

# Coffee and Women in Papua New Guinea

## An Interview with Matilda Rondy Hamago



Matilda Rondy Hamago (photos supplied by Matilda Rondy)

**Coffee is an important cash crop in Papua New Guinea but the industry is male dominated and for women working in the sector there are many challenges. SA COUNTRY WOMAN interviewed Matilda Rondy Hamago, who has worked in the Coffee Industry for over 24 years, about the challenges and issues facing women in PNG today.**

Matilda Rondy Hamago is 51 years old and comes from Wewak Town in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). She studied at Curtin University of Technology and graduated with an Honours Degree in Agribusiness (Horticulture Management) in 2010, followed by a Masters of Philosophy in 2019. Matilda has been employed with the Papua New Guinea Coffee Industry Corporation Limited (CIC) for over 24 years and is now a Senior Socio Economist.

*“When I first started my career with the coffee industry in September of 1998, I was employed as the first female extension officer working amongst all male officers. I worked as the Women’s Liaison Officer promoting women’s interest in growing coffee as a business, which was very challenging, especially having to deal with the very strong cultural barriers among the male smallholder coffee farmers, and especially in the highlands of PNG.”*



Conducting field assessment of a coffee garden in Wasu, Morobe Province

In late 2022 she took on the role of Acting Manager for Research and Innovation Program. This position had been dominated by men for over 30 years. As the first female to be appointed in this role she broke through one of the many glass ceilings in this industry. Nonetheless, Matilda faces many more challenges in this industry on a daily basis.

Matilda described the constraints and challenges faced by female agricultural extension officers in PNG. They include: the lack of funding and management support to carry out their work; difficulties working with males; cultural barriers; and access to promotions. Matilda explained that the male agricultural extension officers usually receive priority funding and thus more resource allocation for their extension activities. Thus, even though their numbers have increased as extension officers, women have

less financial capacity to undertake extension work on behalf of female farmers. This makes it extremely difficult to perform their duties. Matilda stated that, *“the additional recruitment of female extension officers will be unlikely to fully achieve institutional goals to raise the productivity and status of female farmers.”*

Another difficulty is culture based and occurs because men prefer women to be in the supportive roles rather than in leadership roles. This is a cause of frustration for women, as Matilda said, *“Men display insubordination in the work place as they are reluctant to follow directives from females in senior positions.”*

According to Matilda, patriarchal attitudes are widespread and entrenched in PNG and extremely difficult to change.



*“Culturally, men are perceived to be superior to, and more knowledgeable than women and therefore are reluctant to listen to female extension officers. They dismiss or discount the value of information given to them by women. This makes the task of communicating extension information to farmers very difficult for women, especially in the coffee industry. There is still a long way to go before the FEOs are accepted as equals by their male colleagues and male smallholder farmers.”*

For women in the coffee industry it can often take 10 to 15 years to gain any kind of promotion. Despite having the same qualifications, job responsibilities and experiences as men, they are less likely to be promoted or are not encouraged to apply for promotion.

There are many issues facing women in PNG today. Matilda stated that one of the main problems facing women is that they don’t own land, therefore they have no power over the use of land. Traditionally and culturally men are generally considered to be the head of the household and thus will always take the lead in any decision making. Matilda noted that, *“For women farmers their role is always backstage when it comes to attending or receiving extension training.”*

SA COUNTRY WOMAN asked Matilda what women in PNG need in terms of assistance or aid from local and/or international development agencies.

*“It would be nice to seek assistance in terms of economic empowerment initiatives to our women smallholder coffee farmers. Our women coffee farmers are not only involved in coffee farming they are also involved in other agricultural activities.”*

Matilda explained that coffee farmers are encouraged to practice integrated farming systems, and thus they also



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Field visit to women coffee farmers in Wasu, Morobe Province.

need to be bee farmers, fishers, and rear livestock and poultry. Thus, she would like to see women farmers receiving basic life skills training, and cottage industry training, such as roasting and grinding coffee, as well as sewing and cookery.

More directly, Matilda stated that for her women coffee farmers, she needs assistance in securing some small hand coffee grinders and a few sewing machines. The resources would be kept for communal use in the women’s community resource centre.

The aim of economic empowerment activities is to empower and provide alternative income opportunities for women farmers. Having access to resources and equipment is essential to complement any training that women farmers receive. There appears to be some PNG government initiatives

to support the agricultural sector, such as access to loans, and there is some funding allocated to women’s activities through the Women’s Micro-Bank in PNG.

SA COUNTRY WOMAN asked Matilda about her future plans in the coffee growing sector. Not disheartened by the years of challenges, Matilda is currently planning a socio-economic livelihood research pilot project on the use of green solar energy with smallholder coffee farmers.

*“I want to conduct this research and introduce solar panels and see whether the solar energy will have any impact on the women farmer’s livelihoods or not.”*

***Next time you brew a coffee consider supporting PNG Women coffee farmers.***



Conducting physical assessment of a coffee garden in Marawaka, PNG