contrast I describe below the case of Mavis, a woman whose resistance to logging and assertion of land rights reveals the consequences of challenging gendered constructions of acceptable forms of women's power.

### Transgressing scripted gender roles

I met Mavis on a market day in Gizo. Mavis noticed me sitting alone in a local eatery and started a conversation in English. This initial act of confidence and demonstration of English proficiency thoroughly distinguished Mavis from the village women with whom I spent most of my time. Mavis had a formal education to grade six in primary school. She had been absent from her native island for some years prior to 2000 as she had married an Australian man and moved to Australia.

In an interview with Mavis she described her social re-education and her transformation into a cosmopolite, although she did not use that term. She related the following story:

I say Australians, you come to Solomon Islands and see how people live, you will cry. You will really feel sorry for them. As well we women, we go to the garden, we carry heavy water, we carry heavy bags on our backs [Mavis starts crying]. Michelle this has been going on for many many years and I look back so many times I cry sometimes. I go with my sisters to the garden, I can sit down and watch them. I can say this was me, years before. I used to paddle many miles and miles down the river, two or three miles to go and fetch water, every day. This is everyday life. Where's the millions and millions of dollars, the fund that Australia and other countries give to this country to help women and children and youth to develop this country to make the standard of living coming up? Where's all the money gone to?

I went inside an old people's home in the retirement village in Australia. I saw an elderly lady sitting down in the wheelchair and knitting. And I asked my grandma in law, I say, "What are you doing grannie?" she said, "The Rotary Club asked us to knit these dolls so we can raise money, to send money overseas to help needy people in the needy country" and I cry.

Did the leaders of Solomon Islands see this and recognise and realise this one or not? That an elderly lady is sitting in a wheelchair and knitting to support Third World Countries? Where's the money gone to? Has it come to the needy people? Only God knows where that money goes to.<sup>32</sup>

After separating from her first Australian husband but continuing to live in Australia, her transformation continued when she was introduced to the internet. Mavis's activism started when she began online research about her home in Solomon Islands. She said:

Some of my friends [in Australia] advised me, you should go back [to Solomon Islands] and fight. It hurts me to look at foreign investors come to invest here but they end up in court – they choke to invest money and problems happen with partners, government etc. I see things differently after living in Australia. Investors bring in money and employment and benefits. The reason I'm back here is to protect investors, National Government, Provincial Government and grass root level. Where are the resource owners?

I think that Mavis was seeking to convey here the idea that the "big men" - the middlemen, politicians, and sometimes chiefs – were the ones who received most of the financial benefit (after the foreign logging companies), while landowners engaged in protracted legal proceedings with each other and the foreign logging companies. Mavis returned to Solomon Islands in 2007 with a new Australian husband. At the time of our interview she had spent the last six years fighting

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<sup>32</sup> These excerpts from conversations with Mavis are direct transcriptions from recorded conversations conducted in a mixture of English and *pijin*.

protracted legal battles with a variety of parties, including other members of her tribal landholding group and foreign logging companies. She had several different cases still active in the high court. She was claiming the right to exclusive possession of a parcel of land and also opposing foreign logging companies that wanted to, and were currently, operating on her tribal lands. She had gained an impressive knowledge of relevant forestry legislation and the courts system. She had hired and fired seven lawyers during this time because they had failed to represent her interests or had encouraged her to take bribes offered by opposing parties to drop her court cases.

Mavis's natal village had experienced five logging operations by foreign companies, one of which was current at the time of this interview. For each operation there were a plethora of legal disputes; between tribal members, with members of neighbouring tribes and with logging companies. In the interest of protecting Mavis's identity as much as possible I do not name Mavis's home village nor list the numerous and ongoing court cases that have taken place regarding land tenure and logging disputes on the tribal estate of which Mavis is a part. Yet in her natal village there were very few long term infrastructural development outcomes. Mavis is clear about what she wants, everyone to get their share and no-one to go to court:

Resources are owned by the people including the women, not only the men, so let's put it on the table and make a deal, don't put us women underneath...everyone can get their share and work together and no one goes to court.

Mavis told me she attended meetings about logging and land issues and "spoke her mind". It is important to understand how extraordinary Mavis's independent actions are in this context *because* she is a woman. She directly hired her own lawyers. She was not working with or through her family group, husband, or male kin as spokespeople. Additionally, she was not only fighting the logging companies and other members of her tribe about logging deals but she also individually claimed ownership of a parcel of land which she said she had rights to through her membership of the tribal descent group estate and then a further *kastom* ceremony performed by an elder with "traditional" knowledge. There are many protracted court cases about land and logging on

Kolombangara Island. All those that I have detailed knowledge and documentation about involve male protagonists. Mavis's position as a female advocate, and as her own advocate, was unique.<sup>33</sup>

Mavis lived separately in a hamlet she had established some distance from her natal village. She was developing this site as a tourist resort. On a visit to Vavanga village in 2014 I asked one of the elders if he had any news of Mavis. He said Mavis was still fighting to keep the logging companies out of her area and fighting for her right to claim exclusive possession of the area she was living on and developing. He told me he admired her fighting spirit and that she was right to resist the logging companies. He then produced a copy of a letter dated 1998 addressed to Mavis, accusing Mavis of "drunken and disorderly conduct in the village, incestuous cohabitation and illegal claims to land". The letter declared that Mavis was banned from three named villages by order of a joint chiefs' committee. This elder was part of a group of men attempting to thwart Mavis's attempts to claim land rights. The letter he showed me, even though fifteen years old at that time, was to be used as evidence against her land rights claim by proving her immorality.

## Conclusions

Women are subordinate to men as public social actors in Solomon Islands villages. They rarely, if ever, hold formal political positions such as land or village chief, village chairman, or positions of authority equivalent to men within the Church. Their participation in public meetings is circumscribed by social norms defining a hierarchy of rights to speak publicly and about certain topics (covered in detail in Chapters 3 and 4). Basically this hierarchy of rights to speak places men with claim to primary land rights at the top.

On Kolombangara Island (which has a matrilineal land tenure system), women residing matrilocally, and also in areas of matrilineal land tenure, have status as primary land rights holders. Theoretically this status confers rights to speak out at public meetings relating to land and other

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<sup>33</sup> It may be that similar cases exist elsewhere in Solomon Islands that I am not aware of. I did not carry out an extensive search of women's involvement in such cases throughout Solomon Islands.

matters. They generally hold higher status than women residing virilocally or elsewhere not on their matriclan land, who defer to those women with primary land rights in public forums and often in leadership matters. Increasing age also confers greater social status and rights to speak at public meetings. The construction of both these types of rights, however, is still gendered and is predominantly related to men's role as public spokespeople. For example, at meetings about tribal land matters, in several different villages, I have observed men without primary rights to land (but married to a woman with primary rights to the land in question), offering contributions to the meeting. The only occasion on which I saw a woman with the same configuration of relationship to land - that is, married to a primary land rights holder but not one herself - speak up at a meeting about her husband's tribal land, was in the case of Lola described in the previous chapter (4). Additionally, women will usually publicly defer to men the same age with the same lineal ties to land. In the previous chapter we saw how women were excluded from negotiations about logging on many levels and how their voice, when it did emerge in a public meeting, was constructed as aberrant and unreasonable.

It is through a combination of cultural expectations about women's public behavior and Christian construction of gender relations that "good" women are characterised (see also Hermkens, 2012). Christianity plays an important role in naturalising gender constructs. Douglas (2003) argues that many Melanesian villages have a "strongly Christian ambience" where there is an "... ideological coalescence of Christianity and selectively sanitised tradition" (p. 8). She claims dual, somewhat contradictory, functions for women's fellowship groups as, "both self-appointed guardians of Christian and customary morality and conduits for modernity" (p. 8). She recognises here the paradox of *kastom* and Christian gender categories which, while possibly enabling women's empowerment on some levels, deny the extent of their social fluidity.

For example, Pollard (2000) argues for women's power strongly embedded in Christian values and morality. She describes the roots of women's efficacy in peace making during the Ethnic Tensions:

...a woman in Melanesia and thus in Solomon Islands is a peacemaker in her own right. She is blessed with natural, God-given qualities such as love, care, peace, patience, humility and sensitivity. These values make women different from men. Women's various contributions and

responsibilities in the areas of production, reproduction, community work and leadership, family welfare and nation building do not demand conflict. Women's commitment to ensuring sustenance and livelihood for the family, the community and the nation is a driving force towards good governance and prosperity. As mothers of the nation, women are willing and committed to offer their gifts, time and wisdom to find lasting peace for their nation and their children... Thus the motherly nature of women in the contexts of culture and Christianity demonstrates peaceful, non-violent methods whereby women can help resolve conflict. (Liloqula & Pollard, 2000, pp. 9-10)

Characterisations of women which fix their "nature" to motherhood lean towards explanations for the construction of immutable gender categories based in the body. Pollard also bases morality as determined by God, a supernatural divinity, and thus socially transcendent (Looy, 2004). Pollard (2000) describes how women use embodied morality to mediate conflict on Malaita Island:

Women intervene in conflict using their clothes, words and body contact. A woman can stand between two warring parties and challenge them by uttering such words as: "enough is enough, stop fighting, if you continue to fight after my words, you have walked over my legs". (pp. 9-10)

Because it is taboo for a male to step over a woman's body, particularly certain kin relations (Keesing, 1985, p. 28), women's power is activated by transgressions *against their* entitlement to space as socially moral.<sup>34</sup> We can draw on Bourdieu (cited in Skeggs, 2004) to understand this concept of embodiment in "providing a way of recognising authority in its physical dispositions"; in particular, "the embodied entitlement to space (physical and aural)...[as]... a statement of social entitlement" (p. 22). The "embodied entitlement to space" described by Pollard limits possibilities for changing gender norms. Women's authority here lies in culturally distinct feminine stereotypes and traditional power hierarchies.

The Vavanga women's action in stopping the logging machinery can still be understood as an exercise of women's agency even though it does not directly challenge the traditional order. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 8, and simply note here that such agency occurs within what Kandiyoti (1998) calls the "patriarchal bargain". The Vavanga village women negotiate their environmental activism and defence of land rights through deliberate invocation of culturally specific embodied morality. In this chapter I have tried to show that although the women in

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<sup>34</sup> Akin (2003) provides a nuanced discussion on how these taboos and transgressions are part of changing cultural milieu among the Kwai in Malaita. I focus here only on the conceptual underpinnings of pollution on a physical level – that the "pollution" of women's bodies must be contained due to its danger to men in connection to relationship with the ancestors.

Vavanga and Vella Lavella appeared to be acting as environmental champions as *women*, in a way which challenged an image of women as passive victims of male-dominated logging, in fact their action in stopping logging machinery was effective because of its cultural embeddedness inside narrow limits of women's acceptable behaviour.

Mavis's case highlights the contradictions inherent for Solomon Islands village women in remaining socially and culturally embedded while engaging in practices that challenge traditional gender norms. She disregarded culturally appropriate forms in her pursuit of land rights and resistance to logging. It was perhaps her audacity in daring to live independently and claim individual land rights, as a *woman* that earned her the most censure. She occupied an ambiguous space that was at once confronting and offensive to many of her critics. Despite their professed admiration for her daring in challenging authority figures and their underlying support for the principles for which Mavis was fighting, these critics could not accept her transgression of the moral code, specifically of what it is to be a "good" Melanesian woman.

Additionally, Mavis's success in taking a leadership role in challenging both foreign logging companies and powerful Solomon Islander men in positions of authority earns her the special enmity of these powerful men. Mavis shames these big men by challenging them publicly. As Strachan and Akao et al. (2010) observe, "If women tamper with the big man's ego and shame him, he will do everything in his power to shame the woman. In the big man society [men]...who hold power pay back by suppressing women who oppose them or question what they are doing" (p. 73).

By contrast, men engaging in similar activism and manipulation over land issues, also utilising global discourses of environmentality and sustainability, have been able to manoeuvre into positions of power, gaining status and increased control over resources on communally held land. It seems that men who had both wife and mistresses, and individualised attitudes towards property and wealth, did not suffer the same degree of opposition and social ostracism as that directed at Mavis. Rather, such men are most often found occupying the urban elite social strata resident mostly in Honiara (John, 2015). Discussing the difficulties women face in entering national politics in Solomon Islands, Wood (2014) says, "Women are held to different standards of behaviour in

Solomon Islands society, and this is a tool that opponents use (to apparent effect) to call into question the character of women candidates”(p.1).

The next chapter (6) explores gendered constructions within the international development paradigm. I extend local analysis of the “good woman” parameters described in this chapter, to similar constructions in development discourse internationally and within Solomon Islands.

## 6. Solomon Islands environment of development

### Introduction

This chapter examines discursive framing of women in the international development paradigm and how this translates to Solomon Islands context. First, I briefly define and examine international development discourse. Then I trace the evolution of gendered understandings of development and their merger with the concept of sustainability. The discourse surrounding gender equity in development in Solomon Islands is explored. I argue that women are cast as the simultaneous victims and environmental superheroes of sustainable development. The way women are framed in this discourse draws on a construction of the “good woman”, scripted as altruistic and self-sacrificing in a way that ultimately limits women’s freedom and increases their labour burdens. This chapter aims to unsettle gendered sustainable development narratives by examining how they are produced and disseminated along global and national axes of power.

In 2014 I undertook consultancies for two separate non-government research and development organisations. The first consultancy was for a small non-government organisation based in Solomon Islands but funded by international donors. They employed me to evaluate why women were not participating in a project they had designed as an alternative livelihoods project for village women (alternative to forestry). The second consultancy was for a large international non-government organisation. This work included contextualising, for Solomon Islands, research into rural gender norms designed to produce a large and comparative dataset from five developing countries. I had already carried out the majority of my fieldwork in villages by the time I did both these consultancies. Thus, I found stark the gulf between my experience of village realities and the machinations of development organisations on many levels including expectations, priorities, timeframes and aspirations. Many anthropologists of development and conservation have written about these issues in a variety of contexts (for example see Brosius, 1999; Chapin, 2004; Filer, 2000; Hviding, 2003; Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2000).

Most striking for me though was the unproblematic regurgitation of development buzzwords by both the development organisations and the recipients of their projects in the village. *Discourse* loomed large as a tool by which to obtain funding, legitimate interventions and attract projects for both development organisations and recipients. My analysis in this chapter springs from an attempt to understand the disjuncture between three points: development discourse, stated development goals, and the outcomes of development projects despite their discourse and aims. This chapter (6) and the next (7), stand together by highlighting the difference between development discourse and what development projects might be contributing to women's empowerment. That is, while I conclude that development discourse on gender equity is partly counterproductive to feminist aims, Chapter 7 then reveals village women's perceptions that their participation in development projects is contributing to shifting gender norms. I bring this seeming contradiction together through an analysis of agency in Chapter 8.

### Defining development: Development is good?

The basic premise of development discourse is that *development is good*. Cornwall (2008b) uses the language of "myth" to explain this. Myth as a concept describes "the convictions of a group" and an "expression of a determination to act". Myth, she argues, provides the motivation for development actors, and lends "moral conviction" in the face of suffering (p. 3). The nobility of the development myth – the overwhelming conviction that development is good - not only inspires action but legitimates intervention (see also West, 2006). As Cornwall (2007a) puts it, placing "the sanctity of [development] goals beyond reproach" (p. 472). The potency of development myths becomes apparent when they serve political agendas. Within the development paradigm the creation of narratives – language, images, representations and stories - serve to establish discursive power (Cornwall, 2008b, p. 3).

I use the term "international development paradigm" in relation to practices and institutions of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense, particularly, the instrumental use of knowledge to exercise power. As described by Mukhopadhyay (2014), the term "international development paradigm" encompasses:

...those development authorities that through organized practices govern the gender and development discourse and produce the gendered citizen best suited to fulfil their policies...also those modes of government that enabled the gender and development discourse to be institutionalized on a transnational and global scale, as for example, the global multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the international development institutions the United Nations (UN), the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development... [also] Other global players...namely the transnational alliances of non-governmental organisations. (p. 358)

The production of knowledge, discursive categories and their dissemination are themselves acts of power. For example, the word “transformation” has become popular in international development grey literature, as in “transform gender relations”, “transform power relations” (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2010). The crucial questions to ask when confronted with such language is, “transform into what?” To which ideal should unsatisfactory situations be transformed? And who gets to say what this ideal is?

Development is an economic, political and social project; the path of development is mapped by the developed (Rist, 2010, p. 490). This path indicates the flow of power, an acting *upon*, an acting *for*, a setting of agendas; from the most powerful to the least powerful, from the “developed” to the “underdeveloped”. From its inception the concept of development divided the world in an explicitly hierarchical and socially evolutionary way. President of the United States, Harry Truman, on 20 January 1949 said the United States needed to make available the “...benefits of our scientific advances for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (Hooper, 2005, p. 9). Rist (2010) claims that the use of the term in this speech by Truman was merely a “public relations gimmick” so that from the beginning “no-one – not even the US president – really knew what ‘development’ was all about” (p. 485). Esteva (1992) comments on the discursive power of Truman’s statement, that on this day “2 billion people became underdeveloped” (Esteva 1992 quoted in Hooper, 2005, p. 9).

Writing in 1966 Andre Gunder Frank says:

Most studies of development and underdevelopment fail to take account of the economic and other relations between the metropolis and its economic colonies throughout the history of worldwide expansion and development of mercantilist and capitalist system. Consequently, most of our theory fails to explain the structure and development of the capitalist system as a whole and to account for

its simultaneous generation of underdevelopment in some of its parts and of economic development in others. (Gunder Frank, 1966)

What Frank points out is that the discourse of development relies on the fiction that “undeveloped” countries are undeveloped due to their lack of participation in a capitalist economy, when in fact, it is the operation of the capitalist system that has been instrumental in the production and maintenance of global inequalities. Thus these discursive divisions were, and still are, based on politico-economic categorisations; a developing country is a *poor* country, as opposed to a country with some poor people in it.

International development rhetoric maps social as well as economic hierarchies. The notion of western individual freedom as “developed” is set in opposition to “traditional” (undeveloped) notions of personhood embedded in kinship networks, seen as constraining and antithetical to modernity and development (as delivered by engagement with markets and behaving as possessive individuals) (Hickel, 2014). In the Melanesian context Douglas (2003) says:

...rural Melanesians are not premodern, ‘backward’, ‘underdeveloped’, or generically romantic but are our relatively deprived contemporaries. Actual villages are not the anachronistic museums of authentic tradition imagined in urbanite nostalgia, within as well as beyond the region, but historical products of more or less lengthy engagements with commerce, Christianity, migration and colonialism. (p. 7)

As a counterpoint to the premise that *development is good*, Rist (2010) defines development as:

The general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations in order to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by means of market exchange, to effective demand. (p. 487)

As he notes of his own definition, this seems a scandalous characterisation given the “wishful thinking” that usually accompanies notions of development. He concludes that development must be considered a “toxic” word (p. 489). This conclusion stands in stark contrast to the self-professed desire to do good and the moral imperative for development espoused by governments and development institutions. Rist, however, contends that despite popular valorisation of the concept of development, his definition “truly reflects the actual process observable when a country or region is ‘developing’” (p.487).

Rist identifies three characteristics of development. First, land is transformed into a “fictitious commodity” and the natural environment is turned into a “resource”. Thus Rist claims “a country is the more ‘developed’ the more limited the number of free things that are available” (p. 488). Second, labour becomes a “fictitious commodity”; exchange between kin and neighbours is converted into paid employment. Lastly, development causes poverty – poverty as the proof of the good health of the capitalist system – “economic growth takes place at the expense of either the environment or human beings” (p. 489).

Rist’s characteristics above apply to how development is measured, and perhaps, envisaged in the Solomon Islands context. In Solomon Islands, customary land tenure ensures that most people are born with inalienable rights to land. Customary land tenure principles and subsistence livelihoods are the foundation of social, cultural and material life (Crocombe, 1987; Larmour, 1979). If we take commodity to mean something that can be bought or sold, land is explicitly *not* a commodity in the Solomon Islands customary land tenure system.

