



Re-Thinking Gender in the Pacific

Brussels, 14.30 – 16.30, EEAS Building JOYE 02/A546, May 30th 2013

As a follow-up to the ECOPAS Re-Thinking Gender in the Pacific workshop in St Andrews, April 19th, a group of social scientists, including three visiting researchers from the Pacific, will be in Brussels to present the outcomes and discuss the issues.

Re-Thinking Gender in the Pacific was held as part of an on-going 'North Sea-South Seas' annual exchange involving the St Andrews Centre for Pacific Studies (CPS) and the Bergen Pacific Studies Research Group (BPSRG). This was a unique gathering of expertise, working together to unpick the thinking behind current gender policy in the Pacific and drawing this into dialogue with research evidence of real-life practices and challenges, the workshop had the objective of delineating the shape and possibilities for an alternative research-policy agenda in this area.

The focus was on how a range of gender issues are conceptualized in the Pacific, and how we might go about discovering the dynamics and the terms in which these issues are conceived in local terms. The aim here is to better identify the problems from within, so to speak, such that solutions can be more effectively formulated and addressed.

The St Andrews began with a vivid example from a PNG researcher, Fiona Hukula, from her fieldwork in Ninemile Settlement in Port Moresby: a married man who worked with NGOs to provide training and awareness on gender issues and domestic violence, was fined by a mediation group for beating up his wife. Having run a gender workshop in the morning, he hit his wife when he returned in the afternoon to find her playing cards: the man said 'it hurt him' to see this going on whilst he was out at work. Clearly, the vocabulary deployed in the gender workshop did not match the lived reality – the portrayal of gender issues failed to capture the practical concerns.

What can we do to ensure that policy is informed by, and deploys, more appropriate descriptive terms?

This *Re-Thinking Gender in the Pacific* roundtable in Brussels will present the outcomes of the workshop and provide a context for discussion:

- research evidence on gender issues in Pacific
- possible roles and niche for future EU programmes
- key themes and principles of approach for such programmes

Topics covered by the St Andrews workshop

- Gender has been a focus for a long time – Why so little change? What are the barriers?
- What part can the EU play in supporting efforts to address gender inequality?
- EU consulting academics to provide qualitative evidence for issues and theory of change
- Colonial and church histories of implementing European values – is the Pacific being criticized for putting into practice ideas that derive from Europe?
- Evidence of Pacific responding to European derived ideas suggests that deploying such terms in policy may well exacerbating the problems.
- Does treating gender as a matter of men/women ingrain this non-Pacific division?
- Is criticism or understanding the more appropriate starting point?
- Wider contexts for inter-personal violence – can gender violence really be separated out?
- Do we need to be radical and drop gender as a focus?
- Identifying the appropriate entry points and local levels for support.
- Wider understanding of kinship, culture and social obligation is crucial.
- Interplay between economic and social inequalities in urban in-migration.
- Women creating customary wealth versus narratives of ‘uneconomic’ activity.
- External portrayals of Pacific men as violent, and in a negative light.
- Creativity of contemporary masculinities that play to and play off stereotyping.
- Reflections of male prisoners in a Port Moresby jail – locating the cause of violence more important than whether man against woman.
- Kinship obligations mean that responsibility is wider – anxiety about being drawn into, or becoming a target for, violence as a result of relations with others.
- Recent rise in sorcery killings, transformations of customary witchcraft, and the links to new churches which generalize the presence of evil.
- Is violence and torture targeted against the woman or aimed at the witch inside her?
- Taking responsibility for the social consequences of imported terminologies.

Summary of discussion points

1.

Social science research and scholarly debate constantly strives to work with the best conceptual terms in which social life can be described and analysed.

- Because the terms and descriptions in Policy seek to address pressing social issues, there are real life consequences – and an added responsibility - to make sure that we are working with the best descriptions.
- European social scientists can not know the Pacific from the inside, but what we can see may not always be visible from the inside.

