Gender and Customary Governance in Vanuatu

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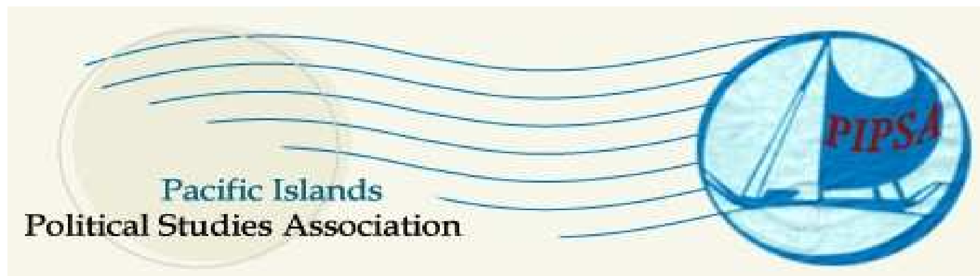

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This is a profoundly complex topic. The following comments are offered at the beginning of a research process, and as a contribution to discussion and reflection, rather than as the polished outcome of much exchange.

The topic grew out of conversations between the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, the office of Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs in Vanuatu (MNCC), and AusAID. In 2004, the Secretariat of the MNCC asked whether, from within a conflict prevention framework, the Centre could offer any support to customary leaders struggling with the extraordinary pressures of rapid change from within and without their own communities, and with the tumble of contradictory pressures that get tagged in the box of 'development'. Later we were joined by AusAID, as a third partner. Together, we developed a program of workshops – although they could be better described as facilitated conversations – with chiefs and others in the community at a number of sites around the country. The workshops are called 'storians' – conversations or storytelling – to try to make it clear that facilitators (whether expatriate or ni-Vanuatu) are not there to present expert knowledge from far away. Rather, the storians provide opportunities for conversations and follow-up actions around critical themes, including supporting reflection on the challenging interactions between indigenous and exogenous approaches to governance; they endeavour to encourage a move away from defensiveness – our own and the storian participants, and to encourage positive linkages and exchange at a number of levels – among different bodies within Vanuatu (e.g., local customary bodies with provincial government and relevant NGOs), within communities about what they see as the critical issues facing them in the context of the values and directions they hold most dear, and between Australians and ni-Vanuatu, as neighbours. These processes call for reflection from ni-Van participants, but they also require a context of self-reflection from Australian or expatriate participants, to enable listening and dialogue. Research topics, including this one, have grown out of our discussions and the partners' interests and concerns.

One of the fundamental challenges of governance across the Pacific Islands region, and in Vanuatu, is the tension between what we might call evolving customary governance values and practices and liberal governance institutions and norms. State models were transposed

to the Pacific Islands, to sit on top of the diverse, semi-autonomous social groups which have been the common form of indigenous political, social and economic life. While some liberal institutions sit quite firmly on top, and some aspects of democratic politics fare well, there is nevertheless a disjunction – sometimes a profound disjunction – between many community norms, values, practices, and the norms and mechanisms of liberal governance (Brown, 2007). Just as problematic is significant friction between the dynamics of exchange economies and of international market economies (Nixon, 2006). This is not a simple dichotomy or polarisation, but a dense, messy set of exchanges, resistances and transformations, taking place within individuals and societies, and engaging virtually all dimensions of people's experience and agency (Keesing, 1996). If it is not a simple dichotomy, even more emphatically it is not an encounter between 'tradition' and 'modernity', where modernity is the inevitable path of the future. Rather it is an evolving encounter between and interweaving of ways of shaping our collective being that none of us understand very well (Sahlins, 2005).

There are ongoing efforts to forge more constructive interface between these sometimes conflicting or incommensurate approaches – our own partnership is part of such undertakings. These efforts can get stuck on a number of friction points. Gender constructions are an area of particular sensitivity in this context.

Assertions of custom are often seen, by both ni-Vanuatu and others, as pitted against assertions of women's rights, and in conflict with many women's desires for greater equality and self-determination. Upholding custom, however, also works as an expression of the desire for self-determination and the maintenance of longstanding community values – something to which women and men are widely committed (Jolly, 1994). This tension renders questions of gender particularly fraught insofar as they are experienced as a battle between competing goods. It also means that gender has become an area of fundamental challenge for constructive exchange or engagement between different governance norms.

