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‘I won’t go hungry if he’s not around’: ‘Working class’ urban Melanesian women’s agency in intimate relationships

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Introduction

In March 2014, I went to Solomon Islands to interview members of the Young Women’s Parliamentary Group. Discussing some of the people who have been an influence on her, Melinda mentioned her aunt. She said spending time with this ‘outspoken’ woman during her adolescence had taught her that:

You don’t have to wait for a man to buy you a house, you don’t have to marry someone who has a job so you can have your future secured, you can secure that for yourself ... The culture in the Solomon Islands is that you have to marry someone who has a good job, someone who has land, who has resources and then he can provide for your children but my Aunt taught me otherwise, no, you can do it for yourself. You don’t need a man to make your life better (interview, Melinda, aged 30, Honiara, March 2014).

Melinda's perspective is indicative of the increase in status that Melanesian women experience as a result of education and formal employment (Marksbury 1993). Her assertiveness reflects a transformed society in which educated women in Melanesia can choose to focus on work rather than domestic lives, as well as whether or not they want to share these lives with a partner.

Perhaps surprisingly given the strength of her above statements, Melinda has a partner. Describing herself as being in a 'de facto relationship', she was pregnant with her first child when we met. But her description of her relationship, like those described by a number of the other young women I have met, strongly reflects the ideal of gender harmony as emphasised among educated and urban-dwelling Melanesians (see Cox and Macintyre 2014; Hirsch and Wardlow (eds) 2006).

I have written previously about Papua New Guinean women's reluctance to marry their countrymen because they fear doing so will thwart their personal and career ambitions and place them at risk of harassment and violence (Spark 2010, 2011). In this chapter, I consider urban Melanesian women's agency in their intimate relationships. Drawing on interviews with young women in Port Moresby, PNG, and Port Vila, Vanuatu, I explore the perspectives of women who are successfully negotiating intimate partnerships and family life, including in some cases as single mothers (for discussion of other work emerging from this research see Spark and Corbett 2016). This perspective reveals the decreasing significance of kin networks and the increasing influence of individualism and ideas of gender equity and personal fulfilment on attitudes to marriage. Adding to the developing body of knowledge about urban women in Melanesia (Cummings 2008, 2013a, 2013b; Hukula 2012; Macintyre 2011; Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993a, 1993b, 1998, 2012), in this chapter I illustrate how women's education and employment enables them to exercise new-found decision-making power with regard to their intimate relationships. I also show how their social connections with one another and ongoing support from their families of origin are allowing them new forms of urban belonging that unsettle both masculine domination of these spaces and traditional constructions of gender.

The emphasis in this paper is on educated urban women and space is critical in conditioning their social experience. To that end, I begin by considering how living in town facilitates young women's agency in

intimate relationships. I then introduce the research participants and discuss the interview material demonstrating how financial autonomy, social support and support from families of origin enable women's ability to negotiate intimate relationships based on the companionate ideals of equality and mutual respect.

The politics of place: Gender and belonging in the city

In my previous discussions of Papua New Guinean women's desire to avoid or delay marriage to Papua New Guinean men, I suggested that educated PNG women were enacting a kind of 'encompassed', negative version of agency akin to that displayed by the *pasinja meris* that Holly Wardlow (2006) writes about in *Wayward Women*. Building on the work of others (Jolly 1997; Macintyre 2000, 2008; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993a, 1993b, 1998), my rationale for this was that educated urban women were constructed as outsiders in their own societies. Because the benefits associated with modernity—including participation in formal education and the economy—tend to be seen overwhelmingly as masculine entitlements, women who are educated and employed are seen as transgressing their roles and threatening to both men and the 'proper order'. In this view, women's presence in urban areas can be read as threatening men's exclusive hold on modernity and the benefits with which it is associated.

Discussing young, unmarried women in Port Vila, Cummings writes that they:

are considered dangerous not only because they are matter out of place (living in the bright lights of the big city, rather than in the island communities to which they are tied through kinship and *kastom*), but because they are also, figuratively speaking, "matter out of time" (2013a: 387).

Consequently, she says it is not surprising that 'these young women spoke longingly of their futures—futures in which they would marry, have children, and be able to command the respect accorded to mothers' (ibid.). Her insights highlight the inextricable connections between women's sense of belonging in a place and their decisions and desires in relation to marriage and partnership.

