

Gender and coastal livelihoods: The case of shell money production and trade in Langalanga, Solomon Islands

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Background

Rural livelihoods in many parts of the Pacific Islands region are tied to coastal marine resources. In this context, growing threats to the sustainability of these resources and limited economic opportunities have led to an increasing number of development interventions seeking to deliver locally appropriate solutions for sustainable livelihoods. Often, the primary goal of such interventions is to improve ecological outcomes, but given the tight connection with people's livelihoods, such goals must also be coupled with local people's own development aspirations, and gender is an integral component of these considerations. Gender shapes people's access to and control over resources (i.e. physical and social), and how benefits from productive activities are distributed (Cohen et al. 2016; Hillenbrand et al. 2015; Kawarazuka et al. 2016). Effectively working with local people requires resource management and community development initiatives to be sensitive to the influence of gender on livelihoods.

Research objectives

In a recently published article by us (Barclay et al. 2018), we considered gender in the context of broader social trends around livelihoods using a case study of shell money production and trade in Solomon Islands. We pooled data from several research projects conducted by the authors between 2010 and 2017 to explore the shell money value chain in Langalanga Lagoon in Malaita Province. Our methods included qualitative interviews (n = 12, eight women, two men, two family groups), focus group discussions with women (n = 5) and men (n = 9) and quantitative questionnaires with 316 households. We complemented this research material with a literature review of published papers providing historical and anthropological accounts of gender norms and roles associated with livelihoods.

Results

Shell money as a livelihood source

Historically, shell money has been central to Langalangan economies and identity, trading activities and part of what has distinguished the Langalanga as a people. Shell money pieces were an important part of the Melanesian 'big man' culture of feasting, trading and warfare. Shell money continues to be used to pay a bride price, offered as compensation in disputes, and traded in exchange for cash, goods or services (Cooper 1971; Faradatolo 2008; Fidali-Hickie and Whippy-Morris 2005; Goto 1996; Robbins

and Akin 1999). In recent decades, a market has emerged for shell jewellery (Fig. 1), including necklaces, bracelets, anklets and earrings made of shell money beads, other shell types, and glass beads. Shell money remains one of the most important sources of income in Langalanga (Sulu et al. 2015).

Gender and changes in the distribution of labour

We find that gender roles – in terms of the type of work done by women and men – have influenced the shell money value chain over time, and in turn are influenced by shifts in the shell money value chain (Fig. 2).

Women have become more actively involved in trading shell money in recent years. In the pre-colonial period, blood feuding by men was a central feature of cultures around the Langalanga area, so in trading situations where groups from different communities came together violence could easily have erupted. In order to avoid this, trading was usually conducted by women who were escorted by male relatives for security reasons (Guo 2001; Ross 2017). After colonisation, the risk of blood feuding violence was less prevalent and shell money trading came to be considered men's work. This was particularly the case where trading involved travel of more than one day, in part due to ideas that it was inappropriate for women to travel away from their families (Keesing 1985; Maranda 2001). However, over the past few decades, women have become active in trading again. According to interviewees, this shift has been prompted, in part, by men spending proceeds from the

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Figure 1. Shell money sold at a Langalanga market. (images: Nick McClean, Kate Barclay)

sale of shell money on alcohol, gambling and extra-marital affairs (see also Fidali-Hickey and Whippy-Morris 2005). The notion that women, more than men, tend to use income for family investment is consistent with gender in development literature (Chaaban and Cunningham 2011).

In the past, free diving to collect shells was considered to be the role of men, as was fishing in general (Guo 2001). By the 1990s, however, there was evidence that some women were also diving (Guo 2001). Our 2010 focus group data show that women in some villages fished (e.g. with a hand line from a canoe) and dived. Fieldwork observations indicated that most of the shell money manufacturing was done by women. Discussions from a men's focus group, however, suggested that while men considered shell money to be 'women's work', the income from shell money has become more lucrative than fishing in recent times, with the result that some men stay at home to help with production instead of fishing.

These changes in gender roles, particularly in the shell money trade, have created friction in terms of: 1) the kinds of activities that are considered suitable for women, 2) who in the family should control cash income, and 3) whether women should keep their income for themselves and their children in the context of a demand-sharing culture.⁵ Social disapproval of women travelling and leaving their domestic duties has meant that it is difficult for women to spend

extended periods of time on trading trips (Keesing 1985; Maranda 2001). Some interviewees reported that women who travel for the shell money trade have been accused of having sexual liaisons, which leads to conflict, including violence within a household. Women also face practical problems regarding childcare while they are away from home. One interviewee said she had experienced social disapproval for her choice to keep her income rather than acquiesce to requests from relatives to share her income with them. As a single mother she felt she needed to keep her money for herself and her children, and go against the cultural norm of demand sharing.

Household differences in pursuing shell money as a livelihood

While the manufacture and sale of shell money remains one of the most important livelihoods in Langalanga Lagoon, our findings also illustrate that the shell money value chain and the income earned varies considerably from family to family, with some making a better living from the trade than others. Two of the families we interviewed ran their shell money business embedded within the local culture, in that they used *wantok* kin reciprocity for people to work together and then to share the income, rather than paying people cash to work for them. By contrast, two other families used a more capitalist approach to their shell money business, paying people cash to work for them in producing shell money. Our data do not show conclusively

⁵ Demand sharing is a practice common in many cultures around the Pacific, where goods and services may be required by a relative or other person with an important social relationship to the giver. This is different to sharing where things are freely offered by the giver, or the sharing negotiated, with the giver having an option to refuse. For example, a young person with a cash job may be required by their Auntie or village elder to give them some cash for medical expenses.