Let's look more carefully at some of the conceptual links and moves that are involved in this knotty issue of 'gender'. The paper first offers a simple statement of the 'problem' as it is understood here, and then explores some of the ways the problem is framed and debated. How gender issues are framed bears directly on gender and customary governance in Vanuatu – it also bears on people's capacities to find ways through the dilemmas facing us.

The Problem

The social problems generated by constructions of gender are generally approached through looking at the status and conditions of women, and that is what this paper will also do. However, it is taken as understood here that serious difficulties faced by women are actually profound problems for society more generally – perhaps they could be understood

as the ‘presenting problem’ for a wider constellation of social deformations and costs. Levels of social cohesion, violence, physical and mental health, food security and education (formal or informal) have repeatedly been shown to be closely linked to the standing and status of women in society. (Patrick Kaiku’s paper touches on some of the broader social problems linked with low status of women in PNG, but also see, for example, AusAID’s 2007 statement on gender policy or VAWG, 2001:10.)

Problems faced by women in Vanuatu could be grouped roughly into two categories: safety and participation.

Safety: Here it is levels of domestic violence in particular that emerge as the leading issue.[2] According to the Government of Vanuatu’s policy paper on ‘Violence against Women (2002-2006)’, ‘[m]any women accept violence to be a natural part of family life. In more recent times, the bride payment has been used as an excuse for men to beat their wives, as they believe they ‘own’ their wife and can therefore treat her in any way they wish. Women seeking help from their families have frequently been sent back into violent situations where they have been either beaten again or murdered. . . . In many traditions in Vanuatu, parents treat female children as if inferior to male children, ... In this context, as adults, men and women thus come to accept as normal violence against women’ (GoV, 2002: 69, 70). Sexual abuse of young girls, often within the extended family setting, is also seen within the country as a problem. ‘[A] child protection survey conducted in 2003 found 84 percent of respondents felt that “sexual abuse is a big problem in Vanuatu”’ (UNICEF, 2005:37).

Participation: Participation in this context means people being able to take part, to a reasonable extent, in the decision-making that shapes their lives. This can be a subtle category – there are different ways of taking part in the shaping of collective (and personal) directions, while different things are seen as susceptible to human activity in different societies. Nevertheless, within the circuit of your own spheres of life and activity, are you part of a web of mutual exchange and mutual respect, and so able to take part in shaping collective directions? Or are you repeatedly or systematically marginalised and so vulnerable? Local and expatriate commentators commonly draw attention to women having little control over decisions concerning either family or community (eg, UNICEF,

[2] As elsewhere, statistical information is patchy. There has a significant increase in the number of domestic violence cases dealt with by the Vanuatu Womens Centre; domestic violence is not treated separately from common assault by police statistics, but common assault is the most common crime and has also been increasing over the past decade (Tor et al). Anecdotally, violence against women (and children) in the home appears to be socially not acceptable, but overlooked – and common. By contrast, cases of rape outside the home seem less common. In aggregated figures from 1988-2002 of Vanuatu Police Force statistics rape of all kinds was the 10th most common recorded crime and accounted for 1.15% of all crime (Tor et al).

2005, CUSO, 2004, Tor, 2004). A 2004 study listed the views that 'women cannot hold decision-making positions', and that 'it is not the woman's place to give advice or to tell men what to do' as commonly held beliefs (Tor et al, 2004:62). The Comprehensive Reform Program, 1997, noted that women are not generally expected or encouraged to participate in decision-making in the family, the community or government' (Appendix D, quoted in Malloch et al, 2006:14). High levels of domestic violence also have serious implications for participation – systemic violence is a powerful mechanism of marginalisation. Nevertheless, there are varied views on levels of participation, with a survey conducted by FSPI indicating 'that 85% of rural respondents recognise women occupying leadership roles' (Kalontano, 2003:45). This may suggest that processes of change are underway.