That it has become a “fictitious commodity” is apparent by the proliferation of seemingly intractable land disputes that have arisen over commercial uses of land (Foale & Macintyre, 2000; Guo, 2011; Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2000; Macintyre & Foale, 2007; McDougall, 2005). Macintyre and Foale (2007) point out in Lihir in Papua New Guinea “the introduction of cash value [for land] has the effect of fragmenting interests and generating tensions between those who want to capitalize on the new value by limiting rights and access and those who want to retain the flexibility that obtained in the past” (p. 57). Some development economists claim that development in the Pacific (and elsewhere) is not possible while customary land tenure principles abide (Hughes, 2003; Seavoy, 2000). Hughes (2003) says, “Communal land ownership has held back indigenous entrepreneurship in the Pacific as it has everywhere in the world. . . . Not one country in the world has developed on the basis of communal land ownership” (p. 11).

Based on their experience in Lihir, Papua New Guinea, Macintyre and Foale (2007) argue that individualising property rights is more likely to reinforce unequal access to land; with men already in positions of power able to gain the most, while women and others with less opportunity and

ability to engage with formal and legal institutions will lose rights in land otherwise protected by customary land tenure principles (p. 56). Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis, however, show how women's ability to participate in decisions over land use may also be limited under customary land tenure. In an African context, Whitehead and Tsikata (2003) argue that a return to customary land tenure may undermine women's land access, and that employing the term "customary" is "a discourse which upholds rather than undermines, social, economic and political inequality" (p. 103). They suggest that the land tenure system per se is not the most salient point for landed gender justice but that "the main problem is that women have too little political voice at all decision-making levels that are implied by the land in question" (p. 103). While it is agreed that secure access to land and property is an integral aspect to women's empowerment (Agarwal, 2007), it is not clear whether landed gender justice is better pursued under customary or privatised land tenure systems in the Pacific, and elsewhere in countries with a recent history of communal land holding systems. While customary land tenure is essential for subsistence food security in Solomon Islands, I argue that women's influence in decision making on customary land in commercial ventures is revealed as severely limited.

Fundamentally, arguments for and against customary land tenure reveal basic epistemological clashes in imaginings of development (Fingleton, 2004, 2005; Moore, 2008, pp. 389-390). Seavoy (2000), an economist lacking (or eschewing) the euphemistic sophistication apparent elsewhere, is explicit that development is primarily a political process and that economics is political. He calls for the abolition of customary land tenure and subsistence food production as a precondition for stimulating economic motivation. In short, his argument is that subsistence food security is inimical to economic development (pp. 2-3). Such rhetoric is not popular in the international development paradigm which uses adjectival modifiers like "human" and "sustainable" to promote development. Additionally, it raises uncomfortable questions about what the aims of development are.

Moretti and Pestre's (2015) quantitative linguistic analysis of World Bank reports from 1946 to 2012 concludes that "development" has become a process without an end point, increasingly focused on changing governance rather than material outcomes; "all change, and no achievement" (p. 99). They found that over time the use of nominalisations in these reports became increasingly

frequent. Nominalisations are words that make “abstract objects” from “actions and processes” and separate actions and processes from human participants (p.90). They provide an example which states “ominous trends” but no human actors, “*Pollution, soil erosion, land degradation, deforestation and deterioration of the urban environment*” (p. 90, italics in original). In this semantic shift economic principles become social actors in a way that precludes opposition; human agency is forfeit to the forces of economic systems (Moretti, 2015, p. 91). Development becomes therefore a general idea, singular in a way that imposes perspective and dominates discursive production (Moretti, 2015, pp. 91-92; Rist, 2010, p. 490).

### Sustainable development

Development in the 1990’s also began to incorporate the ideology of environmentalism. Specifically the idea that the environment, as separate from humans, was in “crisis” and reaching a point of catastrophe due to human industrial activity and population growth. Aside from the obvious separation of nature (environment) and culture (humans), this discourse positions the environment in a state of disaster due to human activity rather than humans as in a state of disaster due to human activity. As comedian George Carlin (2007) states, the environment is going to get along fine without humans long after we have consumed ourselves into extinction.

The release of the Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future* in 1987 popularised the concept of sustainable development, which it defined as; “Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Rist (2010) calls the concept of sustainable development “the height of absurdity”:

The height of absurdity was reached when the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987) tried to reconcile the contradictory requirements to be met in order to protect the environment from pollution, deforestation, the greenhouse effect, and climactic change and, at the same time, to ensure the pursuit of economic growth that was still considered a condition for general happiness. This impossible task resulted in the coining of the catchy phrase ‘sustainable development’, which immediately achieved star status. (p. 487)

Essentially, sustainable development seeks to reconcile the contradictions inherent in an economic system which requires continual growth, based on extraction of fossil fuels, with the finite carrying capacity of the planet still habitable for humans. Physical scientists argue that the earth's current stable (for humans) environmental conditions, known geologically as the Holocene, are in danger of being pushed irretrievably out of balance by human activity since the industrial revolution. The term Anthropocene is used in scientific literature to describe this era, in which human activity is the primary driver in creating environmental conditions less suited to human habitation (Rockstrom, Steffen, Noone, Persson, Chapin et al., 2009). Rockstrom et al (2009) quantify boundaries to "earth-system processes": climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, nitrogen cycle, phosphorus cycle, stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, global freshwater use, change in land use, atmospheric aerosol loading and chemical pollution (p. 473). They suggest that these boundaries must not be "overstepped" if the physical environment of the planet is to continue to support human life. They conclude that "the evidence so far suggests that, as long as the thresholds are not crossed, humanity has the freedom to pursue long-term social and economic development" (p. 475). I do not dispute their conclusions but note that they do not define what social or economic development might encompass in this case. I remained focused on the outcomes of such a narrative for the project of "development".

Absurdity and oxymoron notwithstanding, the narrative of "sustainable development" has been internalised in the popular imaginary and gained the status of "common sense" (Foster, 2011, p. 137). The concept of "the environment" here is attached to a trans-local phenomenon that advances a moral imperative to global scale approaches (MacGregor, 2004: 86). Hickel and Khan (2012) posit that development and conservation have become industries, absorbed by neoliberal ideology. They argue that this ideology – "which revolves around the restructuring of the world to facilitate the spread of free markets" (Igoe & Brockington, 2007, p. 433) - has swallowed the development and conservation paradigms in such a way that it has become the means, the justification and end that cuts across class, religion and political affiliations (Hickel, 2012). The idea of "conservation" is incorporated into such a vision by claims that through the mechanisms of the free market economy "nature" can be protected (Igoe & Brockington, 2007, p. 434). Examples include ideas such as environmental economics and carbon trading schemes, which rely on the commodification of "nature" and its incorporation into a global economic system. For example, the REDD+

initiative of the United Nations which seeks to create financial value for carbon stored in forests as a means of decreasing deforestation in developing countries, as part of global efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations Environment Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, & United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

In this narrative, Solomon Islanders are part of a global vision of development and environmental protection that positions all people as world citizens with an ethical responsibility for the health of a shared planet (MacGregor, 2004, p. 87). In Solomon Islands it is common practice for aid organisations, particularly conservation NGOs, to run what they call “awareness” programs intended to educate the villagers about the problems, crises, or issues in need of fixing, developing or saving (Foale, 2001; West, 2006). A normative version of environmental cosmopolitanism is evident here in which “a trans-locally applicable set of minimal rules...will enable cultural differences to be overcome in the common interest of saving the planet and its biodiversity” (Campbell, 2008, p. 10).

On 25 September 2015 the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations. These goals aim to “End poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all as part of a new sustainable development agenda”, with targets to be reached by 2030 (UN, 2015). The SDGs replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whose targets were to be reached in 2015, as a continuation of global shared responsibility for protecting environmental health and ending poverty. Achievement of MDG targets was mixed across countries and arguably not achieved in any one country (UN, 2015).

While the final MDG report claimed that the project had been “the most successful anti-poverty movement in history” (UN, 2015, p. 3), Hickel (2016) argues that “The MDGs have used targeted statistical manipulation to make it seem as though the poverty and hunger trends have been improving when in fact they have worsened” (p. 1). Hickel analyses the way in which baselines were changed and statistics selectively used in order to present this picture, and concludes that this was done in order to rationalise continuation of current global economic and development policy (p. 13). While an in-depth discussion of this aspect of the development paradigm is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that his insights have implications for the credibility of the

United Nations' current method of measuring the success of development programs – in particular for the newly launched SDGs (see Hickel, 2016, pp. 13-14 for details). This is perhaps the root of the conceptual conundrum; namely, that an economic rationale is being used to promote a form of development that claims to be about more than economics. Such perplexing turns are apparent also in discussions about gender in development.

### The gender agenda

The “gender agenda” has its roots in feminist aims to transform unequal power relations. The success of feminists in promoting this agenda, in broad terms, in development circles can be traced through the 1970s “women in development” agenda, the 1980s “women and development”, the 1990s “gender and development” and the current policy of “gender mainstreaming”. While it is indisputable that the gender agenda has come to prominence, it is questionable whether original feminist aims of transforming unequal power relations have survived absorption into development institutions and government bureaucracies – their “domestication” (Cornwall, 2007b, p. 69).

Cornwall (2007b) claims that gender is one of the many terms in development discourse that has gone from being a “buzzword” to a “fuzzword” (p. 70). Buzzwords are characterised by their “vague and euphemistic qualities”. Buzzwords in the development paradigm in general are terms and concepts put to work in ways that undermine their conceptual historical goals (for some examples see: Cornwall, 2007a, 2007b; Cornwall, 2008b; Hickel, 2014; Hickel, 2012; Murdock, 2003; Rist, 2010; Smyth, 2007) Buzzwords become fuzzwords when they conceal ideological differences. For example, Murdock’s (2003) ethnographic account of the institutionalisation of the feminist agenda in Colombia found that the discourse of gender had moved beyond feminist goals, namely seeking social transformation of unequal power relations, before those goals had been reached (p. 147). She shows how in the process of becoming institutionalised, the term gender has become depoliticised and uncoupled from a feminist agenda seeking structural social change.

Using the language of myth again, Cornwall (2014a) describes how insights from feminist research in development which located the household as a site of “contestation and conflict” produced an

oppositional version of gender relations where men and masculinities were causally linked to women's poverty (p.129). These insights were taken up by the machinations of international development discursive production in a general way, such that the following story line was produced:

Women ...[are]...more deserving of assistance and ...more useful to the development enterprise than men...women are the poorest of the poor; women care for others while men care only for themselves; women are less corrupt than men; women are closer to nature and care more for the environment. (Cornwall, 2014a, p. 129)

Men are depicted here only in a negative role, while women embody positive potential for development. Actual gender relations are obscured, rigidly essentialised, and occur within a heteronormative framework. So while a focus on gender is meant to be about rethinking unequal power relations between men and women, actually “gender” comes to mean a focus on women's disadvantage as compared to men, whose position is then constructed as the norm (Davids, Van Driel, & Parren, 2014, p. 400).

The main character in the gender of development storyline is the Third World Woman (Mohanty, 1984). The Third World Woman is poor, uneducated, traditional, sexually constrained, with her individual freedoms controlled by patriarchal rules of kinship; an image Michelle Rosaldo (1980) called “ourselves undressed” (p. 392). By contrast, the Western Woman is modern, educated, sexually liberated and individually free. Mohanty (1984) claims that by treating Third World Women as objects they are seen as a unified, powerless group prior to analysis. Analysis then only fills in context “almost as if these systems existed outside the relations of women with other women and women with men” (p. 340). Western feminist representations of the Third World Woman have been criticised for ignoring the intersection of gender with other axes of power and recreating social evolutionary thinking on development (Gunnarsson, 2011; Mohanty, 1984).

It was in this way, however, that “knowledge” about gender was made digestible to development institutions. Discretely categorised gendered subjects are amenable to insertion into policy frameworks, training programs and project goals. Mukhopadhyay (2014) describes this as making the field of gender and development “real” and thus governable and finally, normalised (p. 359-361). The gender aspect of the MDGs has been criticised for being top-down and instrumentalist,

“making women work for development, rather than making development work for their equality and empowerment” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 398). Additionally, progress reported in one gendered aspect of the MDG goals may have little effect on gender inequality overall. Cornwall & Rivas (2015) give as an example achievement of MDG 3 in girls education in the Caribbean, while there was no corresponding improvement in women’s economic status (p. 398). An overall criticism of the MDGs is that achieving certain measurable targets did little to address underlying structural causes of inequality. The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while rich in the rhetoric of gender equality, re-enact this submersion of feminist goals.

### Women will save the world: A neoliberal fantasy where gender equity meets sustainable development

The SDGs adopted in 2015 as the new global development agenda include as one of their 17 Goals, “Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. They claim that:

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large. (UN, 2015)

Cornwall (2015) is critical of the SDGs reversion to the “old language” of “women’s empowerment” and “gender equality” which “succumb[s] to an assumed consensus about what they mean and the enticing comfort of gender myths and narratives that rest on essentialisms, often painting women as the deserving subjects of development’s attentions because of their inherent qualities” (p. 399). International discourses of sustainable development claim a special place for women, who are simultaneously portrayed as “virtuous victims” (Sweetman, 2012, p. 402) “development accelerators” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 1) and saviours of the environment (Foster, 2011, p. 137). The World Bank (2011) says, “Gender equality is at the heart of development. It’s the right development objective, and it’s smart economic policy” (p. xiv).

While the capability approach and the Human Development Index seek to measure human development by more than economic terms, a “women as smart economics” approach provides an

economic rationale for gender equality and is explicitly instrumental. This approach strives to make available to women equality of access to resources in the manner of the “rational economic man” albeit in the form of a (good) “womanly” version (Prugl, 2015, p. 619). It is based on the premise that women will be empowered, on many levels and in almost any context, when they gain control over their finances and opportunities to earn income.

While it has been proven that gender equality does positively influence economic growth this “causal link is inconsistent and complex” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 3) and does not reliably operate in the other direction. That is, higher levels of economic growth do not necessarily mean greater gender equity (see for example in PNG Macintyre, n.d.). Emphasis on economic empowerment as a key to women and girls being able to influence the course of their lives ignores social and cultural emplacement, embedded structural inequalities and the global context of inequality that positions such countries and people as undeveloped. Promoting the empowerment of women in this way may be seen as a neoliberal version of feminism (Prugl, 2015, p. 619).

Multinational corporation Nike promotes this strategy in their Girl Effect Project (<http://www.girleffect.org/>). They assert that, “Girls are the most powerful force for change on the planet” and “Investing in girls has the potential to save the world”. The Girl Effect Project claims that it is “...about leveraging the unique potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and the world” (Nike Foundation, 2015). In such rhetoric, the onus of action shifts onto girls to not only lift themselves out of poverty, but to end poverty for everyone else as well (Caron, 2015, pp. 9-10; Hickel, 2014). Women and girls, however, are scripted to be changing the world from within oppressive structural contexts (Chant & Sweetman, 2012, p. 525; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 400).

There are two related assumptions built into this narrative. First, that agency is located as an exercise of free will at the individual level (Wilson, 2008, p. 83). An “empowerment” narrative imputes individual agency unfettered by structural inequalities or other constraints. Second, gendered conceptualisations of agency in neoliberal empowerment narratives, like Nike’s The Girl Effect, rely on a construction of the “good woman” (or girl), altruistic and hardworking, whose priority is to care for her children and extended family, even at the cost of her own health and

certainly at the sacrifice of her leisure time or spending on personal consumption (Wilson, 2008, p. 87). These constructions of the “good woman” imply that efficiency and altruism are uniquely feminine qualities (Wilson, 2008, p. 87). This production of gender identities works ultimately in the service of neoliberal economic goals, legitimising interventions to mobilise women’s “productive capacity” in the formal economy (Foster, 2011; Prugl, 2015).

The way in which women and girls are also constructed as victims in these narratives naturalises systematic gendered discrimination into a fixed gender category; adhering still to the “Third World Woman” (or girl), as described above (Caron, 2015, pp. 11-12). The path scripted for women and girls in this narrative reinforces this gender category when it assumes that unleashing the potential (Nike Foundation, 2015) of girls and women will end global poverty because it is an inherent quality of femaleness to care for others; “...the inevitability that girls will use their wages to invest in their communities and the families they are sure to have” (Caron, 2015, p. 12). Such categorisations also rely on heteronormative positioning of women as mothers and wives. They do not ever assume that women, or girls, might use economic empowerment to live different, or unmarried lives, or to escape circumstances of abuse perpetrated within family situations (Cornwall, 2016, p. 13; Foster, 2011; Macintyre, 2011).

### Developing Solomon Islands’ women

Solomon Islands is a patriarchal society – men have greater access to important resources as well as greater institutional access to power and privilege (Bannerjee, 2007, p. 10). Women do not have access to opportunities to engage in work that draws the highest incomes, for example, in forestry, in mining, or in business generally. Those in a position to negotiate logging and mining agreements are mostly educated men with a command of the English language and the ability to read and write (Monson, 2011). In Solomon Islands, customary land tenure principles, which in theory ensure the inalienability of land, have been eroded by a narrowing of negotiations about land issues to a small group of elite men. Tsikata (2010) makes this point across case studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America:

...changing resource tenures resulting from the commercialisation and concentration of these resources, while appearing to provide the opportunity for a levelling of land relations, had reinforced male-centred tenure arrangements in shrinking the ownership structure to a very small all-male group. (p. 29)

Thus women have largely been excluded from the financial benefits of natural resource extraction on land to which they theoretically have such rights. In Solomon Islands, women's earnings are recorded as below the poverty line (Maetala, 2010, p. 1). This may be a reflection of measures used to define poverty that do not account for subsistence food security rather than any "objective" state of poverty (see also Chant, 2007; Green, 2006).

It is apparent that the importance of subsistence livelihoods is often underestimated in development measurements. A 2015 assessment of poverty in Solomon Islands by the Solomon Islands Government and The World Bank Group concluded that 12.7% of the population live below the poverty line (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2015, p. vii). This assessment was calculated by "minimum expenditures needed to obtain basic food and non-food goods" (p. vi). Given that 85% of the population live in rural areas and rely predominantly on foodstuffs obtained without the use of cash, this is perhaps a misleading way to calculate poverty (see Green, 2006).

Furthermore, a large part of rural women's labour becomes invisible and devalued by discounting subsistence production as a measure of well-being and wealth. The word "subsistence" is mentioned once in the report. It occurs in the context of a calculation of poverty and economic activity which was determined by classifying households into four groups depending on the main activity of the household head in the week prior to the survey (p. 20). There are two main problems with this method. First, measuring economic activity according to the activity of the household head ignores several decades of research proving gender inequitable sharing of household income, if sharing at all takes place, as discussed in Chapter 2 (for example see Kabeer, 1996). Second, women in Solomon Islands are rarely classified as household heads, thus it ignores women's money earning activity within the informal sector, usually marketing of garden produce.

Alice Pollard (2009) makes the point that rural women's lives are centred on their gardens. Pollard refers to women's subsistence food production as "our pride". She says:

Subsistence food production is very meaningful and significant for us because, one it is our livelihood, two because it is our strength and our status. It is our pride. It is the single biggest employment company. 80% of Solomon islanders live by subsistence economy. It links us to our land. It is our source of economic empowerment. It is our social connectedness and relationship. It is our source of peacemaking and friendship. It is our area of expertise, skills and knowledge. It is manageable, it is available, it is accessible, it is cheap, it is fresh, it is organic. It is also a major economic base in Solomon Islands.

Aside from being gender blind, characterisations of poverty that ignore subsistence production do not reflect material conditions or socially and culturally valuable activities. On the other hand, it is relevant to consider to what extent subsistence gardening is held to be a status activity in spite of its clear necessity (for example Golub, 2006 on the Ipiili attitude to work), and also to consider evidence that women's subsistence labour burdens are related to lower levels of education for girls (Macintyre, n.d., p. 270).

