

THE EMANCIPATING POWER

A lifelong dedication to adult education and community development has allowed Professor Barbara Pamphilon to build up women farmers' learning and address gender equity issues in remote regions of Papua New Guinea



PHOTO: BARBARA PAMPHILON, UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

KEY POINTS

- Adult education programs are helping women in PNG break down gender barriers and acquire new skills in managing farm productivity and marketing.
- The well-received program is now being scaled out to reach even more remote communities in rural PNG.

BY DR GIO BRAIDOTTI

The role education plays in everyday problem solving can easily be taken for granted, but it is profound. Education spans the ability to readily access and analyse information through to understanding diagrams, maps and spreadsheets ... in other words, information displayed flat, on the written page, in two dimensions.

Lack of schooling diminishes people's abilities in these skills, creating difficulties that can constrain life outcomes. For rural communities in Papua New Guinea (PNG), this form of disadvantage means that opportunities for women to benefit from their daily labour on household farms and gardens are needlessly limited.

One person who understands and can help overcome these difficulties is Professor Barbara Pamphilon, director of the Australian Institute for Sustainable Communities at the University of Canberra.

Professor Pamphilon was recruited by ACIAR to use the sum of her expertise in adult education

and community development to help rural women in PNG. The project's overarching aim is to deliver training that can support the development of agribusiness-orientated farm management practices.

Early on, Professor Pamphilon decided to focus the pilot program on the more disadvantaged communities in four of the target areas in East New Britain and the Western Highlands.

In many remote areas of PNG, up to 30% of women have never been to school and many more did not complete primary school. Yet, it is these women that Professor Pamphilon describes as the 'backbone of the country', producing the food that sustains many households.

When she surveyed the women's needs, the most important issue she identified was low literacy rates. Low literacy is a consequence of a poor record of girls' education in PNG's past compounded by a sheer lack of schools in remote and rural regions.

"The status of education in PNG is changing," Professor Pamphilon says. "There is a real valuing of education. Now, rural families are keen to see their children receive schooling and the women were extremely keen to learn themselves. They just did not have any accessible opportunities."

As a consequence, the training provided through ACIAR went out to the women and did not expect them to come to central towns. The program had to be packaged in ways that allowed women

to learn 'how to learn' while also empowering them to act within the broader context of their own household, farms and communities.

It took a careful blend of adult learning skills, tools, methods and strategies to realise that outcome, and even more skill to achieve it in ways that are self-perpetuating.

THE TWO-WAY LEARNING GENDER EQUITY 'CLASSROOM'

Having rarely opened a book or sat in groups to solve problems, many of the women were naturally hesitant, uncertain and anxious to please. But Professor Pamphilon's participatory and strengths-based approach cut through all that. Based on acknowledging the abundance of strong local knowledge, it is an extremely empowering approach.

"We go in and work with their strengths and assets," she says. "Sure, we prepare activities, worksheets and the like, and we put in place channels to access a greater network of expertise, like the resources available at PNG's National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI). But we capitalised on women's skill with informal learning and the abundance of local knowledge. We then provide tools to further build those strengths. And in turn we learn about the challenges faced by women. It is really two-way learning."

The lessons learned from every village-based training activity contributed to the action research

OF WORKING TOGETHER



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PHOTO: KATYA MIKHAILOVICH



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PHOTO: KYMA SIMONICINI

1. Susan Trapu, Kwinkya project leader, working with women farmers in the Western Highlands.

2. Professor Barbara Pamphilon addressing gender equity through education in Tubuseria, Central Province, Papua New Guinea.

3. Women farmers in the Gazelle Peninsula, East New Britain, present their ideas for the Maria Books, developed as part of an ACIAR-funded project to teach key agricultural messages to women smallholders and to improve literacy skills.

that furthered the project's goal. For example, interactions at the village level revealed that many farmers were marketing the same kind of produce at the same time, causing market prices to drop. This understanding created opportunities to provide training on seasonal planning, crop diversification and introduce, with NARI's assistance, new production capabilities. With these new skills came greater resilience, including resilience to production constraints such as drought.

The training allowed the villagers to break out of habitual behaviours and see the household's strengths and assets. Training helped them acquire the means to map pathways to highly desired outcomes, such as educating children and increasing the family assets, for instance by building a house.

From the outset, some villagers were selected to receive extra training to become village community educators. These people act as peer educators who roll out the training they have received in ways they know will build on local skills and needs. In the future, these educators can further access outside sources of assistance and they remain in the village after the project team leaves. They also become the role models for more productive and gender-equitable ways to manage the family farm.

Both women and men took on these educator roles.

Professor Pamphilon explains that in targeting gains for women, she prefers to focus on gender equity, which recognises the strengths of both men and women, rather than on women's rights. While a rights-based approach works well in terms of legal frameworks, Professor Pamphilon says it can prove confrontational and divisive in the more intimate setting of households and communities.

"A strong family is a goal shared by men and women," she says. "So we encourage a family team philosophy. In the process, we make visible gender inequality and show how it will be limiting the family's prospects. So it is important to include men. After all, social change can only occur when both women and men change."

That strategy has seen families acquire the ability to plan together, with women's voices included in deciding the family's aspirations and the management changes needed to achieve those goals. That approach included blurring the hard distinction between cultivating food for the family (traditionally women's business) and cash crops (the domain of men). Instead, farming systems and paths to markets are now viewed more holistically. The emphasis is on providing nutritious food for the family, optimising income-earning opportunities and gaining access to micro-financing and savings accounts to build resilience so families can invest back in the farm.

As a development model, it is applicable to other domains, including achieving better health

outcomes. The project ran for four years from 2011 and is now completed. Comparisons of baseline and endline studies are impressive.

As one participant in Kwinkya in the Baiyer Valley, Western Highlands, put it: "In the past our family never talked together. My husband never discussed plans or worked with me. I did things on my own. After the training, my family sits together and discusses our goals. My husband and the children work with me and we always plan together. My husband and I work together as best friends and I am so happy (*mi hamamas tru*)."

So extensive were the gains that a second project has been launched to scale up and roll out the program to more regions. This project will involve training an even larger number of village community educators, led by a women's leadership team in each area, as the project continues to reach out to the most vulnerable women.

Since success tends to breed imitation, however, the families that are achieving more by working together more equitably are providing a beacon and that too is creating an impetus for change. ■

ACIAR PROJECT: ASEM/2010/052 'Improving women's business acumen in PNG: working with women smallholders in horticulture'

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