

GENDER MATTERS

Culture, Power and the Development of Communities

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Introduction: Gender, Culture and Community Development

For women, I suppose in any culture, it [empowerment] is usually double edged. Because, one they have to work through the cultural ladder and then they have to work through the economic ladder. It's like a double chore....The same story I think in most cultures. Partnership is way down the line...between a man and a woman (Williams 2001: 237).

A number of community development writers (Eade 1997; Harrison, Huntington et al. 2000; Sen 2000) have begun to focus on the role of cultural¹ values as facilitators of, or constraints on the abilities of communities to shape and determine their futures. Such literature gives recognition to the ways in which gender, ethnic and other cultural identities may shape people's capacities to change their lives and societies. Power relations are significant in shaping these capacities as cultural systems may confer power and privilege on some by denying the rights and access to resources of others. Alongside other aspects of culture, gender features as a significant area of inequity as 'gender discrimination [is] a remarkably consistent feature of most cultures' (Htun 2000: 189). These issues of gender, culture and power have been increasingly linked to the under-development of some nations and ethnic communities by a growing number of development theorists (Harrison, Huntington et al. 2000).

To date, much of this discussion has taken place within the context of Western-led aid and development initiatives within poorer,

less industrialised countries at the peripheries of the world economy. Globalisation has featured consistently within this literature, particularly as it relates to issues of Western economic and cultural dominance. 'Cultural change' as a process of challenging and ultimately aiming to change aspects of culture which are considered oppressive to some or all members of a community, is viewed by some as 'indispensable' to the development of communities. Fore grounded by discourses of human rights and development (Schech and Haggis 2000), such shifts have occurred despite arguments of cultural relativism².

This paper discusses issues of gender, culture and power as they relate to community development initiatives with migrant communities living in two core, Western, capitalist nations - fore mostly Aotearoa/New Zealand and subsequently Canada. Undertaken toward the author's doctoral dissertation, the New Zealand component is largely based on the work of a women's advocacy group, comprised predominantly of Samoan and Women.

Three key areas of inquiry are pursued. The first of these concerns the juxtaposition of the traditional cultural beliefs and practices of these communities with those of dominant Westernised cultural systems in their new host countries and the implications of this for empowerment. The second area of significance is the way in which some of the beliefs and values inherent in the cultural systems of these communities might limit the agency of some of their members - in this case explored by the gender inequities commonly experienced in these communities. Finally, the paper raises the potential opportunities for cultural change for these communities presented by their new

cultural contexts, and issues associated with this.

Globalisation, Culture and Power

The inquiry conceptualised globalisation as predominantly occurring in two forms: the globalisation of economy and the globalisation of culture. Economic globalisation refers to the increasing free flow of capital, goods and to a lesser extent labour across nation states. Largely promulgated by global forms of capital, the globalisation of culture is conceptualised as occurring through the transmission of culturally dominant systems pertaining to economically powerful nations and the migration of peoples from less industrialised, poorer nations to wealthier, developed countries.

As a major factor in shaping the everyday contexts of the investigation communities, globalisation poses substantial risks and opportunities regarding their empowerment and well-being. Migrants to Aotearoa and Canada must negotiate the marginalising tendencies of these Western, capitalist democracies, that include cultural hegemony and increased risk of wealth and power disparity. However, these countries also offer new opportunities that include the ideal of democratic participation, the more agentic aspects of Western and other cultural systems, educational and economic opportunities. For many migrant women in particular, Western cultural systems offer a cultural space within which to outwardly express ways of being that would not have been acceptable within their home country (Afkhami 1994).

Consequently, whilst making their way forward in their new host country, many members of these communities are invariably faced with choices between cultural preservation and change and the tensions associated with this.

The Research Project

In broad terms, the research project attempted to answer the question: "How can economically and culturally marginalised communities become more empowered to increase control over their health and well-being? In narrower terms, it was concerned with understanding better processes of

community empowerment, i.e. how communities strengthen their ability to take collective action on issues of their choosing and to make positive changes in their environments. Community empowerment practice generally bases itself upon *community development*, defined here as:

an incremental process through which individuals, families and communities gain the power, insight and resources to make decisions and take action regarding their well-being (Saskatoon District Health Community Development Team 1999, p.20)

Theoretically this aligns with a social action (Minkler 1990) approach to community development which emphasises shifts in social power relationships, including those of gender, as playing a significant role in the empowerment process.

