



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## The Relationship between Violence against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment in Bougainville

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Women's economic empowerment is now seen to be a critical aspect of poverty reduction and development and is an important goal of the current Australian aid program.<sup>1</sup> Economic empowerment initiatives generally focus on income-generating activities to enable women to acquire income independently of their partners. Given the importance the Australian aid program places on women's economic empowerment, it is important to reflect on the relationship between economic empowerment and broader empowerment (Eves and Crawford 2014). This In Brief reports on research undertaken as part of the Do No Harm project in three districts of Bougainville: Kieta, Panguna and Tinputz, in October 2015.<sup>2</sup>

It has often been observed that poor women in developing countries tend to spend the income they control largely on family needs rather than on personal needs (Agarwal 1997:25; Mayoux 1999:969). This is corroborated by the Bougainville case study which found that women directed their income mainly to household needs, particularly to their children's health and education. We found that women's greater financial resources enable many men to lessen their contribution to the household, or to opt out entirely — a common occurrence on Bougainville where men often view the money they earn as their own for spending as they wish.

Through the lessening of their household contributions, men gained an increased opportunity to spend money on alcohol. From women's perspectives, this led to marital discord and violence, including economic abuse. We found that men's resource-depleting behaviour was often central to marital discord and violence, and by far the most violence reported was connected to men's consumption of alcohol (Eves 2016). Several women reported that their husbands became violent if they refused to give their husbands money or questioned their expenditure on alcohol. Some men simply seize their wives' income. One man had control of his wife's ATM card and would empty her account when she was paid, saying that he was 'making space for the next lot of money'.

Other research on Bougainville has also found a significant degree of economic abuse. For example, the 2013 Bougainville *Family, Health and Safety Study* reported high rates of physical violence against women, and also high rates of economic abuse: 35.2 per cent of women reported that their male partner had taken their earnings against their will, 55.4 per cent of women reported that they had been subject to economically abusive acts, 21 per cent of women had been prohibited from working, 26 per cent of women reported that they had been subject to economic abuse many times and 23.7 per cent had been subject to economically abusive acts in the past 12 months (Jewkes et al. 2013:41).<sup>3</sup>

### Lessons Learned So Far

The Bougainville Do No Harm research confirms that women do not always gain greater empowerment when they bring money into the household because their access to economic resources does not automatically give them control over those resources. Neither is violence towards them reduced. Indeed, as noted, bringing economic resources into the household may in fact heighten tensions over the expenditure of the resources. Our Bougainville research also confirms other research undertaken in the Pacific. For example, Carnegie and colleagues (2013) found that in semi-subsistence communities in Solomon Islands and Fiji, any cash in the hands of women exposed them to the risk of violence by men, often in association with resource-depleting activities such as gambling and drinking.

An important implication of the research so far is that the design of women's economic empowerment programs should avoid minimalist initiatives — that is, aiming simply to give women access to economic opportunities without any focus on gender and gender relations, especially the role of gender norms and practices in the context of marital relationships. Addressing women's economic opportunities in isolation from other dimensions of their lives, including their

household — where bargaining over resources takes place — can limit the overall gains possible for women. For example, a woman might be considered empowered economically, if she has (1) *the ability to make decisions or influence decisions* on issues of livelihood management (such as children's education and general expenditure) and (2) she has *access to and control over resources* (including ownership of land and property, an equal role in managing and keeping family cash, her own independent income and control of her savings income). But the same woman may be disempowered in a number of other areas pertaining to the absence of certain personal freedoms (being subject to violence, freedom of movement, freedom to choose who to vote for, and freedom to use family planning). These limitations may be imposed not only by husbands but by social gender norms. Achieving women's economic empowerment is contingent not only on having access to economic resources but also the removal of impediments to their freedom which disempower them in other ways.

A number of commentators writing on issues of gender and development have said that increasing women's bargaining power in the household is essential if women are to take control over economic resources and expand their ability to make strategic life choices for their own and their children's benefit. Bina Agarwal (1997:2) argued that very little, if any, attention was being given to gender asymmetries or to the complex range of factors that might determine bargaining power within a household, such as the influence of social norms and practices. Agarwal points out that inequality among household members places some members in a weaker position relative to others in intra-house bargaining, with gender being a very significant basis of such inequality (ibid.:9). That these insights still hold true almost 20 years later shows that interventions that change power relations within the family — in particular by addressing gender norms and practices that limit women's (and men's) choices — are essential to achieving empowerment in economic and other domains.

### Author Notes

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### Endnotes

1. The document currently guiding the delivery of Australian aid, *An Effective Aid Program for Australia*, states that a key objective is 'empowering women to participate in the

economy ... because of the critical untapped role of women in development' (AusAID 2012:28).

2. The research, 'Do No Harm: Understanding the Relationship between Women's Economic Empowerment and Violence against Women in Melanesia', is a collaboration between SSGM and the International Women's Development Agency and funded by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Pacific Women program (Eves and Crawford 2014). Besides myself, the research team included Steven Simiha, Irene Subalik and Genevieve Kouro. It employed in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the relationship between women's economic empowerment and violence against women. The team completed 45 interviews with women, 20 with men, and 20 with key informants.
3. In addition to the male partner taking earnings against the woman's will and preventing her from working, economic abuse included the wife being ejected from the house and the husband keeping money for his own use when his wife needed money to buy food and essential items (Jewkes et al. 2013:41).

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