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WOMEN LEADERS IN SOLOMON ISLANDS PUBLIC SERVICE: A PERSONAL AND SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION

Research on Pacific Island women and leadership has been dominated by a focus on their representation at a parliamentary level. Much less attention has been given to women's participation and experience in public service leadership. As a result, little is known about how women fare in senior government positions or of their contribution to public service performance in Pacific countries. The absence or low representation of women in national politics has overshadowed their level of participation in other public leadership positions. In Solomon Islands, for example, only one woman has been elected to parliament since independence in 1978 (Whittington et al., 2006). Yet in other government arenas an emerging trend shows higher levels of women's involvement in leadership.

The initial aim of this study was to investigate the factors behind the low number of women in leadership positions in Solomon Islands public service. However, this focus changed during my field visit as emerging trends were noted. The new trends provide

an encouraging outlook. In recent years, women have been appointed as heads of government ministries and there are now more women entering managerial and mid-level positions than has been the case in the last ten or 15 years. A number of inter-related factors are behind this development. First, there has been a slight increase in the number of women gaining higher educational qualifications and a corresponding rise in the number of qualified female candidates for government jobs. Second, the affirmative action campaigns by government as well as international and local women's organizations to raise awareness for the enhancement of women's status in the country have had an impact. Third, and largely as a result of affirmative action, there has been a shift in attitudes within the public service towards women as effective leaders.

Two important factors influenced the decision to focus this study on Solomon Islands. First, as the birthplace of my maternal grandfather who worked on colonial plantations in

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Samoa, Solomon Islands has been simultaneously and paradoxically both a distant yet close place for me. Unfamiliarity with the place became a source of both uncertainty and curiosity. This research provided the opportunity for my second visit to the country, venturing out to meet the women and men in government offices, in business, in the churches, on the buses, along the streets, at the Honiara market and in the homes of local *wantoks*, creating new opportunities for friendship and networking, and attempting to better understand the sociocultural world to which my grandfather once belonged.

Second, Solomon Islands has attracted regional and global attention since the beginning of this century, not only for its political instability and its being labelled by some as a 'failing' state as a prelude to the ongoing Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), but also for the reputation it has acquired for the relatively low status of its women. This latter characterisation attracted my interest as a researcher of women and leadership. The initial objective of the study was to understand the socioeconomic, cultural and political reasons behind the absence of women in senior public service positions. Despite the lack of literature specifically on women in the civil service, it became especially clear that my prospective findings might not be different from those already identified in previous studies on women generally in Solomon Islands (for example, Moser, 2007; Pollard, 2000 and 2006). That is, cultural attitudes and structural barriers in a male-dominated society are factors behind the situation of women. A field visit was undertaken to elicit concrete responses from the women and men in the public service.

This paper examines the current situation of women in leadership positions in Solomon Islands public service and discusses the factors behind this new trend. The first section discusses the context of the study as well as the field experience and data collecting methodologies employed. The second analyses the evidence on the current situation of women in senior and mid-level public service positions, paying specific attention to trends over the last ten years. The third and final sec-

tion explores the factors underpinning these trends, particularly the notable increase in the number of highly qualified women in the public service, affirmative action and related policies by government and women's groups, and an attitudinal shift towards the idea of women in positions of leadership within the public service itself. I also speculate on the future prospects for women as senior government employees.

STUDY CONTEXT AND APPROACH

Solomon Islands has gained a reputation for being among the bottom ten countries in the world on the proportion of women in parliamentary positions. There are no women members in the country's 50-seat parliament (Scales and Teakeni, 2006; Huffer, 2006). Only about six per cent of senior public service positions are held by women (Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association, 2006). Many factors are behind this situation. In their diagnostic study of women's participation in politics, Whittington et al. (2006, 3) argue that a major barrier to women's participation in the legislature is a 'traditional belief in "big man" leadership leading to the national realm of public decision-making being regarded as essentially male, with women relegated to the domestic sphere'. In addition, gendered stereotypes introduced largely by the missionaries and colonial administrators have had the effect of promoting the male as the 'natural' leader and decision-maker at the macro level, and still serves to disadvantage women who aspire to national leadership (Webber and Johnson, 2008). The continuing involvement of women in welfare-oriented activities, encouraged and supported by the church and the former Women's Development Division, serves to further validate their place in the domestic sphere (Scheyvens, 2003). These activities, as observed by Penelope Schoeffel (1983, 27) almost three decades ago, have become 'a model of women's "advancement" based on baking of drop scones and embroidering of pillowslips'.