The chosen research method, participatory action research (PAR) is an ideal process for operationalising the concepts of community empowerment and community development. PAR is a cyclic process of inquiry through which participants move through successive phases of action and reflection (evaluation), with each phase informing the next (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). Its key components are extensive collaboration and a reciprocal education process between researchers and the community, and an emphasis on taking action on the issues under study (De Koning and Martin 1996). The researcher's role (Williams) as a co-participant in the advocacy research was intended to be a facilitating and enabling one, combining the functions of researcher and community development practitioner. From this research component several others evolved including a series of interviews with Pacific women undertaking community development with members of their own communities and Canadian-based community developers working alongside social action projects, largely comprised of migrant women.

The advocacy research project was developed in collaboration with Goodworks,

a community outreach program initiated by a religious order in Hilltown. Goodworks' primary objective is the empowerment of Hilltown residents and community workers through skills development and increased input into social policy, which elided neatly with the research project's questions. Through consultation with Goodworks and community workers in the area, an advocacy group of eight women was formed (the Women's Advocacy Group or WAG), out of which evolved the housing advocacy research project. This consisted of four phases, each being between three and six months duration. The first three phases consisted of individual and group capacity-building activities in preparation for the community's housing policy advocacy activities in phase four. During this final phase, the group undertook a child health and safety survey of 42 state-owned houses in the areas, released the survey results at public meeting did media advocacy and attended meetings with key politicians and housing policy people. These 'in the field experiences' with WAG disclosed an unexpected set of power dynamics related to ethnicity and its intersection with gender and identity. These dynamics were further researched during the investigation components.

Research methods employed were participant observation, written surveys, and audio-taped semi-structured interviews and forms of focus group inquiry. Field notes were consistently used to record the researcher's version of events, her impressions and conclusions drawn from them. Steps taken to ensure trustworthiness included sending transcripts to participants for validation and comment and recycling survey and interview data and emerging analysis back through WAG for further comment (face validity).

The cross cultural nature of the research³ presented particular challenges pertaining to trustworthiness. This was partially attended to by the researcher making consistent efforts to be reflexive regarding the impacts of her own perceptions on design and analysis via field notes and cross cultural supervision. The use of multiple methods and the triangulation of data representing participants from a range of roles and

identities (this included Pacific women community developers as distinct from members of WAG) further strengthened the research design. Two Pacific women research participants providing comment on draft presentations of data analysis further dealt with cultural aspects of validity.

Results

Expressions of Gender and Ethnic Cultural Systems in New Cultural Contexts: Cultural Clash or Development?

As the research progressed, it quite quickly became apparent that processes of empowerment are strongly linked to culture. This initially manifested in WAG member's positioning of the researcher as an 'authority' on many issues due to her affiliation with the University and ascribing her a higher status than themselves. Educated professionals and clergy were similarly referred to as 'very high people' which was correctly interpreted to mean that these people were looked up to as having more authority and social status than group members. Instilled from a young age these traditional cultural values of hierarchy and deference to authority (Meleisea 1987; Morton 1996) remained prominent throughout the entire investigation period with WAG.

The ongoing influence of these values displayed itself via WAG members' reluctance to take up leadership positions within the group as well as in the wider community, as the following scenario demonstrates.

The advocacy group decided that its members would announce the upcoming survey at the weekly local church service that most of them attended. It was agreed that one Samoan and one Tongan member of the group would speak in their own languages to the Samoan and Tongan members of the congregation. However on the day before both Samoan members of the group said they were unable to attend church the following day and announce the survey. A Samoan woman community developer who knew the group had this to say:

Can they do it? [Speak out]. Or do they have to overcome the idea of being inferior and inferiority here is attached to being from a low-income family...and going back to last Sunday, I wasn't too surprised...I thought 'are these women ready to speak out?' The idea is there that for them they are very happy to do all the work, you know, ah the background work, because that is what they have been doing all the time (Williams 2001: 235).

The power dynamics inherent in these issues of hierarchy and authority were further layered within these communities through their expression regarding gender. This first became evident in the work of WAG when group membership began to dwindle. Two women withdrew from the group and another contemplated it. While new knowledge had been created in relation to roles outside the home as women, some male and senior family members who argued that their place was at home with the children were also challenging their continued attendance at the group. Eventually open discussion of these issues and ways in which members might resist such claims intended to keep them in traditional roles was possible within the group. This discussion was helpful in surfacing these constraining aspects of culture and power and opening up new possibilities for choice for some members. However given the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles, two members also thought it 'important to keep checking to see if any members were being pressured to stay home'. Eventually group membership stabilised.