Women's livelihood strategies have centred on gardening and marketing of garden produce, fresh and cooked, as a corollary to their large role in supplying household nutritional needs. While women's movement into this public space of commercial activity challenges traditional gender norms which restrict women's independent movement in public places and involvement in business, it has nonetheless been confined to the extension of women's normal subsistence activities. Such activity takes place in the informal sector which positions women as the "gendered precariat".<sup>35</sup> Their livelihood strategies lack security and always position them as financially inferior in comparison to the economic possibilities available to men.

This is not new in Melanesia, nor worldwide (The World Bank, 2011, p. 17). Writing in 1982 of women's financial position in the Papua New Guinea highlands coffee plantations Sexton (1982) described how women were only able to access vastly lower proportions of income compared to men (pp. 167-168). Koczberski (2007) describes the "Mama Lus Frut" scheme and the introduction of the "Mama Card" in Papua New Guinean palm oil plantations, which gave women direct control over their earnings. After the introduction of the card women were able to garner 26% of total crop earnings, rather than the 14% they received before. While not the point of Koczberski's article, her findings show once again how access to high income earning activities is explicitly gendered.

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<sup>35</sup> I have borrowed this term with permission from Dr Robin Rodd (pers comm). It indicates the precariousness of women's position as a group and a category.

Collecting the low value “lus frut” was categorised as women’s work and women did not gain access to the higher value Fresh Fruit Bunches of oil palm fruit nor claim a 50% share of total earnings.

Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) committed in 2014 to spending AUD\$34.8 million over ten years on “initiatives supporting women’s empowerment in Solomon Islands” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2014, p. 2). The bulk of fund allocation reported in the 2014 summary is towards improving safety at markets and initiatives for decreasing violence against women. A focus on market safety and amenities will be very welcome for women who make up the majority of marketers. But such initiatives, however welcome, do not change the essentially precarious nature of marketing livelihoods nor make available higher income earning opportunities. Supporting women in their current activities is necessary and at some level empowering, but it does not address structural causes of inequality.

### Women as environmental champions in Solomon Islands

Gender categories are once more reified where the rhetoric of women’s empowerment as economic development intersects with global environmentalist discourse. The world-wide increased activity of international non-government conservation organisations (Chapin, 2004) has also encompassed Solomon Islands. Global environmentalist lexicon has saturated villager consciousness to the degree that they exhibit cynicism about such discourses. I had the following conversation with a woman friend, Maria:

Michelle: My stomach is feeling very bloated – I think I ate something funny at the market yesterday.

Maria: Maybe you’re pregnant [laughs].

Michelle: If I am then it’s an immaculate conception.

Maria: Just blame climate change.

At this point we both started to laugh.

Solomon Islands is recognised as part of the “East Melanesian Hotspot” along with Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. These countries are classified as hotspots:

...due to their high levels of plant and animal endemism and accelerating levels of habitat loss, caused chiefly by widespread commercial logging and mining, expansion of subsistence and plantation agriculture, population increase, and the impacts of climate change and variability. (Aalbersberg, Avosa, James, Kaluwin, Lokani et al., 2012, p. x)

Many large international and smaller indigenous conservation organisations are active in Solomon Islands and may represent for villagers, particularly those in remote and “bio diverse” locations, the only “development” opportunity available (Foale, 2001; Hviding, 2003; Macintyre & Foale, 2004). Hviding (2003) places this type of conservation NGO activity into a category he calls *porojek* (project) as distinct from *divelopman* (development), which he glosses as being an indigenous enterprise. I place development here in the same category as Hviding’s *porojek*, because for many villagers *any* external organisation coming into the village is perceived to be there for the purposes of “development”. This includes foreign government aid organisations, NGOs (both explicitly development oriented and others with conservation aims), and foreign commercial companies such as logging and mining companies. This is because they represent a source of funds and external resourcing such that “obtaining a *porojek* and keeping it in the village gives an open channel for fulfilling local desires through the flow of money, goods and services” (Hviding, 2003, p. 551).

Support for gender equity measures in the narrative of many development/conservation projects in Solomon Islands is justified by positioning women as victims who disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental degradation, while also being inherently and *naturally* inclined to be environmental defenders who will save the environment if given a chance. For example, a 2015 report from The Nature Conservancy on women’s economic empowerment in Solomon Islands states in its executive summary:

Women play a critical role in the management of marine resources in the countries of the coral triangle, including...Solomon Islands. However...the ability of women to actively participate in the economy around natural resources is limited relative to their male counterparts. However there is global evidence that skilled women who hold jobs and enjoy meaningful status in their communities make themselves and their societies healthier and more productive. (Whitford, 2015, p. 3)

It is possible to produce examples of this narrative *ad nauseam*, from a wide variety of development and conservation organisations in developing countries globally. For example, the United Nations Environment Programme 2011 report declares, “Women play a much stronger role than men in the management of ecosystems services and food security” (Nellemann, 2011, p. 5). It goes on to say, “...women are essential for developing sustainable adaptation options due to their knowledge, multiple and simultaneous responsibilities as well as roles in productive areas” but, “Women generally have far less access to and control over the resources they depend upon” (Nellemann, 2011, p. 6).

Women’s position as victims in this narrative is partly blamed on the lack of women in leadership, governance, and business (Gay, 2009, pp. 182-183). Solomon Islands rates 137 out of 140 listed countries for lowest percentage of women in parliament with only 2% women in national parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015). Since independence in 1978, only three women MPs have been elected to Solomon Islands Parliament: Honourable Hilda Kari in the 1980s, Honourable Vika Lusibaea in 2012 (who was elected in a by-election to her husband’s seat while he was in jail for his activities during the Ethnic Tensions), and, in the federal election of 19 November 2014, the Honourable Freda Soria Comua (Pacific Women in Politics, 2015).

A lack of women in leadership positions in Solomon Islands is sometimes explained as due to the erosion of women’s traditional leadership roles by patriarchal Christianity and modernity, for example:

While women in the Solomon Islands traditionally played a significant role in decision-making forums, including in land and resource management in matrilineal land systems, these roles were eroded over the years with the introduction of patriarchal religious, legal, economic and political systems. As a result, women’s voices and contributions are absent today in the national political sphere. (Braun, 2012, p. 7)

Alternately, these same “traditional” norms are blamed:

Gender inequalities in Solomon Islands are rooted in tradition and culture, maintained through everyday relations between men and women at the household level. For instance one of the primary reasons for women's lack of participation in mainstream politics is the view of decision-making as a male arena. (Gay, 2009, p. 183)

Maetala (2010) claims that women in Solomon Islands are caught in a “push-pull” - a push towards modernisation while still being pulled to fulfil their traditional roles (p. 2). Pollard's (2000) analysis reconciles this paradox by arguing that traditionally women were rarely public political leaders but in matrilineal societies may have had “behind the scenes” influence. She also comments on the effect of “foreign values” on women's satisfaction with traditional roles:

In the traditional political arena women lack formal positions of authority, although they often wield considerable personal influence behind the scenes – especially in the matrilineal societies of Guadalcanal and Savo where women may own land and be clan heads. But even in these matrilineal societies, women have traditionally exerted political authority indirectly through male spokesmen. In the patrilineal societies – much more numerous than the matrilineal ones – the formal decision-making process traditionally has rested exclusively with men...

In modern times, ever-increasing exposure to foreign values has led at least some women to question whether traditional female roles should be the sole source of feminine satisfaction, pride and dignity. (Pollard, 2000, pp. 5-6)

Women's disempowerment in modern day Solomon Islands may be seen as a result of traditional gender norms combined with the effects of a patriarchal colonisation process, which includes the influence of Christian doctrine. The combined effect of these influences marginalised women's public presence, access to education, jobs and physical mobility. This position exists in concert with the development of the modern political system tightly imbricated with a big man style of patronage business in the logging industry (Porter & Allen, 2015).<sup>36</sup> Additionally, “behind the scenes influence” does not represent a measure of gender equity or women's empowerment in many feminist conceptualisations of gender equity, or in idealised representations of women's empowerment as described in the international development paradigm.

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<sup>36</sup> This situation is not unique to the Pacific or “developing” countries. For example, if we use women in parliament as an indicator of women in positions of leadership, worldwide the average is 22.7%. The highest regional average is found in Nordic countries at 41.1%. Australia, the home country of the author, is ranked 56 out of 187 countries with 26% women in the upper house (the Senate) and 38% in the lower house (House of Representatives) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015).

Solomon Islands women's public political action in the modern era has been firmly grounded in images of maternalism and tradition. Such representations align with heteronormative constructions of the altruistic Third World Women evident in the international development paradigm and in the "women as smart economics" approach, which nonetheless expect women to act as individual agents and "rational economic men".

A befuddled statement from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs epitomises the fallout from an epistemological clash between "gender equality" discourse in the international development paradigm and Solomon Islander understandings of gender relations. The Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs was established in June 2007. Prior to this "Women's Affairs" were housed in the Women's Development Division established in the early 1960s and focused on "domestic areas like cooking and sewing". This focus changed with the passing of time to gender equity and women's professional and political representation (Ministry of Women, 2014). Its current strategic objectives directly related to women are:

1. Advance gender equality and enhance women's development.
2. End all forms of violence against women (Ministry of Women, 2014).

The website presents the official Solomon Islands National Government perspective on gender in the section "Challenges to Gender". I quote the last two paragraphs of the statement here:

Modernisation has caused a major upheaval in men's traditional roles. Warfare is gone. An increased dependence on store-bought food items reduces the importance of fishing and farming. Education is generally geared towards the modern, cash-oriented, urban society, rather than to communal livelihoods and village societies. Too, education has begun to treat men and women as equal. These, combined with more available transport, mean that it is common for young men, who traditionally would have been fishing, gardening or cutting copra, to be seen loitering in towns and market places with little to do. Many young men no longer enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that they are making a real contribution to their family and community. This lack manifests itself to some extent in increasing rates of delinquency, alcohol abuse and juvenile delinquency. Meanwhile, women continue to be occupied with much the same domestic chores they have always performed.

Women and men are now competing as well as complementing. There are new roles available to men in the ‘modern’ world. Indeed, there are a variety of salaried jobs as well as new political positions that offer money and influence. NGOs, including churches, and even athletic associations provide new avenues of status. All these are also attractive alternatives to the traditional roles that men have lost with the beginnings of modern society. But therein lies the problem. Men see women scrambling for many of the same positions and intruding in a domain that they regard as theirs. Women work in government agencies, they drive cars, they play netball and volleyball, and they even occasionally run for elected political office. Hence, women are often (wrongly) perceived as competitors more than as partners. This does not appear, however, to affect rates of marriage. (Ministry of Women, 2014)

This somewhat puzzling and contradictory statement seems caught in the “traditional culture” versus “modernisation” arguments described above, which it fails to resolve. While this treatise acknowledges men’s movement away from traditional roles and to some extent women’s further narrowed sphere of activity to traditional areas, it concludes that modernisation has upset gender roles with women “(wrongly) perceived” as “competitors more than partners”. In particular that male identities are challenged by equality in education and modernisation generally which has resulted in their reversion to “delinquency and alcohol abuse”.

Gender “myths” and “narratives” (as described above) which rely on essentialised gender categories are instrumental and have been (and continue to be) used to achieve neoliberal economic ends, in part by ignoring or euphemising the structural drivers of inequality that are intrinsic to the project of commodifying land and labour. The confusion apparent in the “Challenges to Gender” statement is actually the result of an attempt, I argue, to consider the intersection of gender with other axes of power, and also touches upon the issue of “hegemonic masculinities” raised in Chapter 2. For example, the statement describes how increasing urbanisation (only 15% of the total population) and lack of formal education has produced in men an identity crisis which has adversely affected gender relations. It then struggles with how gender roles in heteronormative families (rates of marriage are unaffected) can be reconfigured in a way that maintains social harmony (“complementary” rather than “competitive”) while preserving cultural integrity. Although the veracity of the observations that men see women as competitors for scarce status positions is questionable, given the extremely low participation of women in formal political institutions and the workforce (and low rates of men’s participation in netball?). Similarly, claims that women are “competing” for limited jobs in the formal sector are not supported by statistics. The 2009 Solomon Islands census shows that women are almost half as likely as men to be in paid

work (26% women and 51% men). This difference was more pronounced in rural areas than in urban. In rural areas only 19% of women compared to 42% of men were engaged in paid work. Women are disproportionately represented in “vulnerable employment”, defined as subsistence work, self-employment, and unpaid family work (75% women and 54% men) (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2009).

The statement also reveals problems with understandings of what “gender” is in the context of the narrative produced in international development. Gender is constructed as separate from sex (biology), as a social construct that is therefore amenable to change. That is, sex as biology is seen as fixed, but gender, as opposition between two sexes - men and women, is the object of change (Davids, Van Driel, & Parren, 2014, p. 402). The emphasis on outcomes for women of gender equity measures means that women thus appear as neutrally gendered, or as Davids et al (2014) phrase it, “women appear as if they are not gendered themselves and active agents in (re) producing unequal gender relations, or as if they possess only ‘good gender’” (p. 402). This conceptual division of sex and gender is problematic for the assumption that gender is a transformable aspect of social life (compared to biology) which divorces “women” from the centrality of gender relations to cultural reproduction. The Ministry statement clearly makes this conceptual division, between sex (fixed) and gender (mutable), demonstrated by the title of the statement, “Challenges to Gender”. Modernity is seen as the force that necessitates gender equality which exists in tension to remaining culturally Melanesian (or Solomon Islands) men and women.

## Conclusions

This chapter began by critiquing the discursive power of the international development paradigm and the way in which it creates essentialised gender categories in the service of neoliberal economic goals. Changes promoted as necessary to gender equality focus on procedures and the introduction of incentives rather than change to “discourse, values and power relations” (Eyben, 2010, p. 56). The sustainable development rhetoric of the new global development agenda as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals, does not challenge these constructions but reframes women’s empowerment as individual agency requiring enabling economic conditions.

As with previous incarnations of global development approaches, underlying structural causes of gender inequality remain unchallenged.

In a narrative of development apparent in Solomon Islands, women are occupied in supporting their families from subsistence activities and economic activity in the informal sector, usually marketing garden produce or cooked food, while the activities from which men are making money destroy the environment upon which women depend for their livelihoods. Women are therefore painted as the victims of destructive, unsustainable economic activity from which they do not benefit due to gender inequities, while simultaneously appearing as champions of sustainability and development goals due to inherent female qualities. This narrow construction of women's roles is supported by fixed gender categories in international development discourse and Christian doctrine.

Solomon Islands experiences disproportionately high levels of engagement with international development and conservation organisations, whose mandates have largely merged due to the dominance of sustainable development rhetoric. The discourse of women's empowerment in the international development paradigm sets up an oppositional model of gender relations divorced from cultural, social and historical context. I argue that the confused statement of the Solomon Islands Government on gender is an example of the kinds of epistemological clashes that have resulted between international development paradigm gender myths and narratives and gender relations in Solomon Islands.

It is possible, however, to view the influence of this gender discourse in Solomon Islands in another light. The promotion of women as the solution to sustainable development goals means that issues of gender equity are being discussed in Solomon Islands. Organisations, institutions and groups (government and non-government) must show in some way that they are taking measures towards gender equity in order to secure funding. While the discourse as described in this chapter remains largely instrumental, we can view this situation as an opportunity for subversion. The allocation of resources to gender equity programs can also be used strategically to work for discursive shifts. Eyben (2010) claims:

The safest spaces for learning, sharing and plotting are those established for another more conservative purpose, which the feminist policy actor is then able to *subvert*. In addition to the conspiracy being less obvious because it is taking place within existing organisational arrangements, it is likely that such spaces can be financed from existing budgets. As in Judo, the conspirators are making use of their opponents' resources. (p. 59)

The next chapter (7) presents testimony from Solomon Islands village women on how they see gender equity and women's position developing and the influence of development NGOs. Their talk about women in leadership and women's roles in society reveal similar epistemological struggles to those described here. I use a case study of a women's village savings club to think about what changing gender norms might look like when culturally embedded. This case study also reveals how instrumental discourses on women's empowerment may work towards greater gender justice.

## 7. Growing down like a banana: Village women making change

We women have one kind of development that doesn't come up. It's like you look at those bananas growing there. They grow, we wait for those bananas to grow, but they grow down, they don't grow up. Same as us women here in the Solomons today. Education is good, some women get educated; us women at grassroots level, we have the level we can do. We should stand up and be leaders of the community. We should be at the provincial and national level but we shut up, we box up because of our [low level of] education. And men say we belong in the kitchen. Because of our *kastom* woman cannot go front and top, we make women go down; so that's what I think makes women not come up.

In this chapter I explore how village women are changing gender norms. This chapter is divided into two sections. In section one I present village women's opinions about changing gender roles. Using data from Focus Discussion Groups (FDGs) in nine villages on Kolombangara Island, I explore women's perceptions of their ability to be involved in leadership roles and decision making, and their analysis of how they conceive of their abilities changing. I also detail the simple and unexceptional techniques that enable women's substantive participation in discussions, which the village women I worked with guided me to employ. Section two describes the independent establishment of a women's only savings club in Vavanga village. I discuss the implications of the outcomes of women's only savings clubs for women's autonomy and agency.

### Village women's opinions on changing gender norms

In Chapter 6, characterisations of Solomon Islands women in development rhetoric were explored. This section presents the testimony of Solomon Islands village women in an attempt to unravel some of the contradictions described in the previous chapter – the push-pull experience for Solomon Islands women of changing gender norms. FDGs in each village explored two broad topics: first, women in leadership in Solomon Islands; second, changes in women's lives in the last twenty to thirty years. Most striking across all discussion groups was the similar language that women used to describe women's social position in relation to men. In every FDG women used directional markers to describe women's position as “down” and men's position as “up”, as seen in the quote with which this chapter started.

The villages visited represent a sample of different land tenures, religious denominations and geographical locations on Kolombangara Island. Figure 7.1 shows the villages visited marked with yellow pins: Kuzi, Kena, Vavanga, Hambere, Patupaele, Varu 1, Vao, Poitete, and Sausama. The locations marked in blue pins are the most common large markets that the women in the various target villages frequented as sellers: Gizo, Noro, and Kukundu SDA High School.

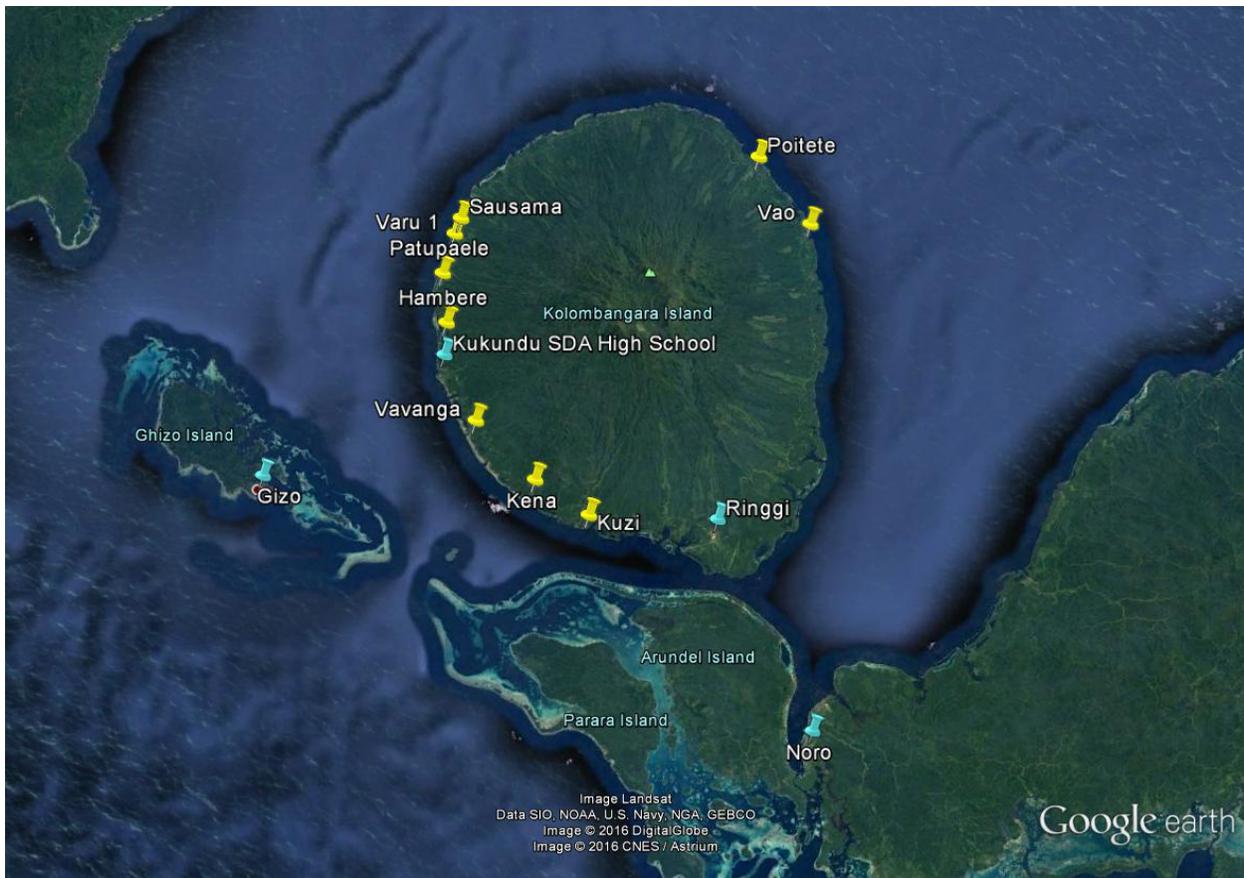


Figure 7.1: Location of villages visited (yellow pins), and closest large markets (blue pins).

