



Women in patrilineal and matrilineal societies in Melanesia

By Rosa Koian

Rosa Koian is the Information Services Coordinator of the Bismarck Ramu Group in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea.

Photo by Lara Daley

A Melanesian woman's role is usually associated with childbearing, yet she is more than that. As she brings children into this world she must make sure she secures a piece of the most important asset – land – for them. And as she uses this land to bring in food she adds value to the land and brings in valuable information and knowledge about the land.

Land is so important that it has not left the discussion table in public offices. While many from the West look at land for its economic value, the people of Papua New Guinea, especially women, look at it for social security. Land is the one thing that has kept Papua New Guineans going for more than 50,000 years.

In Papua New Guinea there are patrilineal and matrilineal societies whose main asset – land – is passed down through the male line and female line, respectively. Therefore, women's responsibilities in securing, protecting and maintaining land for their children vary between these two societies. Land is communally owned by clans who dictate how it is used. However, decision-making processes and the status of women differ greatly in these two societies.

In patrilineal societies, which make up about three quarters of Papua New Guinea, a woman hardly speaks up in public when it comes to land decisions, as men own the land and therefore make all the decisions regarding their land. However, she has the responsibility to convince her husband to decide what is best for their sons. This responsibility is not often easy in this modern world.

Some women in patrilineal societies also own land. This is possible if there are no male children in her family, in which case the land is passed on to the female children, usually to the eldest daughter. However, she is expected to pass this land back to a male child when she is old. In the meantime, while the land is in her custody, she depends on her male cousins or uncles to speak on her behalf.

For example, in a village in East Sepik Province, two women acquired land from their fathers because they had no brothers. The first woman had all daughters but only one survived. This daughter automatically claimed her mother's land. Now she is getting old and has named her eldest son to take the land. She has made her intention known to her uncles who have made a public announcement. The second woman had three sons and she named her third son to inherit her land when she died. Again, this intention was communicated through an elder male uncle who made sure the young man took over the land when he was old enough.

In the second scenario, the land went back to the male line as soon as her son was old enough. In the first scenario, the woman took care of the land and since she also had no sons, she passed the responsibility on to her daughter. As the rules dictate that the land must go back to a male child, her daughter is passing it on to her eldest son.

So in this case, the women are custodians of the land as long as there are no male members of the family alive.

A wedded woman in a patrilineal society is often a stranger in the clan. She is usually an outsider from another clan or from a neighbouring village marrying into the clan. As such, she must be on her best behaviour in the first couple of years for her mother-in-law. This will help her gain information and knowledge about her husband's clan and their land.

In order for her family to survive and be recognised in her husband's clan she must diligently observe the clan's requirements, study her husband's clan land boundaries and learn about how each piece of land can be used before setting out to use it. She must understand how decisions are made and know when and how she can display some disagreements.

As she gives sons to her husband's clan she assumes the responsibility of passing on her knowledge of her husband's land to her sons. Her sons would learn about their father's land from her first, as they are always with their mother up until the age of about 10. In their early years, she must take them out daily and point out where the land is. Usually this is done by her cultivating the land so that her sons know and feel the land they belong to and understand why they must protect it.

Her status thus depends on her ability to raise her sons well and educate them on their prized asset – the land – as well as meeting all other expectations from her husband's people. Her services as food producer, cook, nurse and more is lost to her own family when she leaves, but her husband's clan gains.

As the main food producer of the family, she is always on the land. She knows the physical form of the land and over time would grow and acquaint herself with it spiritually. Even though women from these patrilineal societies do not own land, they are acknowledged for their contribution in helping to keep the land within the clan – firstly by bearing male children who will help protect the land, but more importantly by working the land. The women make gardens, fish in the rivers, gather fruits, nuts, herbs, eggs or other food from the wild. By regularly keeping in contact with the land, the clan, especially the men, value them more.