Questions of Framing

How is violence towards women framed as a problem in discussions of gender in Vanuatu? It seems that questions of gender are often set up along intersecting axes of tension. We could imagine relations between men and women in society as one axis, ranging from relations of mutual respect and safety to the opposite of that. A second axis runs between the set of things we are calling customary governance and local norms (on the one hand) and liberal institutional governance, liberal international norms or 'modernity' (on the other hand). These axes, however, are often conflated or superimposed, one on the other, so that liberal norms are implicitly identified with relations of mutual respect while custom becomes identified with male domination and the abuse of women.

Deep rooted historical, political and discursive dynamics shape this kind of framing[3], but there are also some quite direct reasons for it. To focus on the latter, the expression of distress at violence and marginalisation is often given voice in the language of human rights, as this language has become internationally the leading mechanism for protesting suffering and abuse. The language of human rights, including women's rights, is broadly part of liberal internationalism and liberal political ideals more generally. Relevant official statements, such as the GoV National Plan of Action on Women (2007-2011) situate themselves within a spectrum of international events, meetings, goals and instruments. Phrases with international appeal circulate here too – 'girls can do anything' is a potent phrase in Port Vila, not just a bumper sticker in Sydney. On the other side of the coin, when ni-Vanuatu respond to questions on domestic violence, they will often refer to custom as an explanation for violence against women, as the quote above draws attention to bride price and the differential valuing of girls and boys. Custom is commonly seen as conflicting with international standards of human rights (e.g. see VAWG's paper, 'The Girl Child'). But I suggest that this framing is deeply misleading. When the axes become

[3] See Jolly, 2000:125 and Brown, 2002, chapter 3 for a discussion of universalism and relativism in human rights as 'politically grounded epistemologies' (Jolly, 2000:137).

conflated, a link between custom and male domination and violence becomes doubly emphasized – it is not only that certain practices or values are put forward as a reason for why men hit women; the link between custom and violence also becomes embedded in the trajectory of the argument. At the same time, a link between liberal internationalism or modernity and emancipation of women also becomes embedded. Moving towards better conditions for women can then seem to be tied to embracing liberal conceptions of political community and of the human, and moving away from traditional values. We are offered two sets of oppositions, which become welded into each other. It is worth remembering here that the realities, rather than the ideals, of relations between men and women in liberal states are themselves marked by significant problems of violence, marginalisation and exploitation. The identification of custom with male violence is not only mistaken; it seems likely to create real obstacles to women improving their circumstances and standing in Vanuatu.

Thinking back over conversations that were part of the research for this paper, I was struck by what seemed two strikingly different kinds of exchange. One kind of conversation addressed women and men's behaviour towards each other; because of the kind of questioning, these were often discussions of safety and responses to violence. The second kind of conversation, also in response to questions of gender, was about the tree with its roots in the earth, its shade, the creatures living in or sheltered under its branches, or about the body of the nakamal, or the canoe and the outrigger, or accounts of women weaving the patterns of care which held clan relationships together. One respondent reflected on customary leadership in his area as a feminine role, as carer for and nurturer of connection. Through these images people articulated their sense of gender; there are other accounts, from different parts of the country, that I realise I could have encountered, and other visual, tactile, or enacted depictions of life, creation, vitality, sociality, family – among the various threads that shimmer through 'gender'.

These were the two ways that people I encountered engaged what was at stake for them in talk of gender. How do these two kinds of conversation – one about how men and women act towards each other, the other reflections on fundamental patterns of life – relate to each other? I don't know – there is certainly not a clear or direct line from one to the other for me. And I suspect there is not a clear translation from one to the other for many of the people I was speaking with either. Gender, to follow Marilyn Strathern here, is not reducible solely to the affairs of men and women. For all of us, the ways we apprehend male and female is interwoven into our culturally shared understanding of life – of human and cosmic life, at its deepest and often only vaguely articulated levels. There is surely deep connection between the interaction of men and women and the norms that partially structure that, on the one hand, and this cosmic apprehension of gender, on the other hand – in the case of my own conversations, the latter was often enough spontaneously offered

as a response to questions about men and women. But there may also be considerable flexibility about their alignments, with roots, trunks and branches open to some rather different sets of actual behaviours and interactions.

