

Transforming Workplace Norms in PNG: The Role of the Business Coalition for Women



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Introduction

Announcing Australia's 'new aid paradigm' in June 2014, Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, said: 'We will focus in particular on women's economic empowerment — on promoting women's leadership in politics, business, communities and families and on eliminating violence against women and children.'

The link between women's economic empowerment and the elimination of violence is pertinent in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Significant and persistent gender disparities limit the capacity of all Papua New Guineans to benefit from the country's wealth of natural and human resources.

This *In Brief* highlights the importance of workplace support for women's economic participation. Highlighting the costs of not supporting women, including those who are living with violence and those who are prevented from progressing in their careers, we confirm the potentially transformative possibilities of gender-sensitive and affirmative action policies within the formal employment sector. We then discuss the Business Coalition for Women (BCFW) — a group recently established in PNG to address some of the problems to which we point toward here.

Working Women in PNG

In her profile of PNG women in the modern economy, anthropologist Martha Macintyre (2011, 118) remarks of career women working in towns, 'their lives are those of women who are in paid employment and they share the difficulties of managing this reality with women in other developing and advanced capitalist societies'. These difficulties include the challenges that multiple roles entail. However, where women in advanced capitalist societies are more likely to be able to access formal child care, negotiate part-time work, and seek recourse through formal channels such as the Equal Opportunity Commission, women in PNG lack these supports and mechanisms.

The prevalence and normalisation of violence in PNG is also significant in female labour-force participation. Despite 'the absence of nation-wide data on domestic violence over a long period of time' (Eves 2006, 32), there is research in PNG that dem-

onstrates that gender-based violence reflects and perpetuates entrenched attitudes that are not conducive to women's participation in the workforce (e.g. Spark 2010; 2011; UN 2013; World Bank/IFC 2014). Researchers are also conducting an in-depth study on how the economic empowerment of women affects gender-based violence (see Eves and Crawford 2014). However, there is less research exploring the effect of gender-based violence on economic empowerment. The following case studies exemplify the work that could be done in this area.

Two Case Studies: Eare and Ruth

Born in Port Moresby, Eare is 30, bright and capable, and attended school and university on aid scholarships in Australia and New Zealand. Returning to PNG in her early twenties, she experienced gender discrimination in her new workplace. For instance, while her male colleagues were given benefits including access to their own houses, Eare was forced to share a small and unsafe house with four female colleagues. When the young women were attacked in their home by a group of men and sought support from their workplace, senior staff told them they had brought this experience on themselves because of the clothes they wore (e.g. trousers rather than skirts). Eare sought workplace support to do a PhD but was told she had to 'wait her turn'. Meanwhile, men who had been at the organisation less time than Eare were being given this opportunity. Frustrated, Eare sought and gained work in Australia where she now has permanent residency.

Ruth is 40, has two children, and was recognised by her workplace as being highly organised and reliable, despite being in a violent relationship with a man for 15 years. When Ruth missed days because she was too injured to come to work, people in the organisation turned a blind eye because they didn't want to lose her. However, when Ruth's partner began showing up at work and behaving violently towards her and other staff, Ruth's employers feared for their own safety and became worried about the impact on customers. Realising she had lost her employer's support and tired of dealing with her partner's jealousy and the ever-present threat of his being violent at work, Ruth stopped coming to work and was soon replaced.

The Role of the Business Coalition for Women

These case studies illustrate that workplaces can thwart gender equity in PNG. Many businesses know instinctively that they are not getting it right, and that this is hurting their business. Desirous of change, a number of companies approached the International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group with the suggestion that IFC play a role in helping them address the challenges that gender inequality and gender-based violence present to business.

In response, the IFC and the business community, with seed funding from the Australian Government, created the BCFW. Launched in March 2014, the BCFW is dedicated to improving member businesses by supporting their efforts to recruit, retain, and promote women as employees, leaders, and business partners. It will provide PNG businesses with relevant and practical tools such as model human resource policies, good practices, case studies, and other resources to help make the most of their female talent (www.bcfw.org.pg).

It is important to note that the Business Coalition for Women is not a Coalition of women. The Board of Directors has six men and five women and members, including well-known multinational corporations (Exxonmobil, Westpac, Deloitte Touche) as well as domestic companies (Carpenters Group, Air Niugini, Anitua Corporate Services, South Pacific Brewery). The board is chaired by Lesieli Taviri, General Manager of Origin Energy and an exemplar of the leadership potential in the new generation of educated PNG women.

The BCFW faces challenges and limitations; the major obvious one being that it is working with formally employed women who represent a small minority of PNG women. This does not mean it is only working with the educated, urban, and well off — many members have large numbers of low-literacy women, and there is some coverage of rural and remote areas. However, the membership to date does tend to be larger firms, many of which are foreign-invested.

The BCFW is also experiencing difficulties getting Papua New Guinean men to accept leadership roles. While Papua New Guinean women and expatriate men and women are enthusiastically embracing and championing BCFW goals, some local men

have commented that they consider there is a level playing field and are not keen to join. Despite these challenges, the BCFW already has nearly 50 member companies committed to developing more equitable and gender-positive workplaces for PNG. The coalition is surveying member companies to develop policies that support women who are experiencing violence, to establish mentoring schemes and advance female leadership. These initiatives should be supported by research that analyses how they are being implemented and identifies emerging best practices.

References

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