Gender Voice through Photos

Fr Philip Gibbs

On occasions when I have been a passenger on an aircraft flown by a woman pilot I have noted the reaction of the passengers when the pilot's name is announced or when she emerges from the cockpit. One time when both pilots of the Dash were women: Captain Bona Kipalan and Jacklyn Naing, and their names were announced, one man made the sign of the cross as if praying and another was heard to mutter, "Sem pasin. Meri pilotim balus na mipela ol man i sindaun long baksait!" (It's embarrassing! Women are flying the plane and we men are sitting at the back!). It seems that Air Niugini is taking a lead in gender equity because, in the Highlands at least, I have never seen a woman driving a PMV.

I cannot totally agree when some say that women have low status in Papua New Guinea. Certainly women suffer from violence and are usually expected to acquiesce to men, but it seems to me more a complex of culturally defined power relations than simply a matter of status. In a changing world where women are educated and hold new positions they encounter issues of power and freedom. Men can be more threatened by powerful women than their male counterparts. Women too can be jealous of their salary earning sisters. Do women feel they have to compete with men? Can men respect women who hold positions of authority? Why should some people be surprised that the plane's captain is a woman?

Kup Women for Peace is recognised as one of the most progressive movements for the emancipation of women and men in the Highlands. Yet, the women holding leadership positions still have to cope with deeply felt gender-based attitudes.

Photo 1 shows Mary Kini, one of the co-ordinators for Kup Women for Peace standing to speak on International Women's Day 2008. This was the first time in her life that she had worn trousers. She reflects on the photo as follows: "As you can see I am dressed like an Australian woman there and my colleague wearing a pink dress sitting near me is laughing her head off because she has never seen me wearing trousers. Other people saw me from a distance and they thought it was someone else. When I stood up wearing trousers, in public in front of men and everyone, I felt that I should make myself absent. As I stood I felt really hot and I was aware of my legs and hands trembling. But after standing, when I began to speak it was all gone and I was normal again. It was a good experience. Afterwards when I went into the house I felt that I had really achieved something and I felt good about it. I was brought up to think that women could not wear trousers and I found it really hard to wear trousers. It was like a burden to me and when I wore the trousers the burden was taken away and now I feel free to wear trousers any time I want to. I had to help myself to get rid of the burden. It was an act of liberation for me." It seems that "wearing the trousers" is not merely a colloquial expression in English, but a real issue for some women in PNG.

The first photo is from a series of photos taken by people in local communities utilizing a method called Photovoice. This method uses visual images and accompanying stories to promote participatory means of sharing experiences in ways that lead to social change. It builds on theories of education for critical consciousness to challenge the commonly held assumptions of those who are traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world.

By providing cameras to people who would not normally have a chance to speak out, photovoice combines photography and social awareness for change. It enables people to record and reflect upon their community's strengths and problems. It promotes dialogue through group discussion about photographs taken of life in the community. It can also surprise those in power, for as Caroline C. Wang, who helped develop this method notes, "What experts think is important may not match what people at the grassroots think is important."

Photo 2 presents the image of a policewoman Julie Kapak on parade at a peace ceremony at Kup. She is one of 163 volunteer community police in the community. Angela Apa reflects on the photo as follows: "Law and Order has been a big issue for us. For years there was tribal warfare around Kup. So many men died, but we women too were victims because we were left without brothers, husbands and fathers. Our girls could not go to school because there was no money for school fees. In 2000 we decided that we had to do something and we formed Kup Women for Peace. We intervene and get the men from the fighting parties together and negotiate with them. Sometimes it goes on for days or weeks. Finally they cool down and agree to settle with compensation. In 2004 we formed a group of community police including 50 women. Women are able to understand what other women are going through and also they have a special gift in peace-making that comes from their being

mothers in the family. The photo here of the policewoman represents all the women in Kup – or in the Highlands for that matter – who are wanting law and order so that they can live in peace. By becoming policewomen we are not just sitting pleading for peace but we are real agents of peace."