When ‘Westerners’ like myself talk with ni-Vanuatu about gender, perhaps sometimes even when ni-Vanuatu talk with each other, what do we think are we talking about – what is actually at stake for us in the exchange? Sometimes we might be talking about related, but different, things – and so in important ways talking past each other. Behaviours around power, violence and sex are difficult to tangle with everywhere – we are all part of that. Can societies shift on the first set of issues – that is, on ways that communities support or condone violence towards women – without seriously destabilising, or being destructive towards the latter – the cosmic tree of life, as it is reflected on or enacted? How differently will people engage in exchanges if they feel that what is at stake is fundamentally the tree of life, or their deepest values, rather than questions of violence in the family or respect within community? Placing questions of gender along an axis between customary governance and liberal governance encourages this confusion by making it seem that it is the cosmic tree that is implicitly always at stake.

It is important to be alive to distinction between these two: between the sacred or cosmic, and the interaction of men and women, and to speak to them differently. But at the same time, working with gender roles will often involve both domains, even if only implicitly. Both need to be acknowledged or given space – to work with violence and marginalisation people need to know that what they value or what gives them value is not threatened or destabilised, but respected or affirmed.

Of course, we cannot acknowledge fundamental values if we think that there is a direct line – of causality – running from those values to violence towards women. This raises again the question of the role of traditional values and practices in the marginalisation of women. To address custom, we need to look briefly at some of the different things that are meant in talk of custom.

Custom - Traditional practices

Custom is a multilayered term, open to different purposes and meanings (White, 1993: 476). At one level, custom refers to traditional indigenous life ways. The archipelago did not and does not have one culture or one custom, but different languages, different clan groups, different, but often overlapping cultures and customs. Kinship patterns, land tenures and usage, systems of exchange and sharing, marriage arrangements, patterns of settlement, making of textiles – there are many interweaving dimensions that go up to make people’s evolving but indigenously rooted life ways. Ni-Vanuatu may not always call these life ways ‘custom’ – they are simply what people do. The process of colonisation and

missionisation, the formation of Vanuatu into a single state, and being part of the global political economy have clearly reshaped political, economic and social life profoundly. Many aspects of ancestral life have passed, although some might remain as important reference points. However, significant elements and currents of traditional practice continue, to varying extents, to remain alive and powerful across the country, particularly as they are embedded in rural, subsistence-based life. Traditional values and practices, however, also reach into urban contexts. Customary governance, which in contemporary Vanuatu could be understood as community governance drawing to varying degrees on traditional lifeways, retains significant legitimacy and authority.

From commentary by early missionaries onwards, traditional values and practices have often been seen by expatriate observers as oppressive towards women and marked by male violence. Yet, as an anonymous paper by the Canadian international development organisation, CUSO, points out, 'as traditional practices . . . are further acknowledged and explored . . a number of [. .] inconsistencies [emerge] between those practices and the current situation facing women. . . . considering the important role of women in rural community life . . . . it is hard to accept that violence against women was either tolerated or seen as an accepted practice' (2004). At the same time, the complex interaction with missionary activities, colonisation and early state building is being explored and re-evaluated.

The rhetoric of earlier (and perhaps still a small number of contemporary) Christian missionaries and indigenous converts alike characterised conversion as the 'transformation from the time of darkness to the time of light. . . . [with] the time of darkness [.] typified by ancestral violence, killing and cannibalism, to the time of light characterised by Christian peace, love and togetherness' (Jolly, 2000: 129). These views, however, were not unmediated accounts of a state of affairs, but marked by their own forms of blindness and ways of seeing, and engaged as tools in efforts to reshape local sociality. As Margaret Jolly has pointed out, early foreign observers rarely saw the violence or oppression entailed in their own cultures' and states' practices of forcible 'pacification', colonisation, or blackbirding in Melanesia (2000: 129). Missionaries endeavoured to remodel the family as a basis for Christian life. Their views of more enlightened family practices entailed the gradual movement of men and women into smaller family units and women away from heavier agricultural activities outside, to newly created 'private' spaces inside the domestic spaces of the new homes (Tor et al, 2004). 'The women no longer took part, for example, in building a house; the men started moving away from food preparation and cooking, caring for the children and other shared duties' (Tor et al, 2004: 20). The impact of Western divisions of public and private space has been particularly significant for gender constructions. Margaret Jolly notes that 'although gender difference was encoded spatially in the traditional settlement, the forms and meanings of these separate spheres and sacred

