

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING EXTREME POVERTY IN PNG (In view of empowering women in PNG)

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I was asked by the organizers of this Conference to speak on Effective Approaches to Addressing Extreme Poverty, especially in view of empowering women in PNG. The face of poverty differs depends on where you and who you are focusing on. For instance you will not see poverty in Rabaul, Manus, Lae but you may see faces of poverty in parts of Port Moresby, Daru etc people not having enough to eat and lack of basic services.

Sir Michael Somare, the Prime Minister for Papua New Guinea recently claim in the media that PNG is a rich country , saying this to justify why PNG tax payers should buy him a jet plane for his use. He has not notice the sex workers who sleep at Badili bus stop with their children or the children abundant selling sex at Boroko or the many young people who work in the night clubs in Port Moresby.

It is not surprising, since many leaders would not know that their sisters have no food to eat because the best is given to them (the brothers) while their sisters and the children go without.

So my brief talk is going to be based on issues as I see and I believe legislations and policies that should be address to alleviate poverty in PNG with the view to empower women.

An expatriate man and his wife befriended a local motuan woman. So some weekends the couple would drive out to the beach near the village spending time there with their friend and her family. One of those times the motuan woman's sister joined the group at the beach. The couple wanted to know the sister's name so the husband asked in pidgin "Wanam nam blong susu blong you?" (What's the name of your breast?) Instead of saying "wanam nam blong susa blong you?" The local woman replied "We do not name them".

This may be a joke, but unfortunately, that is what is happening in Papua New Guinea. Women give pleasure and nourished the family but when it comes to planning developing programs, policies and legislations we are forgotten, we do not have names. If you do not have a name and an appropriate status then you cannot be consulted.

Let me tell you a story about a "A fire Truck" – "Fire truck" is a poem written about a woman who sells fire wood on Daru Island, Western Province. It is her only source of income for her family. The poem talks about a woman whose dirty, wearing rages cannot sleep at night waiting for the dawn so she could carry firewood bundles (three or four bundles at a time) on her back to sell, walking with her children aged 3/4 and she pregnant too, dogs chase her, people say sori I do not need fire wood, she would keep

walking and waiting in the hot sun or through the rain and mud. She would sometimes compromise for food in kind so she can feed her family. The same woman can be traded by her husband as a prostitute later in the evening because she was unable to sell her firewood.

The fire truck is a child bride forced into marital relationship by her family because her customs required her to marry at that early age. Many of these girls marry at the age of 14/15 leaving community school at grade 6/8 and by the time they are 19/20 they have three children. I was in Daru recently, and I realized that one of the young women who used to come regularly to sell firewood was not amongst the others. I was later informed that she had died a week before, I arrived at Daru. I was told then, that many of these young girls died before the age of 21 yrs. So what happened to their children?

Looking at the life of this woman one wonders and asks “why is she living at Daru, even for that matter in any urban areas, when survival is so difficult that it takes her dignity and pride away. What lessons can we learn from this poem what could be done to help a woman like the “Fire Truck” who lives in extreme poverty.

- **Lack of Social Research to assess the impact of major development project on women and children.**

Example: The PNG Govt. along with the men in the corridors of the Fly River have decided that having cash in the national purse and in individuals pockets was more important than the preservation of the environment from which women harvest to feed their families. The majestic Fly is now dead for 500 years because of the agreement signed to dump the Okedi Mine Tailings into the Fly River System. The “fire truck” is one example of the people who are experiencing such poverty from the corridors of the Fly River now living at Daru, trying to survive on 126/137 kina paid twice yearly from the CMCA agreements. I have visited these areas and talked to women, who informed me that they wake up each morning wondering what they are going eat that day.

- **Lack of Social Mobilization Strategy on Population Control.**

We are having too many children that we cannot afford to look after. When we were reviewing the Child Welfare Act in 2006, the review committee was informed that 70% of the PNG Population is less than 25 years. And each year we hear the national Govt. Ministers addressing gatherings on how fast the PNG Population is increasing and how we do not have such services as health, schools to keep up with the increasing population demands. But they have not made an effort to implement the National Population policy.

- **Lack of alternate Skills to generate income in the informal sector:**

Many of our people affected by poverty are women who are also the informal sector actors. The common goods sold are ice blocks, second hand clothing, donuts, beetle nuts, spear/cigarettes. There is need to provide alternate skills to enable the informal sector actors to offer a variety of good to attract customers. E.g. jam making, using cane to make furniture, bamboos products, shells, coconut products, etc. What good is it to provide micro-financial programs when the competition is so high that they are unable to repay back the loans?

- **Literacy problem:**

It is known fact that in PNG women have the highest rate of illiteracy rate in the pacific. Some have even suggested that it is up to 60%. Many of these women in the informal sector are illiterate. They continue to depend on relatives and husbands especially to fill in form and etc. It makes it difficult for them to access development information easily and participate in programs that would benefit them.

- **Delivery of Basic Govt. Services - Health and Education**

In many rural areas of PNG there are no health services and education – for the basic reason that there is lack of staff willing to work in the rural areas and lack of drugs. The centralizing of the Provincial Hospital to be managed by the Hospital Boards had actually isolated the hospitals from the general health services provision in the provinces and this has affected the operations of the aid-post. Before the centralization, the Medical Superintendent of the hospital was also in charge of the health planning in the province. This policy move at national level has badly affected the health services in the rural areas.

Most times the teachers and health workers from the rural areas are waiting in town to collect their fortnightly salaries. Those who cannot afford are further marginalized by fees imposed for education and health services.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that we cannot claim to understand and know what women and children want. We need to consciously consult and involve them in planning and implementation of programs and projects etc that directly affect them.