How do we use photovoice methods in our research in the Highlands? First we had to clarify the idea and conceptualize the task. An article by Caroline C. Wang about the use of photovoice as a participatory action research strategy proved to be an excellent recource.[1] We were also encouraged by Cathy Vaughan who had used the method with youth in the Highlands. It sounded like an idea worth trying. I obtained two relatively simple digital cameras for the purpose and asked two groups in Simbu -- Kup Women for Peace and the United Nauro Gor community to send four members each for training. The project was to reflect gender equity from the start so we asked that the participants be both men and women. For most participants, the one day workshop was the first time they had held a camera. During the training we talked about light and how a camera works with that medium. We shared about the ethics of "taking" photos and the issue of power in terms of who holds the camera and who "owns" and interprets the meaning of the photos. We also discussed the philosophy of giving photographs back to community members to invite their participation and also as a way of expressing respect.

Together we devised a list of themes for photo taking. The fundamental idea was to have photos that reflect life in the community. Themes proposed by the participants included: law, justice, community policing, community based projects, human rights and gender issues -- especially women's peace and security, family welfare, environment and conservation, preserving positive cultural traditions, abandoning the negative traditions such as sorcery, youth, disabled people, and HIV and its driving forces. Course participants then went home with four people to share a camera in the two communities. Each month we met again to download photos and to engage in a process of selection and critical reflection.

First those who took the photos assisted by one or two others from the community select those photographs they considered most significant, or simply like best. Secondly they tell stories about the meaning of the images and why the photographs chosen are significant. The process is suggested by the acronym VOICE: voicing our individual and collective experience. People develop their own meanings and a participatory approach can give multiple meanings to single images. Thirdly, they establish connections between the photos and wider issues or themes. This allows people to develop and prioritise their concerns in ways that may be quite different from those of outsiders. It also invites people to promote their own and their community's well-being, noting what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed.

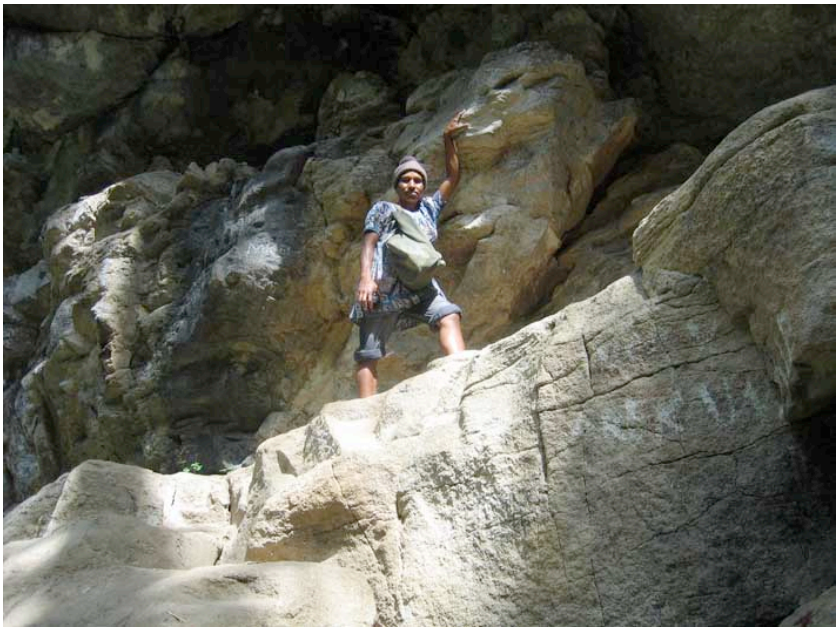
[1] Caroline C. Wang, "Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health," *Journal of Women's Health* 8 (2) 1999: 185-192.

Photo 3 shows a group of young women marching as a brass band. Smearing their bodies with

light coloured clay and black charcoal and painting designs with red and white paint they have decorated themselves to look as though they are wearing uniforms. Some carry wooden guns so they parade like soldiers. Marie Mondu who took the photo reflects as follows: "I caught up with this group of young women at Kerowagi during the 2008 PNG Independence Day celebrations.

