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**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

**The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and  
hunger eradication, development and current challenges**

**Focus: The role of gender-responsive governance and  
institutions for the empowerment of rural women**

**LEVERAGING RURAL WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND  
AGENCY**

by

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## **Background:**

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, directly North of Australia. It is part of the Melanesia sub-region, which also includes Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Caledonia. PNG is the largest of all Pacific Island countries. It has 22 provinces, the newest of which is my home province Jiwaka right in the centre of the Highlands Region, which is the densely populated central mountain range, rich in agricultural, mineral, gas and petroleum resources. Port Moresby, the capital city is far removed from the rest of the other provinces and it is inaccessible by roads.

With a population of seven million and 850 indigenous languages and traditional cultures, PNG is one of the most culturally diverse countries on earth. Less than 20% of its people live in urban centers. The majority of the population lives in traditional societies and practice subsistence-based agriculture. The PNG Constitution (Preamble 5(4)) explicitly recognizes rural societies, made up of tribes and clans and commits to development pathways that ensure villages and communities remain viable and sustainable units of Papua New Guinean society, building where possible on 'PNG ways': traditional institutions and governance. PNG's forward looking Constitution developed through a mass, participatory process, promises equal participation and opportunity for citizens, and promotion of small businesses, sustainable livelihoods and non-violent conflict resolution.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) achieved political independence in 1975, after almost one hundred years of German, British and colonial presence. The mountainous central Highlands Region which embraces seven provinces and hosts more than thirty percent of the population was only explored by outsiders in 1938. A second new province- Hela - has been established at the source of PNG's huge Liquefied National Gas (LNG) deposits, which, over the next 20 years, will be the site of PNG's largest natural resource development.

The PNG law recognizes "customary land title", providing a legal basis to inalienable tenure of traditional lands of the indigenous people. 97% of usable land in PNG remains under customary ownership with 3% in private hands. Alienated land is owned under customary title by traditional landowners, mostly men. Customary property – most usually land – cannot be inherited by will; it can only be inherited according to the custom of the deceased's people. A major development challenge is identifying the membership of customary landowning groups and the owners.

## **Development of Women in Papua New Guinea - Rural Women's Participation and representation at decision making levels and in relevant policy forums on agriculture and rural development**

Women in PNG are seriously disadvantaged in relation to men in PNG, and in relation to women in other countries. PNG women are lagging behind in all aspects of development at

every level from the community, to district and provincial levels. At national level, women's rates of political participation are among the lowest in the world. Currently, PNG has only one female member of Parliament (out of a total of 109 parliament members), and only 4 women have ever been elected to Parliament since Independence in 1975. Women's participation in all levels (family, community, district, provincial and national) is very low. For example, the National Council of Women is the national machinery that represents the interests of women at the national level. This arm of the government is responsible for overseeing service delivery and policy making at national level. However, due to being under resourced and outnumbered by male parliamentarians, issues that affect women are not prioritized.

Women in PNG play a significant role in the production of food and agricultural products, but are ignored in development planning process. This leaves women in disadvantaged position in developing the agricultural sector. Women require an enabling environment with resources, access to information, capacity building, coordination and a sustained market outlet for rural women. There is a need for developing a policy on agriculture extension that should focus on effective, efficient and cost-effective and sustainable extension delivery mechanisms. Voice for Change is providing opportunity for women to access cash from the organization's loans and credit project so that they can engage in income generating activities to support their family. The organization facilitates dissemination of technical and market information for women to improve and expand their economic activities. It collaborates with national and local service providers and increase access and networking with rural communities. The organization facilitates financial literacy training for women members and clients. It undertakes field visits to monitor their small economic projects and to provide support. The organization assists farmers to sell their produce. Voice for Change is establishing dialogue with authorities on the importance of rural markets and the need for improvements.

**Multiple bases of discrimination and victimization of women prevent their participation and representation at decision making and policy forums.**

Traditional social structures and negative attitudes towards women are major contributing factors to women's underdevelopment in PNG. The prevalence of violence against women, the acts of torture and other cruel inhuman treatment for women are increasing in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Studies conducted in 1983 and 2009 indicate that the Highlands women of PNG experience the highest incidence and most severe forms of violence. This is linked to extreme and very often manifestations of some multiple cultural traditions that discriminate against women and girls. These include:

1. **Polygamy:** the 'custom' of traditional male leaders (known as 'big men') being accorded rights to multiple wives, spanning many generations. Today, marrying multiple wives has become a developing trend between the so called educated men who marry to maintain their status quo in the society.

