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You have to be a servant of all: Melanesian women's educational leadership experiences

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This article presents findings from research on women's educational leadership experiences in Melanesia, a least developed part of the world. Specific context research is needed so that theories and strategies developed that help women access educational leadership in developing countries are grounded in grassroots experience.

Keywords: women; educational leadership; developing countries; Melanesia

Introduction

Research on women and educational leadership in the developed world is relatively recent (within the past 30 years). However, this research has contributed extensively to our understanding of women's experiences in accessing leadership positions and operating within those positions. Scholars such as Charol Shakeshaft (US), Valerie Hall (UK), Jill Blackmore (Australia) and Marian Court (New Zealand), to name a few, have made an enormous contribution to the field; they continue to contribute and they are extensively cited. However, in this article we argue that this research has become central in the field of researching women and educational leadership against which other research is juxtaposed, rendering it peripheral. By other research, we mean that undertaken in the developing world, research that sits on the margins fighting for space and visibility. Similarly, women's contribution to educational leadership research fights for space with research undertaken by 'named' and frequently cited male scholars. Women's scholarship remains on the periphery to the central position of men's scholarship. This juxtaposition of women's educational leadership scholarship against men's scholarship and women's scholarship in the developing world juxtaposed against women's scholarship in the developed world sets up a research/scholarship hierarchy. White boys' scholarship is central in the field of educational leadership, Black women's scholarship is not. This positions 'Black people as outsiders looking into the discourse' (Phendla 2009, 62).

As a consequence, theories that help us to understand women's experiences of educational leadership are often developed from research undertaken in western contexts. While these may have some relevance for other cultural contexts, they seldom have what Patti Lather (1986, 271) calls the 'click of recognition' for researchers and participants in, for example, a Melanesian[1] context. To achieve a click of recognition within a broader range of cultural contexts research is needed

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that is undertaken in diverse cultural contexts. The body of research on women and educational leadership in the developing world is small but growing. It needs to grow so that indigenous scholars have access to research within contexts that are more relevant. Scholars from developing countries are calling for specific context research so strategies developed to help women access leadership are grounded in 'Grassroots experience' (Kagoda and Sperandio 2009, 50). Until there is more research published on women and educational leadership in the developing world it will remain on the periphery of scholarship.

This article deliberately foregrounds research from the developing world both in the literature cited and in the presentation of material from three research studies undertaken in Melanesia; one in the Solomon Islands, one in Papua New Guinea and one in Vanuatu. Each study was undertaken by a woman indigenous to that country. These Melanesian countries are economically described as 'least developed' (Parks 2009). So, findings from research undertaken in other developing countries – for example Tanzania (Bandiho 2009), Uganda (Kagoda and Sperandio 2009), South Africa (Phendla 2009), Pakistan (Shah 2009) and Bangladesh (Sperandio 2009) – more appropriately reflect the experiences of women in Melanesia, even though these countries are disparate, from different continents, of different religious affiliations, some with huge populations and others with very small populations. They have more in common with one another than they do with the western world. There is no intention to dismiss western literature as not relevant. However, there are absences from that literature that are central to the experiences of women in developing countries, for example the influence and centrality of religion in women's lives and their leadership (Fua 2009; Shah 2009). In a recent publication (Sanga and Chu 2009) that stories the lives of a new generation of Pacific leaders, their narratives are saturated with reference to leadership as a spiritual experience.

