Introduction: Flux and change in Melanesian gender relations

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The chapters in this volume began as papers at the State of the Pacific conference at The Australian National University in 2014. My own contribution there was a simple reflection on the ideas of change and transition in gender relations in Papua New Guinea, the country in which I have conducted most of my research. In introducing the chapters I have retained many of my initial observations about transformations of gender relations in Papua New Guinea, but have attempted to draw comparisons in order to illustrate broad themes that have been the subjects of inquiry and the markers of changing gender distinctions in Melanesia. The concepts of change, transformation and transition are imbued with ideas of development and progress—notions themselves that have been subject to criticism for being redolent of colonial ideologies. Whether we consider Melanesian modernity and the move of Melanesia into a globalised world to be ‘progress’ or a further instance of neo-colonialism, many people in this region now live in towns and work in paid employment or worry about their inability to do so. They communicate using mobile phones and the internet; they debate women’s rights and roles in society, drawing upon discourses of human rights and the goals of United Nations agencies. The chapters in this volume document and analyse some of the ways that Melanesians negotiate and embrace changes in their lives, their personal and political aspirations and the tensions between conceptions of gender relations in the past, difficulties in the present and aspirations for the future.
Gender, independence and women leaders

The various architects of independent self-government for Pacific nations were generally optimistic liberals on the subject of gender. In each of the countries discussed in this volume, women and men were guaranteed equal rights as citizens in their new constitutions. Unlike European, American and Australian women, Pacific women did not have to struggle to be enfranchised. They were not legally excluded from educational or employment opportunities, nor were there constraints on their rights to hold property. Similarly, men in Pacific countries were granted suffrage without the contestations over class, land ownership, property and other factors that had been central to the campaigns for manhood suffrage in other countries. Yet the assumptions about equality that were held by those who wrote gender equity into their constitutions were rapidly proven false or inadequate in the years following independence. While men eagerly sought tertiary education, embraced new roles in politics and public administration and started commercial enterprises, relatively few Pacific women did so.

This should not have been surprising. After all, in all Pacific countries prior to independence, most of the political, administrative and business roles had been occupied by (white) men, and Pauline Soaki notes in her chapter the historical determinants of contemporary structural inequity. Education for girls, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, had been limited in the years leading up to independence. The business of governing, legislating and providing services was already established as primarily a male preserve. In short, the ideals of gender equality enshrined in constitutions were going to be difficult to achieve given the legacies of colonialism and the structural barriers that women faced.

Nonetheless, in each country, there were some women who were able to take advantage of the aspirations of new nationhood. I recall my first trip to Papua New Guinea in 1979 when I visited several government departments and encountered a number of Papua New Guinean women who held senior positions in the administration. In thinking about the recent changes in gender relations discussed in this volume, where women appear to be gaining ground, the extraordinary women who preceded them need to be acknowledged. In the 1980s, only 18 per cent of public servants were women and the majority were in low-level clerical jobs. But there were women who held very senior government positions. To mention just a few: Margaret Nakikus was the Director of the National
Planning Office; Felecia Dobunaba became Secretary of the Department of Welfare; Rose Kekedo headed the Department of Community and Family Services; Naomi Martin, the first PNG woman to obtain a PhD, became the head of the Commission for Higher Education; Meg Taylor was an advisor to the first Prime Minister, Michael Somare, later becoming Ambassador to the United States, Mexico and Canada. The list could be extended. These women were trailblazers who faced forms of gender discrimination but were able to succeed in high-profile careers.

