

## *Original Paper*

# Pacific Leadership and Impact on the Samoan Woman

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### **1. Leadership Thinking of the New Generation Leaders in the Pacific**

Under the guise of Leadership Pacific, there has been a “new generation” of leadership thinkers and developers articulated in Sanga and Chu (2009). The first narrative explained that “leadership begins with a splash” (Chu, 2009, p. 15), narrating an experience of being led into the deep ends of a swimming pool at the age of four and told to swim. The choice of keeping legs kicking and arms moving assisted in floating. The story illustrated that leadership is about making immediate decisions. The experience in the swimming pool could be drawn as a parallel to a classroom mentor that encouraged students to succeed. Chui concluded that “leadership is about relationships of influence” (Chu, 2009, p. 21) since relationship with a classroom mentor prompted the desire to move forward in pursuit of academic dreams.

The idea of moving forward was also embraced by Fito'o (2009) who saw leadership as a journey of failures, promises, recovery, and exceeding expectations. It summed up leadership experiences as a never-ending challenge. One of the strategies suggested in countering continuous challenges faced in leadership journey was passing on knowledge of treasured events to the younger generations (Southon, 2009). These treasures could be learnt from the advice of the elders, taking the initiative and being accountable. As pointed out “If you have nothing nice to say about someone, don't say anything at all” (Southon, 2009, p. 49). The idea of serving silently is embraced by Rimoni (2009) who suggested that leadership is service (*tautua*), and service to the church is an example of one of the many services people provided to give back to caregivers like parents, siblings, relatives, and the community. It also alluded to leadership as learning about patience, respect, and restraining behaviour, as well as sincerely holding communitarian values. Rimoni complemented Fito'o's (2009) account of the never-ending challenges in the leadership environment as “rewarding, inspirational, powerful, natural, stressful, exciting, hungry, determined, warm, tired, busy, active, and energetic” (p. 55).

Vunariri (2009) stated that leadership is about “mentors who are by your side on your leadership journey, who listened to you, walked and ate with you, as well as share your dull and bright days” (p. 58). This leadership is manifested in the belief that leadership fit the context of leaders and followers.

Events that happened in the country illustrated people respect foreign leadership values, ignoring leadership offered by traditional societies. In this view, leadership should emphasise the importance of local concepts and practices of leadership, paying attention to the moral and ethical values that maintained harmony in society. Sustaining harmonious society involved genuine leadership and true service to others (Samala, 2009). This is leading expecting nothing in return but focuses on the needs of followers, demonstrating care, and putting decisions into actions. Actions result in making a difference, and leaders should take the initiative to make changes that prospered the organisation and fostered leadership capacity. As such self-empowered leaders have faith in their leading spirits, doing right, but owning up to mistakes and being held accountable (Raivoka, 2009). Leadership stories are a platform for exploring leadership by ordinary people in Pacific contexts. The leadership voices of future leaders of the Pacific should inspire leaders of different spheres to revisit and re-examine their leadership styles, values, and beliefs for the betterment of the organisations they lead. Such stories provided a level of influence for further analysis of Samoan leadership.

## 2. Leadership in Samoa

The Samoan context of leadership is alive in myths about civil wars such as the legend of Nafanua, the war goddess who was awarded four paramount chiefly titles (*pāpā*) in respect of being victorious, signifying bravery and dedication. The modern suppression of women leaders in Samoa focused on Samoan society and the role of the traditional leader (*matai*) in village communities.

The term leadership is translated into the Samoan language as *ta'iga*, (Milner, 1966, p. 391), meaning “the leader leading.” This meant that the quality of *ta'iga* depended on the kind of leader and how the organization is run. Samoan leadership operated at the *matai* system. This system predominantly differentiated two distinct categories of *matai* according to the social role played in the village council (*fono*) or in ceremonial activities (Hennings, 2007). These two-*matai* types referred to as chief (*ali'i*) and orator (*tūlāfale*) played different roles outside their families, but executed the same responsibilities of exercising authority and control (*pule*) over all family affairs. The main role of orators is presenting speeches, a similar manner to that of Maori male leaders in the *marae* (Mahuika, 1992). Aiono and Crocombe (1992) explained that the *matai* is the leader of the Samoan extended family (*'āiga potopoto*). According to Aiono and Crocombe (1992):

“The *matai* is a complete and separate entity that speaks in a specific vocabulary, that behaves and thinks in a distinctive manner, and that is dedicated and committed to the achievement and maintenance of peace. A *matai* is an heir who has been selected to the *matai* title of an extended family by all heirs of the *matai* title (p. 120).

