

Women in Leadership

*A Keynote Address delivered at 2016 PNG Update on 3rd November 2016 at the University of Papua New Guinea by **Professor Betty Lovai**, Executive Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, UPNG.*

Introduction

“Yu no man, yu meri”¹ – “you are not a man you are a woman.” Does it sound familiar? Women are not favoured to take leadership in many societies because of tradition and stereotyping concerning the place of women in society. This mindset will not go away easily.

Acknowledgements

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

- I would like to thank the conference organisers for the invitation to give this keynote address.
- I acknowledge the support of the development partners – and especially the Australian Government in supporting PNG government policies that address gender inequality and help promote women into leadership positions.
- I would like to pay my respects to past and present women who, as leaders in PNG, have been bold in accepting a new worldview and promoting gender equality in a culturally difficult environment.
- I would like to acknowledge male champions, fathers, brothers, sons, husbands, and grandfathers who support their wives, sisters, mothers, daughters and granddaughters.

Gender inequality is a major development issue in PNG. Different governments through the adoption of national plans² have sought to address gender inequality. The founding fathers of the nation were visionary when they created space for women to advance as a group and for their voices to be heard and for them to have a greater say in the affairs of the country. The constitution provides for women to be equal partners in all aspects of development.³ Experience over the last 41 years shows that integration of gender equality through legislation and policy has not automatically achieved gender equality or leadership equality for women. After 8 national elections, only 7 women have been elected to Parliament with only 3 women currently members of parliament.

The agenda on women in leadership has focused on increasing numbers, strengthening institutional capacity to help implement policies and legislation, building capacity to get more women into leadership positions, and mobilizing and coordinating adequate resources (financial, human and infrastructure) to support initiatives to promote women into leadership roles. Development approaches taken to progressing and advancing equality in

¹ This phrase literally means ‘you are not a man you are a woman.’ It is a reflection of how women are valued and women’s place in society.

² National Development Strategy 1975-1985; National Development Plan 1989-1990; Development Plan 1989-1997; Medium Term Development Strategy 1997-2002; Medium Term Development Strategy 2005- 2010; PNG Development Strategic Plan 2010-2030; Medium Term Development Plan 2011 – 2015; and PNG VISION 2050.

³ The National Goals and Directive Principle 2 (5) in the preamble to our Constitution calls for “equal participation by women citizens in all political, economic, social and religious activities.”

leadership have been undermined by gender systems and constructs, where gender inequality is deeply rooted in culture and custom.

Development Approaches

Development initiatives have sought to better prepare women for leadership roles but their impact has been limited and the majority of women in the country have not felt their impact. In the 1960s the colonial administration treated women as an isolated, welfare group. In the 1970s development experts advocated for women's engagement as a critical link to the development agenda. The disadvantaged position of women was officially recognized for the first time in PNG in the early 1970s. The House of Assembly in 1971 passed a motion to involve women in all aspects of development. The motion read:

That this House calls upon the Administration to bring more women of Papua New Guinea into the orbit of public activity in the social, economic and political spheres by:

- (a) encouraging parents to allow their daughters to enter educational institutions at all levels from primary to university;*
- (b) encouraging the participation of women in institutions such as a local government councils, district advisory councils, district education boards and the House of Assembly, if necessary reserving places for them in these institutions;*
- (c) encouraging women to take positions in commercial enterprise and the Public Service by making facilities available for their training; and*
- (d) disseminating relevant information amongst the people of Papua New Guinea regarding the importance of encouraging women to develop their natural abilities for the betterment of their country and people⁴.*

As independence was approaching, PNG was encouraged to achieve greater gender equality. The government launched its Eight-Point Improvement Plan in 1972 with provisions for greater participation of women in development. The Seventh Point of this plan called for 'a rapid increase in the active and equal participation of women in all types of economic and social activity.' The Overseas Development Group's Report on Development Strategy provided the basis for the Eight-Point Plan. The report was reacting to the existing patterns of underdevelopment in the third world and recommended that PNG seek to advance development by increasing the active participation of women. By the 1980s, development experts recognized gender issues in development and the importance of engaging women in the development agenda. This was followed by gender mainstreaming in the global development agenda after the fourth UN Women's conference in Beijing in 1995.

The drive to get women into leadership positions is a global agenda. PNG's Country Report for the Beijing conference identified leadership as one of its eight priorities. Looking back, women have progressed in experience and thinking since Beijing, and have matured in their attitude in addressing gender inequality. Exposure to international conversations has improved discourse and the articulation of gender equality in PNG. Development partners' efforts have provided visibility on gender inequality in PNG and strengthened women's voice for empowerment. The Pacific Platform for Action⁵ highlighted that women were under

⁴ "From Rhetoric to Reality: Papua New Guinea's Eight Point Plan and National Goals after a decade" Papers from the Fifth Waigani Seminar. University of Papua New Guinea Press: Waigani, page 38.

⁵ South Pacific Commission (1994) Pacific Platform for Action Rethinking Sustainable Development for Pacific Women Towards the Year 2000

represented in government and community decision-making bodies – in Boards, Trade Unions, etc. – and pointed out that the constraints that prevented women from entry into public politics are structural, cultural and religious.