Conventions pertaining to gender continued to structure the lives of WAG members both practically— i.e. child-rearing expectations, or whether they were able to decide for themselves to come to the group and their level of comfort in performing certain roles within project activities. The latter included presenting the housing survey results to more senior (and often male) members of

their community. As one Samoan community developer said:

Normally you know, in another situation, they [WAG members] wouldn't be given the opportunity, because men would always be the ones who would speak up for them (Williams 2001: 240).

The Pacific women community developers generally viewed traditional cultural protocol as often inhibiting Pacific women's empowerment within the New Zealand context. Speaking of Pacific women taking up advocacy roles one community developer said:

It's an uphill struggle for women to do that, because they have to struggle against the protocol. They have to do that first let alone beginning to take some initiative....[It's] very big. Double upstream swim really. (Williams 2001: 240).

Canadian data revealed variations of similar gender-power dynamics whose expression was specific to investigation locales and cultural contexts:

The Hispanic men often resist the women becoming empowered. They don't like me giving driving lessons. They want the wife to continue to be subservient at home, domestic, clean house (Williams,2001: 249).

One Canadian community developer talked about the impact on her own community development work of more subtle forms of gender-power dynamics such as dominant patriarchal constructions of women:

I know on this coalition a couple of times when I have really wanted to chew somebody out. Rather than being seen as this hysterical angry woman type of thing, I've thought it through well (Williams 2001: 249).

However, for many of these research participants, particularly those from strongly patriarchal cultures, exposure to different cultural systems within their host countries often afforded them, at least potentially, new avenues of expression and ways of being. Speaking of her membership in one skills development group, one woman said:

I am lucky I get to know this and it really builds up my knowledge...But my husband says 'look at you, you old, you can't go to school! That's the Tongan people looking at me that way. But you people you encourage us to go for our goals (Williams 2001: 247).

However, these potential transitions were frequently challenged within communities:

We provided a computer course for 15 women. Now the men who were out working were really threatened. I was challenged many times because they said: 'I am the one going to work. I earn the money. She just stays at home and looks after the kids. Why should she know how to operate a computer?'.....Two weeks before that course started it was like a volcanic eruption. A lot of anger (Williams 2001: 250).

Such stories confirm community development writer Deborah Eade's observations of the potency of gender equity issues. She writes: 'women must tread very carefully in questioning any aspect of a conservative and strongly patriarchal culture' (Eade 1997). P65

Conclusion: the Challenge of Cultural Change

All cultural systems both enhance and constrain the self-determination of people within them. The ways in which they do this are in part contingent on people's gender and other identities, and relative positionings.

Processes of cultural globalisation bring real opportunities for cultural exchange and integration of elements of other cultures deemed to strengthen empowerment. At the same time, globalising processes are imbued with particular kinds of power relations that ascribe more power to some nations and cultural communities than others. In particular communities at the economic and cultural margins face particular decisions about which aspects of their own cultures they wish to see reproduced more fully in society and which aspects of their own cultures they may wish to transform.

However, the tendency to cling to traditional ways of being often remain as expressed by one Samoan woman community developer:

It's all [customs and traditions] very unspoken.....It's not up for public debate and even in that working party [on the education curriculum for young Pacific women] the unspoken rules or unspoken guidelines were there. If anything they [some leaders] try to keep a hold on the traditional (Williams 2001: 251).

Research findings affirm existing literature (Harrison, Huntington et al. 2000) regarding the tendency of cultures under threat (such as those of minority communities) to run the risk of becoming static in the face of possible change. However, in considering questions of gender, culture and empowerment, it is proposed that communities would benefit by reconceptualising their cultural beliefs and practices as important tools for cultural adaptation rather than fixed patterns that simply determine the way things are. Cultural systems that are fluid and open to change will indeed be more empowering to their members as expressed by one Pacific women community developer:

We need to make changes to the expression of those [cultural] values so that we can move forward in a new land. I have always said to the youth that I have worked with 'we

have to start singing a new song. We can keep the same notes so to speak but we have to give a new arrangement to them'....To me the culture is simply a medium of expressing....I mediate my culture, not my culture mediates me (Williams 2001: 252).

Notes

¹ Culture here is considered to be more than ethnicity, place of birth or mother tongue. It is the web or collective matrix of influences that shape the lives of groups and individuals, including social institutions, systems of norms, beliefs and values and world view (Coran 1995). As such, culture includes gender roles and expectations, and plays a central role in community development.

² Cultural relativism refers to the argument that no cultural system can be evaluated against another and is particularly relevant to the situation of Western development programmes and cultural imperialism.

³ The researcher's (Williams) ethnic cultural identity as New Zealand born European differed from the majority of participants.

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