

Leftemap olgeta: Seasonal Work, Women and Leadership

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Introduction

The potential for seasonal work opportunities in Australia and New Zealand to influence attitudes towards gender relations in Pacific Island countries has been the subject of interest by policymakers, employers and scholars for quite some time. While women participate in seasonal work programs in small numbers, when they do, the economic gains that women make are assumed to provide the potential for women to transform their lives and social status on their return home. As an extension of these assumptions, seasonal work programs could be seen as an opportunity to improve women's leadership potential and generate changes in attitudes towards women's leadership both in workplaces and in home communities. However, women participating in seasonal work are coming from contexts where women's leadership may be limited to certain spheres at household or community levels, where the risk of partner violence is high and where understandings of gender relations are much more complex than simple binaries of men versus women. Is improving women's leadership potential really a simple matter of offering economic opportunities and training?

This paper shares experiences of ni-Vanuatu women who participated in a training program that focused on their leadership development during their engagement in seasonal work in New Zealand. Offering training to seasonal workers can be challenging in both a practical and ideological sense. Rosters may commit workers to 12-hour shifts, leaving little time for other activities. Moreover, differing attitudes to training seasonal workers prevail depending on the benefits that are hoped to be derived from seasonal work programs: do seasonal workers only require job-ready skills to benefit New Zealand or Australian industries or do they need greater learning opportunities to be able

to contribute to development on their return home? Vakameasina, a training program delivered by Fruition Horticulture,¹ developed and delivered a pilot women's leadership and personal development program during 2020 when a window — provided by the downtime created by COVID-19 restrictions — offered an opportunity to engage women in intensive training.

The experiences of participants in Vakameasina's women's leadership program, as discussed in this paper, demonstrate that leadership programs can develop women's self-efficacy and identity as leaders, both in the short term in their workplaces and in their plans for their lives on their return home. However, such outcomes were achieved through supportive contexts provided by both employers and trainers who were interested in women's development for their own sake and cognisant of the complexities in women's lives and the risks surrounding ideas of women's empowerment. While the long-term impacts of seasonal work and training opportunities for changes in attitudes to gender roles remain unclear, the pilot program demonstrates the importance of investing in women who are taking up seasonal work.

This paper is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides a background to seasonal worker schemes, including those of Australia and New Zealand, and describes the benefits of investing in training for seasonal workers. This part also provides information on women's participation in labour mobility schemes and the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to developing women's leadership capacity. Part 2 relates the research findings in the context of gender and leadership narratives. The paper concludes with two main observations: that designers and facilitators of women's leadership programs need to respond to any potential risks to women as a result of the program; and that expectations surrounding the empowerment

of women in their home communities need to be managed.

Part 1: Background

Long-term research with mostly male seasonal workers has shown that not only does seasonal work result in remittances to home countries for school fees, community projects or other forms of development, it also provides opportunities to enhance workers' ability to elevate their status within their community (Bailey and Wells 2017; Bailey 2019; Gibson and Mackenzie 2014). Facilitating higher rates of women's participation in seasonal work is therefore regarded as a way to improve women's lives in the Pacific — through generating independent income for women and upgrading their social status. Developing women's skills and knowledge during their seasonal work experience creates an opportunity to enable women to take on leadership roles both in their workplaces and home lives. However, while in theory these assumed pathways for raising women's status may seem simple, there are two key barriers to overcome: attitudes towards training seasonal workers and gender relations in the contexts which women come from and will return home to.

The role of migration in promoting change, particularly for sending countries, has long been documented. Well-formulated seasonal worker programs have the potential to play a role in development — if they are designed to lead to an equitable distribution of wealth between host and home countries — alongside 'fairer trade, better aid and debt relief' for the sending country (Pritchett 2006:1). Yet the impacts of temporary employment migration schemes depend on the commitment of implementing organisations to ensuring that benefits do accrue to workers and their home countries (Bedford et al. 2017). Women and men who take up seasonal work opportunities in an international context are often described as a resource, as a 'worker', to fill gaps where there 'are not enough New Zealand workers' (Immigration New Zealand 2021:1) or as a 'reliable, returning workforce when there is not enough local Australian labour to meet seasonal demand' (Australian Government 2021a:1). When workers are viewed purely as resources, this narrows the scope of the developmental intentions of seasonal labour mobility programs to individual income generation and remittances as a source of economic development.

