



Dame Carol Kidu on why things are getting tougher for PNG's women

By Carol Kidu and Ashlee Betteridge

Dame Carol Kidu is a tireless campaigner for the rights of women and girls in Papua New Guinea. A former PNG Member of Parliament and Minister for Community Development, Dame Kidu was the sole female representative in the PNG Parliament for a decade before her retirement in 2012, after a political career of 15 years.

I spoke to her on the sidelines of her recent visit to Canberra for the Australian launch of the new World Bank report *Voice and agency: empowering women and girls for shared prosperity*. You can listen to a full podcast of the launch event, including Dame Kidu's remarks, [here](#).

Ashlee: I thought I would just start with a really broad question. What do you think the biggest challenges are for women and girls in PNG right now?

Dame Kidu: I think the challenge for the nation to do with girls is to ensure that

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women and girls are educated and have access to learning. And I'm not necessarily talking about the formal education system. Although there is now free education, many people have never been in the formal system and so remain excluded. I think we should have our across-the-board policy as access to learning for everybody, and move forth from there. Informal and flexible learning opportunities need to be available to promote lifelong learning and to develop a knowledge based society - both traditional knowledge and skills as well as introduced knowledge and skills.

For girls and women, [the biggest challenge] is probably defining their space in a rapidly changing society because change can be confusing, frightening and even abusive.

Ashlee: Do you see that as something that needs to come from the top? Or from within the community? How do you think that can be achieved?

Dame Kidu: It has to happen at the top in terms of setting benchmarks of what is and is not acceptable. So the top has this extremely important role, but that alone won't change the reality lived by girls and women.

So it's got to come from all areas of society.

[Women and girls] don't live as isolated beings. They live as part of families and communities - far more so than an Australian girl. To educate girls in a way that doesn't fit for them within their society or in a way that does not respect their dignity and their rights in their own cultural context is a disservice to them.

When I was a Minister I used to say to some of our development partners: will you stop teaching rights as an individualistic Western framework? Work on the issue of how we can address rights-based issues within a communal society. Sometimes you just set young women up for impossible situations when they are told about all their rights, while the community hasn't been sensitised to this type of

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thinking. Sometimes it can be very stark in a society going through rapid change and even result in tragedy, such as increased rates of suicide. So we need to manage the way in which we help towards achieving this agency and voice for women. It's an issue to do with the whole community and the family.

Ashlee: Do you feel that political representation is one avenue to achieve this?

Dame Kidu: Of course, it has to be. Political representation is really important. And not just women for womens' sake. The fact is, you have to get the different ways of looking at things around the decision-making table, as well as role modelling for young girls to see women in those decision-making positions.

And one would hope that women in decision-making positions would utilise their influence to the benefit of other women and girls, as well as the whole society.

Ashlee: You mentioned earlier that some things have gotten worse for women and girls. Do you think that gender violence is one of those issues that has escalated?

Dame Kidu: Most definitely. I would say some of the violence that we see nowadays, certainly in the PNG societies that I'm familiar with, you wouldn't have seen traditionally. There were mechanisms that managed it.

Why don't I tell you a little story, about my sister-in-law. She ran away. She was a Grade 9 student. She ran off with a boy and disappeared for a couple of days. And by the time they found her I thought, *Oh my God. What's going to happen?*

When we'd found where she was and we took her back to the village, everyone was yelling and screaming - saying what a bad girl she's been, etc. At the house, my husband's brothers got up ready to beat their sister because of the shame she had brought to the family, and that was their job to discipline her. However, they didn't get a chance to really hurt her. The moment they got up, certain women jumped up also and encircled her - literally encircled her with their arms linked around her.

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And so while the brothers were trying to punch their sister, they had to get through this protective barrier of big Motu women who were their mothers-in-law and their aunts. They were the protectors for the girl. And so the brothers all yelled and screamed and punched the air between the barrier of protectors but the girl didn't get hurt at all in any physical way. And then when they'd all said everything they wanted to say their sister, the senior aunt took her out to the back verandah and cut her hair short as a punishment for her behaviour. And it was all over. The next day things were back to normal.

It was really fascinating for me to see this. Nowadays people don't jump up and protect. These roles that were part of the society, with certain people having the role of being a protector, have gone.

And quite often now you'll see women being really beaten badly and nobody intervenes - particularly when they're not within their family setting. There's nobody to jump up and be their protector. So in that way, they are definitely physically more vulnerable now.

When a young woman reached puberty in my husband's society, and I think in most PNG societies, she was chaperoned by her brothers. And the possibility for her to be raped or assaulted reduced considerably. My husband had to chaperone his sisters and when he was a young boy he just had to tag along with her all the time. He said how he used to get sick of it. So there's all these things that actually protected girls from harm but didn't actually teach them that they have the right to say no. Nor teach the males that a woman has the right to say no.

So there are all those complexities that are often missed and not understood. And so the country gets labelled as being a country full of absolutely horrific men. But it's not. There's a breakdown in these roles.

Ashlee: What do you think needs to be done?

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Dame Kidu: Things are being done. There's a lot of drafting of laws and so on to bring change. But we are in a transition period. The laws are not being effectively implemented yet. There is this gap where there will continue to be women suffering (as there are in Western societies, in silence behind closed doors, too ashamed to say what is happening to them).

Nowadays, the bride price is being used to excuse violence. Traditionally if a woman was abused in her marriage, she could pack up with her children and go back to her family or her family would come and take her. By custom really, the children belong to the man's family. But if everyone knew a woman was being abused, the man's family knew that for her to come back with the children they would have to give more.

But there's just a vacuum now.

There's a lot of people working on it. There's a lot of commitment. And there are human rights defender groups as well as male champions groups, and there's various things such as safe houses and specialised police units being put in place.

But now we're seeing things now like horrific torturing of people being labelled as witches. That's not traditional. Yes, sorcerers or sorceresses were killed traditionally. But not in the way this is being done.

Ashlee: Do you see scope for Australia or other development partners to do more on this issue?

Dame Kidu: I think there's already a lot of focus from the development partners on the issue of violence. And it is important to manage that focus so that it doesn't become something being done by the outside and get labelled as a Western thing.

Unfortunately when I was championing some of these things, I'd be accused of bringing my Western values into it. So it's got to be done sensitively.

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Ashlee: If you could call on the Australian government to do one thing for PNG, what would the most important thing be?

Dame Kidu: Focus on strengthening the capacity and efficiency of the public service rather than by-passing it and implementing through NGOs in isolation. This will require helping to facilitate integrated partnerships for community engagement and service delivery so that Papua New Guinea takes ownership of development assistance and incorporates successes into departmental operational plans. Ownership is essential for sustainability.

PNG may have many problems - but there are many admirable things about PNG. The fact that a nation of over 800 languages and tribes has, next year, come together for 40 years, without an assassination, without a revolution, except for an offshore civil war in Bougainville. I think that does speak volumes about our capacity to resolve things, in perhaps unusual ways.

Dame Carol Kidu is a former Papua New Guinea Member of Parliament, Minister for Community Development, and advocate for women's rights. Ashlee Betteridge is a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre.

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