In all of the countries that feature in this collection women faced similar barriers. In Solomon Islands, Lily Ogatina Poznanski was the first woman elected to political office in 1965—a considerable achievement prior to independence when women were unable to vote. Since then women have contested seats in every election, although the number who have won seats remains low. But, as in Papua New Guinea, during the 1970s and 1980s a number of highly educated women gained senior positions in the public service. Phyllis Taloikwai was the first woman to become a permanent secretary; Joy Kere was appointed Chief Planning Officer in the Health Planning Unit; and others followed in their wake in the decades that followed. In Vanuatu only four women have been elected to parliament since 1980 and there are currently no female members of parliament, but women such as Hilda Lini and Grace Molisa held senior posts in government administrations during the colonial period and were prominent in debates about the role of women in the postcolonial state. In 1966, in Fiji, Adi Losalini Dovi was the first woman to become a member of parliament. Nominated by the Council of Chiefs, her election owed much to her status in the hierarchy, but she did continue as an elected member for more than a decade. Fiji currently has a higher percentage of women in parliament (16 per cent) than any other Pacific nation.

Despite being the most populous and richest country in Melanesia, Papua New Guinea’s record on gender equity is poor. Since 1964, when all adult men and women gained the vote, only six women have been elected to parliament. For many years, Dame Carol Kidu was the sole voice for women. Only three women have ever been elected as heads of provincial government: in Morobe, Enny Moaitz; in Milne Bay, Dame Josephine Abaijah; and Julie Soso in Eastern Highlands Province. While the number of women in politics and senior administrative positions is a relatively simple way of assessing gender equity in those spheres, achieving an increase in female participation has been a goal set by external agencies such as the United Nations and Australian Agency for International
Development aspirations

Notions of capitalist economic progress and the consolidation of political systems, which draw on Western liberal ideals of democratic representation and the individual liberty of all citizens, inspire international programs aiming to improve the status of women in developing countries. Liberal feminist
objectives in the West emphasised gender equity and equality, politically and economically, in ways consonant with their economic and political systems. While some of these ideals find a ‘fit’ with people and governments in emergent Pacific nations, others seem alien or inappropriate. Understandings of gender relations and social distinction that people locate in a precolonial past (as custom or tradition) are perceived by some as incompatible with introduced ideas of citizenship and equality. However, the complex entanglement of social relations based in precolonial systems with those of colonialism, Western education, new economic forms and Christian adherence belies this simplistic division into intrinsic and introduced.

Pacific women measure the advancement of their interests in many fields apart from political leadership. The processes of transformation in gender categories and gender relations discussed in this collection have a history. From the first waves of European colonisation and missionary activity in the Pacific (Choi and Jolly (eds) 2014; Jolly and Macintyre 1989), existing social and cultural norms have been challenged and changed by exogenous agents. Sometimes the changes have been embraced, sometimes rejected or resisted. The establishment of mission schools for girls across the region and the development of organisations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the Girl Guides, as well as church-based women’s organisations, set in train new ways for women to define and pursue their collective interests. Parochial institutions, that might at first seem to have been imposed by outsiders bent on recasting the lives of women and girls, rapidly became ‘vernacularised’ and provided some of the means of managing their changed circumstances (Douglas 2003; McDougall 2003; Pollard and Waring (eds) 2010).

Interpreting gender: Anthropology and development studies

Since the late 1970s, feminist and liberal democratic ideas of gender equality have also underpinned a great deal of the research into gender and women. In particular, academic and applied studies of economic development have stressed the need to attend to women’s roles as producers and providers of food in subsistence-based economies, and the problems that arise when projects involve predominantly male labour. Within anthropology, approaches to gender inequality have varied. In the relativist tradition that has characterised the discipline, many
writers stressed complementarity and argued that the use of Western or European ideas of status differentiation were inappropriate and failed to capture cultural ideals of reciprocity and interdependence between the sexes (e.g. O’Brien and Tiffany 1984; Weiner 1976). Annette Weiner’s study of Trobriand women (1976) emphasised the differences between men’s and women’s value and the ways that cultural measures of status were incommensurable with their analogues in Euro-American societies. Margaret Jolly (1994) delineated the ways that distinct domains of power enabled women to gain prestige and status in a Vanuatu society. Lisette Josephides (1985) was one of few feminist anthropologists who attended to the use of physical violence by men to subjugate and gain control over women’s productivity for their own ends.