Learning from global leadership experiences empowers and heightens consciousness in the country. Globalisation create awareness; provides clarity on women and leadership; empowers women to learn from comparative experience; provides visibility on gender inequality; and helps women in PNG understand that we are not alone in promoting women in leadership. Global initiatives and development approaches provide hope and opportunity to address gender inequality. However, it is important to stress that cultural mindsets continue to challenge the development efforts to change gender inequality in PNG.

Cultural mindsets are barriers to changing gender inequality in leadership. This country is so diverse and so too are its gender systems and constructs. Gender inequality is deeply rooted in culture and custom. Gender equality challenges cultural mindsets and power structures in our social systems. Culture influences the political environment, especially in public meeting places at the local and village levels, where women are not directly engaged in decision making. Women are not allowed to assume leadership roles in many societies because of tradition and stereotyping concerning the place of women in society. Women's customary status has relevance and important but it must not prevent women from taking on leadership roles in modern PNG. Let me illustrate the cultural perspective of women, from where I come from to show the mindset women are up against.⁶



Gogodala Communal Long House

Features of the Gogodala Communal Long House:

- The entire village was accommodated in the long house.
- Gender divide was structured into the architectural design of the long house; the structure of the house separated men and women from direct interaction.

⁶ The author belongs to the Gogodala tribe from the Middle Fly District in Western Province in PNG. Crawford (1981) noted that the Gogodala is a large non-Austronesian speaking group living in thirty villages along the Aramia River.

- Men used the central hall as a living room and this male space was where important decisions were made; women were excluded from decision-making.
- The men used levels above the central hall for sleeping.
- Only men were allowed to enter the house through the front and the back entrance.
- There were cubicles on both sides of the central hall for women, girls and children. Each family occupied a cubicle.
- Each cubicle had a ladder for women, girls and children to enter the house.
- Cubicles had openings wide enough to pass food to male members in the central chamber.
- The physical structure of the Gogodala long house was dismantled but the cultural mindset of its gender structure has not changed.



Parliament

Features of Papua New Guinea's National Parliament:

- The Parliament is structured to accommodate men and women.
- The rules and requirements to enter parliament are not gender specific.
- It is very difficult to get women into Parliament, after 8 national elections, only 7 women have walked through the front door.
- Affirmative actions to increase participation of women in political leadership were rejected in parliament.

Leadership Challenges for Women in PNG?

Institutional and Structural Constraints

In spite of the Constitution guaranteeing 'equal opportunity for all citizens' there are institutional and structural constraints faced by women aspiring to leadership positions in many sectors of society.

Perception

Many female leaders face challenges in the work force including envy, jealousy and misunderstanding. A study seeking to understand the experiences and influences on women holding senior public sector positions revealed that Ministers and male colleagues see them as women first rather than as professionals. Gender bias too often prevents men *and women* from seeing women as capable and competent leaders. There is still a struggle between traditional cultural and social norms and modern expectations and aspirations for women in society. We must change the way women are viewed.

Managing Private Space is a key challenge when women step into leadership positions.

Managing being a wife and a mother is a challenge for women in leadership positions. Maintaining a balance between a career and home life is not something women are trained to do. Unfortunately marriage for some women has become a place for emotional and physical abuse due to jealousy and insecurity. For example, a couple of years ago, a female friend sent me a text message at 4am suggesting a breakfast meeting at 7am at the Crown Plaza. I could not sleep after reading the text message, wondering why it was so important for her to send a text message in the early hours of the morning. She wanted to share with me the abuse she had to put up with, every time she returned from a business trip.

Unspoken Expectation

Leadership is considered not to be for women, as it's a boy's club. When a woman applies for a leadership position in an organisation, conversations are centered around, 'can she fit in' and 'can she adjust.' In 2007, I was asked a question after my seminar presentation for the position of the Executive Dean. I quote, "Will you attend after hour functions." My immediate reaction was, the question is irrelevant but I responded, "I will attend work related functions." It has never been an issue for me since 2007. An unspoken expectation is to earn respect, acceptance, and approval from the boy's club.

Women are perceived to be weak in leadership

Women are capable of being leaders, *but men are simply preferred as leaders*. A lack of confidence in the abilities of women is strongly influenced by our cultural perspective. In August of this year, I was reporting the behavior of a group of students during the recent student crisis, when I was interrupted by a question, "Why are you afraid?" I responded, I am not afraid of students, I am merely reporting the unacceptable behavior of a few students who removed resumption of teaching forms from the school office and torn them up. It may have been an innocent question, but would a male dean have been asked this question? It appeared to me that I was being asked the question because I was a woman – and would therefore be afraid of aggressive male students.

Do we value women as leaders?

Women leaders need encouragement, honest opinion, support and constructive criticism. When male colleagues acknowledge and value the contribution of women, it boosts our self-esteem.

What can be done to reach a stage where both women and men are chosen to be leaders? We are familiar with the constraints that work against gender equality. We also know the preconditions required for gender equality and these are addressed through government policies and legislations and other development initiatives. We expect more women in leadership positions **but our cultural mindset remains the main constraint** hindering progress in this regard. More constructive efforts are needed to change attitudes, change mindsets and address critical cultural barriers.

I don't have to be a man to be a leader.

Thank you.