The villages of Kuzi, Kena, Vavanga, Hambere and Patupaele are located on customary land. The villages of Varu 1, Sausama, Poitete and Vao are located within the KFPL leased land. The village of Varu 1 is involved in ongoing disputes about the boundaries of the KFPL lease land which it claims do not encompass the village of Varu 1 (Civil case No. 25 of 2012. HCSI CC NO. 25 of 2012). The village of Sausama is located within the KFPL leased land boundary but contains blocks of registered land. Poitete is a KFPL company town. Vao is a village located on a narrow

strip of land on the coast side of the KFPL ring road within the KFPL lease (See Map 1.3 in Chapter 1).

The villages I visited were mostly SDA, with the exception of Kena which is a Christian Fellowship Church village.<sup>37</sup> Poitete is a KFPL company town and is a mixture of denominations, but I met only with women in the SDA church. Table 7.1 shows village details.

Table 7.1: Village details

<b>Name of village</b>	<b>Number of FDG participants</b>	<b>Religious denomination</b>	<b>Land tenure</b>	<b>Main markets</b>
Vavanga	18	Seventh Day Adventist and Baha'i	Customary	Gizo
Kena	21	Christian Fellowship Church	Customary	Gizo
Kuzi	20	Seventh Day Adventist and Baha'i	Registered and customary	Gizo
Poitete	19	Mixed – met only with Seventh Day Adventist	KFPL lease land	Noro, Ringgi
Vao	15	Seventh Day Adventist	KFPL lease land	Noro
Sausama	8	Seventh Day Adventist and Anglican	Registered land on edge of KFPL lease	Gizo
Varu	14	Seventh Day Adventist	Customary land with disputed border of KFPL lease land	Gizo
Hambere	20	Seventh Day Adventist	Customary land	Kukundu SDA High School
Patupaele	18	6 hamlets Seventh Day Adventist and 1 hamlet Anglican	Customary land	Gizo

<sup>37</sup> See Hviding (2011) for details on the Christian Fellowship Church.

In total, 153 women attended the FDGs in groups of eight to twenty-one participants (Figure 7.2). The women ranged in age from 18 to 80 years, with most participants between the ages of 20 and 50 years old (Figure 7.3). On average participants had three to five children, with a few notable outliers; for example one woman had twelve children (Figure 7.4). Almost even numbers of participants were native to the village of the FDG as had married into the village of the FDG from other islands. A smaller number of participants had married into the FDG village from another village on Kolombangara Island (Figure 7.5).

There were always children present at any FDG, but all FDGs were scheduled during weekdays when school age children would be in school. This was a deliberate strategy to minimise the distraction of children's demands and allow the women time to participate in the FDG. It is a distinctive feature of all-women meetings that there will be children present, while there are rarely any present at all male meetings.

The program of each village visit was the same. Two women research assistants from Vavanga village accompanied me to each village. The women I worked with in Vavanga arranged this roster. On each visit one research assistant was a woman native to Kolombangara Island with Nduke as her mother tongue. The other woman was a *roroto* (Nduke), a woman married into Kolombangara Island from another island. Connections to land are primary to identity in Solomon Islands and also govern certain rules of social behaviour including when, where and what people may speak about, and in front of whom. In planning the roster of research assistants the Vavanga women explained that this configuration of assistants showed respect to the women of the village visited and affirmed connections between the participants in the FDG and my research delegation.

A FDG was conducted with the village women for one and a half to two hours. At the conclusion of the FDG I provided morning tea. Following morning tea some, and sometimes all, of the women would take me on a tour of their gardens. Depending on the village, the location of garden sites could be up to an hour or more walk away from the village. Garden visits lasted between two and four hours. After the garden visit there was a women's lunch which the women of the FDG village provided. In every village I visited, the women were extremely proud to show me their gardens and very flattered that I wanted to see them. It was common for women to comment that I was the

first [white]<sup>38</sup> person to come to their village especially to talk with them and hear their views, and the first person to want to see their gardens.

We say thank you that you come. Thank you that you come down to our level. Many times when [aid] donors<sup>39</sup> come to the village they never look at the women. They don't even look at us at all, nothing. So we say thank you to you too much now. You write a book and send it back to us and then when the donors come they will know who we are. You are the first one that has come here to find out what is the situation of us women here. We say thank you too much to you.

Every time we go to a meeting we all come and sit down and write our names but the help we need doesn't come. I don't know what happens, maybe some man *kai kai selen* [eats the money – misuses the money]. It's important that you, a woman, comes to us, you are the first woman to come to us. We look to the future and hope that you will come back to help us.



Plate 7.1: Visiting the gardens of the women of Hambere. A snack stop underneath the jackfruit tree.

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<sup>38</sup> I use the term “white” as this is how people referred to me. People commonly used skin colour gradations to describe people, for example someone might say, “You know Mary, my friend, the really black one”.

<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note the woman's use of language here. The word “donor” was rendered as “donor” in *pijin*. The woman uses the word “donor” to describe *any* foreigners coming into the village. The idea of foreigners or projects of some kind are encompassed by the idea that they are “donors” – they will be a conduit for funds or resources. I describe this situation in Chapter 6.

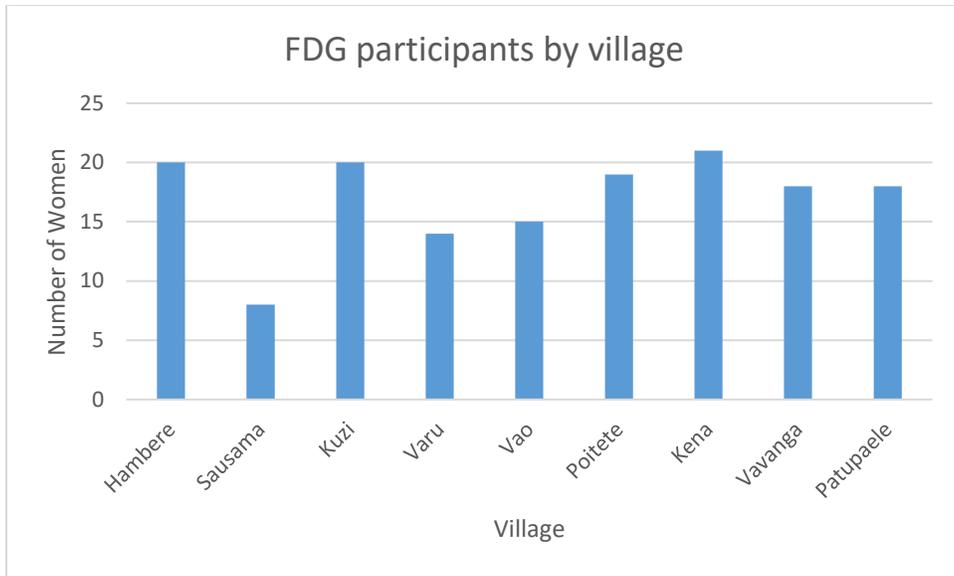


Figure 7.2: FDG participants by village

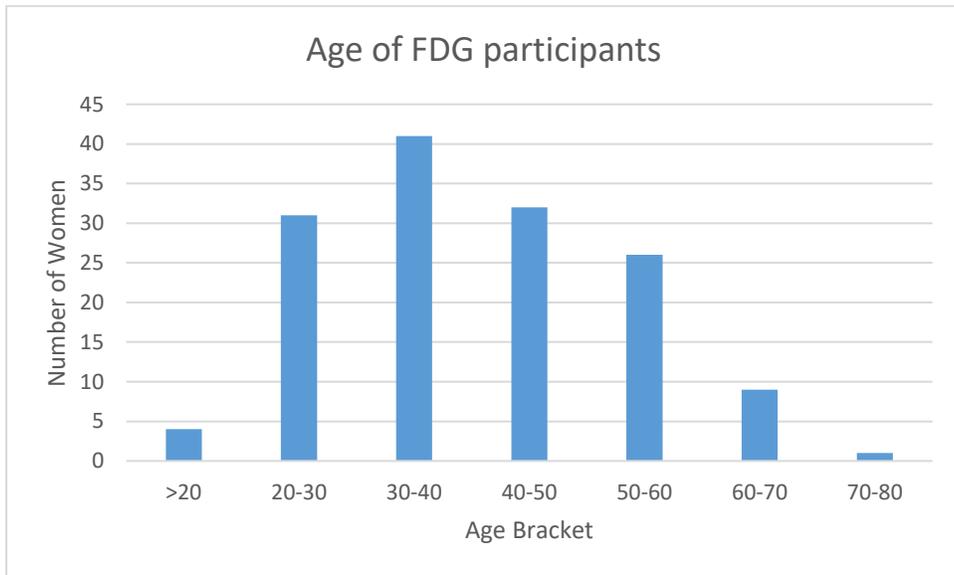


Figure 7.3: Age of FDG participants

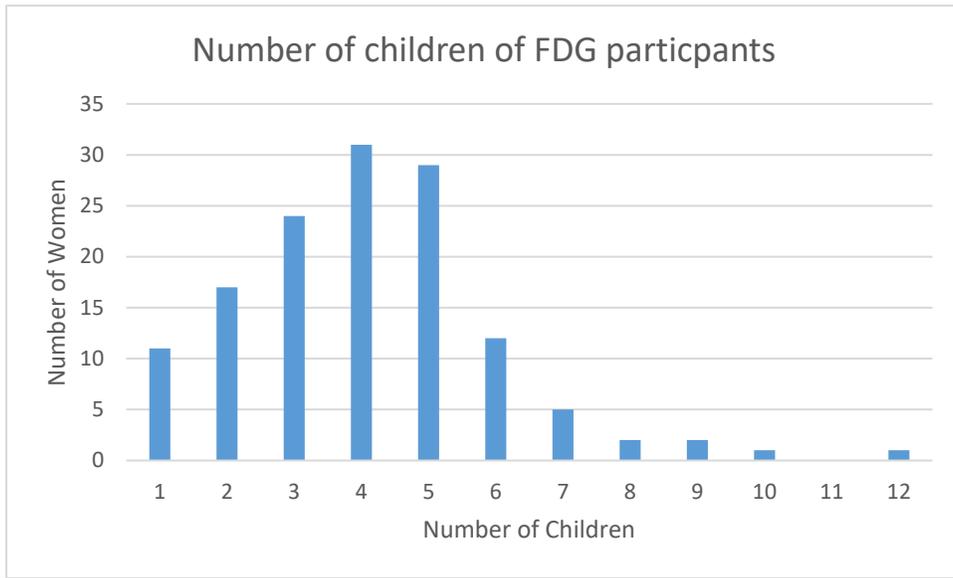


Figure 7.4: Number of children of FDG participants

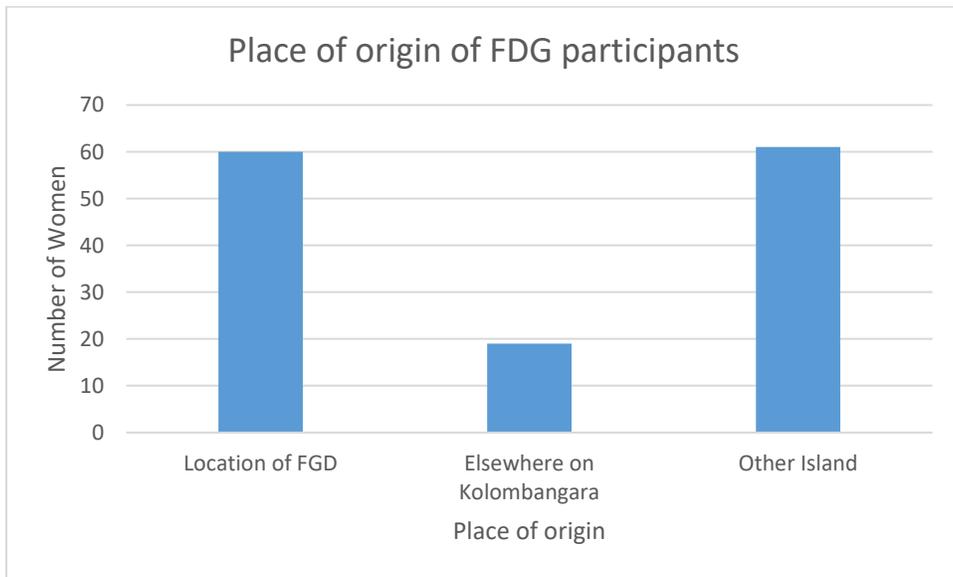


Figure 7.5: Place of origin of FDG participants

### FDGs as transformative practice

Cornwall (2003) examines how contemporary Gender and Development (GAD) approaches focus on issues of power, voice, agency and rights. She is critical of how mainstreaming participatory practices has led to their instrumentalisation in a way that has diluted their political scope and submerged their more radical dimensions (p. 1327). She highlights the difference between “...rhetoric, which is replete with grand-sounding promises of empowerment of the marginalised, and what mainstream agencies actually do, which often takes the shape of enlisting people in pre-determined ventures and securing their compliance with pre-shaped agendas” (p. 1327). This lack of nuance in “doing gender” increases the gap between theory and practice.

I argue that my research methodology in these FDGs speaks to these concerns on at least two counts. First, by recognising power differentials within groups of women and strategising to allow the emergence of more marginalised voices. In the FDGs women were divided into groups according to age, forming older, middle aged and young women’s groups. Significantly different answers were not elicited from different age ranges. Rather, I divided the women into these groups as a strategy to avoid reinforcing existing unequal relations between women (Cornwall, 2003, p. 1328). As mentioned above, rights to speak are also based on affiliation to place, thus women residing matrilocally in areas with matrilineal land tenure (as on Kolombangara) have rights above women married into a village. In small groups with age peers these “married in” women are therefore more able to offer their opinions. Rules of respect also dictate deference to age, so by grouping the women according to age this format of reporting allowed each age group of women to contribute.

These small group discussions often took place in language (Nduke), which again allowed for more lively contributions from some participants, particularly many older women who were more comfortable speaking in language than *pijin*. Secondly, it allowed women time to think about the topic and throw out ideas without fear of being judged by the larger group. After the women had discussed the question in smaller groups I asked them to report back the results of their discussion to the larger group. All FDGs were conducted in Solomon Islands *pijin*. I asked and was answered in *pijin*. Sometimes my native Kolombangaran research assistant would give clarification in Nduke of questions asked by me or in response to questions by the women in the FDG.

Second, I aimed for inclusivity by paying attention to simple details which enable participation, such as, asking communities to schedule the FDG times most suitable to them, and communicating with villages in a way that promotes inclusivity. For example when approaching a village to ask if people would be willing to participate in my research, the Vavanga women advised me to write a letter to the village chief (always male) or other male authority figure, sometimes the Pastor. I invariably did not get a reply from this male authority figure. Instead a reply would come from a woman in the village, either a relative of someone in Vavanga, or a woman leader of a village woman's group, or from a woman church representative. That my reply came through these channels was a clear signal that my research was established as "women's business". It also made it clear that the program was for women generally in the village, not just women of one denomination, or one lineage, or with ties to whoever the contact person was. In this way the phenomenon of information "gatekeeping" was avoided.

The initial involvement of male leaders, however, was a crucial step in this process. The FDG then went ahead with their knowledge and blessings. Moving through existing channels of authority allows everyone involved to keep face. Moore (2008) says, "Bigmen will readily compromise and negotiate but they react poorly to public humiliation" (p. 395; see also Strachan, 2010). Acknowledging the authority of male village leaders and recognising that they hold a position as first point of contact with outsiders allows them to be gracious in their support of projects for women. My experience during the village visits was that any male leaders, that briefly attended the meetings or conversed with me, pledged their support for the promotion of women and women's concerns in their villages. I speculate below, when analysing women's testimony about "permission from men" for women to lead, if this undermines the concept of empowerment or is a subversive act in its own right.

## Results of FDGs

In FDGs I asked two questions about women in leadership:

1. Should women be in the national parliament in Solomon Islands?

## 2. Can a woman be the village chief, organiser or chairman?

I asked the women to think about the reality of these positions for women today and in their village; not a wish for the future, or what they felt could be, or had heard about happening elsewhere. I asked about women in national parliament first as women in my FDGs were village women with generally very low levels of education, usually primary school completion with some few who had attended secondary school. When they imagined women in parliament they did not imagine themselves.<sup>40</sup> They imagined an educated city woman who they nevertheless would be able to approach because she was a woman. I was aware of this tendency through conversations with village women in Vavanga and other areas in the Solomons. My second question about whether a woman could be a village chair(wo)man was intended to prompt them to imagine a woman in charge in their own village – whether it be themselves or someone else.

In all FDGs, women's answers to these two questions were very similar. Directional markers were used to describe gender relations. Village women described themselves as “down” and men as “up”, women as “below” and men “on top”. These words are the same in *pijin* and English. Overall the women I spoke to agreed that it would be a good thing for women to be in parliament or in positions of community leadership in Solomon Islands but that gender norms prevented this from happening. There were four related dimensions to how women described their “down” position: first, as “down” because of tradition and *kastom* that keep women in the home; second, as down because men put and kept them down; third, as staying down because women put and keep each other down; and finally, that women's position as “down” in relation to men was a matter of “respect”.

In the first instance, “down” is used to describe women's position as a result of *kastom* and tradition; that women's place is in the home and the home is a low status position.

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<sup>40</sup> Others have reported this educated/uneducated, urban/rural divide. For example, see Douglas (2003): “...rural women commonly express modest, practical, but entirely modern wish lists – for reliable power, clean water, literacy classes, adequate health services, and sufficient cash to pay school fees, make contributions to their Christian fellowship groups, and buy a few luxuries (including imported food). Yet, like most ordinary people in Melanesia, they commonly stereotype the emerging urban-based indigenous elites as selfish, corrupt and unMelanesian. In every country in the region, disparities in wealth and opportunities are felt across a widening rural-urban divide and trigger a drift to the towns” (p. 7).

Men look down on us women. Sometimes they say women are not enough for this position because they are busy in the house and cooking and don't like women to go around too much.

It would be good for women to be in parliament because when I look at male MPs [Members of Parliament] I see that they don't listen to what women want, they don't look at the level of women. Women start down and go up, but men start high so men can't look at the level of women, men just look over the level of woman.

The language of respect was often used to explain why women were “down”. For example:

First our custom of respect is that we push men to be the leader or organiser inside the village. It's respect, so the man must go, he is the head so we must put him on top. But women should be there too because every time the men look down on women. The women are good at organising but women are frightened to talk that's why men always hold this work. So we women we need to come up a little bit.

