

Impact of Customary Land Tenure Systems and Reforms on Women in Papua New Guinea

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SUMMARY

The marks of capitalism expressed through western ideals pertinent to economic progress have prompted a challenge for Papua New Guinea (PNG) to reform customary land without de-stabilising the traditional land tenure system. This thesis explores the effects of the recent customary land reform – Voluntary Customary Land Registration (VCLR) on women in PNG. The interrelationship between customary land tenure systems and customary land reform and how they affect women is explored through case study methodology in the study sites of Toudikwa Land Group in the Milne Bay Province; Aridagin Land Group and Butibam Village both in the Morobe Province. In each study area, qualitative data collection methods (un-structured interviews with thirty-seven people, four focus group discussions and field observations) were used. Thematic analysis of the research data found that certain fundamental principles of inheritance (be it patrilineal or matrilineal), communal ownership, and an inherent gendered distribution of property rights, appear to have remained more or less intact. The VCLR process reinforces bonds of family/lineage land rights and locality boundaries and limits the rights of outsiders, and this is now codified in government systems; it helps to recognise, protect and indeed, forefront, women's rights in ownership (matrilineal case) and access to land (patrilineal) where they already exist due to custom. However, this research also found there were also low levels of literacy; meaning comprehension of these laws and access to information was limited. The women in the Incorporated Land Group Executive committees had limited to nil business acumen to perform the functions needed for their incorporated body introduced by the land reform process. Some women in peri-urban areas utilised their accessibility to urban areas to improve their personal status through education. Educational equity is also important for women to enable some degree of economic empowerment and improve rural women's visibility in the community, and to avoid being undermined by male siblings, in a matrilineal society. This thesis argues that in a single nation-state like PNG, the recent customary land reform is complex in its impacts on rural women.

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On the one hand it offers tenure security to those women who already have ownership or access rights to the land by codifying these customary rights, but then on the other hand it entrenches gendered power relations that are within these customary land tenure systems. Therefore, despite providing tenure security, customary land tenure systems and land reform may have negative impacts on women's land rights, access to land and any subsequent empowerment.

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