My recent conversations with women in Port Moresby suggest that educated urban women feel more at home in the urban centres of Melanesia than they have previously. The increasing prevalence of representations of femininity, such as those portrayed in the PNG magazines, *Stella* and *Lily* (Spark 2014a, 2015), and the ongoing influence of human rights discourses emphasising gender equality, are giving rise to new, more globally focused versions of femininity in which being educated, employed and having the capacity to consume matter more than the familial affiliations and associated productivity created through marriage. Displacing more traditional constructions of femininity, at least among the so-called ‘elites’ or ‘working class’ (Cox 2014), these changes would appear to be shifting single urban women’s experiences of life in the region’s cities and towns. Where once isolation, harassment and embattlement were the norm particularly for single women living in Port Moresby (Johnson 1984), these experiences are now offset by opportunities to enter and enjoy parts of the city without being accompanied by men.

In both Port Moresby and Port Vila, women find support in their friendships with one another, meeting often in the town’s safe places such as at the cafés, restaurants and gyms within the large hotels. Since opening in 2011, Vision City, a large enclosed shopping mall in Waigani, Port Moresby, has become a meeting place for women wishing to ‘dress up’, shop or meet friends in a secure environment (for a discussion of Vision City as a middle-class place, see Barbara, Cox and Leach 2015). Women’s choice to meet at such places suggests that these new spaces of commodification are important sites of belonging for educated and employed women, serving as a reminder that ‘commodification is not simply a process by which the colonized, the “native”, tradition is corrupted’ (Jacobs 1996: 161) but also one in which oppressed groups can articulate a new sense of self.

With these more positive or at least ambivalent possibilities in mind, in this chapter I take a more optimistic perspective than I have previously, arguing that some among the educated urban cohort of women I discuss are experiencing positive agency of a kind hitherto unimaginable in Melanesia. Without discounting the ongoing security issues that limit women’s mobility and personal freedom in Port Moresby (Spark 2014b), and to a lesser extent Port Vila, I argue that these urban centres are important sites for women to contest and reinvent essentialised constructions of identity and place.

The lives of both the educated urban women I discuss and the rural Huli women insightfully analysed by Wardlow are shaped by what Margaret Jolly calls the 'twin agents of modernity' (2015: 66): the commodity economy and Christian missionisation (see also Taylor and Morgain 2015). In the rural contexts of Melanesia, the kin networks and social systems that have historically supported women have been and continue to be eroded as men leave to pursue wage labour. Whereas educated women in the country's urban centres still lag behind men in terms of their employment in the formal sector (Jolly et al. 2015), they are better placed than their rural counterparts to access the kinds of jobs that bring both money and prestige. Consequently, the key difference between the educated urban women I discuss and rural women in both PNG and Vanuatu relates to the former's financial autonomy and the status this brings. In turn, women's improved socioeconomic status enhances their ability to access the psychosocial resources necessary for mental health and support. Discussing social support among women in rural PNG, Rachael Hinton and Jaya Earnest note that 'distance' plays a part in restricting women's access to support networks. Alongside a 'heavy workload, familial obligations, and a husband's control over his wife's movements', all of which 'restrict a woman's ability to socialize and make social contacts' (2011: 233), women in villages are more likely than their urban counterparts to experience 'distance' because they typically separate from their families of origin and long-term support networks when they marry.

But, as Jolly notes, the desire to construct oneself outside traditional kinship systems is 'not just confined to the urban elite' (2015: 73). Rural women in PNG can and do demonstrate a desire to position themselves outside the marriage system. However, they have varying degrees of success in doing so, with many seeking eventually to reintegrate themselves into their families and communities because of the high price and precarity of their autonomy (Wardlow 2006; see also Jolly et al. 2015). Discussing the 'passenger women' who seek to get back 'inside the fence' of kin-based systems of belonging, Wardlow writes:

All of them chafed under the restrictions they had decided to reimpose upon themselves, but all of them wanted to relinquish their former way of life for the security of being known as a *wali ore* (good or proper woman) (Wardlow 2006: 223).

Educated and employed women living in the urban centres of Port Moresby and Port Vila are aware that they inhabit Christian communities and are not immune from the criticism to which they can be subject when they make unconventional choices about relationships and family. But, arguably, unlike the passenger women Wardlow discusses, young women's security in an urban community is beginning to depend less on their reputations than on their capacity to support themselves financially. Moreover, whereas 'wayward women' are unable to exert much influence on their kin—indeed disappointment with the kinship systems that once supported women is a factor in their decision to engage in transactional sex—educated urban women wield forms of power historically associated with men because they earn and share money with their families, enhancing their status and decision-making power (see Gewertz and Errington 1999; Hukula 2012; Koczberski 2002; Sharp et al. 2015). Prioritising personal independence and mutually respectful relationships over church- or custom-defined ideas about what makes a 'good woman', many are accruing the benefits of self-proprietship whether they are married, have children or not. Indeed, it would appear that in urban centres, ideas about what makes a good woman are now starting to echo those about what makes a good man—namely, someone who supports their family and helps to steer those with limited education. Consequently, in the cities of Port Vila and Port Moresby, the experience of belonging thus seems to be becoming less about gender and marital status than the capacity to earn money. This belonging is circumscribed by security challenges, but security is also mediated by income, including, most significantly, whether or not women can afford a car, an objective that was a high priority among those I spoke with, especially in Port Moresby.