The status, selection, eligibility, and explicit roles of the *matai* is illustrated above and the family name or title of succession was passed on from one holder to another. In Samoan custom, nothing would prevent a *matai* holding two or more titles (Grattan, 1985), but *matais* should fulfill their obligations.

Security of a *matai* title and status would depend on lineage. At the same time, the Samoan proverb, “*O le ala i le pule o le tautua* - the path to power is through service - demonstrates the importance of achievement as heredity” (Iati, 2000, p. 72). Both men and women were entitled to hold *matai* titles, although currently fewer than 10% of women held *matai* titles (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Progressive changes have been made in Samoa as women sought to attain *matai* status.

Each household has its chief, or *matai*, a man or woman whose authority extended to all members in their performance of domestic tasks, in the maintenance of orderly relation and in regulating relations with village households. The chief controlled the recruitment of members and may expel anyone who, by refusing to submit to authority, threatened the unity of the group. The chief’s authority is applied irrespective of the places from which people of the household came, those in residence, and the authority to which they were or had been subjected elsewhere (Gilson, 1970).

*Matai* are members of the village council or the local government (*pulega a le nuu*), a rule-making body whose decisions hold an immense weight in Samoan traditional villages (Techera, 2006). The village council or local government have the power to deal with matters of the village, in accordance with the custom and function as set forth in the Village Council Act 1990 (White & Lindstrom, 1997). The rule-making body is free to create its own laws and guidelines for how village life should be conducted, and *matai*s acted as the judicial and executive authority of each village (Grattan, 1985). Thus, jurisdiction of the village *fono* was limited to the residents of each village, with the exception of government, freehold, or leasehold land.

However, it was argued that the roles and responsibilities were compromised due to the situation and circumstances in foreign countries. Samoa made it mandatory for its citizens and people, men and women with blood ties 21 years and over as eligible to become *matai*s (Le Tagaloa, 1996).

To gain a better understanding of the *matai*’s role within the Samoan culture during the post-independence era the Samoan Parliament passed the Village Fono Act of 1990 to increase the power and influence of *matai* in the areas that were most crucial: the village (*nu’u*) outlined below:

Traditional leadership had been merged into national political avenues to a greater extent when compared to past years. Like traditional leadership, control of the political arena by people of high status with *matai* (holders of cultural titles) was the representatives of political constituencies. In 1991 universal suffrage was introduced but only *matai*s were eligible to stand for parliament (Macpherson, 1997). *Matai*s hold power and authority both at the local and national level as a result of the changes in Samoan power structures and historical circumstances.

At the national level, leadership was located in the power of parliamentary members. This stemmed equally from their *matai* status and as nominated officers (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2000). In efforts to empower more people in the leadership arena, Samoans have generated new titles and allowed numerous titles to be singly or jointly held. This had increased the number of *matai*, and can be seen as continuously adopting the traditional hierarchical system in alignment with the Westminster style of political administration.

Leadership held by village councils or local government consisted of *matais* which existed in every Samoan village. This council, also known as *Pulega Fa'amatai*, is the rule-making body of the village. The village structure has three to five components, all under the watchful eye of local government. Aiono and Crocombe (1992) identified five components within the cultural structure of traditional villages:

The council of matai, consisted of chiefs and orators; (2) *Faletua ma Tausi*, chiefs and orators' wives; (3) *Aumaga*, the untitled men and sons of *matais* served the *matais*; (4) *Tama'ita'i*, daughters of matai and untitled men of the village; (5) *Tamaiti*, were children of the village (Aiono & Crocombe, 1992, p. 119).

Membership of local government was mandatory and the decision-making forum of the village. It had the authority and power to make rules and sanctions for village communities. According to Le Tagaloa (1996) the *matai* system was not powerful unless the organisations worked together to support and serve them. At the local government level, *matai* with high ranks held extensive power, making decisions and socially controlling village and district councils, the *fono*. *Matais* had to appropriately uphold the Samoan values of honesty, integrity, reliability, and respect. *Matais* were also expected to ensure the safety of families. Titles could be voided if *matais* failed to perform their responsibilities (Tcherkesoff, 2000). At the local government level, the influence of *matais* was not challenged in decisions-making as to right or wrong and severe punishments were issued to people who disobeyed village rules. Harsh punishments included burning houses and being evicted from the community (Va'a, 2000) which caused terrible damage to the economy and sanity of punished families. Women leaders advised local government to lessen the harsh punishment due to its effect on the families. Furthermore, it could be argued that a gender-balanced decision-making cohort – where a broad-base of leadership was valued – was likely to result in more judicious conclusions than those (decision-making bodies) that were heavily gender-biased.