Attention to women's under-representation in decision-making circles in Solomon

Islands is not an entirely recent phenomenon. Some 20 years ago, a handful of qualified women in government employment critiqued the lack of female participation in senior and managerial positions—a situation attributed to the lack of necessary training in these fields and the absence of opportunity to hold these positions (Sade, 1992). A major part of the problem lies with the structural barriers and biased attitudes against women among the decision-making bodies within the public service. The failure of the government to involve the few qualified women teachers at the time in education-related decision making, or to pay attention to maternal health and welfare, together with the unfair distribution of overseas scholarships to boys rather than girls, was to the detriment not just of women but of the country as whole (Kii, 1992; Maeke, 1992; Luilano, 1992).

Despite their very low numbers at the time, highly qualified Solomon Islander women in the public service would most likely have made a difference had they been appointed at decision-making levels. Emphasizing the link between the absence of women in important education committees and the very small number of girls entering the secondary and tertiary levels, one of the first Solomon Islander women to get a university education, Afu Sade (1992, 155) argued:

The myth that parents stop girls from going to school cannot be considered seriously because in 1981 the total intake of boys into primary schools in the country was 17,697, and the number for girls was 12,619. However the intake into secondary schools in the same year was 1,218 boys and 407 girls. In 1984 students accepted for tertiary education in Fiji was 109 boys, 19 girls; in PNG, 79 boys, 20 girls; in New Zealand, 20 boys, 4 girls; in Australia 8 boys, 2 girls.

Afu alluded to systemic biases against the selection of girls in the education system. The factors associated with these were unclear, although one could speculate on the influence of societal perceptions about females as horticulturalists, as Solomon Islands population specialist Murray Chapman (2009) pointed out:

For women and girls of village and rural society, where 85 percent of Solomon Islanders still live, 'domestic chores' mean being the anchor of a horticultural, subsistence system. It is women who are the food cultivators, the botanists, the soils scientists, the fertilizer specialists, the harvesters. They expect to be able to train their daughters how to 'garden' once they reach the ages of six to eight and become deeply worried about a family's future if absence for formal education means this cannot happen.

Biased patterns against girls' education persisted over the years and characterized much of the post-independence period. Another prevailing trend has been that the majority of girls who were awarded overseas scholarships were placed in programs relating to teaching, home economics, and administration, while boys were able to pursue all the professional and technical careers. As Chapman (2009), has noted:

Alice Pollard, Hazel Lulei, Jully Makini, Afu Sade, all at one time in the public service and who, in the early 1980s, went to University of the South Pacific (USP) on government scholarships but were channelled into two-year DipEds rather than three-year undergraduate degrees. Because what could talented Solomon Island women do other than to teach?

Cultural attitudes about women being suited to certain sectors of the economy prevailed, and it is clear why they, for a long time, could not hold senior positions in government. The women leaders within the public service today understand this well. Ethel Sigimanu, PS of the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs (2009), pointed out during our interview, 'The public service is genderised. People bring with them their 'linen' from the village—our cultural views of what women should and should not do, and for a long time that has been like a disease in the service'.

Long regarded as the norm in Solomon Islands society, stereotyped gendered roles and the inequitable status of women would not be easy to change. While gender equality

and women's suitability for high-level leadership are formally acknowledged as crucial to national development, these are often still seen as foreign creations, not originating from local realities or products of local efforts, and hence genuine commitment to them by an administration dominated by men has been largely absent (Bennett, 2002). To avoid the perpetuation of this 'us versus them' dichotomy, it is important that Solomon Islander women and men themselves engage with the issues and be part of the emerging transitions. The highly qualified Solomon Islanders, both women and men, residing locally and overseas, are only too aware of this. Many of them believe that, given the changing nature of political and socio-economic engagements with the international community, change is inevitable (Pollard, 2006; Ngele, 2009; Sigimanu, 2009).

Already, local women's groups, with support from international women's organizations, plus the Solomon Island government's ratification of the UN's Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have been major avenues for the campaign for women's representation in parliament (Huffer, 2006; Solomon Islands Government, 2009). The last two years, 2008–2009, witnessed a much more visible and vocal women's movement in the country that resulted in several high-level consultations among the women's organizations and the government. In May 2009, the Temporary Special Measures (TSM) campaign was launched, proposing that ten seats reserved for women be added to the existing 50-seat parliament with elected women representing the nine provinces and Honiara. Although the proposal was defeated in caucus in June of that year, the TSM became an important issue of national debate and, as such, it increased people's levels of awareness regarding the call for better recognition of women (Sigimanu, 2009). In a recent statement, Prime Minister Derek Sikua announced that continuing efforts would be made by his government to guarantee the election of women through their political parties in the 2010 elections (Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association, 2009).