Professional urban women's financial autonomy marks them as different from the majority of their counterparts for whom marriage is still the pathway to social belonging and protection, including in urban areas. Discussing Vanuatu, Maggie Cummings writes that 'often, married women bring home the bacon, fry it in the pan, and play the role of docile, respectful wife, as well' (2013a: 387). While this remains true for many urban women in Port Moresby and Port Vila, there are an increasing number of women who are more likely to bring home the bacon and give it to someone else to fry. Or, as I am investigating in another paper, to leave home and go out to eat at one of the increasing number of venues on offer in these rapidly transforming urban centres. In what follows, I explore young Melanesian women's perspectives, highlighting three

factors that are enabling them to attain the kinds of relationships they seek. These are: having money, peer support and family support. Before doing so, it is necessary to discuss the research method and participants.

Research participants and method

This chapter draws on interviews with young, tertiary-educated and employed women in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, and Port Vila in Vanuatu. Not long ago, this two-country approach would have been decried on the basis that it collapses contexts and cultures. However, the forces that have restructured life and the institution of marriage in the Oceanic region have given rise to pan-Pacific revisions of male–female partnerships that make it fitting to discuss these two contexts in parallel (Marksbury 1993).

Across the two countries, I interviewed 52 women. Participants were between the ages of 20 and 35 years at the time of interview with the majority being in their late 20s or early 30s. Most had grown up in urban areas and the majority had completed at least one undergraduate degree, with some having also completed postgraduate studies. In the case of some of the Papua New Guinean women discussed here, I had, at the time of writing, interviewed them twice, once in 2007 and again in 2011.¹ All the Vanuatu interviews took place in May 2014. Those who took part reside in the urban capitals of their respective countries and were employed at the time of interview, the majority in professional roles reflecting their tertiary qualifications.

The interviews were semi-structured and designed to provide insight into the women's perceptions and experiences, including how they view the impact of their familial, educational and career backgrounds on their lives and choices. Although my research was not focused on intimate relationships *per se*, women discussed their home lives as part of a broader consideration of women's changing roles and the challenges of juggling work and family. The quotations used are illustrative rather than exhaustive and have been selected on the basis of their 'typicality' and capacity to illuminate the perspective of this cohort on the subject of marriage and partnership. I have used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

1 Since this time, I have also conducted focus groups with some of the original participants from Port Moresby. I draw on these focus group discussions in forthcoming publications.

The importance of financial autonomy

Previous research on attitudes to intimate relationships in Melanesia has noted profound differences between the sexes. For example, Pamela Rosi and Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993: 184) illustrate important gender differences with regard to perceptions about educated urban women's roles. While male students wanted women to be homemakers, female students were studying to achieve professional success and 'wanted husbands who would support their careers'. Other research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s reveals significant differences by sex in relation to reasons for marriage. For instance, women rated 'love' more highly than males while males rated the family, the line and the clan higher than females (Conway 1990: 64). Though not focused on marriage, Jenkins and Alpers' article about youth sexuality and urbanisation notes that young women voice their desire for their boyfriends in 'terms similar to those found elsewhere', noting that, conversely, 'young men, however, seem to have no vocabulary of love, no way to talk about their deeper feelings except in terms of sexual pleasure, i.e. "kisim piling"' (1996: 249). Summarising the differences between men and women, Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi write:

On the whole, women wanted more supportive, egalitarian, and Westernized relationships while men expected more submissiveness out of their educated wives than was usually the case. This dissonance is matched by an increasing number of educated Papua New Guinean women who choose to marry non-Papua New Guinean husbands ... or to engage in de facto relationships that do not bind the woman into a desperate marital situation (1993: 207–208).

These gender differences led Martha Ward to conclude that these are 'nowhere ... more pronounced than in Melanesia' (1993: 249).

More recently, John Cox and Martha Macintyre have discussed the influence of Christianity and 'cosmopolitanism' on constructions of masculinity, noting 'glimpses of a masculinity that seeks to be humble, considerate, and loving to women' (2014: 154). Elsewhere, Fiona Hukula argues that constructions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' in Port Moresby are changing as a result of broader social changes and in and through men's and women's relationships with one another (2012: 90). She writes:

In addition to the changing roles of women, new ideas of being a man complement and challenge the old ideas of maleness. NGO campaigns advocating for the eradication of violence against women portray the non-violent unaggressive man as the ideal type. Priests and pastors who urge their congregations to adhere to Christian principles of love and respect also espouse similar notions and ideals from the pulpit (*ibid.*: 154).