There had been no change in the formal structure of the village and district *fono* since contacts with Europeans in the 1880's (Tcherkesoff, 2000). Administrative tasks were passed on to committees headed by younger and active *matais* (Davidson, 1967). All levels of administration were male dominated in Samoa and traditional communities upheld and augmented male preference in the selection of family and village leaders. Thus, male domination endured in village councils, making it very hard for women leaders to challenge the status quo. The effect meant men gained ascendancy in leadership despite Samoa's history. According to Macpherson (1985), initial contacts with Europeans guaranteed the continuation of chiefly ruling in Samoa.

Leadership in Samoa's history offered precedents for female leaders to follow the role-models of great leaders of the past, both mythical and actual that were sidelined due to cultural values, religious beliefs and social assumptions. Patrilineal leadership existed both in local and national government, as well as in families and churches. While in theory, traditional positions such as *matai* were non-gendered, new traditions surfaced which was an impediment to Samoan women's involvement in leadership. It

assumed women's engagement in child rearing and household commitments did not equip them for leadership positions. Unfortunately, this assumption decreased women's opportunities for leadership positions and acted to bolster the exclusive and discriminatory practices in Samoa to date.

### **3. Leadership Characteristics: A Gender Issue**

The issue of female leadership is a contentious one and needs to be assessed for relevancy, appropriateness and meritocracy whether gender positively or negatively contributed to leadership in Samoa. The literature indicated a number of female-oriented characteristics of leadership that supported women eligibility to leadership probably more than their male counterpart (Paris, Howell & Dorfman, 2009; Holden & Raffo, 2014). This would strengthen the argument that women leadership should not be discounted nor discriminated against. Women leadership in Samoa is challenged on several fronts, such as cultural values, religious beliefs, and social orientation.

Blackmore (1999) cited in Pounder and Coleman (2002) differentiated between the nature of female and male leadership styles. Blackmore's (1999) research findings on educational leadership concluded that females are relationship-oriented and democratic while males are task-oriented and autocratic. The unique characteristics of female leaders were often activated in leadership forum and gatherings women attended. In reference to women's committees in Samoa, women socialised in communal activities like fine-mat weaving, tapa making, garlanding and hosting guests. Additionally, they interactively work for the common good of the society by providing services to household, children's health and education as well as community work.

Others like Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) claimed another characteristic of a female leader is circulating and interacting with people while men retained their independence when mingling with others. Socialization is part of the female persona and are people-oriented. This is networking with people, embracing relationships and sharing views while men, on the other hand, tended to focus on completing tasks, achieving goals, hoarding information, and winning (Chliwniak, 1997). With reference to decision-making, Porat (1991) argued that women often support consensual agreement, but men were inclined to lean towards the majority rule and emphasized the goal. Espousing relationships and distributing knowledge are effective tools in decision-making.

Women in leadership posts managed to confront obstacles, consulted people, and sought consensus before finalising decisions. These were based on the construction of plans and strategies for the organisation, which women leaders were more than capable of executing, according to Cohen (2003). However, some found that, these characteristics made very little difference in the results men and women achieved as leaders (Anderson, Lievens, Van Dam, & Born, (2006). Furthermore, while Yukl (2002) revealed that female leaders were more inclusive, interpersonally sensitive, and nurturing; Morgan (2004) argued that although these particular fortes of women indicated their effective leadership style, they had very little impact on the outcome. Alternatively, women leaders have the potential to acknowledge and appreciate people from all walks of life (Yukl). Nonetheless, different

cultures have particular preferences for leaders pertaining to the norms, values, beliefs, and unique expectations of the culture. The globalisation of management brought to the forefront the need to examine this phenomenon in international arenas (Yukl).