Marilyn Strathern (1980) had argued that women were positioned ‘in-between’ and so were valued as wives and sisters in different ways. In her later work, she insisted that Eurocentric models of sociality and the individuality of persons inevitably compromised the concepts of inequality employed in analyses of Melanesian gender relations (Strathern 1988). Her theories of Melanesian personhood have had a profound effect on subsequent anthropological research into gender relations (see e.g. Eves 1998; Wardlow 2006).

One of the main arguments of Strathern’s work was that the Western notion of individual subjectivity meant that ‘a person can dominate another by depriving him or her of that subjectivity’ (1988: 338), whereas Melanesian understandings of personhood prevented this form of dominance. She did acknowledge that it is ‘harder to understand women’s apparent willingness and their seeming connivance in situations that appear to go against their own interests’ (339), but insisted that this was because as a ‘partible person’ a woman embodied the interests of others and so acted in terms of those interests. Her study, while acknowledging social and economic change in Melanesian exchange systems, did not explore the implications of these changes for women’s interests in the context of their roles in the modern economy; nor did it deal with contemporary national or provincial politics. This image of the partible person, deliberately presented as an ideal type rather than a contemporary reality, has been criticised as ahistorical, because it clearly ignores the decades of influences and ‘encompassment’ by ‘Western capitalism, Christianity, and commercially driven mass culture’ (LiPuma 2000: 5). It perpetuates a distinction of radical alterity between ‘Melanesia’ and ‘the West’ that, as Jolly has pointed out, ‘leaves out some of the most interesting chapters in the recent history of the region, unwritten chapters
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replete with gendered personae and processes that constitute exchanges with the “West” (1992: 146). Such exchanges include the adoption of processes that established political independence and the nationhood of Melanesian countries; the introduction of state institutions such as national education systems and health services; and the economic transformations that linked these nations to the global economy.

In the same year that Strathern’s book was published, Paula Brown wrote about the changes that had occurred in women’s lives, predicting that more dramatic changes would occur as more women gained education and moved from villages to towns (1988: 137). She foresaw increased participation in political life and consequent gains in equality in employment and public life. Twelve years later, in her book Changing Gender Relations in Papua New Guinea: The Role of Women’s Organisations, Orovu Sepoe presented a sustained analysis of the ways that women’s organisations contributed to the development of strategies for increasing women’s political and economic participation. Noting that women continue to have much lower rates of education and employment, she observed that major changes in the lives of both urban and rural woman would be needed. She documented the history and activities of several women’s organisations, revealing the various ways such associations have been agents of change in women’s lives for many years. Analogous organisations have been at the centre of endeavours to improve the lives of women across the Pacific (George 2012).

As the authors in this collection show, in the decades that followed the initial publication of Strathern’s book, dramatic changes occurred that have brought about generational differences, regional variations and introduced new ideas about gender, personhood and women’s roles in society. Changes in men’s lives, wrought by new forms of employment and new political roles, were particularly associated with rapid urbanisation. New nationhood for previously colonised Melanesia meant that, across the region, urban centres expanded with new employment opportunities. As more men had formal educational qualifications they dominated public and private sectors. But over the following decades many young men moved from village to town hoping to find work and enjoy the excitement of city life, only to find that jobs were scarce. Underemployment of young men and women is now a problem in most Melanesian countries and is associated with rising crime (Dinnen 1993; Kraemer n.d.; Macintyre 2008).
While there is a considerable anthropological literature that documents ideals of masculinity and male activities, as they were enacted in village tribal settings, this genre tends to emphasise initiation, warriorhood and men’s activities in exchange rituals. Marilyn Strathern’s early study of Highland migrants *No Money on Our Skins* (1975) provides an unsurpassed analysis of the lives of young men who came to Port Moresby in search of work in the 1970s. Only recently have more writers concentrated on the lives of men and gender relations in towns, the ideals and activities of men as they encounter and attempt to manage new inequalities, economic precariousness and changing notions of gender roles (Goddard 2005; Martin 2013; Reed 2003; Taylor 2010, 2016).