Women's position as in-laws married into a village (residing virilocally) was also seen as a *kastom* reason, a facet of showing respect, which kept women “down”. One woman said:

On the side of custom men don't like to put a woman on top. Also in laws – *roroto* [Nduke, people married into the village], cannot be chairwoman or talk too much. Every time we have a meeting they always like to put a man on top, they don't like to put a woman on top. The majority of us women here are married in to here so our *kastom* is that we cannot talk too much, we must be behind, down a little bit. For example I was chosen to be a representative for KIBCA but the others weren't happy because I'm married into here, so others didn't like it. This *kastom* downs women who are married in. The rule doesn't apply evenly to men and women. Men who are married in can still go inside [be leaders or representatives].

Women attributed their down position as due to men putting them down or “looking over” (the top) of women. For example:

I think we are better this time [nowadays] but its *kastom* so I think they don't like to choose us women to chair the community. Even in the network the woman can take leadership positions but when it comes time to make a decision the men take over and don't listen to us women.

Women also commented on how women put and keep themselves and each other down:

Our Melanesian *kastom* makes respect too strong so that girls must stay at home and this is what causes women to keep themselves down.

Women also don't support each other – that's too common with we women, that's why we don't come up good, that's what keeps us down. And women can lie to each other too. If one woman

says I will stand up for provincial government [elections] the other women say yes, yes, good; but then when they stand up the other women don't vote for them, they don't support them. They just vote for the man. When any woman wants to stand up we don't help them stand up either.

Women imagined that they could talk to a woman Member of Parliament (MP) and that a woman MP would understand and address women's needs and problems in a way that men can't and don't. For example:

If women were in parliament it would be easier for us women to tell the woman our needs, we wouldn't feel ashamed because she's a woman. And because she's a woman she would know about our needs and our lives so she would look to the needs of women. She would help women. If a woman is clever and she knows how to talk I think she could go to parliament.

Women expressed that if they were to approach a male MP they would be gossiped about.

Women are frightened and feel ashamed [to speak to a male MP] because other women can gossip about them [for speaking to a man].

If there is a woman in parliament then we women will be free to go talk to that woman. If it's a man it's too hard for us to ask that man because he's a man and maybe someone else looks at me and says what is she going to ask him? If the MP is a woman then we don't have that worry.

These women's opinions can be taken in conjunction with Wood's (2014) analysis of why women can't win elections in Solomon Islands. Wood acknowledges that gender norms which prescribe leadership roles only for men are an impediment to women winning elections. He cites data, however, from the annual *People's Survey* (RAMSI, 2011) which shows that the majority of men and women respondents answered affirmatively to the question, "Should there be women MPs in parliament?" He says, "If they [respondents] can be taken at face value, such data stands at odds with a situation where women choose not to stand in elections in Solomon Islands because doing so violates social norms" (p. 7). He distinguishes between normative constraints about whether women *should* stand for parliament and women's belief about whether they *could* stand and win (see also Agarwal, 1994, p. 500).

The responses of village women, detailed above, point to some reasons for the seeming inconsistency of why women do not eventually get elected when they do stand even though people say they think women MPs are a good idea. While ideas of gender equity and fairness of gender

equality have entered village lexicon, women's imaginings of the possibility of having political power are limited by a self-assessment of their position in society vis-à-vis the authority of men (and clearly also by men's imaginings of women having (any) political power). Strachan's (2010) work with women leaders in education in Solomon Islands yielded similar testimony. She says:

Women are brought up in cultures that emphasise male superiority and from an early age are taught how they should behave towards men. In most islands, this means men make decisions and have the final say and women are silent. This can also render women silent within the workplace and cause them to question their authority and ability. (p. 69)

Aside from the obvious need for men's thinking about gender to change, women were conscious that they needed to improve their own opinion of themselves and their abilities if they were to take positions of authority. Responses in the FDGs reveal that women's awareness of their position, and opportunities to reflect and form groups to talk about their situation ("consciousness raising"), are instrumental in empowering women (see Cornwall, 2014b). Many responses indicate that this space has been created through the operation of development NGOs which have also supplied the language women needed to think through the unequal power dynamics of gender relations. To position development discourse as instrumental in "educating" women about gender equity is problematic for its socially evolutionary implications. To do so carries echoes of a development project of "transformation", discussed in the previous chapter, such that development discourse is aligned with women's empowerment and *kastom* is positioned as oppressive and "undeveloped". I return to this point in section two of this chapter when discussing women's savings clubs.

#### Exposure: Women coming "out" and "up"

Ideas about the relative location of people generally in Solomon Islands society represented those in urban centres, or outside the village, as "up". The village level was consistently represented as down, as the lowest level. One woman said to me, *Mifela village women, mifela no save anyting* – "We village women don't know anything". Both men and women in the villages expressed this sentiment – that village life is linked to "backwardness" (*local*) while urban life represents "modernity". This kind of imagining was intimately linked to the idea of education, as formal education in the school system and also informal exposure to outside ideas. I asked how the position of women had changed in the village over the last twenty to thirty years. The responses

in each FDG consistently related to how women had “come out” now through their *thinking*. One woman said:

Before women would be hidden so their thinking couldn't “come out” [develop]. They just stayed at home so they didn't have any good ideas or know how to think, but now women have been exposed to all kinds of programs and have been given small leadership work, so now they are brave and can hold positions [of leadership].

Many women expressed the idea that NGO activity had significantly changed the position of women in the villages. In one village where the women had attended many different NGO activities and programs the women said:

Others can talk out now too. We are happy because lots of NGOs have come here and they have helped us women. We are able to go to the meeting and participate with them but before we were frightened and we would say, “What should we tell them?” We were too frightened to go close up to these NGO people but now we have changed, we come and greet them. Before we were frightened, we would hide and shut the door. This change came because workshop after workshop from lots of different organisations came, some for just us women and some for everyone. So we came to the workshops and we have changed. We have started to open up. We are slow, but maybe one day we will be the chairman.

When Live and Learn came here with their Gender Balance workshop we wanted to do it. Some men say, ‘leave that gender balance’ [don't participate], but we want everyone to be equal. This time we women can talk at the meetings. We are changing this time. Before when men talked at the meeting we just waited to say yes, but now we are tired of saying yes and sick of hearing lies. So now we women we say, ‘no more’, we say, ‘you must not put us women down anymore’. We must fight for women's rights as well.

Some older women expressed their feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty about these changes to women's position:

Before we women were of one mind [knew and followed set *kastom* rules and prescribed gender roles]. Everything was good. Before we didn't go around [outside the house, village, family area]. We stopped quiet [at home or in our work]. But this time young women aren't the same. Before the old women were level headed, they did not attend workshops. This time women attend workshops. The women have started to come up. Women are coordinators of some programs, women at the grassroots village level. Before it wasn't like that. World [international] programs come too. Before we didn't have anything like that here.

This woman's quote acknowledges the shifting landscape of gender norms and how this feels for her like shaky ground. She says before when everyone knew their place “everything was good”

and the “old women were level headed”. Yet, she uses the directional markers to indicate improvement, “The women have started to come up”.

Another older woman, while lamenting the erosion of the concept of respect which she saw as the social glue of community life and right relations, also described these changes as bringing more power and freedom for women. Crucially, she concludes that because women “go out” now they can *think*:

Before it was different because women couldn't come out they just stayed at home. But now, you look, women are the first ones to arrive at any program. Women now they don't have respect, they are the changes we see. They [women] go around anyhow so it's hard for them to take responsibility, to take leadership. It's hard but it's good too because women go out and get exposed [to life] so now they can think.

This woman's comments speak to the tension between women's attempts to navigate the pathways defined for “good” moral women (described in Chapter 5) while taking on roles outside those defined by *kastom*, which dictates, among other things, that women must stay silent and hidden.

These concerns are also related to speculations about the opportunity and possibility of sexual infidelity (raised in Chapter 2). When women move outside the closely monitored sphere of the village environment they may fall under suspicion of taking up extramarital sexual opportunities. This is what the women referred to above as being “gossiped about” if they spoke to male MPs. Macintyre (2001) found this was one of the main objections by men in Misima, Papua New Guinea, to women engaging in wage labour outside the village; namely, “the fear that women will engage in illicit sexual relationships once they are away from the constraints of village life” (p. 109). In her study women agreed that work outside the village would provide greater opportunities for sexual liaisons.

The concept of the “home” and the “house” recur in women's testimony. When people refer to the home and house in village contexts they refer to physical as well as conceptual space. Physically “the house” refers to the buildings that comprise living, sleeping and cooking areas, which may encompass several separate buildings and surrounding outdoor space. It also includes physical areas connected with women's labour: the women's washing area at the river, intertidal zones

where women may collect food, gardens and parts of the forest women may access for food or other materials. So women's place as in the house refers to specific gendered division of labour which describes physically where women's activities take place relating to food, feeding and care of others - children, husbands, the sick and infirm.

Hviding (1996) describes this as an opposition between the wild and the domesticated. Speaking of maritime practice in Marovo lagoon, Hviding characterises men's work and sphere of activity as "highly mobile and free-ranging" and spatially open (p. 169). By contrast women's work and areas are characterised as damp and dark, intertidal zones, the mangrove and other areas close to the land. He designates as women's areas the "lower zones" - the garden and the village - and as men's areas the "upper zones" - the open sea and the wild bush (Hviding, 1996, p. 157). Women's characterisations in the FDG responses of themselves as in the home (down and hidden) while men are up and out, align ideologically to Hviding's spatial gender divisions. When women speak about gender norms changing in the village they declare their need for openness, for not being hidden, for not being silent, for not being constrained – for coming up and out.

The village women also expressed the sentiment that male village leaders increasingly turn to women to get work done; women now do the bulk of community work – "men ...look[ing] for female bodies" (Van Allen, 1975, p. 30). One young woman said:

Women's position has changed, it's not same as in the past. Women can do things that only men did before. We do all kinds of work in the community, it's not only the men who do this. Women are the first ones there especially in the community or village. Any time any big project happens women are the main ones, men alone can't do it.

An elderly woman in the same FDG added:

Before when men ran a program we weren't included, but now, the men look to us too and when we run a program the men support us – we are involved a lot inside now. Young men don't come up to take leadership positions or do the work, only mature men are there, so women go inside and support the men. Some young men are not interested in community work and just hang around. The big men and the village community don't know these young men well either so they look to us women.

This woman's testimony alludes to issues raised in the "Challenges to Gender" statement of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs quoted in the previous chapter. This mentioned education being geared towards urban, modern lifestyles and increasing male juvenile delinquency in urban centres. Where are the young men if they are not in the village? The drift to urban centres in Solomon Islands has also been gendered. Young men are looking for possibilities outside village life and they are able to be independently mobile in a way that young women are not. This has created space in the village for women to take up community responsibilities outside women's traditional areas. I argue, however, that women's increased village level responsibilities in these circumstances are not a clear indication of women's empowerment or more equitable gender relations. While women may take on greater community responsibilities this does not occur in concert with men taking up some of women's usual tasks or a decrease in women's other responsibilities. Rather, women's labour burdens are likely to increase, while men's perceptions of what male responsibilities are remains the same. Women are also not in positions of autonomous authority. Experience from elsewhere confirms these observations and shows how little these circumstances have changed in decades. This is what Van Allen (1975) refers to in the 1970s in Africa:

What seems clear from women's experience – whether under capitalism, colonialism or revolutionary socialism – is that formal political equality and economic equality are not enough. Unless the male members of a liberation movement, a ruling party or a government themselves develop a feminist consciousness and a commitment to male-female equality, women will end up where they have always been: invisible except when men, for their own purposes, whether personal or political, look for female bodies. (Van Allen, 1975, p. 30)

Women also saw men as having ultimate control over whether they would be *allowed* to occupy positions of authority and leadership. One older woman said:

But today, at this time now, white men have come and we are civilised, so women can be the chairman. If you are a woman who is a good leader and has a good heart and has love, you can be leader, but it depends on men. We still have a habit, a belief that women must be down, so we always put men up. So these things mean that women cannot stand up to be the chairman. Men take control, so if men agree that women can be chairmen then women can be chairmen.

Pollard (2000) also concludes that women's "influence has been limited by the men's right to have the final word. In modern Solomon Islands society, women remain under-empowered, owing to the general belief that they are inferior to, and should be subordinate to men" (p. 19). Such

statements – that women can take control if men “let” them - raise interesting questions for the concept of empowerment. Bina Agarwal (1994) defines empowerment, as “*a process that enhances the ability of disadvantaged (‘powerless’) individuals or groups to challenge and change (in their favour) existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions*” (p. 39, italics in original). Does the idea of “permission to be in control” by the dominant group disrupt the premise of empowerment?

This idea of “permitted” empowerment appears also in the work of Alice Pollard (2000). In describing “a professional woman” in Solomon Islands, Mrs Susan, she says, “Mrs Susan’s professional work has removed her entirely from traditional women’s roles and status...She is not dependent on her husband when she makes decisions” (p. 15). She then goes on to say:

Mrs Susan feels that her overseas education has been the prime factor in bringing about the change of her role and status in society; she also credits her husband for **permitting her to influence his decisions** on family and personal matters. (p. 15, emphasis added)

Can we view these processes as subversive, inasmuch as they are enhancing women’s ability to change existing power relationships with the collusion and permission of those whose structurally located power they are challenging? If you need *permission* are you still subordinate? I consider this question in more detail in Chapter 8 in a discussion of agency. In the next section I examine to what extent an independently established women’s only savings club in Vavanga village may be viewed as an expression of autonomy.

### What is real autonomy? A case study of a village women’s savings club.

In the last ten years there has been a proliferation of women’s savings clubs in Solomon Islands. These clubs are a village banking system restricted to women, who meet on a regular basis to deposit money which is periodically taken to a formal banking institution. Exact information on the number of clubs is unavailable, but anecdotal evidence suggests they are widespread, particularly on Malaita and in the Western Province. While some savings clubs are supported by external organisations, (such as Live and Learn, the International Women’s Development Association and Ausaid), others have been established by village women encouraged by educated

kin living elsewhere. The increase in these clubs in Solomon Islands has been partly motivated by the success of the high profile West Are'Are Rototanikeni (WARA) savings club on Malaita, under the leadership of West Are'Are woman, Dr Alice Pollard<sup>41</sup> and facilitated by educated West Are'Are women living in Honiara. This club has been running since 2004 and now has 800 members.

The uptake of the savings club idea also occurs in the context of decades of promotion in the international development paradigm of micro-credit schemes (Mayoux, 2002). During the 1990s microfinance schemes for women were lauded as setting up a “virtuous spiral” for economic empowerment, rhetoric which echoes women as saviours in sustainable development. This narrative is described in Chapter 6 and has been thoroughly critiqued by others (Kabeer, 2005; Remenyi, 2002). Mayoux (2002) argues that the problem with microfinance schemes is not their lack of success in providing real empowerment, but perhaps their vision in claiming this as their purpose; an issue of discursive power. By which she means, the schemes *do* contribute to women's empowerment but maybe not in the ways those promoting them claim they do, or intend them to; arguments which are mainly economic. She argues for a redefinition of empowerment in the context of the schemes (p. 78). I take up her challenge here.

In this section rather than ask, “Why are women's only savings clubs successful in Solomon Islands?” I ask, “What are they successful at?” I argue that the value of women's only savings clubs is not actually economic. I make this claim against the tide of neoliberal discourse in international development described in Chapter 6, and with the support of research that shows the link between greater incomes for women and gender equality is not directly causal but is partial and complex (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 3).

Instead I argue for three related empowerment outcomes for women's only savings clubs:

1. Establishing a women's secular business space
2. Consciousness raising
3. Private practice space for public action

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<sup>41</sup> For details see: <http://www.iwda.org.au/our-work/womens-economic-empowerment-sustainable-livelihoods/economic-empowerment-and-sustainable-livelihoods-in-solomon-islands/>



*Plate 7.2: The Vavanga women's savings club in operation.*

I use as a case study a women's savings club independently established in Vavanga village while I was living there. The women started the club after an informal information session with an educated kinswoman visiting from Honiara. She described the functioning of similar clubs she knew about and helped the women formulate banking procedures and club rules. The initial start-up fund consisted of a SBD\$20 (AUD\$2.86) contribution from each member to buy the small material items needed to start banking – padlocks, notebooks, pens and ledger books. The immediate effect of the savings club was increased marketing activity of garden produce and cooked food by club members on deposit weeks

### Secular space

In Solomon Islands “women's groups” are found most often within church organisations. Church groups are instrumental for women in networking between villages, islands, provinces and

throughout the Pacific as a whole, as well as globally in some cases. These church groups have provided valuable training and leadership opportunities for many women (Douglas, 2003; McDougall, 2003).

Women's leadership roles and codes of behaviour generally inside these Christian groups conform to a gender hierarchy which originates in the Book of Genesis in the Bible – Eve as Adam's companion and helpmate and as the source of temptation (Meleisea, 2015, p. 34; Strachan, 2010, pp. 69-71). For example:

8 I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting;

9 in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or pearls or costly clothing,

10 but which is proper for women professing godliness with good works.

11 Let a woman learn in silence with all submission.

12 And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.

13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.

15 Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with self-control. (*The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, 1982, 1 Timothy 2:8-15)

Women's social role when interpreted through this Christian lens always places a man in the final position of authority (and admonishes women to learn in silence with all submission, and salvation through childbearing). While women may be church leaders, there is a man at the top of the leadership hierarchy in all Christian denominations active in the Solomons. Similarly, in the village, chiefs and other top authority figures are men.

The savings club opens a secular space which calls for gatherings of women not based on Christian denomination, and in which women are the ultimate authority. I do not claim that women somehow suddenly cease to be "Christian women" in a savings club, but the secular space that is opened is a recognised women's business space. This is revolutionary – for village women to have a business space of which they have sole control. They have resources and they make decisions as a group of

women without oversight by male village or church leaders. Again, I do not claim that the women cease to be culturally and socially embedded; husbands may still exercise control over the extent of their wives' participation. The women, however, have power as a group of women in this case because the majority of village women have joined. The main point here is that in this secular space, of the savings club operations, the women have real autonomy, meaning the right or condition of self-government ("Autonomy," 2016).

Additionally, the way in which the women incorporate the ideas of modern banking independently into the village level operation of the saving's club represents a change of development perspective. The Vavanga women were the sole architects of the form the savings club took. Rather than being the objects of development, the women were empowered to be their own experts on what worked best for them.

This process converted a foreign idea into contextually relevant knowledge. In this way external ideas are incorporated into indigenous epistemology as defined by Gegeo (2002); "a cultural group's way of thinking and of creating, (re)formulating, and theorising about knowledge via traditional discourses and media of communication, anchoring the truth of discourse in culture" (p. 381). In other words, village women's secular and group financial activity became normalised through the operation of the savings clubs in a way that was culturally understandable.

### Consciousness raising

I deliberately use the 1960s feminist term "consciousness raising" to invoke a sense of developing thinking outside oppressive structures by sharing experience (Brownmiller, 1999). The savings clubs, as a secular women's only space, opens up the opportunity for discussion and self-reflection in a framework outside the dictates of Christian doctrine. Although again, I do not make any claim that this occurs outside women's underlying value systems informed by Christian Melanesian culture. The savings club model, however, has been formulated on western and international development discourse about women's empowerment and gender equality.

The power of such discourse is not least derived from the unequal power relations that position the Solomons as undeveloped globally. In a kind of ironic and circular logic, women's and men's

perception that the village is “local” and “backwards” gives weight to ideas emanating from modern, rich countries. This brings new imaginings and possibilities. This view was expressed by a woman quoted earlier when she said, “But today, at this time now, white men have come and we are civilised, so women can be the chairman”.