Two recent publications and three research studies inform this article: *Women leading education across the continents: Sharing the spirit, fanning the flame*, edited by Helen Sobehart (2009) and *Living and leaving a legacy of hope: Stories by new generation Pacific Leaders*, edited by Kabini Sanga and Cherie Chu (2009). These two publications were chosen because they contain a wealth of material about women and educational leadership in developing countries. The former (Sobehart 2009) takes a traditional approach, and there are many references to scholarly literature, much of it western, as it charts women's experiences around the world, including the developing world. The second publication (Sanga and Chu 2009) takes an altogether different approach. Not one scholarly reference is cited. Each author tells their leadership story using fluid narrative, reflecting the oral tradition of Pacific peoples. Neither of these publications was available when Shalom Akao (Solomon Islands), Bessie Kilavanwa (PNG) and Daisy Warsal (Vanuatu) were carrying out their research on women educational leaders in Melanesia. However, the experiences of the women in Melanesia resonate with those in other developing countries. To illustrate, and using the women's voices, we provide examples from Shalom's, Bessie's and Daisy's research. Sometimes, these illustrations use their voices as well as those of their participants.

The Melanesian research

Shalom, Bessie and Daisy were all secondary school teachers before each won a scholarship to study educational leadership for their master's degrees in New Zealand.

Each is passionate about working for and with women to improve their human rights and their ability to participate effectively and safely in educational leadership in their countries. The focus of their research was women leaders in secondary education (high schools) in Melanesia. The studies were undertaken over a five-year span as Bessie (2004), Shalom (2008) and Daisy (2009) completed their master's theses. They were small, qualitative, feminist studies. The face-to-face interviews were undertaken in each country so the women's leadership studied is situated in their home context. While studying in New Zealand the researchers were removed from powerful cultural norms; this gave them space to engage in feminist research. Although each used feminist research methodology to inform their work, identifying as feminists was problematic for them. Shalom comments, 'At this point of my research journey, I do not have the courage to identify as a feminist because I come from a society that snubs anyone who tries to go against the cultural norms' (Akao 2008, 64). Similarly, Bessie comments that although women in PNG would not identify as feminist because of the 'ridicule and repercussions that may arise from being labelled feminist' this does not stop women doing feminist work (Kilavanwa 2004, 95). After successfully completing their master's degrees, Shalom, Bessie and Daisy have returned home. Each continues to work to advance the status of women – that is, doing feminist work.

Representation and access

There is a great deal of research that charts the involvement of women in educational leadership in western countries. Tracking the increase in representation, the barriers to access and the experiences while in leadership positions have been central to that scholarship.[2] Unlike in many western countries, teaching in developing countries is not a feminised profession and women are the minority in the teaching workforce. For example, in Tanzania only 12.7% of secondary school principals are women (Bandiho 2009), in Uganda only 14% of the principals of coeducational secondary schools are women and no women are principals of boys-only schools, yet men are found in principals' positions in girls-only schools (Kagoda and Sperandio 2009). A similarly low representation of women in educational leadership positions can be found in South Africa (Phendla 2009) and Pakistan (Shah 2009). These statistics closely resemble the Melanesian situation. For example, in 2002 only 8% of secondary school principals in Vanuatu were women (Strachan 2004) and since then the percentage has dropped to 3.9% in 2008 (Warsal 2009): a worrying trend. In the Solomon Islands women's representation in educational leadership is even lower. In 2006, only 2.9% of secondary principals were women (Akao 2008). It is the same for PNG (Kilavanwa 2004). Even though women are in the minority in the teaching service in these countries, they are proportionally more underrepresented in leadership than their western counterparts. It would seem that the poorer the country, the less likely you are to find women in senior positions in education.

The findings from the three Melanesian studies (Akao 2008; Kilavanwa 2004; Warsal 2009) indicate there are conflicting accounts about how the women managed to gain leadership positions. What is common in the women's accounts is that appointment procedures were seldom followed, even though the education authorities are required to do so. Positions were not advertised, applications were not asked for and interviews not held. There was no transparency. Sometimes this advantaged the women as the ones who found themselves in senior positions were

often put there by men, even when they were reluctant and didn't want to be in those positions. This suggests that the women's path to leadership was unplanned. They had not sought these positions but certain factors enabled them to be successful in gaining a leadership position. Anna from the Solomon Islands comments:

> The position was not advertised. I did not write an application letter. The Chief Education Officer just put me as deputy. I think he based it on merit in that I was the longest serving teacher, so that's what it is based on, my experience as a teacher. (Akao 2008, 83)

Anna is constructing her merit as long service and experience rather than as ability and skill. Similarly, Jackie, also from the Solomon Islands, puts her promotion to a new school, again not applied for, down to the fact she lived close to the school, so it was convenient to appoint her. This impacts on women in two ways. First, the women's ability and skill are made invisible; they perceive that they were appointed not because they deserved the promotion but because it was convenient to appoint them. Second, the procedures required to appoint principals are often ignored and bypassed, so there are no visible 'rules' or procedures for other women to follow to gain a promotion. The process is accidental and makes it very difficult for women to plan for promotion. Promotion is by serendipity and whether their careers are progressed or not is dependent on and at the mercy of men. Because men control the positions that make the principal's appointments, men control women's access to leadership. Once women are in leadership positions, gender, culture and religion play an important role in how their leadership is experienced and practiced.

Gender and culture

In the developing world, societal constructs of gender are deeply embedded in culture. Gender and culture do not exist in isolation – they are interwoven. Men and women learn and practice a set of scripts within their feminine and masculine roles as part of their socialisation. Daisy describes growing up on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu:

> Growing up as a Ni-Vanuatu woman, I belong to a culture that is very male dominated. I have also been subjected to the discrimination that nearly all Vanuatu women face daily as part of normal cultural practices. In the village, as a girl I was expected to be by my grandmother's and aunties' sides, helping them with the daily domestic chores. However, the inequality in the gendered roles was more evident in the way the village women were treated. My mother, being from another island, would comment 'these Tannese women are treated like horses', because everyday, as part of their daily chores, having toiled and laboured in the gardens for almost the whole day planting root crops for the family, they were expected to bring back to the village the meal for the evening. With large baskets of root crops and vegetables, such as bananas, cassava [manioc] or taro strapped to their back with bush ropes, and while also juggling their little ones in their arms. (Warsal 2009, 4)

However, some argue that it has not always been that way, that in pre-European times the women of Melanesia 'made decisions in their own right and exerted powerful influence in social events' (Sepoe 2000 and Strathern 1998 cited in Kilavanwa 2004). This is contested ground, but what is evident is that both colonisation and missionisation (Christianity) impacted profoundly on Melanesian societies and the construction of gender. For example, the monogamous nuclear family unit was considered to be the ideal Christian home but presents a strongly masculinist image

where leadership and authority are dominated by the husband and male kin, that is, 'big man' leadership. Women are told to always obey the husband because this is good in the sight of God and it is sinful to do otherwise (Kilavanwa 2004).

Shah (2009) argues that these constructions of gender have implications for women leaders. In both conservative Muslim society (for example Pakistan) and conservative Christian society (for example Pacific Island nations) constructions of gender define women as home-makers, not leaders (Shah 2009; Strachan 2009). Even though many of the storytellers are women, of the 28 leadership stories in Sanga and Chu's (2009) edited book, only two stories (Joskin 2009; Pollard 2009) acknowledge and problematise gender in the context of education and educational leadership. Their stories appear to be gender blind, in stark contrast to the women's experiences in the Melanesian study. Maybe this is because all the authors, both men and women, had successfully navigated their own cultural contexts, completed higher degrees and become leaders. Their gendered role as women is central to how the women were able to access and operate in leadership. Pollard's narrative about the role women played in the peace negotiations at a very dangerous time in the Solomon Islands speaks to both the power of the women when they used culturally specific strategies, and their marginalisation when later during the peace talks they were excluded. This resonates with Shah's point that 'leadership is a situated concept' (Shah 2009, 128). How gender is constructed impacts significantly on how women experience (or do not experience) leadership, as the stories shared from the Melanesian women attest (Akao 2008; Kilavanwa 2004; Warsal 2009). Janice (Solomon Islands) shares decision-making in her school:

> They [women] are not taken seriously . . . some of the decisions that our deputy makes, the principal just over-rides. Some of the things she says or she assigns tasks to be done, no one takes it seriously. I feel it's because she is a woman. (Akao 2008, 94)

Women are brought up in cultures that emphasise male superiority and from an early age are taught how they should behave towards men. In most islands, this means men make decisions and have the final say and women are silent. This can also render women silent within the workplace and cause them to question their authority and ability:

> Because of our culture . . . women should not talk and question what the men do, so women's voices are not heard. I myself have this feeling, so when someone in authority is male and he makes a decision, I just follow whatever decision is made, even though I may disagree with that decision. (Fiona)

> There are times that I too think that maybe men are right and maybe the decisions that men make are always right or maybe better than women (Mylene). (Akao 2008, 95)

Culture impacts on how women perceive themselves as leaders. It reduces their ability to actively and effectively participate in decision-making and to lead in their preferred ways (Akao 2008). Big man leadership reduces women's access to education and therefore educational leadership (Strachan 2009).

Religion

In Melanesia, leadership as service is constructed as a Christian duty. This is not surprising as PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are Christian nations and

Christianity is enshrined in their constitutions. Similarly, Pakistan is an Islamic state. Islamic women are positioned as nurturers and bring their nurturing family role, which can be constructed as service, into their public leadership domain (Shah 2009). Women's leadership in education in strongly religious countries cannot be separated from their role in the family and the community. Church Women Fellowships have added a new dimension to the churches' traditional domain of spirituality and religion in Melanesia. Many Melanesian women have found Christianity liberating and a source of empowerment that encourages women to utilise their mental and emotional capacities. The Fellowships constitute an alternative Melanesian feminist experience, one that is organised by women (Kilavanwa 2004). However, the religious discourse that places men as leaders in both the public and private domains is powerful. Daisy comments on the importance of Christianity in her life:

> I have been taught over and over again that God is an orderly God and that we must practise the order of God here on earth, and that means in the three worldly institutions that the Lord has ordained; that is, in the Government, the Church, and the family there has to be God's order. In the family the head of the family is the father. That means the wives have to submit to their husbands but must be loved by their husbands because they are one in flesh and spirit. As a born-again Christian I believe these words of the Bible. (Warsal 2009, 7)

Religion also has a powerful influence on how women practice their leadership. Fuapepe Rimoni is Samoan. She comments 'the Church [Christian] has also meant that my siblings and I have come to learn certain things about leadership ... leadership is tautua [service]' (Rimoni 2009, 51–2), and 'genuine leadership is true service' (Samala 2009, 63). The leadership as service discourse uses the language of Christianity to justify and guide its practice. 'It [leadership] was always a lesson about selfless service' (Tuatonga 2009, 194). The women of the Solomon Islands who were involved in negotiating between the warring factions (of men) used prayer to give them strength: 'We ... believed that God answers prayers. Praying and singing gave us inner strength and clarity of mind' (Pollard 2009, 132). These women are highly educated with advanced degrees and in difficult times their faith takes precedence over their education. There is very little leadership training for both men and women who take up leadership positions. They have faith in God to help guide them in their leadership practice. The women in Shalom's study commented on their leadership that encompassed the ideas of servant leadership:

> ... leadership is shown where a leader knows how to lead people as well as being able to listen ... also you need to carry out your responsibilities faithfully, so that means that to be a leader, you have to be a servant of all (Janice). (Akao 2008, 99)

In the Melanesian studies many of the women referred to how being a Christian helped them on a daily basis. Most of the participants viewed Christianity as the main component in their leadership practice. Christian values of respect, forgiveness and honesty were repeatedly mentioned. For example, Eva had a bad employment experience but because of her Christian values chose to forgive those that had harmed her (Warsal 2009). Prayer was not only a comfort for the women leaders, it played a powerful role and was essential in their lives and leadership as Chantal explains:

> ... sometimes I don't understand how I can handle this [work situation]; it's only because I have this little group of women that I always go to and we always pray for each

other and I think that helps me with my decision-making because when I find that I have a lot of work or I know that I am stressing out I go to them and tell them and they put it on their prayer list and they pray for me and I pray for myself and the next day I am fine again. So I can handle this only because of that [prayer]. (Warsal 2009, 73–4)

The women's relationship with God provided comfort during hard times. Servant leadership provided the women with a way to lead that was congruent with their Christianity and their gendered role as Melanesian women. However, this can also be problematic as it continues to position women as subordinate and does nothing to challenge the inequalities in attitudes, systems and social structures.

Relationships

Pacific people are a collective people and their leadership stories make relational connections to the family (including those still alive and those who have died), God, and the community (Sanga and Chu 2009). Their leadership is not an individual endeavour; it is spoken of and enacted in relationship to others. The influence of family in developing values that are carried through into leadership actions is central to the process of learning leadership in Pacific contexts. Often the leadership lessons are learned through powerful and often repeated family homilies such as 'never give up', 'you can do it', 'leadership is hard work' and 'a good leader shows by doing' (Sanga and Chu 2009). Remembering and taking these homilies into their Pacific leadership practice keeps their families close and gives strength and comfort during difficult times. The support of family throughout the leadership journey, including gaining qualifications, is illustrated at the marae[3] graduation ceremonies at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. Many Pacific graduates, including Maori, will take family members with them when they go to get capped by the vice-chancellor. They walk alongside one another, thus acknowledging the support of their family and how the journey to graduation was a family endeavour. The strong extended family networks mean that many Pacific women do not have to take time out from their careers for child rearing. They can call on those networks to help care for the children, thus, as with women in Pakistan (Shah 2009), lowering a barrier to their participation in the workforce.

However, even with child care the Melanesian women leaders all struggled to balance their professional and personal lives as they also had huge domestic responsibilities (Akao 2008; Warsal 2009): 'Being educated and school leaders neither changes the roles of motherhood nor the obligations of a wife' (Kilavanwa 2004, 63). When women participate in educational leadership they take their families with them and when they go home they take their work with them. Support from partners is critical to their survival as educational leaders. To maintain that support, they must not neglect their womanly duties.

Building and maintaining good relationships was important to the women (Akao 2008) and had beneficial effects. They helped to run more inclusive and effective schools and therefore lessened the likelihood that the women would experience harassment. The women's leadership in Shalom's study was about working together not only with the school principal and deputy; also there was emphasis on teamwork with teachers. They saw the importance of relationships and collective decision-making. Being a good leader involved building and maintaining relationships with

various groups: the teachers and students in schools, the education community and the parents. Haylie (Vanuatu) commented:

> To be a good leader does not mean that you have to isolate yourself all the time from those working under you. You need to share ideas and hear the opinions of others about issues so that when decisions have to be made … open to others. Restrictions are there but you must ensure that your relationship with the teachers is good. (Akao 2008, 98–9)

Although the women preferred to be inclusive in their leadership, some women found that in order not to be perceived as weak, emotional and irrational leaders they needed to lead like a man. In Bessie's study, Eva decided to be authoritarian because she didn't want to be put down and manipulated by men (Kilavanwa 2004). Eva, like the other women in the Melanesian studies, strategised how she could both lead and survive in what at times was a very hostile environment.

Violence

In societies where gender roles are tightly culturally prescribed, such as in Melanesia and Pakistan, women can experience high levels of violence if they challenge those roles, for example, by occupying leadership roles that are considered to be the domain of men. Western women leaders also experience violence, in its many different forms. We argue that violence in western contexts, often called workplace harassment or bullying, is different in type and scale than that for women in developing countries where violence against women is endemic (as in Melanesia). Violence is often justified as part of cultural and Christian beliefs that view men as leaders and women as homemakers and the property of men (Kilavanwa 2004) which has been wrongly interpreted by men to justify the abuse of women (Warsal 2009).

