

Pots, Plates and *Tinpis*: New income flows and the strengthening of women's gendered identities in Papua New Guinea¹

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ABSTRACT *Gina Koczberski reports on the recently introduced Mama Lus Frut scheme in the oil palm smallholder sector in Papua New Guinea to remunerate women separately for their work on family-owned oil palm holdings. The scheme provides an example of the way in which women respond to new economic opportunities to redefine and strengthen their identities and relationships within the home and the wider community.*

KEYWORDS *cash crops; domestic sphere; economic empowerment; indigenous economy; oil palm*

Now, we women don't need to be concerned about the men because the *mama* card has reduced our family burdens. Women are happy because they have their own money to use. When the *mama* card was introduced, major changes occurred for us as mothers and daughters. Now, women are content because they are earning money from the *mama* card. With the *papa* card, loans must be repaid to the bank or to the company for tools and seedlings, and the [*papa*] cheque is shared with sons. Women concentrate on the *mama* card and [with this economic independence] there is no need to bother men about what [women] need or want to do. (Maria, Hoskins smallholder, translated from Melanesian pidgin)

Introduction of cash crops and the economic marginalization of women

Economic development has proved particularly challenging in Papua New Guinea (PNG) where changes brought about by colonization, independence and globalization have been relatively recently experienced. Struggling to unify over 700 language groups and promote agricultural development, the state must also respond to rapid urbanization and high youth unemployment, deal with rising ethnic tensions and law and order problems (Connell, 1997; Dinnen, 2000; Koczberski et al., 2001). Agriculture still supports the majority of the population and smallholder cash crop production provides cash income for many rural residents. But the agricultural export sector, with the

exception of oil palm, has been relatively stagnant over the last decade.

The oil palm industry in PNG can be seen as one of the few development 'successes'. It was started in West New Britain in the late 1960s with the development of company plantations, oil palm processing mills and smallholder Land Settlement Schemes. Smallholder families were voluntarily relocated to these schemes from densely populated regions and allocated approximately six hectares of land, four designated for the cultivation of oil palm and two for garden production. As the industry expanded, customary landowners surrounding the settlement schemes were encouraged to allocate land to oil palm, usually two hectares per family. Oil palm is now grown in five areas in PNG with smallholders accounting for 43 percent of the area under oil palm and 33 percent of total production.

The introduction of cash crops has brought new sources of wealth that have altered traditional power relations in the domestic and social spheres, irrevocably changing everyday lives in PNG. Cash and consumer goods have begun to supplant more traditional items such as garden produce, pigs, shell money or other indigenous valuables and the desire for new consumables and experiences (e.g. permanent houses, processed food, travel and education) is strong. Both women and men are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfil domestic and social obligations without cash. But for women, lack of

access to cash directly challenges their sense of personhood by undermining their traditionally powerful role in the domestic and social spheres.

In many developing countries where cash crops have been introduced as a development intervention aimed at improving income security, men have often claimed ownership of the crop and control of the income, disregarding the role that women play in the production system. The case of smallholder oil palm in PNG is no exception. Little of the oil palm income received by the male heads has filtered through to women due to other demands on the cash, such as debt repayments, meeting social obligations, payments to sons and the social pressure to drink and gamble. With few economic rewards from oil palm and little recognition of their role in the industry, most women have withdrawn their labour from oil palm production. Instead, they concentrate their efforts in food gardening where they have had more control over production and the opportunity to earn a small income from selling garden food.²

The *Mama Lus Frut* Scheme and the creation of new economic spaces for women

With women refusing to contribute labour to household oil palm production, the industry faced the problem of a high rate of loose fruit wastage among smallholders. When the fruit is harvested or over-ripe, oil palm fruitlets become dislodged from the main bunch and scatter over the ground. These loose fruitlets can account for up to 14 percent of the total harvest (Lewis, 2000). Because loose fruit collection is a gendered female task, estimates suggested that between 60 and 70 percent of loose fruit was left to rot on the ground, representing a substantial loss of revenue for the industry and income for smallholders.