Keesing (1985), speaking of his experience with Kwaio women, concluded that women’s “muteness” - that is, their inability or unwillingness to “articulate ‘global’ views, to talk insightfully about themselves, their life and their societies” (p. 27) - was historically and contextually situated. Namely, that village women have not had the space, experience, or opportunity to engage in “consciousness raising”. This perspective may be countered by Sexton’s (1982) analysis that *Wok Meri* women’s savings clubs in highland PNG were a reflection of women’s dissatisfaction with men’s control of money matters and also of women’s analysis and perceptions of themselves and gender relations. Women’s testimony from my village FDG’s clearly shows that village women engage in practices of critical reflection on gender relations and social issues, couched in the language of gender and social justice, sometimes prompted by international and local development and conservation NGO activity (see also Agarwal, 2001, p. 1642). Spaces for women to engage in critical thinking and the opportunity to discuss ideas about their lives allows village women to gain confidence in themselves and engage further with new ideas and community level decision making processes.

### Practice space

My final point is about making space for women’s ways of doing. The success of the women’s savings club provides material validation of women’s ways of meeting and doing. The data presented in Chapter 3 showed no correlation between proportional representation of women at public community meetings and women’s contributions. This is contrary to findings and recommendations by others about critical mass of women at meetings to encourage their contribution. Chapter 3 also showed how women’s and men’s meeting styles fundamentally differed, and that public community meetings ran on the format of men’s meetings. In the context of modernity and the high value placed on the ability to control material resources, the financial success of women’s savings clubs provides them not only with real material power but also with social valuation.

Chapter 4 started with a transcript of the Bolgabe Women's Club role play on logging. This women's savings club, based in the village of Kena on Kolombangara Island, performed the role play in a meeting house they had built and owned. This was the only public secular building in the village. Their women's savings club then not only created *conceptual* space for women's ways of doing but also owned *material* space, publicly situated in the village.

As the Vavanga women's saving's club progressed, after the initial set up and drafting of rules, the women started to introduce modifications. For example, the club introduced the idea of "top-up", which involved each member of the group contributing a set amount to one or two women's accounts per banking day on a rotating roster. In this way each woman would experience a large influx of funds when it was her turn to be "topped up". In strictly financial terms it is difficult to see what the purpose of this is, as it should make no difference to the final amount in any woman's account if we assume that the amount each woman contributed as top-up would have otherwise been deposited in her own account. The women explained the introduction of the top-up idea as boosting the morale of the woman who was topped up as she saw her account balance rise dramatically on her top-up week. It also fostered group commitment, identity and cohesion; it bound the women as a group. When a woman had contributed top-up to someone else's account but had not yet received a top-up herself she had a vested interest in the continued functioning of the club – to receive her own top-up. Women who had received top-up were now also under obligation – they must do the same for other members. The function of the top-up was more social than financial. Although it could be argued that it had eventual financial outcomes, as women felt encouraged to continue saving and strengthened their commitment to the club as a whole, the financial outcome was a by-product of the social process.

Additionally, new communicative possibilities are revealed by the opportunity provided by the clubs for women to creatively incorporate external knowledge and create a model that worked for them. In Vavanga village, for example, the women enacted an extremely detailed role play of the banking procedure when learning and thinking about how to set up the club. They used leaves, pebbles, bits of paper, and whatever else was on hand, as props and went through every single step of the banking procedure down to even pretending to unlock the (imaginary) box, take things out

of it, and pretending to write in the (prop) pass books. The level of detail they went into in this role play was, in my view, extraordinary, but it served a very important purpose. Everyone present knew exactly what the banking procedure should look like after this role play. There was no assumption of prior knowledge by anyone and this put everyone on an equal footing - everyone was now equally and thoroughly informed about procedures. This also set the standard for transparency of operations.

While this may seem like a minor point it relates to several themes that recur throughout this thesis. In previous chapters I have detailed how women's knowledge of events, such as in logging projects and for meetings, is often partial, and dissemination of information is controlled by men – a form of “degenerate communication” (Kameswari, 2002, and see Chapters 3 and 4). The detailed role play of banking procedure is a demonstration of how information may be disseminated in a way that promotes group equity. Everyone receives the same information, at the same time, at a level of concrete (rather than abstract) detail, thus avoiding obfuscating communication that reinforces existing power hierarchies around rights to speak and participate (see also Monson, 2012, pp. 95-98 on the social efficacy of role plays).

The operation of the savings clubs can be viewed as a practice space for women's ways of meeting and doing, without male oversight, and then proof of the efficacy of their methods. A male elder in one village I visited, with a successful women's savings club, commented that only the women knew how to manage their money in his village. He said, “The only money in this village now is in the women's savings club”. Men's acknowledgement of women's success contributes to shifting gendered notions of valid behaviour.

## Conclusions

Village women's analysis about the possibility of women leaders at all levels reflects their consciousness that gender norms are a fundamental ordering principle in their lives but that they have a part in constituting them. Women use the language of “exposure” to talk about women coming “up” and “out” and changing their thinking. The wearing of trousers, and the so far

persistent opposition to this in many villages, provides an interesting metaphor. An older woman quoted above says that women “go around anyhow so it’s hard for them to take responsibility”. She is referring to how women may not stay home or attend to traditional obligations, but also to how young women may dress, particularly wearing trousers, which is considered inappropriate dress for women in many villages and explicitly banned in some (see Plate 7.3). Pollard (2000) also mentions how older Waisisi women regard women wearing trousers in public as “offensive and shameful” (p. 51). One woman in Vavanga explained it to me like this:

Women shouldn’t wear trousers. It doesn’t show respect. That’s a custom that’s been taken from European culture. But for us it’s taboo. Because if you wear trousers your front [gesturing to crotch] and your back [gesturing to bottom] can be seen. If you bend down everything is visible. If a man looks at you like that then some kind of thinking can come to his head; how you bend down, or how you walk about...he can look how your body is. I don’t like it either if my daughters wear trousers. I tell them not to wear trousers. I tell them, if you wear trousers and walk in front of your brother, that’s taboo. But all kinds of Western styles have come now [to Solomon Islands] and it’s spoiling our children.

Definitions of expose in the Oxford English Dictionary include: to make something visible by uncovering it, to cause someone to be vulnerable to risk, to publicly and indecently display one’s genitals, to reveal the true (objectionable) nature of someone and to make (something embarrassing or damaging) public (“Expose,” 2016). The coming “up and out” of women is connected conceptually to all these notions of exposure which symbolically the wearing of trousers links to modernity – a destabilising of tradition and custom which makes many people, both men and women, uncomfortable (Brimacombe, 2016). Others have pointed out this relationship in other parts of the Pacific. Cummings (2013) argues that in Vanuatu women wearing trousers are attempting to “redefine and re-embody – though with limited success – relationships between *kastom* and modernity, the local and the foreign, black and white, rural and urban, past and future” (p. 34).

To temper this discomfort, oppositional conceptualisations of empowerment – one group taking power from another (women taking male positions of leadership) - were reframed by the women by talk of “permitted empowerment”. Women said they could be leaders if men let them – a giving of power by men rather than a taking by women. Such discussions take place in the context of women moving into what is perceived as male domains; women moving up and out of the “home”

space into public political positions. I argue that the operation of women’s savings clubs point to an alternative path of women’s empowerment which employs a more Foucauldian notion of power in which “power is...seen as a creative and productive force that circulates and makes the process of change a combined result of structural factors and people's subjective position and action” (Davids, Van Driel, & Parren, 2014, p. 398).



Plate 7.3: Sign in Langa Langa lagoon, Malaita Island warning of a \$50.00 fine for wearing trousers. Note also number 2 on the sign: \$50 fine for "talking with opposite sex in private place and husband is away".

The success of the savings clubs as a women’s empowerment measure reveals financial outcomes as part of social transformation – not necessarily the other way around. The way the women started and maintained their own club in Vavanga village provides an example of the generative exercise of women’s agency in a way that was at once materially and socially empowering, discussed further in the next chapter (8). The clubs provide a *women’s* business model. Material successes of women’s savings clubs provide women’s ways of doing business (meeting and speaking) with legitimacy and validation. In turn this may start to make new space for women’s participation in decision making in a more substantive way, that redefines valid public, political behaviour.

## 8. Agency: Understanding lack of underwear as resistance

### Introduction

I stood on the point with three older women watching the logging barge approach the village.<sup>42</sup> The women were angry. Despite their opposition, here was the barge arriving. They told me they were going to stop the barge from landing on the point. I asked them how and Beatrice said:

I will take off my clothes, my shirt, and my skirt and then I will run naked onto the barge. That's what I'm going to do once the barge arrives here. That's what I'm waiting for. I'm waiting for the barge to dock at the wharf then I will take off my shirt and skirt and run naked now. I have come here today with no underwear on. So I'm ready. I will welcome the company.

Beatrice and her two cousins (who were sisters) were resident matrilocally in the village and had primary land rights in the descent group estate. They had been vocal in their opposition to this logging operation since they had first heard about it. They had attended clan meetings in the village and had voiced their opposition. They had not been involved in the legal challenges to the logging company nor in the many informal strategy meetings (of men) by those opposed to the logging. But their brother (and cousin) had attended and was involved in this aspect of the opposition on their behalf. At the moment of the logging company's arrival in the village, Beatrice was threatening to use her embodied gendered power as a weapon. Despite the opposition she had expressed many times over the preceding months, here was the logging company arriving. How can we understand Beatrice's threat to run naked onto the barge? If this is an act of resistance I ask, resistance against whom? Or what? Is Beatrice's threat an expression of *women's* resistance? Is it an act of agency that contributes to changing gendered social norms?

This chapter focuses on village women's capacity to influence, change and transform gendered social norms and also thinks about the way international development discourse may be

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<sup>42</sup> This is the same incident described in more detail in Chapter 5.

strategically employed to claim certain actions by women are *gendered* resistance. The concept of agency is used as a theoretical lens to think through the constraining and enabling factors on women's capacity for action, using as examples some of the ethnographic incidents described earlier. Rather than think about change in only oppositional terms I use an expanded concept of agency to think about different types of power relations and their intersection with changing gender norms (McNay, 2000, p. 158). I ask, how can the concept of agency mediate between the structural (material) constraints and cultural factors (identity politics) that effect the what, when, where and how of women's ability to act? In this thesis I ground these questions in a feminist project of making women visible – what are women doing? With what consequences for gender justice?

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, a discussion of the concept of agency in feminist literature and the particular theoretical slant that will be used in this chapter. The second section applies this lens to ethnographic incidents detailed in previous chapters of this thesis to test how a generative theory of agency may be evidenced in “lived reality” (McNay, 2004). The final section details my conclusions.

### What is agency?

A basic definition of agency describes the capacity of people to shape their actions in response to certain situations. Theoretically the concept of agency is used as a mediating concept in the transformation of social relations. That is, how do we understand individual capacity to act within certain social milieu? Capacity is the key word in this definition – it describes ability or power for action. The genealogy of the concept of agency is rooted in enlightenment thought – a concept of the individual with socially unfettered free will making rational choices (Wilson, 2008). Often agency is framed as oppositional, expressed as resistance against norms oppressive to a particular social group. This conceptualisation of agency produces dualisms as manifestations of an analysis of inequality such that “difference is often taken to culminate in conversions...an evaluation of a relationship or context in favour of one set of relations at the expense of the other” (Strathern, 1987, p. 5).

Feminist and other scholars have criticised this as a narrow construction of agency, in that it assumes fixed gender categories and thus treats agency as only taking place as opposition. Such a construction assumes a “norm” against which other actors are necessarily marginal. It also creates a theoretical dichotomy; agency (based on identity/subject formation and recognition) against structure. Thus a tension exists theoretically between the “weight of social structures” and the abilities of social actors (Charrad, 2010, p. 517).

Fraser (1995) argues that gender injustice takes place at the intersection of political/economic injustice (structure) and cultural/symbolic injustice (identity). That is, political/economic injustice results in maldistribution as a result of structural discrimination, for example class-based access to resources. Fraser argues that (class) difference is a product of the political economy which has cultural outcomes, but is not culturally derived (Fraser 1995, pp. 75-76). At the other end of the spectrum is a collectivity rooted wholly in culture, which cuts across political economic divides. It exists not by virtue of the division of labour but because of the “cultural-valuation” structure. The root of the injustice is cultural misrecognition from which economic injustices are derived. Fraser gives the example of homosexuals as a collectivity of this type.

Fraser (1995) claims that gender (and race) are bivalent collectivities such that they suffer simultaneously from maldistribution and misrecognition but not as effects of one another (p. 78). Fraser and others recognise that such distinctions are only for analytical purposes and that in practice the two categories, socioeconomic injustice and cultural/symbolic injustice, are mutually constitutive and entangled (Fraser, 1995, pp. 69-70; Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 137; McNay, 2004; Wilson, 2008). Thus, they may reinforce one another and result in a “vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination” (Fraser, 1995, pp. 72-73).

The predicament in addressing gender oppression, if we use Fraser’s categories of political-economic injustice and cultural/symbolic injustice, is that the remedy for one aspect seemingly countermands the other (McNay, 2004, p. 176). This dilemma is apparent in various emphases found in the use of the concept of agency. Some of these stress structural limits to such an extent that women are denied any agency and presented mostly as victims; or conversely, other approaches ascribe such a high degree of agency to women that structural oppression is no longer obvious (Charrad, 2010, pp. 517-518).

Many current theories of agency, particularly of women in developing countries, recognise that agency is exhibited in a variety of structural locations and not only as overt resistance (Bespinar, 2010; Charrad, 2010; Hilsdon, 2007). Dichotomous understandings of both oppression and identity formation are thus broken down. Citing Foucault (1980) and Giddens (1979), Charrad (2010) suggests that agency is not synonymous with resistance but may be enabled or created by particular (oppressive) relations of power (p. 518). Bespinar (2010) builds on this analysis and argues that agency is always contextual but must be understood based on meaning and value systems of actors, without falling prey to romanticisation of women's agency such that consequences for women's empowerment are sidelined (p. 525).

Contextualising agency in this way then reveals a further distinction between strategic and practical gender interests. Strategic gender interests look to alleviation and transformation of structural constraints for women on a society-wide level, while practical gender interests provide strategies to cope within oppressive (structural) conditions but may not change them (Bespinar, 2010, p. 525). This distinction helps in understanding the difference between individual and collective agency.

As an individual a woman may exhibit agency at a practical level, for example by secretly saving her earnings from marketing (described in Chapter 2), which may not change the structural gendered constraints which have motivated her to take this course of action. Certain authors are more or less pessimistic about the possibilities for wider social change emerging from this type of agency. Bespinar (2010) concludes in her analysis of Turkish women's agency in work-related strategies that the women's strategies are "personal and practical...and ultimately reinforce patriarchal values and traditional gender roles" (p. 530). Kandiyoti (1988) calls this "bargaining with the patriarchy" and argues, more optimistically, that women's practical resistance (as an exercise of individual agency) may lead to social transformation as unconscious aspects of gendered subjectivity change (pp. 285-286). She argues for "less ethnocentric or class-bound definitions of what constitutes a feminist consciousness" (p. 286).

Strategic interest may be illustrated by exhibitions of agency at a collective level, for example when women engage in public criticism of male authority figures as a group of women, as described in the Bolgabe women's role play (Chapter 4). There is yet more nuance to these distinctions; gender interest may not be the same thing as women's interests. As Kandiyoti (1998) points out, "mobilization by women does not necessarily presuppose an expression of gender interests" (p. 141). I raised this question in Chapter 5 when thinking about the Vavanga village and Vella Lavella women's resistance to logging – and conclude that their action was not an expression of gender interest despite rousing rhetoric to the contrary which described the women as "defenceless mothers...protect[ing] their rights and resources". That is, although this was action by *women* it was not about changing gender norms around decision making over natural resource management or land tenure issues.

The rhetoric of women's empowerment in international development conceptually elides women's and gender interests as well as strategic and practical interests, as described in Chapter 6. Wilson (2008) explains the central paradox of the concept of women's empowerment, as used by development institutions, is that it focuses on self-improvement as empowerment, rather than giving power to one group by taking it away from another. Empowerment without this core is defined as: "...power less in terms of domination over others (with its implicit assumption that a gain for women implies a loss for men), and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength" (Moser, 1993, p. 74). Power is not necessarily a finite resource, but a version of empowerment that imagines women becoming empowered without any change to gender relations at a strategic level is clearly problematic. This version of agency then situates women's (not gender) interests at a practical level inside the patriarchal bargain but not challenging structural oppression. It does not account for structural violence or the social and cultural institutions through which unequal power relations are reproduced. Women's "transformation" therefore means simply moving within or possibly up existing hierarchies of power (Wilson, 2008, p. 85). As discussed in Chapter 6, such formulations reify discrete categorisations based on gender with a net effect of "...minimal redistribution and no further change at the same time as precluding other identity formation" (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 364).

An effect of an increased focus on recognition is the reification of group identities with a corresponding decreased focus on distributive injustices (Fraser, 2000, p. 108). Such a move represents a trend worldwide in social conflicts, including within feminism, from “battles over redistribution” to “claims for the recognition of difference” (Fraser, 2000, p. 107). Fraser (2000) describes this as “the problem of displacement” whereby the politics of recognition has come to replace (“marginalise, eclipse and displace”), redistributive struggles (p. 108). Wilson (2008) claims that neoliberal discourses have usurped the concept of women’s agency by seeking the “exercise of agency...in women’s strategies for survival rather than struggles for transformation, and at the level of the individual rather than with the collective” (p. 83). She argues that such framing, which claims that women have the capacity to exercise agency as “rational individuals”, accepts the normative dualisms of liberalism (Wilson, 2008, p. 83).

Theoretically separating “gender interests” from “women’s interests” is related to the problematic theorising of subjectivity through subordinate identities. The first wave of feminists asserted the need for recognition of the category of women as an oppressed social collective. This was necessary as an initial step in remedying gender injustice based on the politics of recognition. Identifying women’s group specificity was predicated on exposing patriarchal practices which privileged androcentric perspectives and devalued and/or rendered invisible women’s experience. Early feminist work focussed on how women experienced discrimination and oppression because they were *women*. Greater recognition of the heterogeneity of “women’s” experience led to extensive debate within feminist literature about the ethnocentric bias and homogenising effects of this categorisation of all women within the framework of western academia (Mohanty, 1984).

Audre Lorde’s (2007 (1984)) brilliant speech, *The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*, demanded accountability from western feminist theorists for categorisations of women that discounted and rendered invisible the unequal power relations between women on many counts. For example, experiences of women whose oppression intersects with other unequal power differentials: women of colour, “Third World Women”, non-heterosexual women, and women with disabilities, to name a few. She asked, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?” (pp. 100-111). Chandra Mohanty (1984)

similarly questioned western designated frameworks used to construct a categorisation of “Third World Women”, which rendered poor women in developing countries as perennial victims bereft of agency. What Lorde and Mohanty point out is the intersection of gender oppression with other axes of power. The theoretical perspective of intersectionality has been offered as a way of encompassing multiple women’s experiences within feminism (Gunnarsson, 2011).

Expanded definitions of agency allow that conflicting structural forces may enable and constrain women’s empowerment in different ways simultaneously (Charrad, 2010, p. 518), and that women may act in contextually situated ways that challenge rigid gender identities and subvert and change them. McNay (2003) argues, however, that these understandings of agency remain essentially negatively formulated. Namely, that the subject is seen as formed through external discursive practices – through subjectification (p. 140). A negative concept of subject formation thus remains essentially oppositional; the subject’s oppression defines it therefore renegotiation must take the form of resistance. While McNay acknowledges the power of this formulation of agency for the possibility of resistance, she challenges the determinism which may accompany an oppositional concept of subject formation on two counts. First, there is an implied passivity of the subject which leads to, second, a rather constrained understanding of agency that lacks the element of creativity.