While the country debated the TSM (in caucus and in letters to newspapers and on

radio talkback shows), two women permanent secretaries were appointed by Cabinet to head two very important government ministries: Joy Kere, for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (in October 2008); and Ruth Liloqula, for Lands, Housing and Survey (in April 2009). At the same time, the two international bodies—RAMSI and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)—increased their capacity-building programs for women in the central and provincial governments. RAMSI hired a gender adviser to help improve the ways it builds, monitors, and reports gender equity in its development programs (Solomon Star, 2009a). UNIFEM continues its work with the Solomon Islands National Council of Women (SINCW) and the Women in Shared Decision Making (WSDM) funding awareness and training workshops aimed at increasing women's representation in politics and strengthening their capacity as leaders in all levels of society (Dyer, 2009; Solomon Star, 2009b).

VOICING CHANGE

Solomon Islander women situate their own voice for change within this current discourse, echoing the earlier efforts of the few women leaders of the past. A relatively new local group called the Professional Women in Uniform (PWU) is one organization that has been very active in encouraging and building women's professional development. Comprising six groups of women in uniform—Corrections Women's Network, Civil Aviation Women's Group, Customs Women's Group, Immigration Women's Group, Quarantine Women's Group and the Police Women's Network—PWU's vision is to lead women to attain equal professional partnerships in government. One of its important aims is to build the capacity of its members to better prepare them for leadership roles. As acknowledged by its founder and supporter, Helen Sinclair (2009), 'most of the women in this group do not have degrees and they suffer from that in terms of work and salary status in the civil service.' Encouraging women to 'take the risk' to achieve their potential and thus build their confidence has been a strong focus of the organization.

In addition, individual women scholars and activists like Alice Pollard (2006), Shalom Akao (2008), Jully Makini (2008) and Sarah Dyer (2009) continue to work as professionals in government, in NGOs and in their communities, championing education for girls for effective reform. They argue that women's determination is a powerful tool for pushing through the cultural barriers and stereotypes (Solomon Star, 2008). Reflecting on the outstanding contribution of women to peace building during the 1998–2003 tensions in the country, these leaders believe that their own determination and persistence has to be part of the equation for the fight for inclusion in leadership. However, many other women have conformed to the existing gender relations and are lukewarm about changing. As Pollard emphasizes, 'Grasp is a key word for women when it comes to opportunities. You cannot just sit and expect things to come to you. You have to develop an attitude that you are going to go and get what you want, push for it' (quoted in Solomon Star, 2008). The personal stories of senior women in government and NGOs in this study highlight the same point—persistent effort through campaign and advocacy work is crucial for their recognition.

It is clear that for Solomon Islander women the journey has been long and hard. It is also clear that they are not alone. There are parallels in the experiences of women public servants in other Pacific island countries. Zubrinich and Haley's (2009) study of women's experiences in the public services of six Pacific Island countries—Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa and Kiribati—highlights women's struggles in both the work and home environments. Not only are women 'significantly under-represented in the higher echelons of the public sector [but] ... [b]eing senior at work does not change their position at home where besides being wage earners they take the full brunt of housekeeping and childminding chores' (ibid., 4, 23). Even in the case of Samoa, which has near parity gender composition in CEO and ACEO positions, the current CEO of the Public Service Commission, Beth Onesemo, thinks that this is not enough (Liki, 2008). Women's identities as profession-

als, mothers, wives, and—increasingly—solo mothers, define their multiple responsibilities which are often overshadowed by formal work commitments. Hoping that the current trend of more women taking up senior government jobs would continue, Onesemo (2009) believes that highly qualified women, of whom Samoa has a large supply, must be encouraged to apply for key positions.