Riggio (2010) argued that there were no distinctions between the behaviours of men and women leaders, perhaps because responding to leadership challenges demanded particular engagements, attitudes, and values: the required standards of performance have to be achieved, and a leader, whether male or female, had to lead the organisation to meet certain goals. Irrespective of any perceived gender differences, Cliff (2005) and Dobbins and Platz (1986) supported the notion that a leader is genderless. This correlated with other findings cited by Vecchio (2002) as well as Engen, Leeden, and Willemsen (2001) who all argued that no significant gender differences in leadership existed. In contrast, Bart and McQueen (2013) commended the ability of women leaders to make fair decisions - a factor that made them better leaders.

Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory found women leaders possess the required characteristics of being socialised, communicative, interactive, consultative, constructive, inclusive, sensitive, and nurturing which begged the question whether similar attributes were seen in men. However, as the literature portrayed, these characteristics allowed female leaders an edge over male leaders, although one would need to place it in perspective in today's world. Another characteristic of a female leader is vision (Seeley, 1992) guiding the organisation to achieve its goals, indicating organizational direction that individuals, stakeholders, and authority understood. Seeley (1992) described vision as a goal-oriented mental paradigm that directed people's behaviour. Most of the traditional leaders had difficulties in adjusting to changes and different value structures. Therefore, as Sanga (2005) pointed out, in the Pacific contexts, directing and guiding traditional communities was deemed a difficult task.

According to Macpherson (1997), the style of leadership should be strategically selected and implemented in order to benefit the organisation. The success of the chosen style depended on the leader, the situation, and the kind of institution or organisation. Clearly, leaders needed to possess certain competency level to lead organisations effectively and efficiently. Sanga claimed traditional leaders with little or no exposure to education are academically weak in visualising issues of the outside world. As a result, traditional morals of group beliefs decreased, adding more pressure to society. This view contradicted traditional leaders of Samoa where women's committees as some were well-educated, had effective leadership skills and wide exposure to international forums. As a result, women's committees were very successful in their role by responding to the needs of village communities.

The literature provided a range of female characteristics of leadership such as being relationship-oriented and in addition to the competencies that enabled them to practically implement these leadership characteristics to lead organisations. These features of women leadership coupled with communal and solidarity efforts (Harding, 1997 & 1998) opened leadership opportunities. Although

many women leaders possessed these characteristics, it did not smooth the path and many encountered challenges, especially when competing with men for leadership positions.

#### **4. Leadership Challenges for Women**

Documentation of the challenges women face in struggling for leadership highlighted gender inequalities in representation and participation. It identified the obstacles that women in general faced while striving for leadership positions. Analysis of the literature paid attention to the nature of the challenges and the underpinning reasons. Barriers to women in leadership positions seemed to be universal.

In a global summary of women in management positions, Berthoin and Izraeli (1993) found that the major obstacle confronting women managers was the stereotypical belief that associated managerial positions with being male. However, both male and female managers demonstrated similar certainties in this regard. Atypical sentiments correlated with findings of a pragmatic examination of managerial sex-role stereotyping that also revealed the 'think manager–think male' belief (Schein, 1973) in the United States. As a mental hurdle to the progression of women in administrative posts, a 'think manager–think male' philosophy raised prejudice against women in managerial selection, placement, promotion, and training decisions (Schein, 2001). These selection criteria were easily accessed by men as documented in many leadership studies where people's views of the type of leaders required were influenced by research findings. For instance, Inglehart and Norris (2000) in comparative wide-reaching research of 55 societies concluded that the two major barriers to leadership opportunities for women were (1) traditional attitudes towards women as leaders, and (2) political cultures in governments. Inglehart and Norris mentioned demotivating scenarios for women running for political posts. As such, fewer women showed interest in competing for positions of authority.

According to Riggio's (2010) study of chief executive officers, both genders manifested the same kind of leadership behaviours. Support for this finding was emphasized by Bolman and Deal (1991) in a frame-orientation survey among men and women leaders, which indicated no dissimilar elements surfaced in the behaviour of men and women. Nevertheless, research revealed that men and women approached leadership similarly in cultures that had different gender perceptions and values for leaders. In some cultures, the views of the minority were suppressed, especially those of minority women. Records at the National Women's History Museum showed the oppression encountered by African American women in the United States of America. According to the records of the African American Women Suffrage (1998), black women strived through harsh conditions to be included in the women's suffrage movement after the eradication of slavery. Moreover, the suffrage movement leaders were political policy makers who maneuvered complex government processes to attain their goal. They recruited both revolutionaries and conventional activists to push their agenda. The considerable skills of both contributed to the final accomplishment of the goal for the movement without shedding any blood. Adler (1994) alluded to this as a very extraordinary effort by women. In a study of emigrant

managers, Adler concluded that women were more outstanding in their performances than men despite the suppressive pressures they had encountered in struggling for leadership positions. Furthermore, it was noticeable that when women finally got to positions of authority, they proved themselves to be very capable leaders.