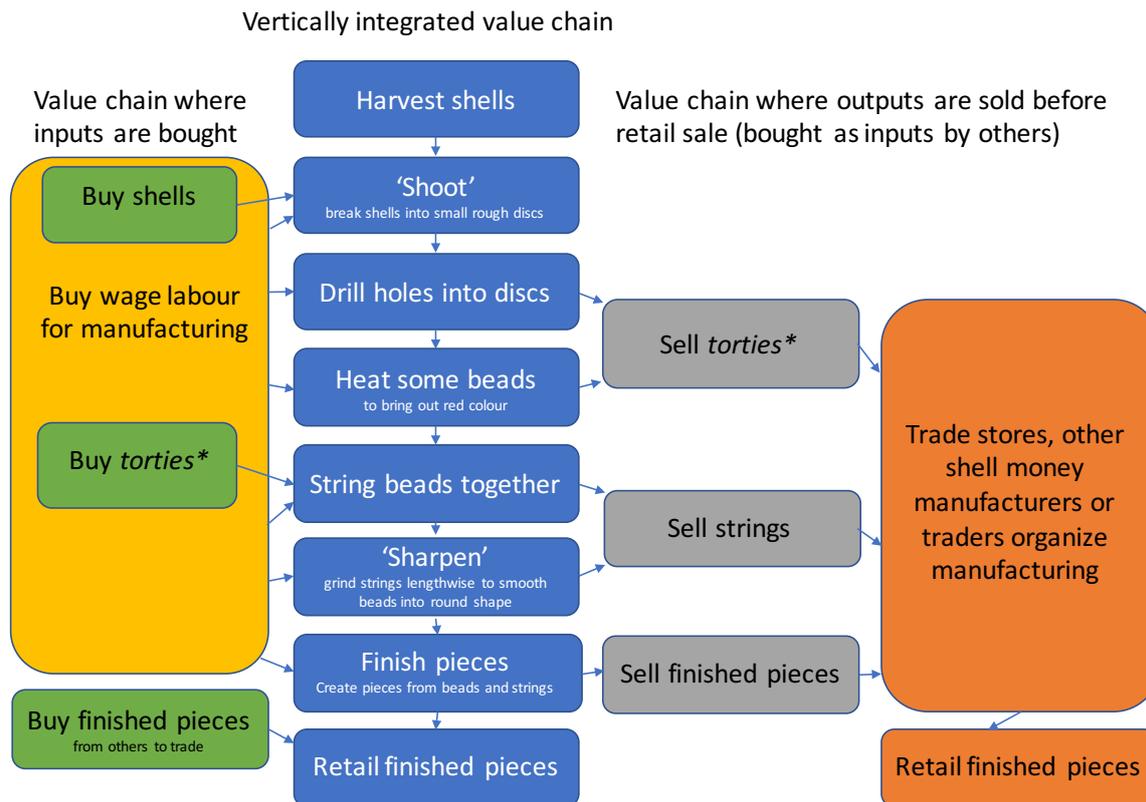


Figure 2. Shell money value chain.

why this difference arose, but we note that the two families that paid cash for wage labour in their shell money business were single mothers with children and who were dependent on their income. It would be useful in future research to explore whether economic options are different for single mothers and women embedded through marriage into wider family networks. Are single mothers able to access the safety net benefits of *wantok* sharing in the same way as married women? Do single women have more freedom to choose an economic path than married women?

Two of the families we interviewed had used microloans or grants through aid programmes to help build their shell money businesses. A third family had pressing livelihood problems in terms of poor access to cooking fuel, drinking water, land to grow vegetables, and transport to market for selling goods or to school for the children. A fourth family lived in a similarly poor location, but through developing a shell money business had been able to afford rainwater tanks, gas bottles for cooking and a boat with an outboard motor and fuel for transport. Families vary greatly in their capacity to develop business opportunities due to their natural capital (access to water, land, fuel), education levels, and personal interests and capacities. The usefulness of development assistance in the form of loans or grants for businesses, therefore, will also vary.

Another difference visible in our interviews was that the families that were doing well with shell money were focused

on selling finished products, having either made the pieces themselves or bought inputs, including labour. The one family we interviewed that was not selling finished pieces, but was making and selling tins of beads or unfinished strings, was struggling economically. Our dataset is too small to conclude that marketing finished pieces is definitely a better livelihood activity than selling inputs, but this would be an important question to pursue in future research. The implications are that developing shell money as a livelihood activity could exacerbate economic inequalities in communities, or even lead to the impoverishment of some families.

Conclusion

Our paper points to some key considerations for practitioners working on coastal livelihood development. First, a gender-nuanced understanding of livelihoods is important for informing the design and implementation of locally appropriate development interventions. Second, gender norms shaping the distribution of labour are not static. Our results highlight that gender roles change over time in response to economic, social and political drivers. Third, interventions seeking to improve livelihoods in coastal communities should understand differentiation within communities. For example, practitioners should consider whether interventions may contribute toward community development, or inadvertently increase inequality between families. Development assistance in the form of micro

capital for businesses can be useful, but not for everyone. There is, thus, also a role for development interventions directly targeting basic needs, such as drinking water, cooking fuel, land for gardening, and transport systems.

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