Investing in workers

The New Zealand and Australian governments have approached seasonal work arrangements with Pacific Island countries differently, including in their approaches to worker development (Bedford et al. 2017). From the outset, the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in New Zealand has had three objectives: to fulfil labour shortages, provide sustainable temporary migration arrangements, and meet economic development goals for the Pacific. The RSE is therefore managed by three government portfolios responsible for social development, labour and immigration, and New Zealand's aid program (Ramasamy et al. 2008). In Australia, the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) is located within the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and responsibility for add-on skills training for workers sits with the Pacific Labour Facility in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

In the early stages of developing the RSE scheme in New Zealand, upskilling workers was identified as a key development strategy, not only to benefit employers in terms of job-readiness, but also to enable workers to develop new knowledge and capacity relevant to their home lives (Bailey 2009; 2019). As one means of achieving the development and capacity-building aims of the RSE, the New Zealand government established the Vakameasina training program in 2011, which is delivered by Fruition Horticulture. The Vakameasina program has the goal of enhancing seasonal workers' experiences of living in New Zealand, as well as providing training opportunities to enable workers to return home with relevant new knowledge and capacities. In contrast, to date, workers in Australia have been able to access a limited 'add-on skills training' program in first aid, English and information technology, but the intention to deliver an 'enhanced skills training package' has been announced (Australian Government 2021b).

For employers accustomed to transitory labour to fulfil their seasonal workload, investing in worker development is a change of mindset. While it was initially thought that Pacific Island workers might only take up one or two seasonal opportunities, a high number engage in multiple seasons. There is a need to reframe mindsets that seasonal work is short-term and finite to better reflect the lived practice of seasonal work, which is recurring over extended time

periods. This means that when employers invest in workers' professional development there is a 'circular' benefit to both workers and their employers (Gibson and Mackenzie 2014:13). However, when decisions about investment in training are largely left to employers, worker development is usually limited to workers' job-readiness, such as training in harvesting or maintaining vines. The structure of seasonal work hierarchies does enable the opportunities for leadership skills to be developed. For example, team leaders are often chosen to work with cohorts of workers from their own community or country, to be a key point of communication between employers and workers and are encouraged to be 'ambassadors for their countries' (Bailey 2017a & b). Employers value highly the role of team leaders as they manage behaviours, provide pastoral care, support new workers and 'employers have stated that time, money and attention to team leaders is vital' (Bailey 2017a:2). Employers can also support workers in the development of the complex behavioural and attitudinal aspects of the team leader role, beyond supervisory skills and 'job readiness'.

Developing women through seasonal work

Women from the Pacific Island region participate in seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand in small numbers. In New Zealand, women represent approximately 11 per cent of all workers with the largest cohort of women coming from Vanuatu. In 2018–19, 419 women from Vanuatu participated in RSE, nearly double that of the next largest cohort of 195 women from Solomon Islands.² Women's low participation rates can be attributed to a number of supply and demand factors. In host countries, it has taken time for some employers to recognise the value of women workers and overcome bias about the types of roles that women might be able to take on (Bailey 2019; Ball et al. 2015; Chatterier 2019). In home countries, cultural norms and gendered divisions of labour, as well as women's lack of strong networks with employer agents, can prevent women's participation (Bailey 2019; Ball et al. 2015; Chatterier 2019).

With women's low participation rates, the opportunity is limited for seasonal work to bring about changes in gender relations or women's status. While studies have shown that women and men taking up seasonal work have changed their attitudes due to exposure to different gender roles in host countries

(Cardno 20/12/2018), such studies are short-term in nature and are limited to workers while they are in host countries or immediately after their return home. In addition, back in the home country, the extra workload that women take up to facilitate men's absence while they participate in seasonal work has largely gone unrecognised but has the potential to create an unfair burden on women (Chatterier 2019). Until women's capacity to translate their seasonal work experience into positive benefits at home is documented in greater depth, policy to increase women's participation is largely based on broad assumptions that link economic independence with women's empowerment. However, in other contexts research has shown that care must be taken to avoid assumptions that women's economic empowerment will lead to empowerment in other parts of their lives, including their potential for leadership. If women's increasing independence, skills or economic capacity is perceived as a threat to their partner's masculinity or authority, this empowerment can come at a price of increased partner violence or controlling behaviour (Eves 2018).

Workers come from diverse cultural contexts in the Pacific Islands, and even within Vanuatu itself there are many cultures, languages, family arrangements and context-specific barriers to women's opportunities for independent income and increase in status. Access to education and literacy, key skills for participating in workplaces, is limited for many ni-Vanuatu, particularly after primary school, due to the high cost of school fees for families, a lack of access to facilities and teachers, as well as the increased frequency of disruption due to natural disasters such as Cyclone Pam. In addition, boys' education seems to be prioritised over girls during times of hardship (Government of Vanuatu 2020).