spaces is very different to those prevalent in the West. . . Indeed the very basis of the division [of public and private] is missing since the most central and public institutions revolved around the sacralisation of domestic life. Growing crops, herding pigs, nurturing children and perpetuating the cycles of kinship linking ancestors and descendants was the stuff of public as well as private life' (Jolly, 1989:222 in Malloch, 2006: 9).

Colonial and later Western accounts have persistently overlooked the significance of women's activities for political life (broadly understood) within indigenous communities, and have rendered invisible traditional forms of activity in which women's work was and is highly valued. Lissant Bolton points to a 'study of banana-leaf bundles and skirts [which] provided a new assessment of women's role in exchange, highlighting women's power and importance, but . . also [drawing] attention to the importance of these object types, which Western eyes easily overlook' (2006:127). This overlooking is in part grounded in the placement of women in the private sphere – that is, in the realm that is other than the public life of the community. Regarding the critical issue of land, Bolton notes for example, '[m]en practice their relationship to land by having enduring rights to it; women practice their relationship to land by bearing children to it. Both men and women practice their relationship to land by using it for gardens and by living on it. The colonial interpretation of such systems accounted men as landowners and discounted women's relationship to land, and this perspective has been upheld by ni-Vanuatu since independence' (Bolton, 2006:188).

Certainly women in some islands could achieve high standing in their communities. A study by Roselyn Tor and Anthea Toka draws attention to traditional mechanisms by which women achieved formally recognised high status – 'in most islands in Vanuatu, women had their own grade-taking ceremonies . . ..' (2004:62) Women still do have such ceremonies, but they have become much less common. Moreover, in some areas men's grade-taking and status was, and to some extent still is, dependent on wives' independent achievement of status. Lissant Bolton, writing of Ambae in the 1990s, notes '[w]omen's ranks are not subordinate to men's ranks but are distinct from them, even though a woman's rank-taking ceremonies are often tied to her husband's progress through the huqe. A man may even stand in awe of his wife's achievements in the huhuru' (2006:143). Such standing was achieved not through a restricted domain of 'women's work' but, as with men, through the woman's capacity to draw upon and generate extensive cross-community exchange networks. Margaret Jolly also argues that '[w]omen are actors and not just spectators in the public rituals of circumcision, marriage, death and grade-taking. Women as well as men attain rank . . . They may be lesser actors, but they are certainly not excluded from public ceremonials and are pre-eminent in their own exclusivist and equally sacred rituals . .' (1989:222 in Malloch, 2006:8).

As well as rendering women less visible in the context of political community, private domestic spaces create areas outside scrutiny in more direct ways. Various studies have drawn attention to the extensive system of customary controls and supports which ensured that family life was open to the wider community and which would have made, and in some areas still make, domestic violence difficult (eg, Bolton, 2006). By contrast, the 'absence of many traditional protections of an extended family', the increasing emergence of nuclear families, and the weakening of traditional norms managing family life have been put forward as contributing to the increase in domestic violence (VAWG, 2001:8). It is notable that rural areas, which are generally more traditional in their patterns of life, are also associated with greater feelings of personal safety. A study by FSP found that '[v]iolence, and domestic violence, are of concern in urban areas. . . .Violence against children was a concern of 56% of urban respondents and 33% of rural respondents. Domestic violence between married couples was listed as a concern by 68% of urban respondents and 32% of rural respondents' (Kalontano et al, 2003:109). Interviews with the author noted the passing, within respondents' lifetime and experience, of heavy custom fines for violence within families.[4]

Bride-price, now widespread throughout Vanuatu, is often identified as a traditional practice that leads to domestic violence, on the basis that the man has 'paid' for his wife, and can therefore do what he likes. Roselyn Tor's study considers the contemporary practice of bride-price in five areas. The authors, drawing on extensive interviews, argue that bride-price is a modern concept which significantly distorts the functions and significance of gift-giving to the girl's family or village, gifts which were often part of a broader, cross-generational pattern of two-way exchange. Changing economic systems and values, however, have altered the context in which this exchange finds meaning. In the traditional exchange or gift economy, the concept of payment is significantly different than in a commodity and market economy.

