

The amazing ladies of Hela

by Stephanie Copus-Campbell

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One of the great privileges of my job with the [Oil Search Foundation](#) (OSF) is to visit remote parts of Papua New Guinea and meet the incredible people who live and work there. I recently had the opportunity to visit Hela Province in the remote Highlands region where OSF is currently supporting the province in its important work to prevent and treat HIV.

I often tell people that if you have not been to Hela you must go. There is no other spot like it on earth. To illustrate, I awoke one morning to what I thought was the sound of a bizarrely pitched bugle only to realise it was a musically talented bird perched outside my window (I will swear it was a Bird of Paradise until proven otherwise). Hela is an amazing and unique place not only because of its fauna, but because of the combination of physical beauty, vibrant culture and traditional ways of life.

The streets of Tari, the provincial capital, bring to life the essence of Hela. It is not uncommon to see the famous Huli Wigmen, in traditional gear, going about their daily business. I especially love the Hela women, dressed in an array of vibrant colours, walking their fat pigs on thin ropes or balancing an assortment of household necessities, from firewood to buckets of water, carefully on their heads. Numerous roadside markets offer these women and their communities a place to trade both goods and stories and add to the colourful scene that makes Hela, and Tari, so beautiful.

However working in Hela and ensuring services are delivered to its 500,000 plus population is not without significant challenges. Remote populations, fierce tribal fights between warring clans, low levels of literacy and difficult challenges for women in Hela, including at the roadside markets, are but just a few issues that make our job, supporting our partners, at times very difficult.

Of course one can become overwhelmed by the challenges, but I instead like to focus on the solutions. And the most effective solution of all is the many

extraordinary people who, day after day, achieve extraordinary outcomes.

I mentioned to the Provincial Health Advisor, Dr Hewali Hamiya, the great importance the Oil Search Foundation places on working with local partners. His response was to introduce me to the Hela Ladies Empowerment Group, a collective of women from four clans working together to address the needs of women and children in their communities. Meeting the over 50 women who make up the group, I was again reminded why empowering them is so important to improving livelihoods.

It provided a practical example of the international evidence that consistently shows supporting women has a very direct link to — among other things — improved literacy, better health and increased family income.

The Hela Ladies Group was formed out of concern for a number of local women who were facing unacceptable security risks selling their produce at roadside markets. The group worked together to ensure a secure business environment for women to grow and sell vegetables. The business has boomed and the women are now the main suppliers of food to Tari hospital and other establishments, providing much needed income to the women and their families.

From this beginning the Hela Ladies Empowerment Group, now in its third year of operation, has implemented women's literacy education programs and an early childhood education program. At their own initiative they are now receiving training from the Bank of South Pacific in financial literacy and management and have set up an effective governance system. The Oil Search Foundation is considering ways we might partner with this self-lead group in areas of health messaging and also with age appropriate books and literacy training.

One of the teachers told us that she loves being involved in the group because it gives her hope. It gives me hope too, and is one of the many reasons I love Papua New Guinea and its very special Hela province.

Stephanie Copus-Campbell is the Executive Director of the Oil Search Foundation.

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Author/s:

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