Communities' attitudes to gender can impact on women's labour force participation in Vanuatu. These attitudes are driven by expectations that women carry the burden of unpaid domestic, community and cultural labour, regardless of their employment or income-earning status; rural living (for up to three-quarters of the population); limited access to finance; and a lack of support from partners and extended family for education or careers for women (Bowman et al. 2009; Vanuatu TVET 2016). Social norms in Vanuatu have resulted in masculinity being associated with power and decision-making, while femininity is associated with caregiving and maintenance of cultural

obligations (Bowman et al. 2009). The majority of women (estimated to be 72 per cent) have or continue to experience physical and sexual violence in Vanuatu (Vanuatu Women's Centre 2011).

When women take up seasonal work opportunities, they are stepping outside of expected gender roles in home communities. For example, when explaining why women were not selected from the Lolihor community in Vanuatu for seasonal work, the chair of the Development Council explained:

When we think of sending the boys to New Zealand we think that the women stay back to look after all these resources ... We want the women in the villages to look after the children, the garden and the livestock. And our plan is when we started the scheme is to tell the boys that when you go you have to do plenty for the women; tell the boys to allocate some funds that's why we have a big market house in there. To help the women later on (as cited in Bailey 2019:29).

Agencies promoting policies and programs that aim to improve gender relations in Vanuatu have learnt the hard way that gender equality is largely regarded as an outsider-driven concept 'inconsistent with cultural and religious values and traditions' (Vanuatu Skills Partnership 2019). Gender relations in Vanuatu may be understood through a more complex set of social arrangements rather than binaries of men versus women. As Bolton points out:

A person is the sum of the net of relationships in which he or she is engaged ... The idea of a singular identity, enshrined in a singular name, is entirely alien ... In each relationship, a person has different responsibilities and obligations and different access to authority or power. The suggestion that all men have power over women misunderstands the specificity of each relationship in such a system — between a daughter and her father, a father's sister and her brother's son, or a wife and her husband (2003:55).

Internationally driven policies that are seen as counter to local custom and adversarial to existing gender relations have tarnished perceptions of what gender equality might mean for communities and led to perceptions that gender is often a concept only associated with women (Rosseau and Kenneth-Watson

2018). More recent policies and programs have taken great care to reframe concepts of gender equality and women's leadership by ensuring that change is driven locally and in ways that are appropriate to cultural contexts (Vanuatu Skills Partnership 2019). This means that any training program offered while women are in other countries needs to be cognisant of the contexts which women return home to.

Organisations intending to deliver training for women participating in seasonal work face the dual challenge of being able to step outside skills-based courses that are directly relevant to the workplace and provide both context and culturally relevant training. The risks of mismatching training programs and the needs of workers when they return to their home countries have been documented, particularly when top-down rather than responsive approaches are taken (Curtain and Howes 2021). The Vakameasina program has a flexible funding model with an adaptive design, meaning that training programs can be tailored to seasonal workers' interests. For example, in response to worker feedback, Vakameasina assists workers with studying for their driver's licence (a key skill required in host countries) or how to safely use a chainsaw (a key skill required in home countries to assist with recovery after cyclones) (Bailey 2019). In addition, Vakameasina assists with skills useful for any kind of employment in home or host countries, such as English language literacy and numeracy.

Vakameasina has run a leadership program for a number of years, yet staff recognised that women participated in small numbers and were not highly engaged in a mixed cohort. In 2020, Vakameasina redeveloped their program and trialled a women-only leadership training course with a small group of women from Vanuatu. The following sections share findings from interviews with some of the participants, their employer (hereafter referred to as the employer) and the program tutor (hereafter referred to as Vakameasina). The women participating in this research had undertaken numerous seasons as an RSE worker (up to 9 years). Some were spending an extended time in New Zealand due to COVID-19, while the remaining women had returned to Vanuatu. Only two women in Vanuatu were able to be reached due to lack of connectivity in some parts of Vanuatu. Interviews were conducted by telephone and through the internet conferencing platform Zoom, or Facebook. Interviews were conducted in a mix of English and

Bislama. Some quotes are participants' own expression in English, some are the translation. Names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants in the research.