2. **Bride price payments:** As the highlands regions transitions to a cash-based economy, traditional customs are often distorted to fit new opportunities. Buying wives is common, and elevates male status, while dramatically diminishing the rights and possibilities of young brides to escape violent marriages. Bride price and polygamy combined enables men with money to ‘purchase’ and control multiple wives in many different locations.
3. **Forced marriages:** Young women and girls are often ‘forced’ to marry combatants or men with money in exchange for their support during tribal fighting or as a desperate measure to seek security especially the internally displaced people.
4. **Sorcery, witch-hunting and extra-judicial killings:** Throughout Melanesia, it is widely held that some people hold magical powers that can be used for good or ill. Women accused of making spells are increasingly blamed for deaths and accidents and this is used to justify extra judicial pronouncements of guilt, leading to increasingly barbaric and often sexual mob torture and frenzied killings in many parts of the Highlands. Most occur with total impunity.

### **Complicating contextual and societal changes**

Other changes compounding these problems negatively impacting the daily life of women and girls and contributing to conflict include:

1. **PNG’s HIV/AIDS epidemic:** The Highlands region has the one of the world’s highest incidences of HIV infection and related deaths, and high rates of infection among women and girls and they suffer more discrimination and neglect, because the causes, progression and treatment of HIV&AIDS are little known or understood, women are often accused as sorcerers responsible for AIDS and cancer-related deaths.
2. **Growing Gun culture** Highland men are involved in manufacture or smuggling of guns, leaking police and military weapons and emerging young warlords lead long-distance treks to the coastal ports of Lae or Daru, or across the border to buy guns. Communities collectively aspire and contribute to the highest powered weapons and the best marksmen. Community members unwilling to participate are harassed, expelled and under threat of harm and injury must go into ‘exile’. Police are unable to stop wars or attend to crimes because they are very often too under-resourced to conduct proper daily police operations.
3. **Drugs and alcohol:** Marijuana cultivation is common and widespread as a cash crop in PNG. PNG marijuana, high in THC potent content is smoked across the region, and is linked to rising incidence of marijuana related psychoses. Mobs of young men, high on marijuana or alcohol are increasingly leading in ‘pin-pointing’ women as witches and sorcerers, and in a frenzy of barbarism torturing and killing alleged sorcerers. The state has limited control as much marijuana is cultivated in remote places or in the regions most affected by armed tribal fighting that is often declared no-go zones for outsiders, including police.

4. **Globalization of media and communications:** the advent of TV, video and DVDs have led to a huge influx of affordable B grade movies, and pornographic material viewed in a context of limited or no legal literacy, where Rambo is a popular icon/superhero, CSI normalizes gun violence and victimization of women, and pornography tantalizes men and boys moving in a world of changing sexual attitudes, norms and behaviors.

### **Thousands of Internally Displaced people**

Tribal fighting occurred for generations across PNG (and Melanesia), but was largely quashed in the coastal region by PNG's century of colonial administrative, policing and judicial systems and Christian churches. Since independence in 1975, state legislative, administrative, and judicial systems in the largely unexplored Highlands Region were still very weak, inadequate, neglected, and under-resourced. Traditional leaders, police and judiciary are also severely challenged by combatants/warriors in possession of more sophisticated and powerful weapons than those available to state security forces. The meaning of wealth, prosperity, leadership and governance in traditional societies has been rapidly and radically transformed with the advent of the cash economy, the accelerated exploitation of vast mineral, gas (LNG) and oil wealth, and new systems of local and national Government.

Home made and smuggled or stolen high-powered weapons have replaced traditional bows and arrows. Young men with lethal weapons are overruling traditional leaders. Customs which once protected women and children from harm and particularly women and girls from SGBV, during times of conflict and during normal times have progressively deteriorated. Guns are a highly desired commodity and feature more significantly in communities' sense of security than police of state justice systems do. Local mercenaries and hired guns have emerged. Whole populations of villagers – women and men – are under great pressure to contribute to community caches of weapons/village arsenals stockpiled in the name of community security and status.

The reality of PNG IDPs, displaced by armed conflict is yet to be named and acknowledged by the state and the world. At any point in time several hundreds of thousands of Highlands's people are experiencing internal displacement including serious loss of livelihood and increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. The problems stemming from internal displacement are many and multi-faceted. In fact in Melanesian tradition living and depending on someone else's land and resources, incurs debt, humiliation and vulnerability. This leads to the buildup of anger and frustration motivating displaced men to plan and work hard to buy weapons to exact revenge.

Highlands women in tribal fighting zones in PNG report living in fear and terror of the many forms of violence, many involving torture, maiming, mutilation and murder, loss of freedoms of mobility and expression. Women in conflict affected highlands societies are in dire need of financial support to engage in economic activity to generate income to meet

their family's basic needs and to seek justice. Their greatest desire is for peace to be restored soon so that they can return to their rightful homeland; however their aspirations, priorities, needs and concerns are silenced by men, guns and the constrained circumstances and conditions they live in.