To increase smallholder output and bring women into oil palm production in West New Britain, the oil palm agricultural extension service (OPIC) and the oil palm company (New Britain Palm Oil Limited) introduced the *Mama Lus Frut* Scheme – a collection and payment system that would remunerate women directly for harvesting loose fruit. In the initial planning stages in 1997,

10 women were selected to trial the scheme, but this was soon abandoned due to the intense interest from women who wanted to join. Since then 3271 women have been issued with a harvesting card, representing 67 percent of all smallholder blocks.

Approximately 26 percent of smallholder oil palm income is now paid to women, and in 2000 women earned an average weekly income of K27.75, which is 93 percent of the average weekly wage for low-skilled rural workers in formal employment in Papua New Guinea.

As Maria's quote at the beginning of the paper illustrates, the *mama* card was welcomed because of the financial autonomy it created for women. This autonomy was not, however, expressed in the liberal feminist sense of the free autonomous individual, but rather in terms of how economic independence enabled them to strengthen social connections with their families and communities.

Pots, plates and *tinpis*: strengthening women's gendered and community identity

Following the introduction of the *mama* card, the main stores in the nearest town of Kimbe reported significant increases in the sale of large cooking pots, plates and mattresses. Repeatedly women told us that the main benefits of the *mama* card were that it enabled them to obtain durable household items and to purchase food and clothing for their families. 'Women are happy with the scheme because they now have new pots and plates' was a common statement.

With most of the larger expensive durable household items purchased, women now tend to spend most of their money on food, clothing and meeting family needs such as school fees. Before the *mama* card, as one small store owner remarked:

... women relied on market income [from sale of garden produce] and seldom made store purchases. Now, they have their own money and many of them come to our store. While men buy cigarettes, women buy food like rice, tinned fish and biscuits. (Otto, translated from Melanesian pidgin)

Otto's remark illustrates the marked differences in male and female expenditure patterns. Unlike men,

women spend most of their cash income on food for the family. This was often commented upon and used by the women we talked to as a way of representing men as wasteful and thinking only of themselves, and women as wise, responsible and thinking of others. Such a comparison garners public recognition of the enhanced capacity of women to provide for their families, allowing women to reassert their power and identity within their households and communities.

Reaffirming their domestic and social identities was most important to women. The considerable valuing of women's domestic role is best illustrated in a conversation with a woman who was relaying the impact of the *mama* card on her friend and neighbour, a woman who prior to the *mama* card had had great difficulty obtaining money from her husband. The introduction of the *mama* card, she said, made an enormous difference to her friend's life as, for the first time, she had money to enable her to adequately meet the needs of her family. Reflecting on the change in her life the friend confided, 'I am now a real woman [mother, sister, wife, in-law]'

This sense of completeness that has come with increased access to cash is central to why the scheme has been so enthusiastically adopted by women. The view of being less than a full woman/person reveals much about how women see themselves. In many PNG communities, women's identity is located in the domestic sphere where social relationships are enacted (Strathern, 1990). It is here women can show themselves to be good mothers, wives, sisters, and in-laws and in so doing assert their sense of personhood.

In recent years performing womanhood has been a struggle. A woman has had to rely on her husband for money and it has been for him to decide the amount to be given to her. Most women have considered the amount insufficient for them to perform their roles satisfactorily. The frequent domestic disputes that occurred over the distribution of oil palm income were, according to women, related largely to men's minimal contribution to household welfare.

With a separate income earned from their own harvesting labour, women now have considerable control over its disbursement and are directing it to

culturally valued activities, namely maintaining family and social relationships. Women and men all point to the way that the *lus frut* payment has helped to reduce intra-family disputes over the distribution of oil palm income, both between men and women, and between brothers and their families all living on one block.

The widespread reduction in domestic disputes and social disharmony is linked to the clear distinction emerging between the expenditure patterns of the *mama* and *papa* money (as Maria's quote at the beginning of the paper suggests). An unexpected consequence has been growth of the expectation that men should place a small amount of their oil palm harvest on the *mama* card as a contribution to the household. Women's achievement of more reliable material provision for their families, greater domestic harmony and community cohesion is enabling them to 'reapportion and create new value for practices associated with home and domesticity' (Harcourt et al., 2001: 14).