Part 2 illustrates that the barriers and enablers to women's participation in seasonal work and developmental opportunities are shaped by narratives of gender and leadership and that responsive processes are essential to engaging with cultural contexts and multiple conceptualisations of leadership. Finally two key findings for program designers are discussed: the importance of managing the potential risks when engaging women in leadership programs or other forms of empowerment and having appropriate expectations for change.

Part 2: Research Findings

Narratives of gender

A number of approaches have been used to attract more women into seasonal work opportunities. In this research the women's employer found that longer deployments have a major impact on women's interest in participating in seasonal worker schemes, and they are trialling shorter seasonal work opportunities. At present, shorter assignments are harder to come by, particularly due to caps on numbers of workers in New Zealand and the reduction in financial gain for workers. Other approaches for diversifying the workforce include recruiting women in groups from the same areas. While housing women and men together has presented some concerns in the past (Bailey 2019), in this research the women's employer found this can also be a positive move, for example, in the case where workers from one village share a residence or where women work alongside their husbands, sisters or other close relatives. Other recommendations to improve the 'family-friendliness' of seasonal work include more flexible visa arrangements, providing greater access to phone and internet options, and greater recognition of and support for the roles taken on by support networks at home (Bedford et al. 2020).

Yet, much research and policy on labour mobility schemes on barriers to women's participation in seasonal work is tied to the gendered notions of the breadwinner model, which Australian and New Zealand workplaces are constructed around (Chattier 2019; Underhill-Sem and Masters 2017). The breadwinner model is tied to Western constructions

of nuclear families, where men work take on the bulk of work outside the home and women take care of domestic matters. This means that women can face judgement about whether 'enough' time is spent caring for children, on their own, as a means of measuring the standard of their 'mothering'. In addition, it is important to recognise that seasonal work narratives position women as suited to 'softer', domestic labour rather than outdoor labour. In Vanuatu, this attitude dates to colonial times, when missionaries discouraged women's physical labour outside the household, purportedly as a means of elevating women's status (Bolton 2003), yet women make up the largest proportion of subsistence workers and household food producers in Vanuatu (Chattier 2019; Underhill-Sem and Masters 2017).

Gendered narratives about barriers to women's participation in seasonal work have the potential to take on greater power than the actual circumstances of women's lives, especially for women from communities where notions of the individual versus the collective, kinship and care are quite different to Western frames. It is important, therefore, to check in with women themselves about what they might perceive to be barriers to their participation.

In this research, some participants noted that gaining a husband's permission (or not) was a major enabler (or barrier) to a woman's ability to participate in seasonal work, as well as the availability of an extended support network, particularly sisters or mothers, to take on their responsibilities at home. All respondents in this research had worked several seasons in New Zealand (up to 9), had children, and had arrangements in place, that they felt good about, with their sisters, mothers or husbands for their children's care:

I started travelling to New Zealand when I have two kids, one girl and one boy and then after that I had another boy, so that's three of them and now I'm waiting for another one, then that's four. When I was travelling, they were staying with my mum so my mum is responsible for them for most of the time that I travel, but I trust my mum and that's why I can leave them with her and travel to New Zealand (Isabel, worker).

Furthermore, the women in this research valued their physical strength, pointing out how the roles that women in Vanuatu take on as part of their household

responsibilities, such as gardening, made them good seasonal workers:

We work harder than men, we do everything [at home], that's why we come to New Zealand but we know how to do men's work in New Zealand, we already can do it, we work with the men, we got used to it in Vanuatu (Mary, worker).

While this is not a representative sample of seasonal workers, it does point to the need to be careful in the way that narratives around the barriers to women's participation in labour mobility schemes are constructed.

Creating a culturally responsive leadership course

The challenge with leadership programs developed in New Zealand or Australia is the translation of the concept of leadership across multiple cultural worlds. Women who are trained in leadership in international contexts are required to translate ideas of leadership to their local setting when they return home. Such leaders face the challenge of respecting traditions and culture, while promoting changes in mindsets (see, for example, Kalpokas Doan 2021). Through the women's leadership program, Vakameasina managed this challenge very carefully through several processes: using extensive research — particularly by Pacific Island authors — to inform the course content, establishing a Pacific women's advisory group, and co-constructing the curriculum with participants. As a result, the leadership program focused heavily on family as both an enabler and barrier to leadership, refrained from a predetermined idea of leadership and instead focused on facilitating women's leadership identity:

Researchers have also found that there is a process by which people come to understand themselves as leaders thereby developing an identity as such ... Therefore, a leadership identity can be thought of as a socially constructed identity, similar to other socially constructed identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Socially constructed identities develop through people's interactions with peers, families, and societal and historical norms (Vogel 2019:7, cited in Fruition Horticulture 2020:2).