Marilyn Strathern (1984), Lissant Bolton (2006) and Margaret Jolly (2000) also question the implications for gender constructions of differences between dominant Western and Melanesian models of, or ways of understanding, the human person. 'The idea of a singular identity, enshrined in a singular name, is entirely alien to the indigenous system. In each relationship, a person has different responsibilities and obligations and different access to authority or power. Moreover, the kinship system is constructed so that it constantly ramifies to create a kin relationship between any two individuals. . . . The suggestion that all men have power over all women misunderstands the specificity of each relationship in such a system . . ' (Bolton, 2006:55). Different understandings of the human do not

[4] Margaret Jolly also comments on the rarity of domestic violence within the communities where she undertook two years of field research in the 1970s, and where 'there were strong . . ideals of the inviolability of the person and the sanctity of the body' 2000:130.

remove oppression or violence, but they can significantly alter the context within which people act to change or respond to such violence.

Kastom and the State

If it is not primarily traditional practices, or those currents of traditional culture that are alive today, what is it that accounts for violence towards and entrenched marginalisation of women? And does custom really have no part to play in it? I want to suggest two, intersecting responses here – one to look again at custom, the second at the extraordinary scale, rapid pace and relentless demands of change – that is, at significant social stress.

One dynamic of custom, that of traditional and evolving life practices, has been briefly examined. But interweaving with life practices there is another dimension at play which is relevant here.
Custom as a singular English or Bislama term, as '*kastom'*, is a new idea; it has only been around since about the 1960s, or perhaps a little earlier. This is *kastom* understood less as traditional life ways than as the self-conscious assertion of identity or the 'externalisation of culture as a symbol' (Keesing, 1982:300 in White, 1993:476). Such an assertion can be understood as a response to the on-going and extraordinary impact of foreign, Western forms of political, economic and social relations. It is a mixed response – one not simply of assertion, but also of exploration and engagement. K*astom* articulates an 'awareness of a collective selfhood' contrasting 'with a collective other' (White, 1993:476) – a collective selfhood that brings together the many cultural differences which ni-Vanuatu celebrate. There can be elements of rejection – of modernity, of otherness, of threats of loss, but oppositional dynamics are far from being the only or the dominant transaction at work in *kastom*. Margaret Jolly has detailed the oppositional response in her study of South Pentecost in the 1970s. Here, a reification of *kastom* can create conditions for heightened forms of control of women (Jolly, 1994). 'The self-conscious need to 'hold women tight' becomes not just an internal imperative but part of the resistant relation to external pressures . . . [an] anti-colonial defence of tradition' that Jolly points out is a commonplace pattern in nationalist movements (1994: 257). A powerful polarisation of roles can take shape, as men patrol the symbolic barricades to keep away the forces of disintegration from their identities and their kin.

But *kastom* also emerged as the language of independence and the basis of nationhood. It provided the vocabulary in which the independence movement could assert their rights to land and demand it back from colonial possession – a central driver of independence. At the same time, as the independence movement joined the political and cultural debate with colonial interests and municipal powers, they had no choice but to argue upon the political ground of the state. 'Independence' is a function of statehood, and the independence movement thereby took on the space of the state, with no alternative but to be the inheritors