In this volume, Stephanie Lusby and Jenny Munro each examine the tensions and problems in men’s lives, in Papua New Guinea and West Papua respectively, as they are manifest in urban work environments and in their relations with other men and women in differing contexts. New styles of masculine behaviour associated with employment and educational attainment become markers of class and status as a ‘modern’ urban person. But, as both authors explain, often men are ambivalent about the concomitant changes in women’s lives and they too appeal to gendered distinctions that they locate in ‘tradition’ or ‘custom’. They can resort to violence as a way of ‘disciplining’ or punishing wives and women who do not conform to the normative values or behaviours that they consider appropriate. But as Munro illustrates, even a man who does hit his wife is aware that this is unacceptable. As he struggles with racism, poverty, dashed hopes and an acute awareness of contemporary inequalities generated by the Indonesian state, he recognises the value of gender equality.

While anthropologists engaged in debates about the nature of gender relations and the problems of applying Western notions of status and oppression to Melanesian societies, within development studies there was little doubt that the lives of women needed to change for the better. The arguments of aid agencies such as UNIFEM and AusAID concentrated on ways of advancing women’s interests in economic development and increasing women’s participation in education, employment and politics. From the 1980s almost all aid donors and non-government organisations acknowledged that gender initiatives aimed at including women had to be incorporated into economic development and aid projects. High maternal and infant mortality; the scourges of malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS; low rates of education for girls and few opportunities for women to engage in income-generating projects were problems
that demanded changes in the ways that aid projects were designed and implemented. The strong cultural relativism of anthropology that inhibited researchers from characterising Melanesian women as oppressed or in need of assistance in engaging with modernity never really had much purchase among aid project practitioners. They held much more to ideas of economic advancement and modernisation and emphasised the need for gender equity and inclusiveness in development projects (Stratigos and Hughes (eds) 1987; United Nations 1996).

Twenty years on, 15 years after ambitious Millennium Development Goals were set for changes in gender equality across the Pacific, the gains have not been dramatic—but there have been gains. This volume documents and analyses some of the changes that Melanesian women have experienced and the many ways that they are initiating changes for themselves. It also shows how many of the old debates about the tensions between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ persist in contemporary discourses surrounding gender relations. The hopes and aspirations of young women, especially those who have gained education in the last decade, are now finding expression in ways that have no precedent in the Pacific. Where in the past women's organisations often willingly confined their interests to ‘women’s issues’ and did not challenge the male dominance of political institutions or access to employment, young women are now raising the issues in a variety of contexts (see Spark 2014a, 2015). They are mindful of the strengths of Melanesian women who are their forebears, metaphorically and actually (see Rooney, this volume), but they are also prepared to challenge the restrictions of earlier gender ideals.

I have worked in Papua New Guinea for almost 40 years and much of my research and practical engagement on a variety of projects has concentrated on women’s lives and gender relations (Macintyre 1998). When, in 1979, I first undertook fieldwork on the island of Tubetube in Milne Bay Province, I was impressed by the commitment to girls’ education and optimistic about the future of those who gained entry to secondary school from the small community school on the island. They had role models from the late 1960s, when several young Tubetube women had completed high school and gained tertiary qualifications and well-paid jobs in journalism, dentistry and clerical administration (Macintyre 1985). The experiences of the following generation revealed the difficulties they faced; difficulties echoed in the lives of many of their contemporaries elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. Parents could not pay fees; homesickness and the problems of adjusting to boarding-school life
caused girls to drop out; one girl became pregnant, another lost interest in her studies—none of them followed the examples of their predecessors. These girls returned to the island, married and followed in their mothers’ footsteps, becoming skilled gardeners and bearers of children. While at first some referred to themselves shamefacedly as ‘dropouts’ they have all adapted to life on this small island with equanimity. But all harbour hopes that their children will gain an education that will enable them to move to town and find a job that pays well.