In addition, Vakameasina tutors took care to model behaviours that challenged traditional ideas of

an out-in-front leader through the teaching style in the classroom:

When we think about the often patriarchal and hierarchical leadership that is still in place for some of the Pacific Island places, in a general sense, so sometimes in the classroom that's what the learners want to see, that's somebody sitting in the front who talks and talks. So, with this leadership course, to frame up, to actually do what I was saying. You know that leadership can be co-constructed, that we can challenge all these ideas or these differences in the leadership. I definitely needed to work hard to make sure that I wasn't doing that in the room, but that was something that I was acutely aware of again, walking the talk (Sara, Educational Leader).

Given the complexities of translating a concept such as leadership across multiple cultural worlds, a key part of the course was to use group processes to deconstruct and then reconstruct notions of leadership through participants' own eyes. The lead tutor felt that this process was integral to what made the course so powerful, particularly in how this enabled women to develop their own leadership identity:

We start off defining leadership as a group, we're not giving a definition, we do that together. We start off with that idea that there are many different leadership frameworks ... we do that deconstruction ... and after that we define leadership. We then talk about ... what makes up my idea of leadership ... that's when suddenly they are like ... I actually fit those qualities, I've got those qualities of what I admire, I can see that in myself and I can grow the other ones. So, I just think it was time and space that they haven't had, and maybe the provocation (Sara, Educational Leader).

An important part of Vakameasina's offering and encouraging women to participate in the leadership course, was therefore building women's trust to engage with the tutors and content around leadership. This trust assists women to recognise the roles that they take on are leadership and enables them to develop a leadership identity.

Narratives of leadership: upholding community obligations

The concept of leadership is ambiguous and contested, yet commonly associated with individuals, in the form of a visible 'out-in-front leader' or, in Melanesia, big-man or chiefly style of leadership. In more recent times, however, programs that aim to develop the skills of potential future leaders in the Pacific Islands region have emphasised the collective nature of leadership, highlighting that leadership is a networked approach to influence by mobilising people and resources to bring about change (Howard 2019).

Women in this research described their initial hesitancy with the idea of leadership, or indeed that they themselves might be leaders, as they regarded it as a concept associated with national politics or in a sphere above the community or household level:

The thinking in Vanuatu is like this: some of our leaders and chiefs appoint the women to take women's leadership roles in the community. But regarding those who take on leadership at a national level, they don't regard women as leaders. Like the men, ah? They compete to get into government, but just them, the men, they don't regard women as leaders inside parliament, but in the community yes, some of us women are leaders in our communities (Mary, worker).

Alternatively, there were women who held leadership roles in their workplace but did not feel comfortable that they had a strong understanding of leadership:

I was taking part in some of the leadership in my workplace like as a team leader, not really understanding what leadership was, but now when I take the course, I had more understanding and knowledge from that course, so it helped me a lot (Isabel, worker).

The employer stated that they value women workers highly, not only due to their work capacity, but also their emotional resilience and positive influence on other workers. Yet despite proving their worth, both the employer and the women themselves noted that they had challenges with demonstrating leadership in their workplaces:

[Women] tend to be in the back and they are quite shy, and they are quiet and they just kind of

get on and do what they are told. Which, when an opportunity came to put them on a leadership course, we absolutely grabbed at that one (Jessica, employer).

In part, the employer had noted their workers were drawing on concepts of leadership based on status and connections within a village, for example, to a chief, rather than the types of skills and behaviours that RSE employers look for in the workplace. The program tutor also noted that cultural obligations often prescribed who might be seen or represented as a leader.

Women described many situations where they enact leadership through cultural and community obligations yet reported that before the course, they had not recognised their actions as a form of leadership. As an example, women often described the roles that they played within community through a lens of *leftemap olgeta*. *Leftemap olgeta* literally translates to 'lift them up':

Oli stap mekem komuniti wok ... Like we visitim ... i go ia, go ia, go ia, Blong leftemap olgeta ... samtaem mifala i go visitim olgeta we oli no, oli nogat ... oli ol wido ah? Blong karem smol kakae go givim long ol, klinim haos blong ol, wasem klos blong ol, afta samtaem mifala i go planem, presem garen, afta mi i planem kakae blo olgeta.

We do community work ... go visiting, here, there ... to encourage them, sometimes we go to visits those who ... who don't have ... widows yes? To take a bit of food to give to them, clean their houses, wash their clothes; sometimes we go to plant their gardens, plant their food (Lillian, worker).