Often it is the women who keep the history of the clan because they remember the stories associated with land acquisition well. In some societies, sons often seek their mother's or aunt's advice on the clan's history before they set out to discuss matters relating to their land. They also seek advice on the traditional processes involved.

In matrilineal societies (mainly the New Guinea islands region and Milne Bay Province), women own the land and therefore are responsible for land decisions in their clans. This ownership of land gives these women a relatively higher status in their communities compared to women in patrilineal societies. In Bougainville, a woman's decisions are conveyed through a brother or an uncle who speaks on her behalf and is trusted to convey her decisions at meetings attended by men only. The women decide the ownership and the usage of land.

Here the land is passed down to her daughters who pass it down to their daughters and so on. Unlike women in patrilineal societies, women in matrilineal societies do not have to leave the land they have known as children. Over the course of their lives they have studied their land and come to understand its value well. In this sense they maintain the longest relationship with the land, as they become one with it.

This gives these women more power as they do not have to move to make a new life like their sisters in patrilineal societies. They remain in their childhood neighbourhoods. They do not have to re-learn a new way of life or another history. They understand that their chief responsibility is to use the land in such a way that it continues to provide for them and their clan. They understand that in distributing the land they must be fair to all.

The Challenges

Today, women in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies experience all sorts of pressures with regard to land. In patrilineal societies women must speak up if they want a future for their sons and women in matrilineal societies must not rely on their brothers and uncles.

This is especially important now as development agencies often by-pass women when they undertake consultations for development projects. Women in patrilineal societies must decide whether to save a piece of her husband's land for her son, or give her consent on behalf of her son for developments to take place on her husband's land. This is often a very painful experience as many women can see far into the future and while they already know the difficulties that lie ahead, they must also decide what is best for the present.

For example, mining and logging activities have pushed women in matrilineal societies so far that they have had to stand up and show some resistance. In Bouganville, women resisted the mine long before the mine started pouring out millions of kina. In Misima, Milne Bay Province, even though the mine is now gone, women remain scared.

Another trend that has not received much attention in the last decade concerns land acquisition, ownership and user rights.

These issues are important in cases where, for example, a woman from a patrilineal society marries into a matrilineal society. She would leave her land and her people and go to her husband's people and land as dictated by her culture. However, her sister-in-law, who is the landowner, has not left the land and may not even decide to pass some piece of land to her brother. He may be granted user rights and he will have to live with that as prescribed by his matrilineal culture. Alternatively, his wife could decide to take him with her to her people. Her brothers will welcome her and her family but again will grant her user rights to the land. So she is left out in this asset distribution.

On the other hand, if a woman from a matrilineal society marries into a patrilineal society she may leave her land temporarily to live on his land, but maintains all the decision-making powers. As she enters her husband's land she has gained a portion of it for her sons and her own land for her daughters.

So while this scenario works in favour of women in matrilineal societies as they accumulate more land through marriage, women in patrilineal societies must be stronger if they want to be recognised as genuine members of their clan.

Current economic development trends have also placed women in a tight spot as men strive to find ways to

bring in development, while all the time forgetting to involve women in the process. Land discussions without women's involvement will not achieve true development as Melanesians, men or women, are tied to the land, but women understand land better as the motivation is family survival.

Furthermore, development agencies are pushing for land registration in Papua New Guinea in order to facilitate development. This raises the question of what kind of development, and development for whom? Papua New Guineans have lived from their land for thousands of years, and land registration wants to alienate land from its people.

This is dangerous for people whose livelihood depends on the land. Land registration, whether voluntarily or other, is taking land away from people. While those pushing land registration argue that the land will remain with the people, history has proved that in the end, people will lose control of it and thus become dependent on other people. This will not solve the poverty problem. It will only add to it.

It is best to leave the land with the men and women who understand it better. Those who are pushing for large-scale developments must speak to the women who relate to the land better. Women in matrilineal societies own land and women in patrilineal societies are respected for their guardianship of the land.



Photo by Lara Daley