In Pakistan women 'underplay their leadership roles... and often leave mainstream leadership positions for men' (Shah 2009, 136) because operating within the male domain of leadership leaves them vulnerable. Like their Melanesian sisters, operating within their culturally prescribed roles is less threatening to men and therefore safer (Strachan et al. 2007).

Violence and its impact on women educational leaders in Melanesia is graphically illustrated in the women's stories. Being a woman leader can be very dangerous work. Despite Christianity being such an important part of the lives of Melanesian people the women in the three studies experienced attitudes and behaviours from others that could only be described as 'un-Christian'. However, women can be both the perpetrators and the receivers of violence. For example, in PNG when Sibona was the deputy principal of a school, her son was hit in class by the provincial education superintendent. Sibona went to the superintendent's house to confront him and the conversation turned into a heated argument as he did not like being corrected by a woman. He became physically violent and Sibona's initial response was also violent. Sibona describes the incident:

> When he tried to punch me he tripped and fell. I was so angry, I picked up the biggest rock nearby and wanted to break his head and kill him … But a neighbour, a medical doctor, begged me to put the rock down. My students and friends wanted me to give them the ok to beat him up but I didn't. We went to the police and he was charged and reprimanded. (Kilavanwa 2004, 84–5)

This behaviour is typical in a big man's society. If women tamper with the big man's ego and shame him, he will do everything in his power to shame the woman. In the big man society, male head teachers, inspectors and superintendents who hold power pay back by suppressing women who oppose them or question what they are doing (Kilavanwa 2004).

Flora (Vanuatu) had a series of bad experiences that graphically illustrate the extremes people will go to when women challenge the cultural norms by being in leadership positions. The misogynistic behaviour of both community members and Ministry of Education officials is quite extraordinary. One month after Flora was appointed principal of a high school in Vanuatu there was a national teachers' strike. Flora was falsely accused of organising the strike and tried to explain that to the Ministry of Education:

> I tried telling them [Ministry of Education staff] that I did not take part in the strike as I was the only teacher that tried to make sure the student's needs were met. They had food because I was the principal so I had to play my part ... Every other teacher was on strike. (Warsal 2009, 81)

The staff at the Ministry of Education did not believe that she had been at the school to look after the students. Instead, they believed the false allegations that were made by teachers and the community, so she was suspended from her position and told to leave the school. Flora was very upset that no-one at the Ministry of Education or the Teaching Service Commission supported her. She took the case to court and sued the government to prove that her demotion was illegal and did not follow proper procedures. She won her court case and was awarded a substantial amount of money (Warsal 2009).

Although Chantal (Vanuatu) on the whole had a positive leadership experience she did experience resentment from some male students who threw stones at her because '[they] did not want to accept her authority because she was a female' (Warsal 2009, 87). These may seem to be extreme cases: they are not. In Melanesia, violence against women is endemic and there is little support when things go wrong. Women are isolated and exposed.

Moving forward

In western nations, the call for diversity in educational leadership is often related to the call for a more socially just representation to be able to lead increasingly diverse school populations. In Melanesia it is a different story. Schools are run almost exclusively by men and the student population is almost totally ethnically homogeneous (Melanesian with a small percentage of Polynesian). In Melanesia, the discourse of diversity in educational leadership seldom includes any other ethnicity and never includes gay or disabled. The lack of diversity in Melanesian educational leadership has to do with how the Melanesian culture constructs women's gendered roles. Discrimination against women is quantitatively and qualitatively different to that experienced by women in western societies. This is due in large part to the influence of traditional cultural practices and customs that are patriarchal. In the Melanesian context male, big man, leadership is normalised and sets a superior and privileged standard. This means that women's leadership is viewed as deviant and creates a leadership binary that obscures valid alternative

leadership options (Gunn 2009). Power is inherent in big man leadership as normative. When women lead they are disrupting the norm and claiming the power. For the Melanesian women in Shalom's, Bessie's and Daisy's research this meant they were vulnerable and exposed to retaliation.