While most of the women I spoke to identify as Christian, several indicated that they no longer attend church. A minority even suggested (somewhat sheepishly) that their Christianity was more a remnant influence from their childhoods than an active and ongoing part of their lives. Nevertheless, whether they were strong, practising Christians or not, among this cohort, there is a general consensus that Christianity promotes gender equity rather than female subordination (Hermkens 2012). As Susan put it, 'I want them [men] to know that God created us equal and there's no preference that man should take the upper hand' (interview, Susan, aged 22, Port Moresby, December 2007). Moreover, in situations where women had experienced difficulties in an intimate relationship, none expressed misgivings about not remaining in the relationship on the basis that they perceived this to be their Christian duty. Rather, they were more likely to construct their partners as having failed in their Christian duties if they had been unfaithful, tended to drink too much or be violent. This indicates how Christianity, as a 'venerable set of social norms that include assemblages of Christian and neotraditional practices and ideals' (Cox, *this volume*), is informing the modern perspectives of women in this cohort.

Below I discuss Melissa's experience to demonstrate that employed urban women are increasingly realising their goal of creating egalitarian, considerate relationships with (reconstructed) Papua New Guinean men.

When we met in 2007, Melissa was 26 and the single mother of a three-year-old girl. She had left a violent relationship with the child's father and said while she knew nice Papua New Guinean men, she wanted to marry someone from overseas. When I interviewed her again in 2011, Melissa was in a relationship with Jonah, a Papua New Guinean man with whom she'd had a second daughter. Though Melissa had initially had concerns about whether Jonah would care for her first daughter who was not his biological child, she had found him to be consistently supportive and loving to both herself and their children. Both Macintyre (2011) and Jolly (2015) have noted that 'money changes everything'.

In Melissa's case, this is amply true, but as the following demonstrates, moving back to the city and away from her partner and his family in the village also helped.

When she became pregnant to her first partner, Melissa was a student. Lacking the resources to remain in town, the couple went to live in her partner's village. In the village, Melissa was subject to poverty, exhausting amounts of work, violence and the judgement of her partner's family who she said valued her only for domestic labour. In 2007, she described her situation:

I was the only one working and when I was working, it all went on diapers and diapers are very expensive and food and that's it ... My ex-boyfriend then, my ex-partner he wasn't working so it was all on me to be a super woman and do everything. It came to a point where I didn't have the bus fare for the next day and I didn't have lunch. I'd only have breakfast ... come back and have only one meal at like 7:00 at night. So I lost so much weight (interview, Melissa, aged 26, Port Moresby, December 2007).

In addition to paying for the food, Melissa cooked for between 10 and 20 people each night. Her experience demonstrates that women's participation in wage labour does not on its own guarantee their increased status.

Melissa's move back into town and separation from her partner and his family gave her the freedom to commence a new relationship with Jonah, one based on reciprocity rather than reliance. Melissa also found a new job working for a large multinational. As part of her employment, Melissa was about to take part in a three-month training program in Australia while Jonah assumed responsibility for their daughters in PNG. In contrast to her previous partner who broke her arm when she was late home from work (see Spark 2011), Melissa told Jonah when she was going out 'for a drink with the girls' and he took care of their children. She noted that this was unusual, saying, 'A typical PNG man would be like, "Where do you think you're going? Stay at home, look after your kids"'. Emphasising that their relationship began as a friendship and that Jonah was 'so caring and understanding' Melissa said:

To this date, I'm just really really happy. It's like wow, y'know and I'm so happy too. I mean we have our challenges. What relationship doesn't? But when I sit down and put things into perspective, it's like there are men 10 times worse than he is. I've been through with someone who's been at the opposite end, who treated me like, violent and all that, so he's

never even touched me, y'know the most is maybe shout but that's about it. But I'm the one who's ruling him half the time so (laughs)! And I'm so happy (interview, Melissa, aged 30, Port Moresby, 2011).

In addition to demonstrating how Melissa's financial independence enabled her to negotiate a more equitable relationship, her experiences with Jonah are testament to the changing views of men, some of whom appear to be embracing their roles as emotionally supportive partners and fathers.