In 1995 I undertook a study of the possible social impacts of a large gold mine in Lihir, an island off the coast of New Ireland in Papua New Guinea. Before the mining operations began the people were subsistence gardeners, and I observed levels of rural poverty beyond those I had seen in Milne Bay Province. There were relatively few ways that people could make money and the travel to commercial centres was difficult. Not surprisingly, most Lihirians welcomed the mine as an opportunity for economic advancement. They negotiated an Integrated Benefits Package with the mining company that gave privileged access to jobs, a housing scheme, a road around the island, royalties, new schools and a hospital. At that time nobody on the island imagined that the negative effects might ever outweigh these benefits, and women I interviewed were enthusiastic supporters of the project. Many women were eager to gain employment.

At the time construction of the mine began, Lihirian women had high hopes of employment and were quite adventurous about the sorts of jobs they might take on. But with the exception of the few who trained as heavy vehicle drivers (see Macintyre 2001) most were employed in positions that reflected mining company policies—as cleaners, laundry workers and clerical staff. Part of the training for female staff included sessions on grooming, applying make-up and nail polish and ‘feminine comportment’. The global mining industry is overwhelmingly masculine and its hiring policies everywhere reflect gendered stereotypes of workers. Women in secretarial and clerical positions were well paid, but the majority of women earned extremely low wages. During the 10 years I worked in Lihir only one woman was appointed as a supervisor and not one held a managerial position.

While I experienced disappointment at the ways that gender disparities, inequalities in the workplace and Western assumptions about the sexual division of labour were instituted in Lihir, most of the female employees did not. In interviews conducted each year, the majority of women employees
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said that their economic independence outweighed other problems (Macintyre 2011). But given that the resources boom in Papua New Guinea has meant that similar employment policies have been established in every mine site, the forces of economic globalisation can only be seen as conservative in respect to gender and work. Across the Pacific, particularly in countries where the dominant industries involve the exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies, men gain more jobs than women. Their employers often implicitly reinforce values of male economic privilege that affect familial relations and marginalise women.

Stephanie Lusby’s chapter in this volume illustrates the ways that Melanesian men working in the security industry construe violence, including domestic violence, as a masculine prerogative. She shows also that contemporary aspirational masculine behaviour embodies ethical considerations that justify violence when it is used to enforce discipline and actions that are ‘right’. This moral justification, which people perceive as both traditional and Christian, affirms gendered behaviours and positions men as the arbiters and instruments of punishment. Munro’s chapter recounts the use of violence by a West Papuan husband who, in the context of stigmatising racism, discrimination and economic disadvantage, struggles to live up to his own ideals of gender equality.

The tensions that girls and women experience as they attempt to embrace aspects of modernity through education and employment are not new, but the numbers of women affected across the Pacific are increasing. Dramatic differences have occurred through communications technology. Mobile phones and computers are ubiquitous in towns; and even in places as remote as Tubetube several people have them.

Tait Brimacombe (this volume) demonstrates how these forms of communication enable new ways of participating in actions that are both social and political. The formation of groups on Facebook and other social media sites not only links people with shared interests and political concerns, it also enables them to express opinions and respond to political actions. Civil society organisations have flourished in the last decade and the emergence of organisations such as Pacific Young Women’s Leadership Alliance facilitates communication across the region. As Brimacombe reveals, sponsored conferences bring together young women whose shared visions of new social and political roles challenge the sexism and parochialism of the past. In considering the mechanisms of ‘transition’ in a complex, contemporary context, the young women who participate
in conversations within and between these broadly based organisations provide striking examples of new initiatives. Their adoption of electronic media has been one of the more remarkable changes in the ways that women can form communities of interest.