McNay (2000, 2010) proposes a *generative* theory of agency which allows for subject self-formation and reflexivity:

It is not possible to understand what makes an action political or not, or indeed what disinclines individuals to behave in a political manner in the first place without engaging with their own understandings and interpretations of self and world. Contra post identity assumptions, such an interpretative approach to agency need not necessarily involve a retreat to a problematic subjectivism, if it is construed in terms of a relational and materialist phenomenology suggested partly in the Bourdieusian idea of habitus. (McNay, 2010, p. 512)

This is the same approach recommended by feminist analysts of international development, such as Batliwala (2007) and Cornwall (2014b), in the face of the disintegration of the concept of empowerment. In the analysis that follows, the concept of empowerment is based on a definition of power which includes “control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology”

(Batliwala, 1994, p. 129). This definition recognises that empowerment is multidimensional and includes: structural changes to power relations which enable greater resource access and control; shifts in consciousness that foster self-understanding, self-recognition and self-reflexivity, and the capacity to imagine and formulate strategies for change; and ideological impetus to remedy social injustice which involves changing power relations. Further, by stressing the intellectual and ideological components of empowerment the focus is shifted away from an instrumental view looking for measurable “empowerment outcomes”, to empowerment as a process (Cornwall, 2014b, p. 3). This view of power allows for agency in a variety of locations; moving from a concept of *power over* to understanding agency as *power to* that has context (Davids, Van Driel, & Parren, 2014, p. 398). Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as changes to people’s ability to make strategic life choices (where previously they could not). “The ability to exercise choice” is defined through three inter-related dimensions: resources - material, human and social; agency, “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them”; and achievements (outcomes) (pp. 437-438).

I elide in some ways the concepts of empowerment and agency by presupposing that women’s exercise of agency is about enabling further action and creating space for more varied possibilities for action. Empowerment as I use the term thus encompasses practical and strategic interests. Practical interests describe how women act to relieve individual oppression within oppressive structures and is seen as part of the empowerment journey. Strategic interests indicate the creation of ideological space by individual self-awareness (feminist consciousness) and therefore an increased capacity to act for social change as a collective. The final element to this understanding of agency is self-subject formation - that is, the ability of the subject to define their position as a gendered subject. Butler’s (1988) phenomenological interpretation of subject formation posits that identity is constituted through “a stylized repetition of acts” and that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 519). This interpretation of subject formation establishes that the subject is mutable, which allows for change within constructions of gender categories. While McNay (2003, 2004) criticises this performative notion of subject formation for structural abstraction and as lacking temporality, it is useful to use it selectively to think about how gender norms may change

through small and embodied performances such that notions of what constitutes the “abiding gendered self” transform.

McNay (2003) proposes resituating experience in power relations in a way that allows for a creative dimension to agency, a rethinking of autonomy and reflexivity (p. 141). She uses Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* to reconcile embodiment and social practice so as to conceive of “social agents rather than subjects” (McNay, 2003, p. 140). In Bourdieu’s model of change, based on a concept of *habitus*, change is rarely radical but the *habitus* is in a constant state of revision such that “the new and unexpected is always incorporated upon the basis of previously established, embodied dispositions” (McNay, 2003, p. 144). Such an understanding of agency and change locates subjects within relations of power and imagines change in small and slow ways, not as utopian visions of grand revolution. Davids et al. (2014) describe this type of agency as creating “room to maneuver”, resistance as “small, messy, fragmented and everyday kinds of subversions, conscious and unconscious” (p. 404).

McNay (2003) argues that this also gives temporality to subject formation and agency. She extends this analysis to conclude that the subject’s self-understanding brings a temporal dimension to their capacity to act based on anticipation, made possible due to an awareness of their current position. That is, increased opportunities for self-reflection and the ability to manipulate future possibilities leads to higher hopes and expectations, an increase in agency which in itself allows for further opportunities and increases the power of the subject to reformulate themselves as subjects. In the words of Bourdieu: “The real ambition to control the future...varies with the real power to control that future, which means first of all having a grasp on the present itself” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.221 in McNay, 2003, p. 146). Given the way village women’s and men’s lives interact with global imaginings of wealth, modernity, human rights and gender equity “higher hopes and expectations” may also be cause for frustration if not achievable. For example, some ethnographers draw the connection between high levels of violence against women by men in the Pacific and frustrated male engagements with the possibilities offered by “modernity” (for example see Zimmer-Tamakoshi, 2012).

To reiterate: we can conceive of the subject as exercising agency in the creation of their own subject formation. Ethnographically grounding and contextualising understandings of agency allows the incorporation of intersectional experience, therefore locating subjects in overarching systems of power, rather than merely as essentialised categories. In this way both subject formation and the exercise of agency can be located temporally and structurally through examining lived experience. This conceptualisation of agency allows that subjects remain culturally embedded, thus avoiding abstraction and a tendency to skew theoretically in favour of (unachievable) remedies either of recognition or redistribution. Using this framework we can strive to understand how a village woman can exercise agency and a reflexive understanding of self that, while remaining culturally embedded, nevertheless imagines change.

### Women as generative agents: Wearing hidden trousers

In the Bolgaba women's role play, presented at the start of Chapter 4, women rendered their dissatisfaction with male domination of logging negotiations and distribution of benefits. They damningly criticised authority figures, particularly the chief, and portrayed men drinking, gambling and behaving badly. In performing this role play the women exhibit a degree of agency in their self-awareness of their current position and an ability to articulate their interests, both through the script of the role play and in performing it publicly.

Yet they paid "compensation" at the start of the play explicitly so that female affines could wear trousers and speak in public – something they are not normally allowed to do. The female principal of the village school made the compensation payment to a male representative before the performance. She said:

Before this play starts, on behalf of our chief who is not here today, we have a second in charge who will hold this money [the compensation money]. This is for our custom concerning women not being allowed to do certain things, especially women wearing boy's trousers to show respect to our men. So when we engage in this behaviour and pay this money it means that the women, and we women who have married into this village, who are not from here, we can wear any costume to do our play. So when we put this money here it means we are allowed to do this for only the period of time that the play is on.

“Compensation” in Solomon Islands is a payment, traditionally made in shell money (and/or pigs) and often, in a contemporary context, with cash and shell money. A compensation payment is made by a perpetrator to a victim or their family for socially unacceptable transgressions. The payment is to compensate the victim for harm. Contemporary transgressions for which compensation may be claimed include: “swearing” – insults, insulting name calling, loss or damage to property, loss of human life or freedoms (rape, injury), and transgression of cultural taboos (inappropriate verbal or physical behaviour in the context of kin or other relations). The payment of compensation neutralises the perpetrator’s deed; no further action or retaliation may be taken by the victim. Akin (1999) stresses that the central aspect to compensation payments is their simultaneously aggressive and conciliatory nature. Compensation is for the purposes of asserting “rights and strengths” and restoring “social stability” (p. 46).

In the context of compensation payment in the women’s role play, this payment was made in anticipation of the transgression rather than after. Are the women paying compensation or buying permission to behave in culturally inappropriate ways? Is this difference important or does this payment – by virtue of being called compensation - preclude the possibility of retaliation or future censure? A woman described to me this custom of paying compensation in order to speak out:

They [in-laws] must put down money (*torowe selen*) before they can talk. They can’t just talk all about. They must put money first and then they can talk. Otherwise talk can go all around and big arguments can come, go and come, go and come, until it finishes. And then to make things straight, they must pay money, and then it will be finished. That’s our custom.

Alternatively, is there no penalty or repercussions for this atypical public behaviour by women because the role play is seen as an essentially cathartic act? A “letting off of steam?” (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 142). Is this part of the “maintenance of systems of domination”- acts of resistance within the patriarchal bargain that do not “necessarily lead to a renegotiation of conjugal or labour contracts but produces relief within them?” (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 142). The women’s focus in the role play on misuse of funds by men and the outcomes of logging, point to their concern with gaining a greater share of benefits and better environmental outcomes, rather than a seat at the negotiating table. Does the role play as an act of resistance therefore aim to change the inequitable structure of existing gender relations or merely to bargain for rearrangement within them?

Moreover, does it in any way challenge the constraints of women's gendered identity? While the women paid compensation to wear trousers while performing in the play, without exception those women in trousers wrapped a sarong (*lavalava*) around their hips to cover the obvious bifurcation of their legs.

Possibly we can view the payment of the compensation as relating not only to some form of cultural sanctioning but also to a cultural negotiation of the way in which this space was opened for women to emerge as public political commentators. There is disjuncture between the concept of compensation as a payment for an already committed transgression, and the women's payment in anticipation of one.<sup>43</sup> I argue that this points to creativity in making culturally recognisable a display of socially transgressive women's behaviour enabled by the power of "foreign" rhetoric and resources. In this way the women remain culturally embedded while shifting the parameters of gendered social norms.

This instance represents a clear shift in women's imaginings of public speech and in constructions of women's speech. I conclude, therefore, that women have been generative agents here in their own subject formation specifically as *women* public social commentators. The form of commentary and the space in which the performance took place represent an ideological claim by the women, while their payment of compensation and the wearing of sarongs over trousers allows them to remain within gendered "embodied dispositions" (McNay, 2003, p. 144).

The women here are clearly acting as a group of *women*, a group constituted through the auspices of an international NGO working with a mandate of women's empowerment, but has the role play furthered strategic gendered interests? The Bolgaba women's club owned the hall in which the performance took place. It was the only public secular building in the village. The club had been able to build the hall through funding by Live and Learn (an international NGO). The role plays were initially formulated and performed during a gender equity workshop run by the same organisation. This space, conceptual and physical, for women's articulation of their interests,

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<sup>43</sup> The payment of "compensation" in this case points I think to complex cultural negotiations to do with opening subjects for discussion. A full exploration of this aspect is beyond the scope of this thesis but a subject for further research.

opened through the power of international development discourse on gender equity combined with the flow of actual material resources to the women's savings club. Yet the extent to which such performances and women taking the role of critical public commentators may affect the structural factors that consistently cut women out of negotiations in issues of natural resource management is not clear and a subject for further research. By way of contrast, I turn next to analysing how embracing the politics of difference can, instead of being agentically generative, revert to abstraction in a way that reinforces structural inequalities.

### Being strategic about patriarchal bargains and implicit contracts

Women's autobiographical accounts and data on marketing activity in Chapter 2 reveal the extent to which marital circumstances influence women's livelihood strategies. When discussing the "patriarchal bargain" Kandiyoti (1988) provides multiple African examples of women's negotiations inside marriage that preserve their relative autonomy in certain areas (pp. 276-277). These African examples resonate with case studies from Papua New Guinea. For example, Koczberski (2007) uses the term "implicit contract" to describe how husbands and wives negotiate household sharing of labour and distribution of profits in oil palm fruit collection in Papua New Guinea. Her proposition is that when women contribute their labour to fruit collection, in return, they expect money for household items and their husband's labour on certain tasks. If men did not fulfil their part of the contract women could withhold their labour. She details how the introduction of the "Mama Card", which provided for direct remuneration to women for their collection of the loose fruit ("lus frut"), formalised allocation of resources previously extant in the "implied contract" of the household.

Koczberski (2007) claims that the success of the "Mama Card" scheme had three key lessons: 1) understanding intra-household relations could improve women's access to commodity crop income; 2) guaranteeing women's remuneration through institutional arrangements can improve household relations and rates of women's participation in commodity production; and 3) commodity firms can play a role in reducing economic pressures within families that are the cause of intra-household conflict (pp. 1182-1183). In this way she claims to "...widen the analysis of

intra-household conflicts over labour and income by linking broader cultural ideologies and economic processes with intra-household gender relations and women's bargaining power" (p. 1183).

What Koczberski does not draw out in her analysis is how women's bargaining in this context did not challenge unequal access to income based explicitly on a gendered division of labour and rights. While women were able to obtain direct remuneration for their labour through the "Mama Card" they still only had access to 26% of the total crop. Koczberski speculates that one reason men so readily accepted the "Mama Card" scheme was because it did not challenge men's right to the high status, higher earning fresh fruit bunches (FFB). In fact women's percentage of earnings was made up of 14% collection of loose fruit supplemented by FFB harvested by the women or given to them by their husbands. Husbands then saw this contribution of FFB to the "Mama Card" as their contribution to the household, so women would not ask them for additional money. Women's strategies clearly take place within a patriarchal bargain on two counts: first, they still only garner a small percentage of total profits, and second, their labour is confined to an already demarcated women's sphere – collection of the loose fruit, the lower income earning sphere. I suggest that intra-household relations are improved in such a situation as the power status quo is not challenged but is, in fact, more clearly defined and crystallised.

I am arguing here that gender ideologies are constitutive of economic and political processes *not* merely "cultural beliefs and attitudes which are somehow attached" (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 137). Thus the collection of loose fruit in Papua New Guinean palm oil plantations, and marketing of garden produce for women in Solomon Islands (and PNG), is linked to ideology of female spheres of activity which relegates women to these lower paid forms of work. The initiative of the "Mama Card", and in Solomon Islands case funding from Ausaid and others to improve women's marketing conditions, while welcome initiatives, are moves that reinforce this gender ideology and treat it as natural. In this way while the "Mama Card" as an initiative for women looks like a win for women's empowerment it operates at an individual and practical interest level and ultimately undermines strategic gender interests.

Discussing women's ability to bargain in these situations must take account of the gendered parameters within which they are able to exercise agency and also point to how changing gender norms may be "retrogressive" as well as progressive (McNay, 2000, p. 158). This criticism has been made of microfinance schemes whereby men contribute less to household needs when women gain higher incomes or retain greater control of their earnings (Mayoux, 2002, p. 57). Social injustice is reinforced in both categories of recognition and redistribution; the narrow construction of women's identity is reinforced and fixed to lower income earning spheres - the "problem of displacement" (Fraser, 2000). I described this earlier in Chapter 6 where it appears in international development rhetoric as "women as smart economics" or "efficiency" discourse on women.

### Liberation from what? The case of Mavis

Women's "efficiency" discourse has become ubiquitous along with their "altruism" such that "in the absence of an analysis of patriarchy it implies that these qualities are uniquely feminine" (Wilson, 2008, p. 87). "Good women" are constructed as morally superior to men. They spend their money on their family and children while men spend on personal consumption. And their morality is central to social reproduction. This reasoning relies ultimately on women as a category formed through a negative concept of subject formation while promoting a structurally dislocated concept of agency.

Chapter 5 introduced Mavis, a woman who challenged these notions of the good Melanesian woman. In her quest for land rights Mavis operated as an individual, outside the auspices of the church, kin networks, or a community organisation. Mavis's case brings together elements of the analysis of agency described in the two incidents, above, the Bolgabe women's role play and women's economic position. Kandiyoti (1998) asks:

How do forms of resistance which may force a reinterpretation of local theories of entitlement in favour of the less powerful become possible at all? The answer to this question necessarily entails a consideration of the capacity of disadvantaged groups to achieve a degree of articulation of their interests and to acquire the means to act in their furtherance. (p. 138)

I suggest that Mavis exhibits agency outside the parameters of the patriarchal bargain. She explicitly challenges the status quo. Her insistence on her right to such behaviour is not through her identity as a woman, but as a landowner. Mavis is also overt about the cultural roots of her resistance. She has spent time living in Australia and frames gender equity through a western, not Melanesian, cultural lens. I proposed in Chapter 5 that the basis of Mavis's agency is at once ideological and material. She has the material resources to gain independence from the network of obligations and dependency inherent in predominantly subsistence livelihoods available to most village women. But this is possible not mainly because of her economic situation. It is her *ideological* break with gendered cultural boundaries that sees her deploy her resources in this manner. She is actively involved in her subject formation, what McNay (2003) calls, generative agency. We can think of her exercise of agency as a break from "stylized" gendered acts in such a way that it allows the imagining for other women of a different conceptualisation of the "abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1988).

### Conclusions: An empowerment journey

Neoliberal discourses of women's empowerment in developing world contexts focus predominantly on enabling women to participate in the formal economy. The ethnographic incidents discussed above reveal how the exercise of agency under such a framework may take place within narrow limits, inside the "patriarchal bargain", in ways which do not challenge embedded gendered structural inequalities. When women are economically "empowered" most often this takes place within a very limited sphere already demarcated as women's activity and always unequal to the economic opportunities available to men. In this way both gender identity and gendered access to resources and economic opportunities are mutually reinforcing; gender identity and redistribution of resources are "ineluctably entwined" (McNay, 2004, p. 176).

Nevertheless, if we view empowerment as a journey not a destination (Cornwall, 2014b), we can argue that patriarchal bargains notwithstanding, it is possible to see how women can exercise agency and how gendered social norms are changing. Creating space for reflection, for public commentary, for women's ownership of physical and social space as a group of women, changes

gender norms such that women become more visible and more able to articulate their rights. This represents a creative reimagining of self, an active part in identity formation.

The case of the village women's assertion of land rights, which takes place seemingly within the boundaries of existing gendered social norms, can nonetheless be seen to be changing them. Central to this analysis is the understanding that neither gendered identity nor political economic position are static, but are negotiated based on previous dispositions, in line with Bourdieu's concept of how *habitus* changes. These women creatively incorporate the "foreign" ideas of gender equity in ways that preserve the integrity of their social and cultural lives and their spiritual commitments, both traditional and Christian, which place women's moral responsibility at the heart of the family (see also Hilsdon, 2007, p. 135). Mavis's case represents a radical breaking of this mould, which may not be what all women want, or are capable of. Mavis, however, is pushing the gendered social boundaries in a way that ultimately creates space for other women to behave differently. Her behaviour, while being constructed at this point as deviant, allows at least the imagining of other possibilities for women (Strachan, 2010).

In this chapter I have tried to show how women exercise agency to negotiate the politics of gender identity and the gender of the political economy in ways that may remain ambiguous and refuse to fit neatly into handy discursive categories. Such framing aims to understand a more generative theory of agency and to push back against neoliberal instrumentalism which, through a particular representation of reality, seeks to legitimate specific interventions (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 362).

Can we conclude that lack of underwear may be construed as resistance and as an expression of agency? Beatrice did not eventually strip naked and run onto the logging barge to "welcome the company". But she and her cousins were the only three anti-logging villagers to approach the barge as it attempted to land. They verbally harangued the logging company employees as they attempted to land on the log point. They said:

You go away. Untie this rope [securing the barge to the point] and go. We don't have any trees here for you. If you take our trees we will have nothing. We don't have any money and we don't need your money. You go now.

Their presence caused some delay to the landing, as the logging company staff stood about uncertainly looking to the police from Gizo present at the scene for guidance. No-one stepped forward to reply to the women, either from the logging company or from the pro-logging faction of villagers. Eventually one woman from the pro-logging faction, who had previously engaged in fisticuffs with Beatrice at the fighting meeting described in Chapter 4, spoke up. A shouted argument ensued with the opposing women keeping a physical distance between them, on either end of the log point. Beatrice and her cousins turned their talk to their right to the land on which they stood based on their tribal connections and the lack of right of the woman opposing them. No-one else intervened or contributed to this argument.

The police dithered. Eventually they asked to sight the logging company's letter from the Ministry of Forests granting approval for them to land their equipment. The logging company produced this letter and the police explained to Beatrice and her cousins that the logging company had permission to land. Meanwhile, in a small meeting house nearby, but not visible from the log point, the men opposed to logging in the village were arguing with some tribal members not resident in Vavanga village that had accompanied the logging company and were the main advocates of the logging operation. The lead figure in this group was the Prime Minister's brother. The talk in the meeting house centred on the legality of the landing and logging license.

These two sites and modes of disagreement/resistance were explicitly gendered. But I return again to the question, was the women's action *women's* resistance? Does it in any way challenge gendered social norms which result in women's oppression? In the context of the discussion of agency in this chapter we can conclude that while Beatrice's action (or threat of) constitutes an individual act of agency she does not exercise this agency for strategic gender interests. In a wider context her resistance is against the global forces that position her at the mercy of rich foreign companies operating under the auspices of a neoliberal system inherently oppressive to women.