Brass bands are commonly formed by young men, so these ladies surely got a lot of heads turning. Another woman in Kundiawa dressed in full traditional decorations, sat on a bicycle and cycled around the showground several times. Women took part separately from the men performers and claim consolation prizes at the celebration. The occasion was just perfect for women to mobilize, compete and partake fully and freely as members of a community." Marie continues, "Holly Wardlow in her book *Wayward Women* tells of liberated Southern Highlands women whose sexuality is a means of agency or escape from being underneath their husband's or their brother's "legs". Other women in various parts of PNG express their independence from their husbands in joining the Legion of Mary. This tendency is inevitable as more Papua New Guinean women are becoming liberated and independent by practicing professions or through agencies such as churches and other groups. Such was certainly true in the Kerowagi District of Simbu Province as women participated fully in this year's Independence Day celebrations. There was this brass band comprised of young women, a rugby team of women, three *singsing* groups of women and so the list goes…."

The photovoice method encourages people to reflect critically on their lives, including the controls they encounter due to cultural and social structures. Photo 4 shows a picture of Margaret Korak of Mingende negotiating a rocky track near the Waghi River. Margaret had a companion take the photo and she reflects on it as follows: "When I was born, traditional customs ruled our



lives. They would say that girls should remain at home to help their mothers. Women should not travel around or speak in public. They should not go to school. 'You should look after pigs and dogs and babies and work in the garden. That is your job,' they would say. That was before. Coming now to the present, still the customs affect us and we women think that there is no real work for us and we feel down. But now they are saying that women can do the same work as men and I have been to a workshop on 'Community Conversations' at Mingende and there I heard that I have rights and I have the freedom to go to other places and the power to speak my mind. So I have gone around with the Community Conversations group and gained experience and spoken out in public. We went to the other side of the Waghi River. This was the first time I had been to such a place in my whole life. At this place on the cliff face track I was really scared and I crawled on my hands and knees. It was an amazing experience. I feel now that I am capable of contributing to the development of my place and my family. I believe we woman have the power to make a difference."

Those using the cameras in Nauro Gor and Kup have taken photos representing all the themes proposed at the training. Some photos show images of large public events – others of domestic life. In this article the focus of attention is on images illustrating gender issues. The following three photos were taken by men and the reflections are from a man's perspective.

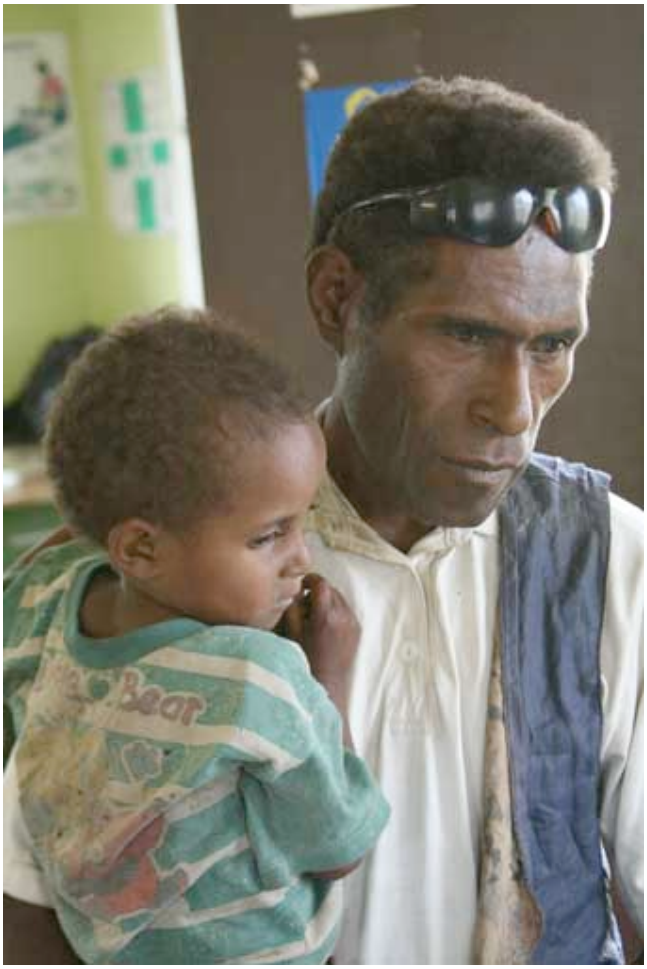
Photo 5 shows Agatha Par working at her sewing machine. Alphonse Kawage who took the photo comments: "Sewing is a skill that helps improve living conditions by having men, women and children be better dressed. It does not look good when a man wears old or torn clothes. We try to repair our clothes by hand, but it does not look good. We don't have money for new clothes so we buy them second-hand. That is why we