Leftemap olgeta is similar to the concept of networked leadership. This is an important form of leadership that takes place from the side or below and is focused on developing trust and confidence in others, achieving leadership through collective rather than individual actions (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). In this way, women are describing lifting others up, encouraging and supporting others rather than elevating their status by sending others down. Or in other words, if I raise others up, then it raises me up too.

This form of leadership was evident throughout women's plans for their return home. Women reported their intentions to provide for their children's school

fees and to create a better future, as well as to make community contributions, for building houses or indeed rebuilding houses in the wake of Cyclone Pam. This includes houses for parents or other relatives first:

We want to change our living, our home. I already do my mum's house ... She's very old, she's 86 years old. It's hard for us to find money at home, that's why we decide to come here (Mary, worker).

Women also planned to share what they had learnt through the course and were especially mindful of other women who were not able to access such opportunities:

It won't be easy, but I will try and gather them [the women] together in one place to talk about this topic Leadership. Some will understand, and some will watch me and see how it turns out and what I do. I've got some experience now, but it's the first time I have done a course like this. And it's the first time they have heard about leadership, it will be hard for them to understand. Some of them don't have a good education ... Many of them, before they go to school, they don't know how to write, they don't know how to read, that's why they use us ladies to teach them, we have to take part of this and explain to them do this and do this, that's why they use us (Mary, worker).

Women's intentions for collective or networked leadership relate very closely to notions of collective identity which are constructed through relationships and obligations to others (Bolton 2003). This way of looking at leadership — in contrast to individualised or status-related forms of leadership — emerged for women throughout the leadership course due to the processes that enabled them to deconstruct and reconstruct their ideas of leadership and to reframe their own identity as leaders. This demonstrates the power of enabling participants to harness their lived experiences to develop and recognise models of leadership that are relevant to their community and cultural contexts.

Do no harm: managing risks to women

The unequal access to opportunities to seasonal work, particularly between villages, has been noted by researchers as problematic (Bedford et al. 2020).

Vanuatu has very high ratios of dependants to breadwinners, particularly in rural areas, with only about one-third of the working-age population accessing paid employment (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2016). In this context, money is conspicuous, particularly the large amounts that seasonal workers can bring back into small villages, and particularly when women become more economically empowered and confident in their voice and skills:

Some of them they might be jealous ... sometimes it's hard to stand up with the men and talk because they tend to regard the voice of women as small, so it's not as important as men's voices and men think of themselves as high or above the women (Mary, worker).

The concept of jealousy in some parts of Vanuatu is much more than an emotion such as envy — it can be a spiritual concept and play an important part in governing social relations and regulating reciprocity. Jealousy can be concerned with the rise of individuals and individual success if 'that stands in direct moral contrast to the grounded and collective sense of identity' that connects kin and creates reciprocal obligations for wealth sharing (Taylor 2015:42). Being jealous (*jelus* or *jalus*) may justify violence that has a redistributive intent or can lead to sorcery-related accusations (Lindstrom 2017; Taylor 2015). Seasonal workers manage this by investing in their community and avoiding conspicuous displays of wealth (Bailey 2014a & b). Given this context, women who undertake leadership programs may face backlash or jealousies as women's skills develop and they seek to assert themselves or create change in their lives or in their communities.

In this research, both Vakameasina program staff and the employer demonstrated great sensitivity to the risks to women when they step outside traditional roles or seek to exercise leadership. They noted that it was important to recognise that their staff were not equipped to be counsellors but they could carefully manage these discussions in partnership with women and had a number of strategies in place to manage the risks. For example, Vakameasina tutors are:

trained in psychological first aid. Our New Zealand Domestic Code of Practice³ requires this. So we are trained to follow the women where they go, comfortably, and then make sure that we are in a position to be able to give them the

support or guide them to the support that they need (Sara, Educational Leader).

The tutors also recognised that women already have the skills to navigate these risks and enabling group discussions was an important part of learning from each other:

Sometimes the way a man might talk is too strong; women can bring peace. We can change them, we can bring peace to what they are saying ... When I talk, I won't talk hard to them, I will flow with their hearts, talk slowly, to comfort them, not rush, and use our language in a way [*tun long lanwis*] that helps them to understand that yes it's true what she's saying (Mary, worker).