Apart from changing gender relationships within households, women are also redefining their relationships with their communities. Many women, especially village women, redistribute a considerable proportion of their new earnings to kin. This can be in the form of inviting female relatives to collect loose fruit and share in the proceeds, giving cash or prestige foods and gifts, or allocating the card and the proceeds to a sibling or close relative for a month. The importance of this practice was explained by a female informant:

We look after members of our immediate and extended families who are having problems. Some of them need to pay school fees for their children and they will come and ask to borrow our card which we lend them. We still have many traditional customary obligations in the village which we meet in this way [by using the *mama* card]. Whoever needs to fulfil customary obligations such as brideprice payments, mortuary payments, or customs for the firstborn child, the card is given to them. (Lina, smallholder, translated from Melanesian pidgin)

Many women emphasized the social obligation to share and to be seen to be generous. The importance of redistributing the wealth of the *mama* card was echoed in many interviews, indicating how women's sense of self is constituted through their wider social and kin networks. These values are

deeply embedded in society and are a central part of PNG sociality.³ Further, as Lina's comment implies, redistributing income helps support families during financially difficult times. Hence, this social practice strengthens the viability of households and communities and improves 'livelihoods without succumbing to western notions of development' (Harcourt et al., 2001: 28).

New visions of coexistence

The above discussion highlights some of the complexities and contradictions of economic development and globalization. At one level, the greater integration of PNG into a monetary economy, and the associated demand for cash and store commodities, has undermined women's ability to perform their roles in the production and reproduction of households. Paradoxically, we have found that when women have been able to access income from the cash economy they have been able to better perform their customary gendered identities and reclaim their 'traditional' power.

In a country such as PNG where indigenous exchange enmeshes women (and men) into ongoing social relationships, it is difficult to view women as 'separate actors' with activities and motivations that can be considered in isolation from others. Women spoke about the *lus frut mama* card not so much in terms of how it enabled them

to challenge existing gender and social roles, but rather how it has helped reinforce, support and reassert their traditional power and identity within their households and communities.

Women have directed the *mama* card payment towards family and kin networks where identities and communities are created. Greater access to cash has offered women new opportunities to participate in reciprocal exchange with kin, thus enhancing their social prestige by allowing them to meet their community obligations and display their generosity. Women have actively imbued the *mama* card with local meanings of gender and personhood, and to some extent, are creating a place-based feminism that emphasizes the continuing importance of the indigenous economy and forms of production and reproduction that support women's 'traditional' power and identity.

The way women are integrating the *mama* card into their local worlds is a reminder of the way 'women are participating in a new and vital politics around place, and around their bodies' (Harcourt et al., 2001: 5). Women's place-based political activities are shaping opportunities to strengthen women's economic power and gendered identities and at the same time create more cohesive and stable communities in which new 'potentially transformative solutions' (Harcourt et al., 2001: 18) can emerge.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on joint fieldwork in West New Britain with George Curry and with research assistance from Norma Konimor.
- 2 On the settlement schemes where access to land and extended family support are limited, cash is increasingly necessary to meet household needs and social obligations, and to fulfill the growing desire for consumer goods. Ironically, in these cash crop dominated environments, subsistence gardening has provided the bulk of household

- food and economic security especially during periods of depressed oil palm prices. For most women marketing garden produce became their primary income source, sometimes supplemented with a small portion of the oil palm income provided by their spouses.
- 3 Recent studies reveal the extent to which indigenous pre-colonial/pre-modern values, social structures and identities continue in many parts of the developing world, although altered and overlain with new experiences, values and practices

(Simon, 1998). For instance, in PNG identities are constituted through the making of social and kinship networks and the maintenance of these networks is an enduring characteristic despite Papua New Guineans' interactions with the capitalist economy (Boyd, 1985; Nihill, 1989; Gewertz and Errington, 1991; Curry and Koczberski, 1998; Curry, 1999).

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