Elizabeth, a 33-year-old ni-Vanuatu woman, also described being in a relationship characterised by her husband's support of her career and willingness to share domestic labour and childcare responsibilities. Elizabeth works in a demanding role at an international organisation in Port Vila and said her husband frequently takes care of their children, makes dinner and drops her at the airport when she leaves for work-related travel. In addition, he was the primary carer for their children when she completed her Master's degree overseas. Partner support for women to pursue tertiary studies overseas also appears to be becoming more common among educated urban couples. While writing this paper, I received an email from a 26-year-old Papua New Guinean woman studying in Australia. She wrote:

You know how I was telling you about my friend Ruth, well, she is here studying and her husband is back home in PNG taking care of their two kids. Anyway when I first met her I thought she was very lucky to have a husband who allowed her to come study here for two years. So in my bias [*sic*] thinking, I thought hers is one of those rare cases (you know to have an understanding PNG husband). Then I just remembered another friend of Ruth's who just completed her masters in Hawai'i and her husband stayed back in PNG with their daughter too. And while I was on the bus getting here, I saw on FB [Facebook] my older cousin posting about how her husband is taking care of their three kids while she is working somewhere in Hagen. So yeah just thinking PNG men (some of them) must be progressing (still slow but at least they are moving) (personal correspondence, Bernadette, May 2015).

When I met her, Elizabeth testified that this seemingly extraordinary reversal of gender roles is becoming increasingly common among her peers and co-workers:

More and more, me and the sort of people that I work with and people that I know and that I'm friends with and of us women who actually earn more than our husbands at the moment, we are the breadwinners. Not to say that our husbands don't work. If my husband didn't work I'd break his head! I earn maybe two or three times more than my husband. I definitely am the breadwinner in the house (interview, Elizabeth, aged 33, Port Vila, May 2014).

Elizabeth later added that if her husband were 'jealous' and she were a 'battered wife', she 'probably wouldn't feel that I need him around'. Her statement explicitly links earning capacity with the kinds of relationships employed urban women are able to negotiate—and to terminate. Ruby's story is illustrative in this regard.

At the age of 21, Ruby, now a 34-year-old woman who lives in Port Vila, became pregnant outside marriage to a man who offered no financial or emotional support to either her or their son. Her partner was also unfaithful and controlling, making her work and home life difficult by constantly harassing her. When I spoke with her in 2014, she described this time:

I was really like a prisoner ... 'cause he wasn't allowing me to go anywhere even during functions or anything he would be like a security watching me. I wasn't feeling comfortable. At one time I remember he tore my clothes in front of my family and everyone in the same neighbourhood. He was really destroying my life (interview, Ruby, aged 34, Port Vila, May 2014).

After three years of enduring this burdensome relationship, Ruby summoned the courage to end it. Commenting on this decision, she said:

The thing that made me strong is that I've got a job. I've got security there. I can do anything cause I have good money. I won't go hungry if he's not around, cause I feed him as well so I think that's what made me strong (interview, Ruby, aged 34, Port Vila, May 2014).

Having separated from this partner, Ruby commenced a new relationship with her current partner who supports her career and with whom she shares domestic duties. She described him as 'very, very supportive and trusting', saying, 'he gives me freedom. Anywhere I want to go I just go'. Ruby also stressed the importance of maintaining equity in relation to domestic duties and childcare. She now has a second child with her new partner and they share housekeeping duties and care for their two children, something that Ruby emphasised is important for her children to witness.

When her son came home from school having been told by the teacher that his father was the 'head of the household', Ruby explained that this was not the case, saying, 'Dad and I both work together in managing the house. If you think I can wash the plate ... Dad can wash the plate'. She said that because of her commitment to teaching her children about equity in the home, it will be 'a lucky woman who marries [her] son' (interview, Ruby, aged 34, Port Vila, May 2014).

Melissa, Elizabeth and Ruby's experiences demonstrate that having money makes a difference to women's capacity to negotiate intimate relationships based on respect and equality. In the following section, I discuss another factor that is enabling educated and employed women's relationship choices: namely, the provision of peer support in which the expectation of respect and gender equity in relationships is assumed.

The importance of social networks and peer support

Research shows that 'people who have more resources ... including social networks, and social support are better able to avoid risk and adopt protective strategies where necessary' (Hinton and Earnest 2011: 225). The importance of social networks and support from 'women with similar experience and needs' (ibid.: 233) emerges as a key factor alongside financial autonomy in determining Melanesian women's willingness to challenge or leave partners with whom they have unequal or destructive relationships. Wendy and Mary Jane's experiences are illustrative.

Wendy is a 31-year-old mother of two who was raised by educated parents and grew up in Port Vila. Determined to follow in her father's footsteps and become a lawyer, she experienced significant challenges after becoming pregnant at the age of 20. While trying to juggle her studies alongside the demands of being a single parent, Wendy relied on her family to assist with childcare for her young daughter because the father of her daughter was not committed to the relationship and was violent and abusive.

