

Women's Experiences as Agricultural Extension Officers in Papua New Guinea: Challenges and Contributions in Coffee, Cocoa and Oil Palm

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural extension is central to improving smallholder productivity, yet in PNG it remains a male-dominated field in which women's roles as both farmers and professionals are undervalued. This paper examines the experiences of female agricultural extension officers (FEOs) working in PNG's three major export crop industries—coffee, cocoa, and oil palm—with emphasis on coffee as the most significant smallholder cash crop. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in Eastern Highlands, East New Britain, and West New Britain provinces between 2017 and 2018, the study documents recruitment pathways, work roles, and constraints faced by twelve FEOs, alongside perspectives from male officers, female farmers, and participants in a graduate training program.

Findings reveal that FEOs confront persistent institutional and cultural barriers, including limited resourcing, negative workplace attitudes, and gendered community norms. Yet their presence is vital in enabling women farmers to access training, voice their concerns, and adopt new agricultural practices. Comparative evidence from cocoa and oil palm shows that these challenges are systemic across export crop sectors, though coffee illustrates them most clearly. The study highlights the dual role of FEOs as professionals navigating discrimination and as agents of change advancing women's inclusion in agriculture.

Strengthening the status of FEOs, expanding their numbers, and addressing institutional inequities are essential for improving extension delivery and gender equity in PNG agriculture.

KEYWORDS: women; gender; agricultural extension; labour constraints; smallholders; export crops

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is central to rural livelihoods in PNG, both as a source of food security and as the basis of household cash incomes. Coffee, cocoa, and oil palm dominate export production and engage millions of smallholder households. Women provide much of the labour for these crops, yet their contributions are undervalued, and they often lack access to extension and training. The result is a

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persistent gender gap in skills, resources, and decision-making in PNG's most important rural industries (Overfield, 1998; Cahn and Liu, 2008).

Extension services, long regarded as key to smallholder productivity, remain male-dominated. Most extension officers are men, and programs have historically targeted male farmers, reflecting cultural norms that position men as decision-makers and income controllers. While there is a large body of research on PNG farming systems, little attention has been paid to women working as extension officers. Their voices are rarely heard, despite their pivotal role in reaching women farmers and helping shift gender relations.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the experiences of female extension officers (FEOs) across coffee, cocoa, and oil palm. Coffee receives particular emphasis as the country's most important smallholder cash crop, engaging around 2.5 million people, but insights from cocoa and oil palm demonstrate that gendered barriers are systemic across export agriculture.

Based on interviews with twelve FEOs, seventeen male colleagues, twenty-seven female farmers, and participants in a graduate training program, the paper explores recruitment pathways, workplace challenges, and relationships with farmers. It argues that FEOs occupy a marginal but crucial position: they face discrimination and resource constraints yet are essential in advancing women's inclusion in extension.

Background and Literature Review

Smallholders dominate PNG's export crop industries. Coffee is grown in 17 of 22 provinces, with 85% of output from households cultivating less than 5 ha (CIC, 2008; Sengere, 2016). Cocoa and oil palm are likewise smallholder-based, though plantation estates remain significant in oil palm (Koczberski et al. 2001; Bourke and Harwood 2009). Productivity is low, constrained by ageing tree stock, limited inputs, and weak extension (World Bank 2009; Sitapai 2011).

Women contribute 50–70% of agricultural labour (NDAL 2007; FAO and UNDP 2002). In coffee, they plant, harvest, and process but rarely control income (Overfield 1998; Curry et al. 2017). Similar patterns hold in cocoa and oil palm, where women's contributions are often treated as supplementary (Linibi 2009; Pamphilon and Mikhailovich 2017; Curry et al. 2019). Extension systems reinforce these inequalities: training typically targets men, while women face barriers of literacy, time, and group membership (Fairbairn-Dunlop 1997; Cahn and Liu 2008).

Globally, only 15% of extension staff are women and just 5% of resources reach women farmers (Hill 2011). PNG has even fewer female officers—perhaps 20–30 across the three crops in 2017 (Hamago 2021). Yet where present, FEOs are critical: women farmers engage more readily with female officers, and female staff are more attuned to women's needs (Pamphilon and Mikhailovich 2017). At the same time, FEOs themselves face discrimination, limited promotion, and inadequate resourcing (Mate 2013). Their experiences thus expose both institutional weaknesses and the potential for change.

METHODS

Research was conducted in 2017–2018 in Eastern Highlands Province (coffee), East New Britain (cocoa), and West New Britain (oil palm), with additional visits to Morobe, Madang, and Oro provinces. The sites represent the three main export industries and their extension agencies (CIC, Cocoa Board, OPIC).