Given the evidence of women's experiences in Pacific governments, one may be left with a rather pessimistic outlook of these places. Recommendations that more work needs to be done have been heard over and over again. For Solomon Islands, claims that the country has a long way to go and that the women there need to be salvaged have dominated scholarly and official policy discourses. However, as Helen Sinclair and the women involved in this study have pointed out, there are pockets of beauty and hope. For Jane Waitara (2009), Permanent Secretary (PS) of the Ministry of Planning and Aid Coordination, 'The few women now in senior government positions is a positive signal to young girls that they too can get this far. They too can become leaders in government ministries.' Ethel Sigimanu (2009), who has been at the centre of women's advocacy for many years, is witnessing 'a slight change in the language of government leaders, and we need to keep encouraging them to speak that language, for the sake of the women of this country.' Similarly, Myline Kuve (2009), PS for the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, stated that 'the trend now is that there are more young women graduating from university. I can see more women going into senior positions in the future and, like everyone else in the Service, they will have to perform'. These testimonies speak to the changes taking place that educated Solomon Islands women 20 years ago only dreamed of and had longed to see. It is testimonies like these that changed the focus of my study. Instead of taking the established path of focussing on the women's struggle and experiences of discrimination and exclusion from national leadership, this research investigates the changes that have been emerging towards the end of the first decade of this century. These changes can be seen

in the stories of the Solomon Islander women leaders contained in this study.

WHEN THE FIELD SPEAKS

I arrived in Honiara with the full understanding that the senior women that I needed to interview were busy people who frequently travelled out of the country. Setting appointments to see them when I arrived was a priority, especially given that my earlier email messages from Canberra had met with complete silence. Assuming that my emails might have been dragged directly into the trash bins of the women leaders, I would understand if their thinking was not to waste time giving information to a youngish, rimland-based researcher whom they had never met before. The silence however could be interpreted in different ways. For me, it was only a temporary gap that could be bridged through face-to-face consultation and, more importantly, the obligation for me, as a Pacific islander, to present a *meaalofa mai le malaga*¹—‘gift from the journeying party’—to those I was meeting. Such a gesture was fitting in this Pacific context. For the women, the *meaalofa mai le malaga* in the form of freshly baked cakes or pies purchased from the El Shaddai café in downtown Honiara was a welcome surprize. If anything, the gesture would have signified the social reciprocity that underpins relations among Pacific Islanders, irrespective of locale.

With the exception of one woman PS who was away on leave, and another who preferred to meet at a restaurant, interviews with the other four were carried out in their offices in the first week. As expected, I had to make appointments through the Executive Personal Secretaries who were sympathetic and helpful. They promptly rang to inform me when an interview time was set. In between the interviews, I visited nine government ministries² to give out my questionnaires to women in senior and mid-level positions. This was difficult at first because I did not know the women. However, they were always generous and suggested names of those in other ministries and NGOs who could participate. Most of the women who participated in the survey were younger in age (average 28 years old)

and were employed at division directorship or principal officer levels.

It was not possible to involve all the women in senior and mid-level government jobs in the survey. A number of these women were based in the provincial centres of Gizo, Western; Taro, Choiseul; A’oke/Auki, Malaita; Buala, Isabel; and Lata, Temotu (Ministry of Public Service Commission, 2009) and it was impossible to meet with them. Most of them are teachers, nurses and agricultural officers. I managed to collect 50 of the 60 questionnaires distributed to the women based in Honiara. Individual interviews were conducted with 30 people in government, including three (who were studying in Canberra), four of the five women PSs, and a small number of non-local women consultants based in Honiara.

Before the interviews with the PS, I was asked to wait outside their offices, the longest time being about 30 minutes. It was during these ‘waiting’ times that I talked to some of the staff who either stopped to ask if I had been attended to or to whom I introduced myself. These short and informal conversations made me feel at home. Although I did not understand much pidgin, the resounding language of respect and reverence among these public servants was something that I could easily relate to. It is also ‘spoken’ in the corridors of the government ministries in my own island country, Samoa, where I once worked. It came as a pleasant surprize that the interviews with the women PSs that followed were more like an extension of the earlier conversations that occurred outside their offices.

In a friendly environment, I was welcomed into the offices of the PSs with smiles and initially some nervous hand shaking. Waiting for me to talk first about my visit, the women’s silence and the seemingly uninterested looks on their faces impressed on me that I should be very clear when telling them about the research. It was important to emphasize that the study’s focus was the views and experiences of the local women in senior government positions with regard to leadership. The women’s stories reflect years of struggle to get where they are today. But it was also clear that their experience has provided them with strength and courage as capable leaders in government.