After having her baby, Wendy commenced a voluntary position at a women's organisation in Port Vila. The role of the women in the organisation in which Wendy works is notable, serving as a powerful example of the ways

in which other women can provide significant impetus and support for women to navigate new pathways to wider social change (Kabeer 2011). Discussing her workplace, Wendy said:

When I came here I found the environment here is different. Because you know how when you have a child, people expect you to be with the father of the child and so when I came here I saw that the staff here they have a totally different view of me. You know it's okay if I have a child but not living with the father, the father is gone off and they encouraged me that 'it's not only you, a lot of women are like that, a lot of young girls are like that'. So that sort of empowered me, it empowered me and so I stayed and volunteered and continued my studies (interview, Wendy, aged 31, Port Vila, May 2014).

The staff's lack of judgement of Wendy is unusual in Melanesia because of the societal expectation that young women will remain chaste until and then raise their children in the context of marriage. Normalising Wendy's perspective—'it's not only you'—the staff offered a different perspective to the dominant societal one in which women who become pregnant outside marriage are judged immoral, despite the fact that the majority of young people have had sex outside marriage (see Buchanan-Awarafu and Maebiru 2008). Their acceptance and support of Wendy gave her the positive social affiliations that help women to rethink abusive relationships. Wendy's experience at the women's organisation contrasts with Esther's experience of being excluded from church business meetings because she'd had a child outside marriage, indicating one reason why some educated professional women, including Esther, no longer attend church.

In the following passage, Wendy links her awareness of her right to punish her partner for his violence with her experiences at the women's organisation. Her emphasis on the 'empowering' support provided by the women at her workplace provides important insight into the ways in which 'chosen communities' can allow women to critique their situations and open up new possibilities and ways of living (Kabeer 1999).

He was being violent to me but from me working here [the women's organisation] and giving information to him 'you know what you're doing is wrong, and if you think you will continue to mistreat me like that this is what I can do and I will do it if you do not stop your mistreatments'. And so I ended up telling him to get out of my house and then he realised 'oh Wendy is talking. I thought she would just say but she would never do what she said she will do if I mistreat her'. And so the fact that I told

him to go and be with his family and I can manage myself and my children without him got him thinking. For about a month I didn't take a restraining order. I just told him to get out. I've had enough of you and your violence so that was 2012. Since then until this day he's not violent anymore. So I guess from what I know and what I've told him I see that I've gained this respect from him and he assists me with the work, he supports me. Like initially if I was to travel, I would go and leave my children with my relatives but since then he's been more responsible. If my boss tells me to go to an island tomorrow, I can just go without thinking 'who's going to cook my children's food? Who's going to take them to school?' Cause I know that he will do these things (interview, Wendy, aged 31, Port Vila, May 2014).

Wendy's statement, 'I can manage myself and my children without him', echoes Elizabeth's claim that if her partner were violent she wouldn't need him around, and Ruby's statement: 'I won't go hungry if he's not around'. All three reveal urban employed women's capacity to negotiate their relationships from a position of strength.

While this strength derives in part from women's financial autonomy, it is also a result of their support of one another. Arguably, female support of peers is more likely to be found in urban than rural areas because the latter contexts are more likely to be characterised by 'traditional' forms of sociality in which 'concern for marriage alliances, dowries, exchanges and bridewealth' (Marksbury 1993: 20) matters more than peer support. Noting that the male/female antagonism that is characteristic of parts of Melanesia does not imply 'the easy congregation of women', Jolly observes that, conversely, in many places 'the diverse origins of wives precluded any strong sense of shared interest between women' (2003: 135). In the city and when women are earning money, families are less likely to have a stake in maintaining a marriage, thus opening up a space for friends, co-workers and peers to offer their (counter) perspectives. Mary Jane's experience of leaving a violent and abusive relationship confirms the significant role friendship networks play in shaping urban women's perspectives on their relationships.

When we met in Port Moresby in 2007, Mary Jane was 25 years old and engaged to be married to her partner of two years. By 2011, she was single, having been separated from her partner since 2008 because of his violence towards her. After being hit by her partner, Mary Jane told him:

Enough, stop it, leave me alone, move on. I'm not going to stay here, I'm not going to stay in this relationship and you're going to keep doing this to me. Y'know it takes two to work out a good relationship and you need to accept the person for who they are. And if you love them you should be able to trust them and not think that they're going and fooling around behind your back (interview, Mary Jane, aged 29, Port Moresby, May 2011).