of that mantle. This itself entailed a profound reworking of key dimensions of ancestral values and practices, which is still very much working its way through Vanuatu's political and cultural life. There has been a process of remaking the category of *kastom* at the new level of the nation or state, where it had not been, and of searching for what this new sense of *kastom* might mean (while drawing significantly on traditional practices). Shaped by the times, character and the needs of the independence movement, then, this national kastom was marked by the conceptual life of 1960s and '70s municipal state practice and norms. The notions of *kastom* that came to the fore were those that independence activitsts could draw out to best do battle with the municipal powers, on Britain and France's own territory. Perhaps as a result, those notions centred around land ownership and amalgamated versions of men's custom. *Kastom* as a national category has come, through the dynamics of independence, to be identified with men's custom and with public spaces. Grace Molisa, a leading female figure in the independence movement (and there were outstanding women) noted that the contribution of women might be recognised at local level, but at the national level, women were missing. 'When men talk about kastom at this level, they omit women; they pretend that women don't have kastom. . . If we make women's work of no importance, much will be lost' (in Bolton, 2006:183).

While a creative element of independence, this new national space of custom may have also opened the way for elements of marginalisation, exclusion, and 'overlooking' – an underlining of the division between public and private spaces that came with colonisation and missionisation. While also marked with many of the positive elements of independence, the new form of the state may have imported into itself more reified, hierarchised socio-political arrangements than had previously existed among indigenous people. And women were now located within these domestic, non-political spaces.

Social Change

At the same time, powerful dynamics of economic and social change have been deeply affecting gender roles and expectations in Vanuatu – what it is to be a 'good' woman, and a 'good' man – but also what it is possible, or necessary, for men and women to do to survive, to look after families, or to prosper. These are changes of the most basic kind - in the ways that people eat and obtain food, earn their livelihood, become educated, arrange their housing (in urban concentrations, for example), meet and partner, create entertainment. An increasing number of young people are growing up in urban environments, seeking jobs in a capitalist labour market and are influenced by the changing expectations created by globalisation. The market economy is also reshaping rural women's and men's activities. Women's roles, for example, have been closely connected with the provision of food within their extended families and communities, but also more broadly with providing nurture, and maintaining community networks which nourish well-being. For many people, however, the provision of food and the structures and needs of

families and communities have changed profoundly with the advent of the cash economy, among other things. Extended families are increasingly becoming nuclear, often intensifying parents' burdens, (Kalontano et al, 2003:84).

Social and economic changes have thus led to new opportunities but also to new burdens or pressures. In urban, but to a somewhat lesser extent also in rural areas, people increasingly need access to cash 'to meet their family and community obligations and expectations', adding to family workloads and generating insecurity, temptation and complexity (Kalontano et al, 2003:46). Research indicates that the market economy has led to women carrying a particularly heavy burden, or drawn them away from traditional routes to community respect. Many women are increasingly making items to sell, for example, but this can also take them away from making items for customary exchange or from caring roles in the family – both traditionally sources of community standing and wellbeing. As a result women's roles and status may need to be supported in new ways (VAWG, 2001; Tor et al, 2004; Cox et al, 2007). FSPI has noted that while changes in gender roles have enabled men and women greater access to equal opportunities, 'negative consequences of these changes include a decline in respect between men and women'(Kalontano et al, 2003:46) as well as 'affairs, jealousy, and excessive violence used in place of discipline [with children in the home]' (Kalontano, 2003:84).

Men's self-esteem has also suffered. The VAWG has noted that whereas men previously played fundamental community roles through fishing and hunting, many must now provide, or are dependent upon, commodities or services requiring cash. However, the formal cash economy remains small, with high rates of unemployment, creating conditions for insecurity and alienation. '[M]any young men no longer enjoy the satisfaction of a real contribution to their community . . .[leading to] increasing rates of substance abuse, particularly kava and alcohol' which in turn leads to violence and sexual violence (VAWG, 2001:3).

The nature and pace of change have generated serious social stress. According to the WHO, for example, Vanuatu has a high suicide rate, and high rates of depression amongst young people (UNICEF, 2005:21). Tensions around rapid social change, over money, and unemployment have been put forward as a potential cause (UNICEF, 2005:21). The pattern of urbanisation has been intense, with urban populations growing at approximately 2-3 times the rate of the rural population (UNICEF, 2005:3) and approximately 40 percent of the urban population living in squatter settlements. The squatter settlements bring people from different custom areas to live side by side; they can also be characterised by poverty, unemployment, and less access to the support systems and the social control offered by more traditional rural zones.