Lumby (2009) suggested that: 'The performance of gender is therefore likely to be intended to manage responses. In order to do so, it is part a choice of whether to place gender in the foreground or to make it disappear entirely' (31). The Melanesian women's performances of their gender differed. Eva tried to 'disappear' her gender by being authoritarian and leading like a 'big man'. For others, their gender was placed in the foreground, in their servant leadership which aligned with their role as Melanesian, Christian women. Ethnicity was neither disappeared nor was it placed in the foreground because the women are not of an ethnic minority. The women were strategic in the performance of their gender within a leadership context. How they chose which strategy to use was dependent upon the powerful, cultural context that constructs big man leadership as normative. The women's leadership was both a situated concept (Shah 2009) and a situated practice.

Attention to the situated nature of leadership should guide how Melanesian women can be supported in their leadership. Bandiho's (2009, 43) call for 'African educators to determine what helps nurture future leaders within the African context while remaining conscious of global realities' is pertinent. We need to heed what Shalom, Bessie and Daisy say will help women in their countries. They recommend addressing the lack of initial leadership training and, more importantly, the limited access that women leaders have to training. There should be opportunities for leadership development for women only. This approach needs to be one that the women participate in, from the planning to the implementation stage, so that they feel a sense of ownership – but more importantly, there needs to be a program that empowers them and develops their leadership skills in the process. It could also offer the women a valid, alternative leadership option that can be employed alongside their faith in God (Akao 2008; Kilavanwa 2004; Warsal 2009).

A network for women needs to be formed by women, for women, so they have a safe haven where they can unwind, discuss and share with other women leaders the issues they face, to empower one another, to gain the strength and courage to continue to move forward in their leadership. This would help reduce their professional isolation. Women's groups in collaboration with non-government and government organisations need to organise awareness regarding the important role women play in society with the aim of reducing negative attitudes towards women (Akao 2008; Kilavanwa 2004; Warsal 2009).

Government agencies must fulfil their Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[4] obligations and formulate policies that recognise the rights of women so they have equal access to education, jobs and training. Unless the governments of the Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu adopt and action policies that address issues of social injustice, gender inequality and the abuse of women's human rights, women will continue to be underrepresented in educational leadership because of their difficulties in accessing leadership positions and because of the difficulties they face when in those positions. Ensuring appointment processes are adhered to is an important obligation (Akao 2008; Kilavanwa 2004; Warsal 2009).

Notes

1. Melanesia is a group of island nations in the southwest Pacific. They include Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. In this article Melanesia refers to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.
2. For a detailed account of the comparison of women's educational leadership between New Zealand and Melanesia see Strachan (2009).
3. Marae are traditional meeting places for Maori.
4. CEDAW is the United Nations international, women's, human rights convention that most countries in the world have ratified, including the Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu. The convention obligates countries to eliminate discrimination against women in law and in practice across a wide range of areas including education.

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Shalom Akao is currently working as Development Programme Coordinator for New Zealand's development agency (NZAID) in Honiara, Solomon Islands. She continues to be involved in policy and research work in educational leadership, policy, women and gender.

Bessie Kilavanwa is a consultant with the Basic Education Development Project (BEDP), an AUSAID project in Papua New Guinea. She has taught extensively in secondary schools within the Education Department in PNG and is passionate about the leadership roles women play in communities. She is also very interested in consultative research to change policy related to gender and women in Papua New Guinea.

Daisy Warsal has returned to Vanuatu after recently completing her Master of Educational Leadership degree. She is now working as a consultant researcher for the Department of Women's Affairs in Vanuatu.

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