

## Coffee is Men's Business (Part 1)

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Coffee is one of the most important cash crops in Papua New Guinea and is the mainstay of the economies of several Highlands provinces, with an estimated almost three million people dependent on income from it (Imbun 2014:27).<sup>1</sup> Ever since its introduction to the Highlands, coffee has been seen as 'men's business' and the continuation of this remnant from Papua New Guinea's colonial past is now a source of domestic conflict.<sup>2</sup> To examine this issue, this In Brief draws on recent research among coffee smallholders in the Eastern Highlands Province.<sup>3</sup>

According to Duncan Overfield, coffee was promoted as 'male' and 'modern' by agents of the colonial state, such as extension officers (1998:53). Helene Barnes also says that coffee was introduced by the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries as a crop for men — in particular for individual men rather than for groups or clans (1981:274; Johnson 1988:110). This male emphasis was reinforced by the state through training for men in coffee husbandry in Farmer Training Schools and in communities (1981:274). Jeanette Dickerson-Putman also writes of the gendered nature of coffee production during the colonial period, stating that the cash-cropping of coffee, as well as conversion to Western religions and new forms of leadership, were introduced explicitly to replace men's roles in warfare, 'big man' leadership and ritual (1996:55). Further, she argues that income-earning activities, such as the production of coffee for sale, were not considered appropriate for women because this would negatively affect their ability to serve their families and communities (1996:55). Rather than promoting coffee as a cash crop for women, Dickerson-Putman argues that a 'status-raising welfare approach' was advocated, involving the promotion by missionary wives and nursing sisters of women's clubs to improve women's home-making skills (1996:55).

Men's control of coffee is not only an artefact of colonial agricultural extension but also a consequence of gender norms and the system of land tenure that privileges men. The High-

lands Region is dominated by patrilineal land tenure systems, which position men as the land owners and mean that the most important asset for the production of coffee — land — is in their control. A man receives parcels of the clan's land from his father, who received them from his father. 'Coffee is seen as planted by, and belonging to men' (Overfield 1998:55) and its being planted on the man's land reinforces his rights over its disposal.

That coffee was promoted as men's business or planted on men's land, however, does not prevent women from being involved in its production. Some observers commented that it increased women's workloads because they were expected to work in their husbands' coffee gardens as well as to do subsistence gardening and other income-generating activities — a state of affairs that still persists today (Dickerson-Putman 1996:56). Today, women carry out a high proportion of the work of coffee production, including land preparation, planting, weeding, mulching, picking, carrying cherries to processing, then pulping, fermentation, washing, and bagging of cherries, drying, and carrying coffee parchment to storage. The work men allocate to themselves, such as pruning, shade control, fertilising and spraying is quite often left undone, with the result that yields are falling.

Due to the historic association of coffee with 'men's business', men tend to see coffee income as largely their own. Indeed, women accuse men disparagingly of wasting coffee income and being preoccupied with themselves: 'They just think about drinking, pleasure, eating, playing cards. That's all.'<sup>4</sup> Our research with coffee smallholders showed that money was the most common reason for arguments between couples, with 37.8% of women and 38% of men saying this was what they argued over.<sup>5</sup> When women talk about arguments over money, they are generally referring to arguments over the disposal of coffee income. Marital conflicts over coffee income, and especially men's resource-depleting misuse of that income, are common, particularly during and following cof-

fee harvesting season. One woman went so far as to say that coffee income only produces marital discord, remarking that 'the only thing that has come about from coffee is arguments'. As another woman explained:

There are lots of conflicts over coffee money. If a man takes coffee to sell it and then doesn't bring any money home, his wife will be cross — 'Ah, you go to sell the coffee and you don't bring any money back. All the time you go and sell coffee, drink beer and then return. You just throw it away on the road.<sup>6</sup> You sell coffee and you don't come straight home, you go and sit down and play cards.' This is a problem and there are many arguments and many conflicts about this.

Given their disproportionately large contribution of unpaid labour to the production of coffee, it is not surprising that many women resent what they see as their husband's misuse of the income and contest it. Women can be forthright in questioning their husbands about their use of coffee income — especially when it comes to gambling or alcohol. That women are prepared to question men's use of coffee income suggests that they have considerable agency and are quite prepared to contest the 'head of the household' ideology, which sees men control coffee income. There are, of course, risks in such strategies, and violence from male partners is an egregious example.

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### Author Notes

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### Endnotes

1. Many coffee producers are smallholders with less than 2.5 hectares of plantings.
2. As one reviewer pointed out, coffee was initially considered white men's business; expatriate-owned plantations dominated production and most of the income went to (male) Australian planters. Local coffee producers replicated the gender relations of coffee plantations, at least in terms of which gender controlled the processing and sale of coffee and the earnings from it.
3. The research was undertaken in three districts: Goroka District, Unggai-Bena District and Okapa District (two sites). The research included a quantitative survey of households (total 143), qualitative interviews (total 64) with women and men and key informant interviews (total 36).
4. Interviews were conducted in Tok Pisin; English translations are by Richard Eves.
5. Women's order of ranking by the most common specific reasons for arguments was money, sex, women, and drinking. Men's ranking was money, women, in-laws, and mobile phones.
6. By which she means, colloquially, that men 'piss it away'.

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