I recall when people first began using computers in Lihir. During their lunch hour young women would surf the web, usually looking for evangelical Christian sites. But over time their interests have become more diverse, and they now use Facebook, often following newsfeeds and discussions that are concerned with issues in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. Websites where women can debate, join forces, protest and respond to social injustices now abound. Often men participate in conversations on these sites dealing with gender relations and female disadvantage. Frequently the tenor is feminist or progressive in tone, with people decrying violence and endorsing changes that will enable women to participate in economic and political activities.

There are two significant changes in the ways that women now voice their views when compared with conversations a decade ago. First, many are extraordinarily confident. Second, they regularly appeal to the notion of human rights. As the authors in this collection observe, even when women are uncertain of their rights defined by international conventions or in the constitution or laws of their countries, they regularly invoke human rights as they protest or describe various disadvantages (Jolly 2000; Macintyre 2000). In the mid-1990s, while conducting consultations with people in urban centres across Papua New Guinea, many people, both male and female, professed ignorance of the meaning of the term. Sometimes one or two people rejected the idea that human rights were relevant to Papua New Guineans, some stating baldly that these were for ‘white people’ and ‘against custom’. As Pauline Soaki (this volume) observes, there are still many who express reservations about the relationship between customs or tradition and the idea that people, individually or collectively, have rights. But in the intervening years, as non-government organisations, foreign aid donors, churches and local groups have invoked the idea of human rights in the context of gender equality, it has become a central theme in campaigns (Macintyre 2000: 167).

The role of international agencies in promoting a discourse of human rights was boosted during the Decade for Women (1975–1986), and women from Pacific countries attended the United Nations conferences in Mexico City, Nairobi and Beijing as representatives of women's
organisations. The governments of Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea are all signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but in practice many of the aims of that convention are ignored or neglected (Biersack, Jolly and Macintyre (eds) 2016). That said, the appeal to human rights is increasingly made by Melanesian women's organisations in their own terms as they define the issues that affect their lives. Throughout the region, groups defined as ‘civil society’ organisations have gained strength and in many respects appear to have had greater success in mobilising women’s grassroots support. Funding, training and administrative reinforcement from foreign aid agencies has assisted in the growth of organisations such as the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, the Vanuatu Women’s Centre and analogous bodies that support campaigns aimed at improving women’s lives.

The campaigns, alas, are generally around issues identified 30 years ago: women’s health; difficulties of access to education; discriminatory work practices; and violence against women. In recent years, the killings associated with sorcery accusations in Papua New Guinea can been added to the litany of social problems that disproportionately affect women. In all Melanesian countries, violence against women remains common and condoned. Whereas in places such as Australia and the United States (where rates also continue to be appallingly high), domestic violence is now stigmatised and unequivocally criminalised, across the Pacific it is contentiously linked to ideologies of male entitlement and authority and practices such as bride price payment (Macintyre 2012). As Soaki found in her study, many Melanesian women continue to condone marital violence as legitimate punishment for a wife’s misbehaviour. The perennial debate over whether such social ills should be attributed to the dramatic changes associated with modernity, or whether they are contemporary manifestations of attitudes and behaviours that existed in the distant past, continues to dominate discussions.

But the changes in gender relations since colonisation, and in ways of life more generally, ensure that what counts as ‘tradition’ is often quite different from past constructions of customary practices and values. As the chapters in this volume show, the appeals to custom, as well as the decrying of its effects, now incorporate Christian ideals of marriage, accommodate new patterns of employment and certainly adhere to entirely different dress codes from those that prevailed in any Melanesian precolonial past (see Spark 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Across the Pacific region, the enveloping Mother Hubbard dresses introduced by nineteenth-century missionaries
to cover bare legs and breasts are now considered ‘traditional’ and worn with pride as ‘national dress’ (Jolly 2014). Young women who wear tight-fitting garments or trousers are considered immodest and older people lament the influence of Western fashions. Indeed, the contemporary ‘sartorial struggle’ (Jolly 2014: 450) encapsulates not only debates over appropriately modest comportment by women, but it is also considered the clear indication of changing sexual mores that threaten gender hierarchies and contribute to epidemics such as HIV/AIDS (Cummings 2008).