In addition, the employer recognised that they had the power to legitimise the women's credibility as leaders through actions such as profiling the women and their achievements in internal communications, providing safe opportunities for leadership, and encouraging male colleagues to back up the women:

We're starting them off smaller, because trying to have women leaders in a group of 400 people, people would just ignore them and it's just going to bring them down from other stuff that they have learnt ... We have used, like a buddy system, other male leaders that we have trained in leadership as well. To say, look we need strong females in your country, this is best for you, for your country, to make your women strong. They are on board with it, to have them there to back these ladies up when they make decisions (Jessica, employer).

The employer also recognised that it was important for organisations to provide ongoing opportunities in the workplace rather than expecting women alone to create change:

You'll see initial results straight away, that's not the end, it's not a one-stop fix all. It does require ongoing work, but you can see the benefits the more you engage with them and what they have learnt. Like anything, you've just got to keep on putting those skills into practice. It will pay dividends. You can't just throw them on a course and think that is going to magically save you or magically turn them into these leaders, it's a good first step to get our RSEs up to a standard where they are able to lead, and we owe them that

because we bought them here. I think we owe them that (Jessica, employer).

These accounts highlight the importance of integrating women's leadership models within community and cultural obligations as well as balancing goals for women's leadership with the risk of harms that women face when they become more empowered, both economically and socially. While women are well equipped to manage these risks themselves, creating change is a collective endeavour and supportive environments offered by training organisations and employers are key. Moreover, Vakameasina ensured that the training outcomes related to women's personal goals rather than broadscale social change.

Creating change

In offering courses on leadership, Vakameasina is recognising the capacity of seasonal workers to create change in their lives and for others around them. Yet, this intent comes with a clear caution around expectations. The leadership course engaged women who had rarely had access to educational or training opportunities. Education can be important to establishing a person's identity and social status (Bailey and Wells 2017) and some of the women frequently expressed that they had finished school in year six and that they had received less education in comparison to their siblings or others around them. Their relatively lower level of education seemed to be a big part of how they viewed themselves. Seasonal work opportunities combined with the leadership training have enabled the women to learn English, gain public speaking experience and other skills. In this context, the opportunity to learn with a group, share ideas, learn from others and speak in front of a group were significant:

I've never attended a course like that, I am very proud of doing that course (Dorothy, worker).

Most of the time in Vanuatu when people ... know the answers but they decide not to speak out but from that course we had the opportunity and courage to speak out for ourselves (Isabel, worker).

In doing so, Vakameasina was enabling a reframing of these women's self-perception:

I went to learn about leadership — I was already doing it at home and in my community but I

didn't realise I was a leader, but when I went on the course, I came to realise that yes, I am already playing a role, a responsibility of a leader in my community and my home (Lillian, worker).

It is clear that women emerged from the course with a different idea of leadership. Rather than leadership associated with status or national politics, the women were now thinking about leadership as something they were already demonstrating in their own lives, that others around them were also important leaders and mentors, and that leadership was about listening and bringing together the ideas of others:

One of the things I learnt is that I am a leader. [As a leader] I will have to listen to the women's advice, I will need to show respect, respect your people, you have to understand what they want to do, so that everyone can come to one decision or to make the right decision for the people and the community, listen to the people (Dorothy, worker).

I learnt that it's important to communicate with the group or the teachers and get all the ideas together and then after that you can speak out on behalf of the group (Isabel, worker).

In addition, the women reported that the opportunity to do a leadership course would elevate their status back at home. They said that the course had enabled them to demonstrate to others in their family, community or church on their return home that they were 'more than fruit pickers' and that they had also developed confidence; they felt proud to speak up and had learnt important skills and knowledge during their seasonal work experience:

It's true I have learned some things — I will go and I will feel good about myself and what I have learned. I will go teach them to my friends and feel good all over again (Lillian, worker).

In a similar fashion, the women's employer reported that they had noticed an immediate impact from the course in terms of women's confidence to speak up and to let their employer know when there were issues that required resolving. This is significant given the power imbalances that workers tend to experience in relation to employers (Bailey 2009; Bedford et al. 2021). However, the employer also noted the potential to

continue such skills development once workers return home:

This is ongoing, we can give them the tools and tell them how you be strong, but it's breaking down those barriers in their own countries ... I do believe it's their ability to pass that down to their children and their children, and you'll see that passing through the generations where they get stronger and stronger. This is how you should be treated, this is how you should be thinking as a woman. This is not ok, and if it's not ok then speak up. And knowledge, knowledge they are learning and retaining that information and using those skills, filling up that toolbox that they have, it can only be good, it can only be right can't it? (Jessica, employer)

Extending the reach of skills development initiatives could be accomplished through more work with women to think through how they can implement their ideas on their return home and the kind of support they might be able to access. As one participant described, even the simple need to have space for women to meet is important in some communities:

We don't really have a place at home to bring all the women to so I can explain what I have learnt ... I need to share some ideas but ... I want a *smol haos* [small building], I share what I can bring and bring them closer to me and I can tell teach them what I learned here, some cooking and then leadership. That's my idea (Lillian, worker).