Widespread and fundamental socio-economic change has lead to a weakening of traditional forms of family and of social order, while alternative, state-based systems are not strong. While this is not to suggest that traditional life was free of violence (structural or direct) towards women, to a significant extent, the violent dimensions of contemporary Vanuatu life seem likely to be less manifestations of traditional culture, than processes of cultural, social, economic and physical displacement, with people taking out their stress on the more vulnerable.

Social stress, new areas of poverty, including some emergence of what is effectively landless poor, elements of a defensive psychology, the marginalisation of women from the public political space, the weakening of traditional forms of social order and support, the notable presence of 19th century missionary or Christian fundamentalist views of gender roles[5], the increasing use of alcohol, kava and other intoxicants – all these factors have enabled the emergence of a kind of rough and ready, might is right machismo that now seams through, at times reshapes and disrupts patterns of traditional sociality. How often is it this machismo that is called 'custom' by intoxicated husbands or boyfriends or angry and alienated young men?

Conclusion

What are the implications of these comments? Violence towards and marginalisation of women have been to a significant extent linked – wrongly this paper has argued – to traditional indigenous life. For expatriates, there has been a tendency to attribute violence (writing as a settler Australian) to a mysterious, dark, other world. This approach to traditional lifeways creates serious obstacles to working with gender violence, in part because it is not correct, but also because it creates resistances instead of cooperation. Rather than being rooted in what is strange and different, the shadowy patterns of structural and systemic violence, while indeed difficult to grasp, are in many ways familiar to us. Of course there are important elements of difference, but at this point in history, gender violence is a shared human problem[6]. Violence against women and marginalisation of women are not something that we should automatically think that movement along an ideological trajectory from custom to liberalism will fix. This is in no way to discount the importance of ongoing work by government, or efforts by international agencies, drawing on liberal governance. Both liberal governance and customary approaches have something to offer.

[5]The impact of Christian churches over the past century or more has been complex; many churches have also provided women with opportunities for community leadership roles, eg, see the work of Bronwen Douglas on Christianity in Vanuatu or Kalontano et al, 2003:45.

[6] A recent report by VicHealth for example found that 'one in four Victorians believed that women make up rape allegations, and 15% thought that women will say 'no' to sex when they mean 'yes'. "A staggering 40% of Victorians . . agree with the myth that men rape because they can't control sexual their sexual urges" (Manne: 2007:40). Or, in 2006, Americans spent US$8billion on pornography (including strip clubs, films, magazines etc), making it a leading industry.

While the problems might in many ways be shared, people and contexts are always particular. If international agencies want to work with ni-Vanuatu on these issues, we have to acknowledge and be attentive to our interlocutors' understandings of gender, to different apprehensions of the sacred or understandings of the human person. As the New Zealand Human Rights Commission Report (2006) *Converging Currents: Custom and Human Rights in the Pacific*, indicated, supporting human dignity, respect and standing is far from antithetical to Pacific cultures. But the approaches and the language need to be meaningful in local contexts, not simply the importation of 'global' languages. It is possible that if customary organisations and leaders themselves considered that working to support the standing of women was not an attack on custom, if it was not framed as entailing a rejection of traditional practice but rather as part of an ongoing evolution of national, custom-based values, the path for cooperation would be more open.

There is a vibrant debate about custom and customary leadership within Vanuatu. It is a continuation of the process of independence – a debate that engages issues of identity and self-determination – of what constitutes local but also emerging national identities, and according to what basis (what way of imagining themselves as political community) ni-Vanuatu can chart a collective path. It is an ongoing effort to bring indigenous and liberal state political dynamics to bear on each other and so is extremely challenging. At independence, women were marginalised from the public political space of the new state, but this is far from being a closed chapter. The questions then might be how might the new public, political spaces of governance, including customary governance, come to acknowledge women; how might custom evolve to support women and men in the new challenges and burdens they bear, as in some ways it has supported women and men in the past, and whether and how women can work with custom to empower themselves.

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