External markers such as clothing are interpreted also as indicators of deeper changes in values and social roles. This generation of young people across Melanesia has perhaps been more exposed to different ideas of marriage and the role of women in the family than any previously (Spark 2011). The ideals of Christian, companionate marriage introduced by missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have taken hold in some quarters, but not others. Recent evangelical churches have promoted models of the nuclear family and household that emphasise more individualistic social values (Cox and Macintyre 2014; Maggio 2016). As Jenny Munro, Ceridwen Spark and John Cox show in this volume, there is greater acceptance of the value of women’s education and even the view that having a working wife might be an advantage rather than a threat. But the variations across the region and within each country mean that generalisations about the progress of these emergent patterns are difficult to make.

Education is highly valued as a means to social mobility and employment, and over the past 20 years the gender balance has improved at every educational level. In Fiji and Vanuatu, all children now attend primary school, in Solomon Islands 87 per cent attend, while Papua New Guinea lags at 63 per cent (UNESCO 2015). In his chapter, John Cox presents a Solomon Islands kindergarten as an example of the way that gender inequalities in education are being challenged at the grassroots level. In North Vella, women established a kindergarten and the woman who initiated the project was strongly supported by her husband. He demonstrates how gender ideologies can be challenged indirectly through projects emphasising the value of education for all children.

Spark, in her study of young women in Port Vila and Port Moresby, considers the ways that their education affects their lives and values. She maintains that ‘women’s education and employment enables them to exercise new-found decision-making power with regard to their intimate relationships’ (Spark, this volume). She explores the attitudes
and aspirations of tertiary-educated women who earn sufficient money to be financially independent and finds that their ideas of love, marriage and family constitute a radical departure from the norms and values of rural women. Their financial autonomy affords them greater freedom, not only as consumers, but in a wide range of social contexts. This perhaps is the sort of change that Paula Brown envisaged in 1988.

Reflecting on my own encounters with Melanesian women over several decades, the transformations documented and analysed in this collection are in some respects unsurprising. They have been in process for several decades and the capacity of Melanesian people to adopt, adapt and forge changes in their lives has long been remarked upon. When I first went to Papua New Guinea, I was convinced that those changes would proceed at a rapid pace. The heady period around independence seemed to usher in an optimism and a pervasive sense of opportunity and possibility. In 1977, when the first election after independence saw Nahau Rooney, Waliyato Clowes and Josephine Abaijah elected, I expected that the number of women in Papua New Guinea’s parliament would gradually increase. It declined. After independence, I thought that women were ensconced in senior public service positions; currently they occupy roughly the same number of senior posts as they did in 1980. The problems that women face in gaining managerial positions seem not to have abated. Rather, they have become more complicated as more young people find that there are simply not enough jobs to fulfil their dreams of permanent, salaried positions, and life in towns brings new problems of housing and economic precariousness. While some young men and women who find paid work flourish, creating new social networks and embracing new ideals of love and marriage, others find themselves marginalised by modernity.

Melanesian social worlds are in flux. While there is increasing engagement in various entrepreneurial activities, in many places this is inflected by older social relationships that oblige people to share and redistribute any gains. Employment associated with mining and fishing has increased, but the workforce is overwhelmingly male. Teaching and nursing still attract women who see them as nurturant professions, consonant with accepted female dispositions. But there are now women who are engineers, geologists and chemists, and many women work in the commercial sector in towns. The social and cultural changes in gender relations occur in the context of growing participation in the global economy and the expansion of communication.
technologies. There are new inequalities and struggles as people adjust and adapt to new circumstances. The chapters in this volume contribute to knowledge and understanding of the effects of this flux on gender relations.

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