Vakameasina program staff also see the potential to extend such possibilities further, for example by developing packages in hard copy or online that learners can take to home communities to take on mentoring roles, to share content, knowledge and skills with others around them. Alternatively, trainers delivering programs such as Vakameasina have the potential to assist seasonal workers to develop formal qualifications. The role of the New Zealand and Australian High Commissions in connecting returned workers with programs that focus on post-school, vocational educational and skills development in home countries, such as the [Vanuatu Skills Partnership](#), is also worthy of further exploration to extend the reach and impact of training.

These findings are not intended to suggest that women who are able to access leadership training

during a seasonal work experience should be held responsible for creating change on their return home, but rather to recognise the flow-on effects that such opportunities offer. While it is important to have fair expectations of what women may achieve on their return home after a seasonal work experience, it is also clear that the women are much more than ‘workers’; they think deeply about their circumstances and the lives of others around them, they consider their roles within their community and how they can share the skills and knowledge with those who are unable to access such opportunities.

Conclusion

By its very nature, seasonal work is taken up by people who want to create change in their lives and in the lives of those around them. When labour mobility programs are designed to enact development goals and benefits to home countries in the form of worker development, this enables programs to focus on workers as whole people, with potential, skills and confidence to advance personally relevant goals. Some seasonal workers may have had limited educational opportunities and training programs such as the Vakameasina leadership program can lead to significant change in their self-efficacy. Expectations of change, however, need to be tempered to the context of participants’ lives and programs need to be designed to minimise the potential for harm.

In this research, the employer emphasised how important it was to take the time to build open communication, to learn about their workers’ cultures, including notions of leadership, and to invest in women’s leadership as part of a long-term vision. They have encouraged women to access training and followed this up by creating a supportive environment and drawing on opportunities to develop women’s skills in the workplace, consolidating learning and taking actions to boost women’s leadership credibility. Staff at Vakameasina are also explicit in their mission to develop programs for seasonal workers that are responsive to workers’ needs and interests and importantly, that are relevant to workers’ home contexts and cultural constructs. This research shows that when opportunities are provided for women — by training organisations, employers or governments — the benefits are twofold. First, leadership training increases the potential for women to contribute to their workplace as well as to their home communities,

and second, they are motivated to share their skills and knowledge with others at home who are unable to access the same opportunities. Further potential exists to connect seasonal workers with local skills development opportunities on their return home.

This paper posed a simple question: is improving women’s leadership potential really a simple matter of offering economic opportunities and training? Frustratingly, the answer is complicated. While seasonal work, economic independence and opportunities to engage in leadership development can create change in women’s lives and behaviours, it is important to avoid leaps in logic that this will lead to broadscale change, particularly for gender equality. The interest in the potential for seasonal work programs to bring about shifts in gender relations is warranted, but short-term assessments risk a lack of attention to cultural contexts and the potential for backlash or jealousy for women taking up these opportunities. Responses from participants in this research indicate that it takes time and relationship building over multiple occasions before workers will discuss sensitive topics relating to gender inequalities with program facilitators. To gain a true picture of gender roles, intimate partner violence and men’s responses to women’s empowerment through seasonal work, researchers need to invest in long-term effort to build trust and create safe spaces.

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Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Vakameasina is a training program funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade as part of its aid program. Fruition Horticulture is a consultancy company that provides technical and research training to the horticultural industry in New Zealand and has the contract to deliver Vakameasina across New Zealand.
2. Figures provided by Rochelle Bailey from her forthcoming paper 'Are We Seeing a Backwards Trend in Female Participation of the RSE Scheme?', currently in review for publication.
3. New Zealand's Code of Practice for Domestic Tertiary Students (Outcome Three) requires training providers to assist students with their physical and mental health through providing links to support when needed, promoting awareness and access to information about mental health, opportunities to improve mental and physical health and providing staff with training on how to recognise and respond to students who may be at risk or experiencing health or wellbeing issues. More information is available at www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/domestic-code-of-practice/principles-outcomes/#outcome-1

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