Emerging from the interviews was a strong sense that change was being experienced in regard to women's positions in public service leadership. As noted earlier, the testimonies of the women leaders shifted my focus away from the factors that constrained women, which appeared to be a well-trodden research path. Instead, I was drawn towards some of the more positive stories that both the women and men were telling. To examine further what I was getting from the interviews, I sought employment data from the Ministry of the Public Service and the Statistics Division of the Ministry of Finance and Treasury, together with my analysis of the 50 questionnaires I received back from women leaders in government ministries, para-public organizations and women's NGOs. The findings indicate a slight improvement in the level of women's participation in senior and mid-level government positions in the last ten years, thus pointing to the possible beginning of a new trend for women and leadership in this sector.

Placing these encouraging findings alongside the predominantly bleak picture of women's absence from high-level decision-making provides an intellectual challenge. That the emerging trends may contradict the broader national picture is one thing, but the possibility of change occurring and not being detected is another. One important factor must be borne in mind when reading these results: there has been no previous study of the public service per se to examine any possible shift related to the employment of highly qualified Solomon Islander women. In the public service, there are many levels that define seniority and mid-level positions and pockets of educated, university trained Solomon Islander women are found in these positions across all ministries. Yet, given their relatively small number compared to that of the men, their experiences could easily be ignored as insignificant statistics.

WOMEN LEADERS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE: THE CURRENT SITUATION

The last *National Census Report*, 1999, shows that 70 per cent (23,713) of Solomon Islands' economically active population of

34,061 were employed in the private sector. The remaining 30 per cent (10,348) were employed in the government sector. Of this number, about 8,176 were working in the Public Service and 2,172 worked for the provincial governments. Table 1 shows the employment numbers for the Public Service between 1988 and 2009 and the breakdown by gender.

Table 1. Number of Public Service employees by gender, 1988, 1998 and 2009

Year	Male	Female	Total
1988*	-	-	8303
1999*	5973	2203	8176
2009**	5877	2285	8162

Notes

* Source: SI Statistics Office, *Employment 1998*.

** Source: Ministry of Public Service, *Master Civil List For 2009*

Gender statistics for 1988 cannot be ascertained. However, it has been reported that for the period 1988 to 1998, 'very few women (1 percent) [were] employed in managerial positions in the public service' (Solomon Islands Statistics Office, 2000). Senior positions had been predominantly occupied by men.

The change in total numbers of public service employees for the three periods reveals an interesting pattern. The total decline over the last 20 years seems to correspond with a drop in the number of men and an increase in the number of women in the civil service. The growth in the number of women corresponds to a national increase in female labour force participation. As noted by Friesen, et al. (2006) in their analysis of the overall national economic activities:

... a notable feature of labour force change between 1988 and 1999 is that the number of women working is still less than half the number of men, while the growth rate of female employment was more than twice that of men: 77 versus 36 percent.

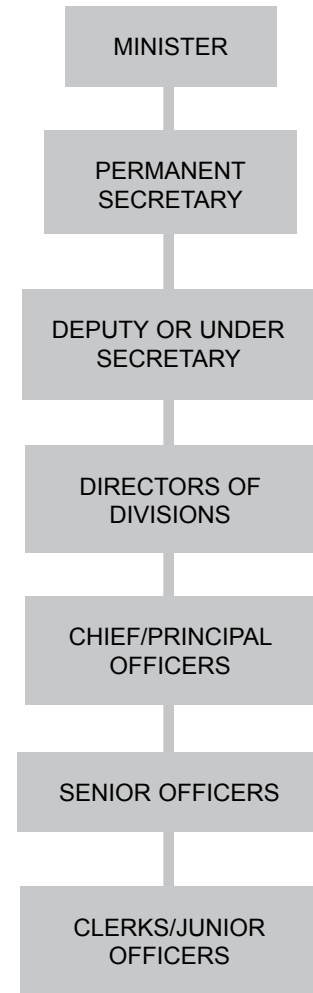
In the civil service alone, the downward trend for male employees continued in the period 1999 to 2009 and at the same time women in the service increased. According to the Under Secretary of the Ministry of Public Service, Nancy Legua (2009), the current drop in the number of men in the service may possibly be due to movement into the private sector. Interestingly enough, the increase in the number of women in the public service particularly between 1999 and 2009 appears to correspond with a sharp increase in the number of women in senior and mid-level jobs in the same period. However, it cannot be assumed that the same factors underpin this positive relationship.