- Alongside its regional partners, the EU wishes to play its part in supporting Pacific declarations and efforts towards gender equality.
- Is there a distinctive role that can be provided or a particular niche that can be developed by the EU?
- How can European social science support the EU in providing such a role and in developing such a niche?

2.

Social science research evidence shows that gender in the Pacific does not mean a simple difference between 'men' and 'women'.

- Gender in the Pacific is not derived from biological difference, but from different ways of acting – not from what people *are*, but from what people *do*.
- Gender in the Pacific is not a stable property or fixed identity or individually controlled – it is a matter of performance and relationality.
- Pacific peoples are not only their own person - kinship connections extend to Mothers and Fathers side through birth, and extend to Affinal kin through marriage.
- A person is differently composed by these different relations – e.g., a woman may well be a Daughter, Sister, Cousin, Mother, Grandmother, Aunty, Neice, Wife and In-law.
- Each kind of relation provides a different basis or context for social action – e.g. the obligations of a Daughter are different to a Wife, and are different whether she is in her own place or that of her Spouse.

3.

Concepts of gender in the contemporary Pacific are the outcome of the interplay between a diversity of customary ideas and the historical encounter with European derived ideas.

- Cultural concepts in the Pacific have always been open to change and to experimenting with the kinds of changes that new ideas might bring about.
- Sometimes this results in the adoption of new terms and practices, and a de-valuing of old ideas. Sometimes this results in the re-valuing of old ideas, and the rejection of new ones.
- Such encounters never leave the concepts unchanged, and they continue to exert an influence and provide a resource to think with.
- European derived ideas demarcate 'men' and 'women', and often ascribed the strict roles which reflected European society at the time – e.g. during the colonial period, women were to be 'seen but not heard' and not expected to take on a public or political role.
- These European derived ideas have left their mark in the terms of both Pacific peoples' concepts of gender, and in the terms of contemporary gender Policy.

4.

Concepts of gender in the contemporary Pacific are also the outcome of the interplay between the way people in different social positions see different kinds of value in such ideas – e.g. personal or political advantages or disadvantages.

- Different concepts will provide a different emphasis to social positions – e.g. gaining or diminishing in importance and changing the balance of power.
- A woman is not simply a woman – e.g. she may act like a Wife or a Daughter, and in order to do so she needs to behave in the right way, and to be treated in the right way. Frictions develop when someone thinks they act in the right way, and yet thinks they are not treated in the right way.
- Even as a Wife she may act in a ‘male’ way if she happens to be the bread-winner, and frictions can develop when a Husband feels de-valued in being treated in a ‘female’ way.
- Difference does not necessarily mean inequality – there are different ways in which equality is manifested not simply by things being the same or symmetrical.
- Gender identities are not stable but are constantly negotiated and changing in step with each moment of the action of social life.

5.

Concepts of gender in the contemporary Pacific are relational – they are the outcome of the translations between different ideas, and relations between different social positions.

- Because gender in the Pacific is not reduceable to the biological difference between men and women, are Policy makers working with the best descriptions for understanding contemporary social issues?
- Because of the influence of colonial history, are Pacific peoples being criticised for acting out European derived ideas and social values?
- Because Pacific peoples do not separate out gender as a discrete issue or domain of action, does Policy exacerbate the problems by treating gender as a separate domain?
- Because ‘gender’ is already, so-to-speak, mainstreamed in social life, does this provide an entry point and pathway towards developing an alternative approach for Policy?
- Because Pacific peoples are the ones actually doing the cultural translation work between new and old ideas, and new and old social positions, can Policy look to them for answers to design programmes that identify and deal with the issues in the right terms and at the right levels through which change is taking place?
- Because concepts of gender in the contemporary Pacific are the outcome of a long and changing history, should Policy responses recognize that programmes for change need to be a combination of short-term interventions and the long-term building up of research capacity within the Pacific?