

10. Leading the March for Gender Equality? Women Leaders in the Public Services of Samoa and Solomon Islands

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Ouvrent-elles la voie à l'égalité des sexes? Les dirigeants féminins dans les services publics de Samoa et des Îles Salomon

La notion de « femmes aux postes de direction » est au centre des travaux pour promouvoir l'égalité des sexes dans la région Pacifique depuis deux décennies. Une grande partie de ces travaux a suivi les efforts effectués à l'échelle de la planète pour accroître le pourcentage de femmes dans les assemblées parlementaires. Plus spécifiquement, les efforts faits par des groupes de femmes dans les sociétés civiles du Pacifique se sont concentrés sur la promotion de certaines politiques, stratégies et formations en vue de la participation des femmes à la vie politique. Cependant, cette insistance a dans une large mesure détourné l'attention des autres domaines des institutions, à savoir le secteur public, où les femmes occupent des postes de direction importants. La nomination de femmes à des postes gouvernementaux de premier plan comme titulaires de portefeuilles ou à la tête de subdivisions ministérielles constitue une évolution récente dans les secteurs publics dans le Pacifique. Pourtant, on connaît peu de choses sur l'importance du nombre des postes de direction attribués aux femmes dans ces domaines et sur ses conséquences sur l'objectif global d'égalité des sexes comme point central du développement. Cet article étudie le lien entre la présence accrue de femmes aux postes de direction dans les services publics et la valorisation de la cause des femmes en général. Plus particulièrement, il pose la question de savoir quel effet la présence des dirigeants féminins au gouvernement produit sur le statut ou la situation des femmes dans la société. Les résultats de la recherche à Samoa et aux Îles Salomon indiquent que si l'amélioration aux niveaux les plus élevés peut ne pas forcément refléter le développement au niveau de la société dans son ensemble, le changement dans les attitudes au niveau de la population et au niveau du gouvernement est d'une importance capitale pour un changement effectif et efficace de politique en matière d'égalité des sexes. La première partie étudie la situation actuelle des femmes aux postes de

direction dans les services publics dans les deux pays ; la deuxième examine les conséquences de la situation actuelle sur l'amélioration de la situation des femmes et l'article se termine en insistant sur la nécessité, dans la recherche sur l'égalité des sexes, d'intégrer tous les éléments et tous les secteurs impliqués en vue d'une connaissance plus équilibrée de la condition des femmes dans les îles du Pacifique.

Introduction

'Women in leadership' has been a focus of gender-equality advocacy work in the Pacific region over the last two decades. Much of this work has followed a global push for a higher participation of women in parliaments. Efforts by Pacific women's civil society groups especially have concentrated on policy advocacy, strategies and training for women's political participation. This emphasis however has to a large extent sidelined attention to other arenas of government, namely the public sector, where women's leadership is also prominent. Women's appointment to senior government positions such as heads of ministries or divisions within ministries has been a recent development in Pacific public sectors (Maetala and Pollard 2009; Liki 2010). Yet, not much is known about the extent of women's leadership there nor about its implications for the overall objective of gender equality as a development focus.

This paper examines the link between having more women leaders in the public service and the enhancement of women's cause in general. Specifically, it asks the question: To what extent do women leaders in government impact on the status of women in society? The paper is based on research conducted in Samoa and Solomon Islands in 2009 and 2010 which identified patterns of women's ascension to public sector leadership. In the Solomon Islands the position of head of a government ministry is referred to as Permanent Secretary (PS). The Samoan equivalent (or near equivalent) of this title is Chief Executive Officer (CEO). I use the term 'women leaders' to refer to women in these senior positions as well as those in deputy, assistantship or managerial levels. Results from research indicate that improvement at the upper levels may not necessarily reflect development at the broader societal level. Attitudinal change at the levels of community and government is central to effective policy change towards gender equality. The first part of the paper surveys the current status of women's leadership in the public services of the two countries. The second part discusses the implications of the current situation for women's advancement. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for analysis on gender equality to be more inclusive of all elements and sectors involved for a more balanced understanding of Pacific Island women's condition.