I propose, therefore, that women's exercise of agency within the patriarchal bargain, on a practical-individual level or as part of coordinated resistance with men against global unequal power dynamics, anyway creates more space for action. An improvement in women's immediate material conditions can be an enabling factor in its own right – enabling women to have greater control

over resources in the short term contributes to greater opportunities for autonomy in the long term. Similarly, while constructions of “gender” within international development may be discursively limiting, I argue that ideological space has opened through the opportunities provided by the operation of NGOs on gender equity and this has been an essential element in women’s “consciousness raising”. Talking about patriarchal bargains and practical interests, however, still accepts that one’s gender will be the basis for deciding the breadth of one’s opportunities and capabilities. Furthermore, such formulations make no promises of revolution, nor provide hopeful or rousing narratives for change. Rather, they speak to pragmatism in the face of oppression and discrimination. If empowerment is indeed a journey and not a destination, where can we find the motivational sustenance needed to make it through the darker and gloomier stretches of the path?

## 9. Conclusion: The dangers of seduction by lyrical metaphor

The opportunity for lyrical metaphorical analysis of gender relations abounds in the Solomon Islands context, and much of Melanesia. For example, rules of pollution dictate that men bathe upstream and women bathe downstream. It is possible to construct a narrative rich in oppositional binaries, with metaphors of women downstream in issues around natural resource management – physically, socially and culturally. When analysing gender relations in Solomon Islands I was initially lured into these seductive metaphors, mostly because of their easy accessibility on Kolombangara Island.



*Plate 9.1: Sleeping woman profile of Kolombangara Island*

Kolombangara Island is named for its abundance of water. *Kolo* means water and *bangara* means chief or king or god; Kolombangara is the king of water, masculine in this aspect. Seen from the provincial capital of Gizo across the Blakett Strait sixteen kilometres away, people claim the island profile looks like a woman lying down. They note her long hair streaming behind her, the point of her nose, forehead and chin, the mounds of her breasts, a round belly and the length her legs. So Kolombangara is referred to as “the sleeping woman”, feminine in this aspect.

Villages on Kolombangara are mostly located on the coastline, and logging activity usually takes place upstream on forested mountain slopes. Village water supplies are almost always downstream of logging activity. Despite an abundance of water, many villages on Kolombangara Island do not have piped water supply and villagers must carry water to the village from the river, or carry things to the river from the village. In many cases water supply infrastructure has been destroyed by logging activity, or watersheds and river buffer zones have not been respected by logging companies resulting in siltation of rivers and decreased and/or dirty water supply. Washing dishes and clothes, and carrying drinking and cooking water is predominantly women’s work. Thus the upstream activity of logging impacts disproportionately on women’s activities downstream.

Metaphorically, being positioned downstream means suffering consequences, not controlling direction or outcomes. The narrative of women that emerges from international discourse on sustainable development positions women in this way; as suffering the consequences of the destruction of the environment on which they rely for their livelihoods while garnering little of the benefits from the commercial activity. In this narrative women are “sleeping” passively in a way that suggests they could “wake up” actively. This is an attractive narrative. It offers hope and is highly optimistic about women’s capacity to effect change. This storyline becomes a kind of “empowerment porn”, as opposed to the 1980s “poverty porn” vision, used to sell development (see Cornwall, 2016).

I argue that it is necessary to resist the seductiveness of stirring lyrical metaphors that promise change in lofty language. Such narratives are attractive not least because when faced with persistent disadvantage of women and repeated evidence of gendered sufferings globally, it is difficult to accept that change might be slow and not occur in a great sweeping revolution which

wipes social injustices away. Thus I could not entirely relinquish the downstream metaphor and retain it in the title of the thesis for its literal and metaphorical salience, even though I argue against it in some ways here.

I suggest, however, that a way to resist such seduction is to find the roots once more – to seek out the real, the mundane, and the prosaic; to remain ethnographically grounded and in this way shift perspective, reframe the picture. This thesis as a whole takes to heart an approach described by Batliwala (2007) in discussing how the “power” has been taken out of women’s empowerment. She concludes:

Clearly, we need to build a new language in which to frame our vision and strategies for social transformation at the local, national, or global level. I for one intend to do so not by re-reading Foucault or Gramsci or other great political philosophers, but by listening to poor women and their movements, listening to their values, principles, articulations, and actions, and by trying to hear how they frame their search for justice. From this, I suspect, will emerge not only a new discourse, but also new concepts and strategies that have not yet entered our political or philosophical imaginations. (Batliwala, 2007, p. 564)

My aim in this thesis is to foreground the experience and perspectives of women in contests over natural resource extraction and issues of “development” in Solomon Islands. In this thesis I have attempted to first, engage in thick ethnography of what village women are actually doing and how they are positioned in matters of development and natural resource management. And second, to make ideological space for new concepts emerging from an understanding of what empowers and enables women to challenge underlying inequitable gender norms. I have used the words *narrative* and *discourse* repeatedly throughout this thesis to describe particular worldviews which have ideological and material outcomes. This thesis is about retelling the story of who village women are and what they are doing. I draw attention to issues of portrayal as an essential step to bringing critical contemplation to the “doing” of gender in development programs in Solomon Islands. In this way we can remember that a critical feminist gaze is not about a sole focus on women, it is about positioning gender relations as a central social organising principle.

## Prioritising our seeing

We do not see everything in the environment in the complete, totally resolved, explicit character of the photograph. We, in fact, prioritize our seeing. (Burton Silverman, <http://www.burtonsilverman.com/>)

A deliberate aspect of my fieldwork methodology was to position myself as a woman researcher interested in women. My aim was to recognise village women's perspectives as central to social and cultural understanding. This is in contrast to the view that work on gender remains separate from "mainstream" work, which does not explicitly focus on women, or even canvas the perspectives of women, but is seen to represent societies as a whole (Moore, 1988; O'Brien, 1984).

The discoveries about men's and women's styles of meeting in Chapter 3, and testimony from women in Chapter 7 about women in leadership, show that mixed gender meetings and conversations will be dominated by men. In my research I chose to spend time almost exclusively with women for two main reasons. First, to make space for women to speak outside the customs that dictate their deference to men and second, because an aim of this thesis is to push back against the idea that male information about society is the most valid information. By devoting myself to women's perspectives and relying on their narratives as reliable sources of information my intention is to claim their validity and refute viricentric value systems which legitimise male knowledge systems over female.

Issues of representation in ethnographic work are important. As Macintyre (2001) found in her work with mining companies, anthropological "clichés" find their way into the language of aid agencies and non-government organisations (p. 108). Macintyre goes on to say that while women are consulted by anthropologists this does not significantly alter gendered power relations, because attention to "cultural sensibilities" means that men are the people "whose representations are accepted as authoritative" (p. 112).

What many development projects seem to suggest is that broad cultural change is needed throughout society before development goals involving gender equity and women's empowerment can be achieved. Such recommendations are clearly hypocritical, coming from so-called "developed" countries in which evidence abounds of gender disparities and oppression of women,

politically, socially and economically. They also carry the suggestion of colonial social Darwinist justifications. Yet arguments that blame cultural factors for lack of gender equity actually reveal that it is cultural factors that prevent women from being merely slotted into existing structures of power because *culturally* these forms of power are inherently gendered. The problem still remains, however, of how to acknowledge the very real existence and consequences of gender inequality, working almost always to the detriment of women as a group, without retreating to a position where women become unmoored from their cultural and social realities in a way that results in “policy evaporation” and ever more “aid” money spent in mysterious ways.

I have suggested in this thesis that an essential aspect to women’s empowerment is recognising generative agency; namely, that women employ creative strategies to effect change. In line with the concept of *habitus* their strategies allow them to maintain their integrity and affirm the lives of those around them. The concepts of integrity and affirmation here are *culturally* prescribed; the change they effect is change by *women*, a category culturally defined and capable of redefinition.

I have argued that what may appear as *women’s* agency can be revealed as co-ordinated strategies between men and women which instrumentally utilise the power inherent in culturally encoded gender categories. On the one hand, the fact of mobilisation by women as a group is itself enabling. Women are mobilised and recognised as a collective with agency. Self and social awareness of this position enables greater collective and individual efficacy. As my analysis shows, women’s mobilisation against logging within a fairly limited “womanly” role has nonetheless allowed them to create physical and conceptual space; to “stimulate critical consciousness and mobilization” (Cornwall, 2014b, p. 2).

On the other hand, these instances cannot be interpreted as *women’s* resistance in the sense that they do not influence or challenge gender norms, but rather, utilise them for particular effect. This analysis goes against the grain of the promotion of women’s empowerment in international development discourse which constructs women’s actions divorced from context in a mode of oppositional gender relations. By constructing women’s empowerment as generated by women’s own capacity for resilience and internal strength (that is, look how women cope despite their clear oppression) this development discourse evades responsibility for the economic, environmental and

social inequality directly caused by the operation of extractive industries by rich countries in poor ones; a continuation of colonial economics and politics under the brand of neoliberalism. These are also the same countries positioned to create and administer development discourse and aid money.

The crisis narrative of global environmental collapse emanating from western scientific institutions demands that human behaviour change in order to allow our continued existence on the planet. The great irony of course is that the wealth that Western countries enjoy has been created, and is maintained, by this environmental destruction in the service of an economic system that has created ever greater inequalities at all levels and demands constant growth on a finite planet. It is not overly cynical to point out that major global financial institutions, like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, participate in development efforts in a way that does not address this clearly fundamental issue.

How do we reconcile the resourceful and resilient character of rural women in Solomon Islands, and indeed elsewhere in so called developing countries, with this simultaneous characterisation, or caricature, of women as perennial victims and ultimate saviours? I argue that this conundrum only exists inside a framework which requires tidy, discrete categorisations capable of insertion into policy intended to be multi-contextual. Perhaps a further step back is needed to view from a greater distance the larger context of global inequality within which such categorisations as “developed” and “undeveloped” exist and, more importantly, have currency. I return again to the power inherent in the project of knowledge production. Who defines the terms of engagement and the terms used in engagement?

The dominance of economic methods for measuring development and well-being, and increasingly environmental degradation or conservation, are a classic example of what Audre Lorde (2007 (1984)) meant when she said the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. That is, the absurdity inherent in the idea that the economic system that demands constant economic growth for its viability and thus has created vast social and economic disparities and massive environmental destruction, can be used to remedy its own effects. In fact its continued application

can only cause exacerbation of the problems it created. Neoliberal justifications for promoting the right of women to control their finances and make choices about their fertility and health, with reference only to the greater *economic* gains this will bring, do not challenge the power structures that place women in a position where they need to assert their right to these freedoms. Rather it feeds women into this politico-economic system and thus keeps advocates for gender equality occupied with the “master’s tools” (Lorde 1984). I am arguing that these are not the only tools available.

Thinking about what women are doing and how they might change social norms through the concept of agency is therefore a somewhat subversive tactic. I have shown throughout this thesis that Solomon Islands village women’s lives occur in the context of a globalising world and at the intersection of social forces that include kin relations, religious imperatives, and cultural understandings of relatedness and right relations. Their testimony reveals their awareness of the many conflicting social forces they negotiate. I have highlighted enabling and constraining factors, discursive and material, to Solomon Islands rural women’s agency. The discourse of environmentalism and gender equity that has entered village lexicon through the operation of NGOs and government actors provides “moments of discursive instability” (Eyben, 2010). These are instances where contradictory trends meet and provide space for subversion (pp. 57-58). I suggest that the politico-economic and socio-cultural environment of rural women in Solomon Islands shows evidence of this type of discursive instability. While men and women struggle with ways to engage with the capitalist economy, global concerns about development and environmental crisis work to unsettle traditional power structures and to some extent the gendered division of labour. Attention to Solomon Islands rural women’s perspectives and the ways in which they exercise agency provides one way to rethink what is “valuable” to human existence, outside the dictates of global corporate capitalism.

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## 11. Appendices

Appendix 1: Collecting *petu*

Appendix 2: Data for 18 community meetings

Appendix 3: Acquiring a logging license

## Appendix 1: Collecting *petu*

Dorothy, Nerolyn and I paddled in a wooden canoe to a mangrove area some three kilometres from the village, heading south towards Ghatere village. We came to shore near a small outcropping of mangroves. As we approached, Nerolyn banged her paddle loudly several times against the side of the canoe – to scare away any crocodiles, she said. We saw the water rippling and spreading out away from the clump of mangroves – so we suspected that a crocodile had been resting there. We disembarked from the boat onto the muddy shore. Our first steps sunk us in mud up to our shins, this made wearing shoes impossible, as taking a step out of the mud merely sucked the shoes off our feet. So, barefoot, we set off through the knobbly mangrove roots. At each step our feet oozed into the sticky brown mud releasing a foul stench of decay.

We picked our way carefully through to avoid injuring our feet on the many small sharp shells clinging to the roots, and always sought firmer bits of ground as we made our way some 150 metres into the mangroves. Nerolyn and Dorothy at this point started to gather the mangrove seeds, looking for unblemished, long seeds, recently fallen to the ground. These were collected into large old ten kilogram rice bags. As one area was picked over, we continued further on into the next section of mangrove swamp where seed pods were to be found.

The light was muted and eerie inside the mangroves and mosquitos thrived in this stifling moist environment. Staying still for any length of time was tantamount to offering oneself as a mosquito banquet. I found the smell foul, particularly when stepping into softer, oozier places, releasing the stench from the bubbling mud. After two hours the ladies had filled their bags. Dorothy's bag weighed twenty kilograms. She hoisted her bag up onto her shoulders and we started to make our cautious way through the slippery and treacherous ground. Nerolyn was shorter than Dorothy and I, and had been in the mud up to her knees. Dorothy was an expert in the mangroves and had managed to avoid stepping in any mud too deep, while I was covered up to my shins.



*Collecting mangrove pods*

We finally reached the edge of the mangroves and I gratefully breathed the fresher air. We loaded the bags full of seed pods into the canoe and started to paddle back. As we crossed the lagoon a large crocodile appeared about 150 metres away, floating on the top of the water. I judged that the head was at least half a metre long. Dorothy wanted to paddle closer for a better look; she said it was a “custom” crocodile and would not harm us. I told her I trusted no crocodile and urged us to paddle away at top speed.

Appendix 2: Data for 18 community meetings. (Chapter 6: Meetings)

Meeting Event	Meeting topic	Men attending	Women attending	Total	% Men attending	% Women attending	Men contributions	Women contributions	Total contributions	% Men contributions	% Women contributions
1	Village water supply	8	10	18	44	56	2	0	2	100	0
2	Village water supply	11	14	25	44	56	1	1	2	50	50
3	Village water supply	11	14	25	44	56	1	1	2	50	50
4	Hydroelectricity mtg. prep for Vanuatu delegation	13	17	30	43	57	1	0	1	100	0
5	Village water supply	12	17	29	41	59	3	0	3	100	0
6	Village water supply	7	10	17	41	59	2	0	2	100	0
7	KAZA community high school	13	20	33	39	61	3	4	7	43	57
8	Village water supply, timber for church and school, tribal meeting tomorrow women to cook	14	22	36	39	61	3	0	3	100	0
9	Village water supply	10	16	26	38	62	4	2	6	67	33
10	Election of new hydroelectricity meeting committee	16	26	42	38	62	13	7	20	65	35
11	Water supply	14	24	38	37	63	4	2	6	67	33
12	Ferguson Vaghi sustainable forestry presentation	18	31	49	37	63	33	19	52	63	37
13	PTA	13	26	39	33	67	37	22	59	63	37

14	1. Program for Chief Steven's funeral. 2. School fundraising. 3. Vavanga community cooking to feed workers at Kukundu clinic	12	24	36	33	67	1	10	11	9	91
15	PTA	12	25	37	32	68	15	11	26	58	42
16	Timber for school and church	6	14	20	30	70	3	1	4	75	25
17	1. Vavanga community cooking to feed workers at Kukundu clinic 2. Hydroelectricity	11	26	37	30	70	3	0	3	100	0
18	Village water supply	8	23	31	26	74	2	1	3	67	33

### Appendix 3: Acquiring a Logging License

Timber rights on customary held land in the Solomon Islands are acquired through a 4 step process identified by 4 forms detailed in the *Forest Resources and Timber Utilization Act*. Form 1 involves the Licensee applying to the Commissioner of Forests for consent to negotiate with the Provincial Government and landowners. Often the Licensee is a Solomon Islander or Solomon Islander company. It is the obligation of the Provincial Government to give public notice of a Timber Rights Meeting at least one month before the meeting. This meeting is the only formal opportunity for the customary landowners to be publicly consulted.

The following people should be present at the Timber Rights Meeting: the provincial government member; the Applicant (the licensee), the customary landowners, any other community member who wishes to object, a Provincial Government Forestry Department officer. According to the Landowners' Advocacy and Legal Support Unit (LALSU) of the Solomon Islands Government Public Solicitors Office, at the Timber Rights Meeting the following issues must be discussed:

- Whether the landowners wish to negotiate with the Applicant (licensee) in the first place
- Whether the people who say they can allow logging on the land are legally allowed to represent the landowners
- The types of timber rights the Applicant (Licensee) will be given
- What share of the profits the landowners will receive
- The role of the Provincial government in the logging operation (Landowners' Advocacy and Legal Support Unit, nd, p. 4)

Additionally LALSU advise that agreements reached at the Timber Rights Meeting must be written down and landowners should retain a copy of the agreement. Any agreement should include “details of how then profit will be shared, and how much involvement the Provincial government is going to have in the logging operation” (Landowners' Advocacy and Legal Support Unit, nd, p. 5).

After a Timber Rights Meeting the Provincial Government may make a determination as to whether to grant timber rights to the Applicant. Form 2 is a Certificate of Determination which will detail the agreement reached at the Timber Rights Meeting, name “Trustees” – people legally allowed to represent the landowners and should also contain a map with the area to be logged. If all parties are not happy with the Certificate of Determination they may make an appeal at this point to the Customary Land Appeals Court.

Form 4 is a Standard Logging Agreement. Form 4, rather than form 3, follows form 2. The Licensee drafts the Standard Logging Agreement which specifies how the profits are to be shared and how the Provincial Government is involved in the logging operation. The Form 4 must be signed by the Trustees identified on the Form 2. Form 3 is the final form, a Certificate of Approval which the Provincial Government will issue on the recommendation of the Commissioner of Forests.

Once the requirements of these four forms have been fulfilled the Licensee may apply for a logging license from the Commissioner of Forest Resources by submitting their Certificate of Approval from the Provincial Government plus Development Consent from the Ministry of the Environment. To obtain Development Consent the Licensee must submit an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report describing the likely environmental impacts of the operation to the Ministry of the Environment. The Director of Environment and Conservation at the Ministry of the Environment decides if the operation is safe and will accordingly issue (or not) Development Consent.

The logging (or mining) company must prepare the EIA done by an expert approved by the Ministry of the Environment. This report must then be made available to the public by the Director of Environment and Conservation for 30 days prior to a public meeting. Any affected parties may attend the public meeting and may register their objections. The Director can make their decision (whether to grant Development Consent) after this meeting. If any party are unhappy with the Director's decision they may lodge an appeal to the Environment Advisory Committee (EAC) at the Ministry of Environment within 30 days of the decision. It is possible to appeal the decision of the EAC directly to the Minister of the Environment. The Minister may make a final decision.

The Licensee will usually make a Technology and Management Agreement with a foreign logging company who will log the trees and sell the timber for the licensee. It is not uncommon for politicians to be directors, or heavily involved, in these Solomon Islander companies.

While the process outlined above is theoretically the legal process for obtaining a logging license there is ample evidence to suggest that this process is not often followed. One assessment of the processes in the logging industry in Solomon Islands summarised:

Demand for hardwood increased in the international markets, including Asia where most of the country's logs are exported. In the late 1990s, following the depletion of timber stocks in Asia, and regional governments' moves to minimize logging, Asian companies began entering into rainforest areas, including Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. Loggers generally extract as much as possible from a concession and move to the next, often leaving the environment in conditions beyond repair.

Governments in most producer countries have encountered great difficulties in managing logging, even where good management measures are in place. Corruption is rife in many poor timber-producing countries, making existing forestry laws nearly unenforceable, while a lack of transparency in commercial transactions means that corrupt officials can grant concessions to cronies without regard for the environment or consideration of local people. This...is essentially the story of forestry and logging in Solomon Islands. (Gay, 2009, p. 214)