

## Understanding Gender Relations in PNG after Decades of Activism — A Personal Perspective, Part 2

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In many cultural settings in Melanesian societies, politics is for the men. How can we challenge an entrenched political culture that restricts the degree to which women are able to play leadership roles and take positions in politics in PNG? In this second In Brief, I look at gender equality and men's perceptions of women leaders in PNG. I will speak of my experience as a grassroots leader and a candidate in national politics. Some men have seen me as a strong leader, 'like a man', referring to the idea that it is only men who display strong leadership abilities. Although I resisted that idea, they insist it was a compliment.

### Son or daughter?

In patriarchal societies, people have different views about women's strength and leadership abilities. My uncle adopted me and gave me a high status for a young girl. He had no sons or children of his own, but he was a powerful man. I was an outsider and I was given status through his family. I felt special, but I also feel like I have to justify the special status that was given to me.

Yet, when I became an adult and moved from a traditional village to a more modern town life in PNG, my experiences of dealing with patriarchy differed. Patriarchy is not embodied by all men, but it is an oppressive system operating through social structures. Power, privileges, and education play a big role in how we look through the lenses of culture wherever we live in this global community. Thus I have always fought for my rights and for other women.

### My village life in Simbu Province

Traditionally, in Simbu Province, pigs are valued higher than money and men who have many pigs are looked up to, as chiefs. My adopted father had three pig houses; each housed 7–10 pigs. When time for slaughter came, he would slaughter more than one, because it gave him pride.

He would slaughter all these pigs but before sharing it with everyone, he would call my name first and give me the best pieces, usually given to people of status. He even called me his father's name. He made an announcement in the village, 'No one will call her Sarah. If anyone calls her Sarah, you will kill a

pig to compensate me, because I adopted her and I changed her name'. He gave me his father's name which is Maima. This is my middle name.

I wouldn't have spoken Sinasina dialect, my uncle's language, if he hadn't adopted me. I was an outsider yet I was given status through his family. That made me feel I have to do justice to that status bestowed on me by my adopted father.

In my uncle's village sons inherit land, but he gave me his land when he was still alive. Recently, I gave some portion of the land to one of my daughters whose children live with me, and to my youngest son who decided to live on my land, instead of following his elder brother to claim his father's land. This is an important approach for any son in a patriarchal society; the sons claim ownership of family land which also gives them power and identity in community social relations.

When my 'adopted' family and clan realised what I did with my land, they expressed gratitude:

It was your land. You have every right to do whatever you wanted. By giving it to your son, you have added a male into our community. Your daughter has two sons too. We will have many sons on our land and community. You are a leader yourself. We respect you.

### My experiences with men's perceptions on strong women leaders

Many men in PNG perceive women who possess strong leadership abilities as a 'strong man in a woman's body'<sup>1</sup> because strong leadership is seen as an attribute of men, not women. As a candidate in the 2002 national elections in Sinasina Yongomugl electorate, Simbu Province, three male candidates who were running for the same seat would greet me with, 'Hey bro!', or introduce me as their brother. I would openly argue that I was not a man. I felt insulted that I was seen as a woman in a man's body because of my strong leadership ability; I was happy being a woman. As a woman I am possibly a better leader, and all women have leadership abilities. Men and women who have heard me would say, 'You should be happy, they recognise that you are a strong leader'. I responded, 'Yes, but

as a woman. I am not a man. And other women are leaders too’.

I have experienced this view in my own province but also with educated elites from other provinces in PNG. In a social gathering in Port Moresby, two men sitting at the bar saw me walk in. The expatriate said to the PNG man, ‘I see a beautiful woman come in’. The PNG guy replied, ‘It is a man. Not a woman’. The expatriate decided to come over and introduce himself. He asked, ‘Do you know that guy over there?’ I responded ‘yes’, and he said, ‘Well, he said that you are a man and I said that you are a woman. So which are you, man or woman?’ I said that I was a woman. I wondered why the other guy called me a man. I walked over to him — he was the head of a government institution and a colleague of mine from Morobe Province — and I asked him, ‘Why did you tell that expatriate guy I was a man?’ He responded, ‘That was a compliment. I respect you. You are a strong woman, with very strong leadership principles. I meant it in that regard, and not to offend you’. I responded:

Maybe from a Melanesian perspective he may have understood your point. But because he is an expatriate he may have thought I could be a lesbian. I do not like it that men think strong women are men if they display leadership capabilities. I am a strong leader as a woman. I believe all women are strong leaders in all levels of life, and Melanesian men should appreciate that.

He agreed and said, ‘I am sorry you took offence’. He bought a tray of beer for my table, came over with the expatriate guy, and explained to him that we were now square — the beer was compensation for demeaning my character.

I was a resident of Western Highlands Province for many years and I now live in Jiwaka Province. The community leaders around where I live call me ‘brother’ or ‘mate’, as a person invited into their club of big-man leadership. We can all work together to change attitudes or perceptions about gendered leadership and create gender-sensitive environments for all to live in harmony and become productive members of the community.

### Author notes

*Sarah Garap is a proponent and practitioner of participatory research as a tool for social change and works primarily in the PNG Highlands.*

### Endnote

1. By this, I do not mean a strong man in a woman’s body. I mean the idea that a strong person can only be found in a man’s body.