are promoting sewing in the community. We are buying some sewing machines and want to have introductory training courses. Having a sewing machine means we can have our own clothes. It makes us self-sufficient so we don't go around wearing second-hand clothes used before by someone else. You can see from the photo how at least one in the community is already benefiting. Agatha can sew clothes that look really nice. She can make a small business out of it and be financially independent, but it costs money to buy material and also spare parts for the machine. There are other issues too. If she is bringing income into the family then how will she share her earnings with her husband? Who will maintain and take care of the machine? Should men learn how to use sewing machines also?

Marie Mondu observes, "How are our men dealing with the fact that more women are becoming liberated? It is observed in a number of occasions where women participation is dominant, males simply withdraw. What concerns me is do Papua New Guineans truly understand what gender equity is? Something is really wrong if men are feeling threatened and women on the other hand are feeling inferior and urged to equal up by competing. Gender equity is not about competition and it's definitely not about singling out roles and obligations according to sex and age! It's about how men, women and children, young and old can complement each other -- in talents, in participation, in freely making decisions that we may all be able to take full responsibility and ownership of our actions. When we start accepting each other's limitations, welcoming participation and give genuine respect to every human being as partners, then we've experienced gender equity in its true sense."

Joe Mopro who took Photo 6 comments: "The photo shows Debbie Chapman and Sarah Garap meeting at a conference on women's rights at Mingende Debbie represents the International Women's Development Association. Sarah is based in Kundiawa and is currently working researching gender-based violence with UNDP. The conference involved developing a curriculum for training more women for leadership in village courts so they can have a say in situations where women are abused or a child is abused. The idea is to train women to sit in at village courts and to represent womenfolk. This means educating women about their rights in the community. Most of the women don't know their rights. That is why it is important to have women advocates like Kup Women for Peace. The United Nauro Gor community too is acting to empower women as for too long they have been suppressed. Hopefully those trained will work to mobilize more women in our community to speak about issues affecting them. This conference has made a difference to me. As a man I learned a lot during the training. Personally I have come to realise that I have not respected my wife as I should. Even though I am an educated man cultural taboos have influenced me. If more men would get this training they would learn better to respect their wives and that would be good for the community as a whole. When I went home after the workshop I apologized to my wife for what I've done and told her how important she is -- something I rarely do."

Photo 7 presents the image of a father with his sick child at the clinic in the local hospital. When a father carries his child into an area normally reserved for women (the Maternal and Child Health clinic) he will have to cope with comments from the female audience. When Alois Tundu brought in his badly dehydrated child one could hear comments like, "Did you leave your wife at home?" Do you have so many children that you have to leave your wife to look after the others? Did your wife die and you are carrying your child here? You two must have had a fight and now your wife has left you with the kid! Fortunately Alois took it in good humour responding to the women's taunts with, "I don't have pigs or money to pay for a new wife so I have to listen to the one I have and bring the child here." Privately he says that it is his turn to bring the child to the hospital and that he and his wife share the responsibility of the children. He hopes that his example will inspire other men to do the same. Perhaps that is where the answer lies -- in partnership within the family.



Some women are respected because they are related to powerful men in the community such as those with material wealth or holding high positions in government offices. Other

women find freedom to exercise their rights in communities where genuine respect is generated such as in churches, schools and offices that observe gender policies. In some cases men respond by withdrawing their participation. At other times, by challenging tradition women become a threat to the community. However, in true partnership both parties must feel worthy of their contributions and not dominated by either sex.

Photovoice has helped to raise these gender issues. Both women and men have held the cameras, taken photos and commented on them. They have entered into dialogue to develop their own meanings. Exhibition of the photos for local viewing allows people to view what others see as important. It opens up communication channels and promotes dialogue and discussion. Ultimately it invites people to promote their own and their community's well-being. Hopefully it will also reach and influence policy makers and others who may be mobilized to bring about change.

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