

The Personal is Political

“My vision is for a Microbank for Women”, Janet Sape says during a late night meeting we’ve scheduled in Port Moresby before she flies out to Lae the next morning. Janet’s track record is impressive. She created several businesses while working at a bank and then founded the City Mother’s Business Foundation to help women, both in the formal and informal sectors. The Foundation already has in excess of 10,000 members.



More recently Janet, in her role as President of Women in Business initiated a PNG Women in Business exposition that was opened by the Prime Minister. When Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare officially launched the expo, Janet also ensured that in the time she had with the Prime Minister, that she secured his support for her vision of a Microbank for Women.

So now Janet is discussing with me how to harness this political will and how to secure support to create a business plan and a series of pilots in five locations in PNG. We talk of her standing for National Parliament in 2012 and of the National Women in Agriculture Roundtable that will take place next week and of how important it will be to hear the voices of women working the land and the issues they face.

“Whatever course of action is taken to improve women’s lives in PNG, whether it’s a women’s microbank, or getting more women to stand for Parliament, consistency and follow up is essential” says Louisa, one of the delegates who’ll be attending the Women in Agriculture Roundtable. “Too many initiatives have faltered for want of good planning and appreciation of the cultural norms in which we live.”

“So much comes back to poverty and lack of economic opportunities for women, adds Roselynn, another delegate.

I listen to a group of PNG women talk about the critical issues facing rural women.

Women have little access to information about the best crops to grow. Then there may be difficulties getting these crops to market due to poor or inaccessible roads”, says Mary.

“The markets themselves are not secure and don’t support good hygiene – there are no toilets or potable water supplies in most markets”. Anna adds

UNIFEM is driving a market improvement program that will hopefully see better conditions for women whose lives are in these market places if the funding can be committed for new markets to be established that are secure, hygienic and under cover. There are other issues too such as lack of access to external markets.

“We would like to be able to sell our yams, taro, tapioca and bananas to Australia as well but we don’t know how to make this happen. We need access to wholesalers and distribution systems” says Roselynn.

Louisa observes that the challenge for women is also to break free of the triple load they carry as co-breadwinners or solo breadwinners, as mothers and as managers of their households. “We hand our money to our husbands or we spend our money on our children and households. We don’t own any land or resources and many of us still lack an education and thus access to jobs.

Elizabeth agrees. "We need a revolution in the way we live our lives, especially in rural areas. We need better nutrition, better hygiene and greater self sufficiency."

"Some of us would like to stand for National Parliament in order to change this situation", says Louisa. "The last two times I funded myself but I can't afford to do so next time".

As I listen to these women, it seems to me that what is needed is a women's fund to help offset the cost of child-care, transport and marketing for women wanting to nominate for the next national elections in 2012. If this support is provided it will motivate more women to stand and help ensure that they have the support they need to have the best chance of winning a seat. Similarly practical measures would help make a difference in other elections in Pacific countries.

"If more women are in Parliament then they will ask key questions about infrastructure investment and government contracts with oil and gas and mining companies. They will also help ensure that money is directed to areas where the need is greatest, including health and education", says Sarah.

"What we've seen over the last number of years is a deferral to the NGO and church communities for provision of core social services instead of government assuming this responsibility" adds her colleague, Rosa.

I'm reminded of Janet's words from the previous night "I want to bring my heart and my head to Parliament." And "I want to create opportunities for women to create their own businesses, for women to have better conditions in all aspects of their lives, for them to assume their full human rights including being involved in decisions that affect their lives."

One of my favourite writers, Rebecca Solnit, wrote recently

'we have most of us, a deep desire for this democratic public life, for a voice, for membership, for purpose and meaning that cannot be only personal. We want larger selves and a larger world.'

Jane Sloane – Papua New Guinea

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