Mary Jane's assertiveness reflects her experience as a young professional in Port Moresby, including inhabiting a milieu in which her friends value autonomy over alliance. Describing her friends' reactions to her partner's jealousy and violence, she said:

Even my friends were like 'just gosh, leave him man'. Cos they would call me like 'you coming', y'know my friend, my best friends from school or whatever, I wouldn't go with them, because of him. Like I stayed away from my friends for like a month or two, no contact or nothing, so it was good to have a little bit of my life back, cause I told him, for me personally, my life is not just you and me and your family, no. It's me, my family, my work, my friends, y'know, it's a big circle, it's not just you, me, case closed. That, he didn't accept (interview, Mary Jane, aged 29, Port Moresby, May 2011).

Mary Jane's confident assertion of her identity outside the parameters of marriage and family is akin to those of young women in advanced capitalist societies. Rather than defining herself in relation to her partner she determines her own 'big circle' and defines herself in relation to her family, friends and career. Encapsulating the increasing importance of voluntary associations, networks, contacts and friendships and the declining significance of kin consciousness (Ward 1993) in contemporary Melanesia, she gives voice to a perspective that is increasingly common among young urban women in Melanesia.

Sarah, an articulate 32-year-old single mother of two who lives in Port Vila, also spoke about the importance of support from like-minded women. While some people were critical of her status as a single mother, she gained support from the educated young women with whom she socialised and worked:

And I see these young women; they're very supportive not just in terms of the profession, the work and everything but also personally. How they provide support to each other, I know that quite a few of them are also single mothers and you know just chipping in and seeing how people are

doing you get an email or something on Facebook saying 'how are you going and how can we support', so I see a lot more of that cooperation (interview, Sarah, aged 32, Port Vila, May 2014).

In most parts of rural Melanesia it is difficult for 'single mothers' to survive, let alone to form socially supportive networks with one another. As Wardlow (2006) discusses, fraternising with Huli women perceived as 'wayward' can be a risky business in rural Melanesia because of the perception that people who associate with such women are themselves morally dubious. Sarah's identification of young women and single mothers' support of one another thus appears to point toward a new stage in the development of women's sociality in urban Melanesia (see also Douglas 2003).

Alongside their friends, young women's families of origin remain important. Where once women moved across the land, creating 'roads' between hamlets (see Jolly 2015), today, urban Melanesian women are maintaining longer and deeper connections with their families of origin. At the same time, ideas about what makes a family are changing and there are an increasing number of matrifocal families in which women are the head of the household by virtue of their status as providers.

'Single' mothers and single women: The importance of families of origin

The women with whom I spoke who were 'single' mothers were not living alone but in a household with a parent or parents and siblings or other family members who would assist with childcare and domestic duties, typically in exchange for the provision of accommodation and food. Their status as providers, often for a number of family members, appeared to outweigh any more negative perceptions about their status as single mothers, at least among the family members they supported. Again, such arrangements appear to work best in the context of the city where young women can manage the number of people in their household and travel to and from their places of employment more easily. Away from the village, they are also insulated to a degree from those with more conservative opinions about their single status.

Discussing women's access to money through the '*mama lus fruit*' scheme in West New Britain, Gina Koczberski observes that the women involved were 'creating a place-based feminism that emphasizes the continuing importance of the indigenous economy and forms of production and reproduction that support women's traditional power and identity' (2002: 91). The urban women I spoke with are more radical in that their status as educated, waged earners enabled them to challenge existing gender and social roles. While not turning their backs on their natal families, they were privileging their status as daughters, sisters and mothers over their roles as 'wives'.

Many young women expressed gratitude that their mothers and other family members such as siblings made their decision to be 'single' possible. For example, Sarah said:

I have a lot of support from my mum and I tell her that every day. I think that if she wasn't living with us, it would be so much more different and difficult but the fact that I have her with me means that I am able to do certain things that I would not be able to do if I was on my own (interview, Sarah, aged 32, Port Vila, May 2014).

Esther, also a ni-Vanuatu woman, left her partner and the father of her young daughter because of his excessive drinking. Because she works full-time in a role that requires her to work at nights and on weekends, she needs support to care for her daughter. Like Sarah, Esther relies on her family for childcare. Invoking the idea of a Melanesian 'support system', she constructs her situation as better than it would be if she were not living in Vanuatu.

So my mum's taking care of her [Esther's daughter] with help from my brothers and my sisters as well ... I am very blessed and very thankful I have that support system here whereas if I was anywhere else I don't think I would have that (interview, Esther, aged 30, Port Vila, May 2014).

The support that the women gain from their families has much to do with the kinds of families in which they have been raised. When Melissa, whom I discussed earlier, fled her violent partner she and her daughter went to her mother's house 'to heal'.