**Voice for Change: Making governance more gender responsive and services more accessible.**

### **Experiences from Voice for Change**

It is this extremely challenging context Voice for Change has been established and is starting to make a breakthrough for women in terms of more gender responsive traditional and imported political and economic systems. Voice for Change was established to increase women's incomes through agricultural production and marketing. Voice for Change uses much of its own members financial resources, established Regional ERAW networks, digital technology and learning opportunities to capacitate and empower themselves to do this work.

Over the past four years Voice for Change leaders have responded by forming an organization that runs two main programs

1. Promoting and Protecting Women's Human Rights
2. Economic Empowerment of Women.

### **Promoting Women's Human Rights**

Leaders who have been trained through regional networks working on law reform and rights based approaches to service delivery and prevention are now making human rights known to community leaders, especially when demanding that conflict be resolved, peace be restored and displaced women and their families be allowed to return to their customary lands and their main source of livelihood: farming and marketing. One strategy is for the leaders to get themselves appointed to be a members of the peace and good order community in their community, in an effort to make the men understand that women have the same rights and potential as men to participate actively and make decision on issues affecting them). Gradually leaders of Voice for Change women are becoming part of the team in negotiating for peace and to resolve conflicts between families and clan members and within their tribe as well as other tribal groups, advocating the rights of women and children be put first, for a change . As women become part of a team involved with parties to resolve issues peacefully, their aim is to make men understand the impact and consequences of their longstanding and increasingly more deadly wars on the women and children. Women leaders take their message to school teachers, students and youths, rugby team members. They sponsor the District Rugby Team to get them on side and talk to the leading sportsmen about the need for more respect for themselves and for other people and especially women that they come across and women's rights.

The bravest of the leaders have become outstanding Women's Human rights defenders. They have empowered themselves to personally and physically intervene to stop domestic violence, for example, when men beat their wives, girlfriends or their sisters or daughters. Voice for Change has a 7 women member team of like-minded women who regularly defend women's human rights and intervene when a woman is encountering violence such as beating from husband or community.

Since January 2009, Voice for Change has been involved in assisting about 500 families who were displaced as a result of a tribal war. Initially a small team organized clothing, food and shelter when IDPs crossed the boundary into their tribal land. Women are now negotiating with male tribal leaders to speed up the peace processes that normally take years, because the longer it takes, the more seriously it is affecting women. The women leading these actions are regularly and repeatedly threatened and warned to cease this kind of humanitarian care, support, documentation and advocacy.

Voice for Change provides a safe space for internally displaced women survivors of VAW to come together to share their concerns and difficulties. They are now in the process of forming a special association of women who have survived the most extreme violence/torture, many of whom are now permanently disabled, due to severed limbs, loss of hearing or sight. These testimonies are documented as case studies.

### **Working with the leaders of communities and the new provincial Government**

Jiwaka is a new province with a new government. Voice for Change has started talking with them to make by-laws, policies, plans, and programs and to allocate budgets to build a new era of equality, development and peace for our people. The organization is starting to talk about zero tolerance of violence in villages, districts and across the province. Voice for Change has approached authorities about prioritizing the planning of new markets, based on a vision of gender –responsive infrastructure and institutions that will enable women, men and youth to step out of their current condition of cycles of violent conflict and terrible loss of life, property, livelihoods and hope to achieve health, wealth and prosperity.

### **Women's economic empowerment**

Voice for Change is providing opportunity for women to access cash from the organization's loans and credit project so that they can engage in income generating activities to support their family. The organization facilitates dissemination of technical and market information for women to improve and expand their economic activities. It collaborates with national and local service providers to increase access and networking with rural communities. The organization facilitates financial literacy training for women members and clients. It undertakes field visits to monitor their small economic projects and to provide support. The organization assists farmers to sell their produce. Women themselves have identified that financial security is the most important aspect of women's development. Women who have been assisted by this project have stated that they now feel

that they have a sense of financial security which enabled them to meet the basic needs for their families. One of the most promising new ideas to is to unite Women market vendors is a mass association, to give them voice in visioning, planning, budgeting and managing the markets, which are their mains site of income earning.

There are other communities and faith based organizations and government organizations work to support the social, economic and political empowerment of rural women at their own level, pace and capacity. There have historically been a variety of initiatives to establish rural women's cooperatives and associations. All of these institutions face similar challenges, including the lack of appropriate infrastructure, communication, organizational and staff capacity and a lack of consistent technical and financial resources. These organizations must be supported and united because they are share a common urgent mandate, to promote the interests of rural women and give voice to rural women themselves.