Women in Higher Places

Despite certain political and sociocultural variations, one factor that parallels Samoa and Solomon Islands is the noticeable rise of women to decision-making levels in government. It is also a notable factor that these women are highly qualified in terms of tertiary educational training and the qualifications they hold. Women's appointment to public service leadership of the two countries is a recent phenomenon, yet an important one for two reasons. First, never before in the respective histories of their public services has been a sharp increase in the number of women appointed to senior executive positions. Second, whether this phenomenon echoes transition at the broader society level is a complex matter and would merit further research. A general picture of the situation of women leaders in government is provided here. An emerging trend is that there are certainly more women in senior positions today than was the situation 10 or 15 years ago. Statistics indicate that in the Solomon Islands, 6 of the 24 government ministries are headed by women. In Samoa 6 of 18 ministries and 8 of 13 government corporations have women CEOs.

The research focus on Samoa and Solomon Islands was to understand the current status of women's leadership in the public service. The study objective was to understand the socioeconomic, cultural and political reasons behind the absence of women in senior Public Service positions. A field visit was undertaken to elicit concrete responses from the women and men in government. Two research tools were employed for data gathering: a survey questionnaire and interviews. The findings indicate an improvement in women's participation in senior and mid-level government jobs pointing to a possible beginning of a new trend for women and leadership in this sector for both countries.

Of the 24 government ministries in the Solomon Islands, five are headed by women. The Office of the National Legislative Assembly is directed also by a woman with another woman as her deputy. Of these six senior women, two have been in these positions since 2002. Two were appointed within the last two years and the other two within the last eighteen months. A sharp increase in the number of women appointed to mid-level positions is a feature of the last ten years. This trend corresponds with a growing number of older public servants and younger women completing tertiary training overseas. Typical positions occupied by these women include Deputy Permanent Secretary, Registrar, Principal Officers, Directors of Divisions within Ministries, Managers or Supervisors of sections. For the newer cohort of women graduates the major fields of study are general bachelor degrees with majors in management, sociology, accounting, biology and education, and a few in law, dentistry and medicine. A significant number obtained their diploma and certificates from Solomon Island College of Higher Education. About 60 per cent of the women

graduated with degrees from the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and Vanuatu, and the rest from tertiary institutions in either Papua New Guinea, Australia or New Zealand.

It is likely that the total figure for this younger cohort of graduates is higher. There are many women who do not work for the public service. Kathleen Lega, for example, graduated with a Bachelor of Pharmacy from the University of Otago, New Zealand, in 2005 and now runs her own business, *Le Pharmacy*, in Honiara. Phyllis Maike, graduated with a Masters of Arts in Planning from the University of Hawai'i in 2004 and now operates her consultancy firm, *Positive Development Limited*. Others like Linda Au, Dr. Joanna Daiwo, Dr. Alice Pollard, Hazel Lulei and Nairie Alamu are employed in either private companies, regional organisations (USP, FFA, SPC and RAMSI) or para-public organisations (NPF, Central Bank and SICHE). Many more women reside in the outer islands operating small family businesses or working in tourist resorts. Indeed, a more thorough survey would locate and confirm the exact count for this group of women graduates.

In Samoa, the number of women in top positions in government ministries is indeed a new thing for the country. Although women did head government departments in the past, appointments were sporadic. Most of those women were wives or daughters of politicians, business people, and church leaders. Today, it is a very different situation with women from different socioeconomic backgrounds making up part of Samoa's pool of the highly qualified.

A combination of factors has contributed to the growing number of women in top government positions. These include: (i) an established cohort of highly qualified women; (ii) international pressure through conventions on the enhancement of women's status; and (iii) the country's accommodating political climate. All these influences happen to emerge at the same time and the right time too. Public Sector Reform in Samoa began in the mid-1990s, and it was basically driven by the three women Chief Executive Officers at the time. Respectively they headed the Public Service Commission, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Women's Affairs. All of these women have graduate degrees.

Broader Implications for Women's Advancement

We need to situate the emerging trends for the two countries in the context of sociocultural and political processes. There is also a need to adopt a more

holistic perspective on the improved status of women based not only on the outcome of women's participation in leadership roles in the public arena but also in their leadership at the community and village levels.