As Melissa said, her mother worked in the area of gender education and told her daughters they were valuable and needed to be 'tough' and expected them to partner with 'open-minded' and 'modern' men. Typically, the families of the women with whom I spoke include one or

two educated parents who promoted gender equity in their household and in education, supporting their daughters to attend school and university in the hope they would obtain secure, professional jobs. As a result of their beliefs and values as well as their emotional and financial investment, the young women's parents place great value on their daughters, expecting them to marry educated professionals with whom they will have equitable relationships. When this proves not to be the case, they assist their daughters to extricate themselves from violent or abusive relationships, rather than expecting them to remain in these for the sake of propriety. Indeed, as Darlene made clear, it was her ongoing relationship with a violent, controlling man that caused friction within her family of origin precisely because her parents and siblings wanted 'more' for her on the basis of her upbringing and education.

Because of the high cost of living in Port Moresby and Port Vila, many single women share homes with their parents and siblings into their 30s. For example, Meg, a 25-year-old who works for an international organisation in Port Moresby, lives with her parents and six siblings. She says that cohabiting means the burden of costs is shared and that family members can support one another.

We all share the cost. I think the good thing about us living together is that nobody really shares that burden ... like nobody's fortnightly salary is really at stake. Everybody shares in whatever money they have and pretty much for everybody it's light, it's not a burden whereas if we were looking after ourselves, we were looking after our own rent, food, transport that would be a big burden. We are able to shoulder everything together cause everybody is able to pull in together resources like money that we need so that's the good thing like nobody feels like they're burdened (interview, Meg, aged 25, Port Moresby, December 2013).

This confirms Sharp et al.'s finding that families in Port Moresby 'adopt collective strategies for generating income, sharing accommodation and caring for children or elderly relatives' (2015: 11). Like the settlement dwellers Rooney describes (in Sharp et al. 2015), young women pursue 'individual aspirations' while situating themselves 'in the collective security of kin and common identity' (2015: 14).

But even when they tend to get along with their families, young women struggle with being unable to live independently from them because of the high cost of living. Cohabiting with their parents presents difficulties for women when it comes to having relationships with both men and friends,

and while young women without cars rely on family members to drive them around, particularly in Port Moresby, this reliance can place a stress on their daily interactions with family members. Discussing this, Jennifer, a 25-year-old who lives in Port Moresby, complained that her parents still treat her like a 16-year-old and that their attempts to restrict her movements caused considerable friction between them. Similarly, Alice, a 32-year-old who lives with her parents and brother in Port Moresby but wants to move out, said: 'I'm not hearing of a lot of 20- or 30-year-old Papua New Guineans who are living on their own and I find that a real concern' (December 2013). Thus while it may be true that 'it is not as individuals that people survive in PNG' (Barber 2010: 95), professional, educated women who are increasingly constructing themselves as individuals with the right to autonomous lives, understandably experience long-term cohabitation with their families of origin as frustrating.

Conclusion

Historically, the majority of Melanesian men have not necessarily echoed educated women's views on gender equality and relationships (Macintyre 2011). The research presented here suggests that this is changing among educated urban Melanesians (Cox and Macintyre 2014). Because educated and employed women need not rely on men for either financial or emotional support, they are freer to negotiate relationships based on equality, mutual respect and companionship. If and when their relationships do not measure up to these ideals, their families, who have themselves invested in the status of these women, affirm their right to pursue independence rather than insisting they remain with abusive or destructive partners for the sake of kinship affiliations. When financial autonomy and family support are augmented by social networks in which women support one another to achieve their individual goals and aspirations with respect to their careers and love lives, there remain few impediments to educated Melanesian women's bargaining power as they determine whether and with whom they will have intimate relationships. As Mary Jane (still happily single) put it when I spoke with her in 2015:

With all the men that were coming into my life it's, "Ah I actually don't need any of your money. I'm okay I'm fine; I know how to handle myself" (interview, Mary Jane, aged 33, Port Moresby, August, 2015).

But there are new challenges for these women as they negotiate life in the urban centres of Port Vila and Port Moresby. The high cost of living means that salaries are quickly spent, especially when shared with other household members, and also the extended family. While women in this situation are better placed to opt out of inequitable intimate relationships, they may also find it difficult to extricate themselves from their families of origin if and when they wish to do so. But if Melanesian women can find the right man, it is conceivable to argue that companionate marriage has now come to represent not only the best chance of harmonious relationships between the sexes, but also the highest probability of thriving in the economically precarious contexts of urban Melanesia. Given that one of the fundamental tasks of marriage is to organise resources, perhaps salaried women's chances of meeting such men will increase as men realise the benefits of partnering with such women outweigh any perceived threats to masculinity.

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This text is taken from *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*,
edited by Martha Macintyre and Ceridwen Spark, published 2017 by
ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.