Participants included twelve FEOs (3 coffee, 3 cocoa, 6 oil palm), 17 male extension officers, 27 female farmers (from farmer groups and the oil palm Mama Loose Fruit scheme), three recent graduates from CARE International's program, and five supervisors. Data collection combined oral histories, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, structured surveys, and case studies (for fieldwork methods in PNG see Apis et al., 2013). Interviews were conducted in English and Tok Pisin, recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes.

Data were analysed thematically, first within participant groups and then comparatively across them. Triangulation across perspectives and reflexive analysis strengthened validity. Ethical approval was obtained from Curtin University, and all participants provided informed consent.



Plate 1: Members of the mama loose fruit scheme and the OPIC and OPRA officers

FINDINGS

Recruitment and career entry

Most FEOs held tertiary agricultural qualifications. In coffee they often entered through CIC's late-1990s recruitment drives. Despite strong credentials, women remained few in number—an estimated 20–30 across all three industries in 2017. Entering male-dominated organisations was daunting, particularly for single mothers facing stigma and scepticism from colleagues.

Institutional constraints

FEOs consistently identified lack of resources as their greatest challenge. In coffee, many provincial offices received no operational funds for transport or training. Officers sometimes walked long distances to visit farmers, exposing themselves to risks. Oil palm and cocoa officers faced similar

constraints, though oil palm provided motorbikes that were often unmaintained. Women reported that men were prioritised in resource allocation, reinforcing FEOs' marginalisation.

Workplace dynamics

Negative attitudes from male colleagues were common, particularly in coffee where the crop is seen as 'male'. Women described being doubted, excluded from decisions, or undermined by male subordinates. In cocoa and oil palm, dynamics were somewhat less hostile but still difficult. Some women faced penalties for caring responsibilities or suspicion from colleagues' spouses, reflecting cultural discomfort with women in professional roles.

Cultural barriers with farmers

Many male farmers dismissed advice from women officers, especially in the Highlands coffee sector. FEOs responded by focusing on women farmers, equipping them with knowledge that could influence husbands indirectly. Over time, some male farmers became more accepting, but patriarchal norms remained a significant barrier (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2010; World Bank and IFPRI 2010).

Work with female farmers

Women farmers valued female officers, reporting greater comfort and openness in discussing sensitive issues such as income control. FEOs observed women's eagerness to adopt new practices, though constrained by lack of resources. In oil palm, the Mama Loose Fruit scheme enabled women to market produce directly, yet recognition and fair returns were still limited (Koczberski 2007).

Training and careers

Access to training and promotion was uneven. Many women felt overlooked for workshops and advancement, with opportunities favouring men. Even those in supervisory positions faced insubordination. Despite decades of service, few had risen to senior roles. Graduate programs such as CARE's offered valuable entry pathways, but scale remained small.

DISCUSSION

The study underscores the marginal yet critical position of FEOs in PNG agriculture. Institutional underfunding and gender discrimination constrain their effectiveness, while cultural norms limit their authority among farmers. These challenges resonate with international findings on women in extension (Hill 2011; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2010) but are intensified in PNG by the small number of female staff and entrenched gender norms.

Coffee illustrates these dynamics most starkly. As PNG's most important smallholder crop, it depends heavily on women's labour yet systematically excludes them from training and decision-making. Female officers in coffee confront suspicion from both colleagues and farmers but also provide unique opportunities for women's inclusion. Cocoa and oil palm confirm that these issues are systemic: in cocoa, women's roles in cooperatives remain secondary, while in oil palm the Mama Loose Fruit scheme, though innovative, has not eliminated gendered inequities.

The implications are clear. Expanding the number of FEOs is essential. Recruitment drives, scholarships, and mentoring can draw more women into extension. Institutional reforms are needed to ensure equitable access to resources, combat workplace discrimination, and support women's

career progression. At the community level, extension strategies must explicitly recognise women as farmers and decision-makers. FEOs are uniquely positioned to facilitate such shifts, but only if adequately supported.

This research also contributes conceptually by shifting focus from women as beneficiaries of extension to women as professionals shaping extension systems. Their experiences highlight how gender inequality is reproduced within institutions and how female professionals can become agents of change.



Plate 2: Matilda Hamago, Senior Socio-Economist at CIC

CONCLUSION

Female extension officers in PNG are few but vital. They face institutional neglect, workplace discrimination, and cultural resistance, yet their presence enables women farmers to access knowledge, voice concerns, and gain confidence. Coffee illustrates both the obstacles and opportunities most clearly, but cocoa and oil palm confirm that gendered barriers in extension are systemic.

Policy priorities include increasing the number of FEOs, improving resourcing, and reforming institutional cultures. Supporting female officers is not only a matter of gender equity but a practical strategy for improving smallholder productivity and livelihoods. Future research should track women's career trajectories, assess institutional reforms, and further explore the intersection of professional and farming women's experiences.

FEOs remain marginal within PNG's extension systems, yet their contributions far exceed their numbers. Strengthening their role is essential for building more inclusive, equitable, and effective agricultural development.

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