An interesting finding from a recent study by Zubrinich and Haley (2009) indicates that for some Pacific women, despite their being senior public servants and involved in decision-making processes in government, they continue to experience problems of domestic violence from jealous husbands, barriers to job promotions and study opportunities, and sexual harassment in the work place. These experiences obviously cannot be seen in the statistics that we have about the women's ascension to government leadership.

Given these problems, we cannot completely claim women's leadership participation as sufficient indicators of the enhancement of women's status. We need to consider more seriously the question of whether high numbers are a condition for policy change. Increasing women's presence in government leadership (and political positions, for that matter) may help highlight gender demands and lead to greater political unity among women. But what is primarily important for the advancement of gender policies is strong advocacy and co-ordination by those who aim for changes in gender relations. Attention must therefore be paid also to other areas or groups that work on increasing awareness campaign on gender equality. These include local women's church or village groups and NGOs.

Domestic violence and VAW are acute social and development issues in the Solomon Islands. The lack of educational opportunities for girls has also been highlighted in previous studies and surveys as another critical development focus. While these are real problems for many Solomon Island women, real change can never be effective or meaningful for the local people through formal policy approaches alone. Putting a man in prison for the crime of wife beating is like band-aiding a big wound. It may earn some points for those fighting against VAW, but it will go a long way when there is attitudinal shift among men and women. In much of the Pacific, change of attitudes towards women as equal partners and who can also be leaders (and towards anything for that matter), begins within the circles of the informal *tok storis* (conversational) sessions and daily interactions among local people. This is why attention to local level women's groups and NGO activities is very important.

The work of the Temporary Special Measure Working Group is a good example of community level operation that is also directly linked to policy level. The Group works to both raise awareness (use of media, lobbying with MPs etc) but also tries to influence parliamentary perspectives on women's leadership. This was the main activity related to women that happened at the time while this research was undertaken.

Despite the fact that Samoa is often hailed as the model for the Pacific in this regard, the problems of violence against women and incest cases against young girls, still exist. Day after day one reads in the paper or hears over the radio about crimes against girls and women. The establishment of the new NGOs 'Victim Support Group' and 'Faataua le Ola' (Value Life), in the last four years reflects the increase of illegal practices against women. These new civil groups – alongside the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, the National Council of Women and the YWCA – drive the campaign against domestic violence bringing about more awareness at the local level, working with both men and women towards a shift of attitudes towards women's and men's roles as equal partners in development.

Thus while it appears that all is improving at the upper levels, this does not indicate a similar pattern at the broader societal level. Policy change at/from the top becomes much more effective and meaningful for society as a whole when attitudinal change also happens at the community and village level. In the Solomon Islands, the call for serious attention to improved educational opportunities for girls in particular has never been stronger. Not only has there been keen advocacy by international women's groups and aid donors such as UNIFEM, but the unyielding stand of the local women themselves is indication that change is inevitable. Almost a decade ago, prominent Solomon Island woman leader and scholar, Alice Pollard (2000: 16) argued

...with the greater involvement of women in education and employment and increasing male acceptance of female participation in areas traditionally denied to them, the old division of labour based on gender will gradually be undermined. Solomon Islands society is in the process of adapting to a new system of economic relationships that are based on cash. Accordingly, new social, political and cultural values are slowly being defined, to which these Solomon Islands women (and men) will have to adjust. In short, change is inevitable, however much some women and men seek to cling to old ways and traditional ideas.

The potential of women's leadership as an indicator for improved women's status and means towards gender equality in Pacific societies extends beyond simply increasing the number of women in top government positions. It may be a formal measure, but it is one that sends a clear message to institutional and social agents about gender inequalities. Attention to women's leadership in government is a recognition that women and men are not playing on a level field. And it raises the profile of women's struggles for greater representation in decision-making positions. But all this must translate to the language and perceptions of the rest of society – at the village and community levels where some extreme examples of crime against women and girls and practices reflecting gender inequalities still exist.

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