Women leaders in politics and business continued to increase and brought set of experiences and perspectives different from the male leaders of the twentieth century (Adler, 1997). Additionally, women leaders' familiarities and viewpoints of the leadership domain provided a transition from the typical male style of administration. Nevertheless, when women were evaluated in leadership positions, they were undervalued in recruitment typically held by men. This was worse when assessors were predominantly male (Denmark, 1993).

The universal tenure of leadership barriers for women motivated male leaders to continue the status quo. The philosophy of 'think male-think manager' (Schein, 2001) was widely adopted, even in traditional societies such as village communities in Samoa, where local government continued to function on the male leadership system. One of the challenges for women's leadership was the reluctance of community women to challenge male leaders due to cultural norm and practices. In that regard, community women's apprehension of local government ensured the existing state of affairs continued.

In the Pacific region, a scoping study was conducted of women leadership outside of national politics in Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji, which concluded that culture was often seen as a barrier for women leadership (Quay, 2006). The study found that there were extreme cases where culture disadvantaged women from gaining leadership positions and men refused to support women leaders. This is a major impediment affecting women leadership, and widening the gap for gender equality in leadership forums.

The obstacles women faced in striving for leadership world-wide, and the universal challenges for women leadership were present in many traditional societies. The restrictions included the association of managerial positions with being male, think-manager-think-male philosophy, research findings that targeted male leaders and their potentials, political cultures, traditional attitudes, and the overall exclusivity of women from power and authority. However, the literature also revealed the affirmative female leadership characteristics of being communal and having solidarity, in striving for leadership posts (Harding 1997 & 1998), aspects of the black feminism that contributed to achieving goals.

## **5. Leadership in Local Government in Samoa**

Samoa has two levels of government; national government consisting of the legislative assembly with 51 parliament members representing each constituency, and village local government based on traditional structures (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2016). The Village Fono Act 1990 and the Internal Affairs Act 1995 were the two pieces of legislation that outlined the functions of the local government (Ministry of Women, 2016). Each of the acts was established to target particular core



functions of local government. The Village Fono Act legalised and authorised the exercise of power and authority by village councils (*fono*) in accordance with custom and function of villages, and to confirm or grant certain powers, while the Internal Affairs Act 1995 established the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the promotion and wellbeing of villages and village authorities, as well as providing the appointment of government representatives (*pulenu'u*), who were based in the village and acted as informants of the village to government (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2016).

There are 286 traditional villages; each has its own local government that is separate and independent from others. Local government determined their own structure according to custom, function, and history. This forum consisted of chiefs and orators representing extended families that administered the village (Toleafoa, 2007). The village council or the local government served as the legislative body, the executive body, and also the judiciary. Samoa's local government system is based on customs observed and practiced by traditional leaders whose roles consisted of providing leadership and formulating laws (Te'o, 2011). There was no elected local government, since village council members were there by right as the head of extended families (Iati, 2000). The government representative (*pulenu'u*) was selected by each local government for three years according to the practice of the village. Often, the position was rotated among members or among groups. Decision-making was the prerogative of local government (Techera, 2006). Other formalised groups within the village such as the women's committee and the untitled men's organisation could be consulted, depending on the precedent of the local government. Power flow is strictly top-down (Grattan, 1985). Local governments had remained largely separate from national government counterpart, which were based on different and often conflicting principles, values, and institutions (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2016).

With globalization evolving at a fast pace, women also have increasingly become aware of their potential as agents of change. Although the literature has alluded to barriers women world-wide have experienced, gender parity is making its mark in all areas of society from the home, to school, the workplace, church, politics and the economic spheres. Even in changing traditional societies like Samoa the voice of women that have taken a backseat through the last two centuries are being heard as they make great representations in various bodies and forums such as members of various government and organisational boards, in courts and in community councils on educational and health issues. Undoubtedly, the world and Samoa is no exception has recognized the pivotal role that women play in advancing the goals and aims of society. Therefore, in positions of authority women could contribute to decision-making in villages, communities and country.

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