The general organizational structure of government ministries in Solomon Islands is illustrated in Figure 1. The senior administrative positions, besides the Minister, are the PS, Deputy PS or Undersecretary and Directors of Divisions. The mid-level positions are those of the Chief or Principal Officers and Senior Officers. According to Legua, the seniority of positions is determined by the respective job descriptions and is reflected in the salary scales. The salary scale for the senior and mid-level positions ranges from 8 (lowest end) to 13 (highest end). The two groups fall in the 11 to 13 and 8 to 10 salary categories respectively.

Table 2 shows the number of women currently in senior and mid-level positions, their formal qualifications and the year in which they attained them. The overall rate of growth of women in these positions particularly in the last decade is shown in Figure 2. In 2009, 335 women occupied these two levels. About 19 per cent (64) were in senior positions and 81 per cent (271) were in mid-level jobs. Of the 24 government ministries, five are headed by women.³ The Office of the National Legislative Assembly is also directed by a woman, Taeasi Sanga, and her deputy is Florence Naesol. Of these six senior women, two have been in these positions since 2002. Two were appointed within the last two years, and the other two within the last 12 months.

A sharp increase in the number of women appointed to mid-level positions is a feature of the last ten years. This corresponds with a growing number of older public servants and

Figure 1. Organizational structure of Solomon Islands Government Ministries



younger women completing tertiary training overseas. Typical positions occupied by these women are shown in Table 3.

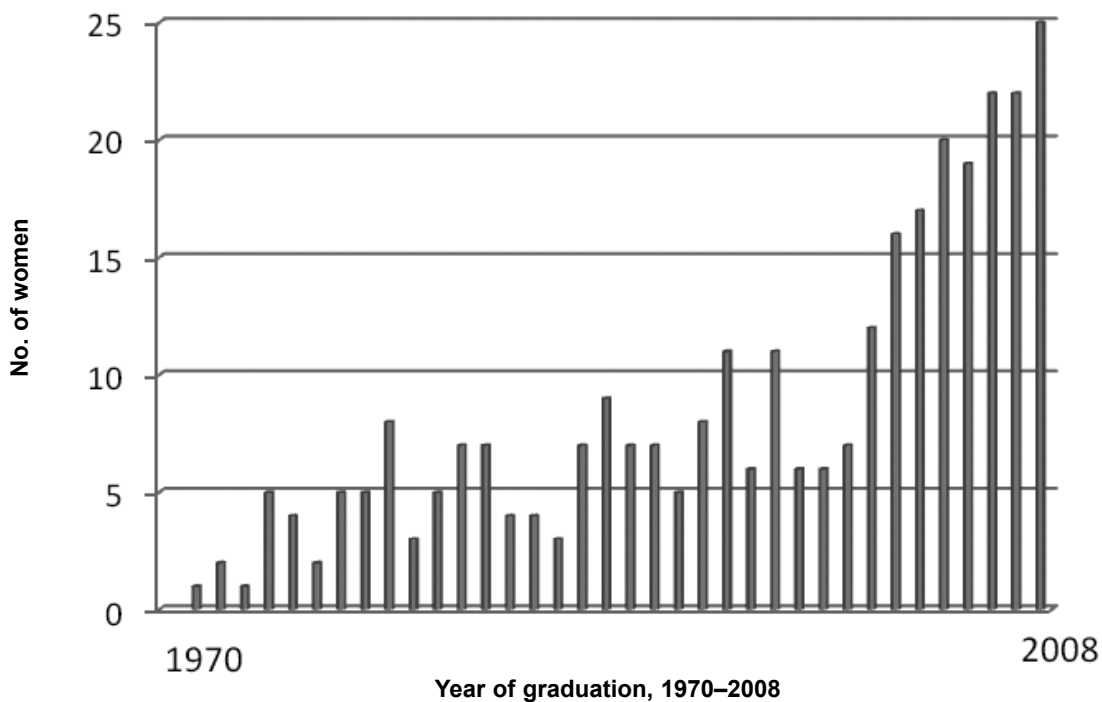
Overall, most senior and mid-level positions continue to be dominated by men. A rough estimate from the Ministry of Public Service (2009) indicates that the proportion of men holding higher offices is three times higher than for women at the same level. However, with the current evidence indicating a relatively fast growth in the rate of women taking senior and mid-level government offices over the last ten years, and assuming such a tendency continues, it is likely that Solomon Islands' public service will enter a new phase of gender equality in its leadership in the next decade or so.

Table 2. Women in senior and mid-level government positions by qualifications and by year of graduation, 2009

Year of graduation	QUALIFICATION					Total
	Certificate	Diploma	Bachelor Degree (inc. medicine)	Masters	PhD	
1970–1979	25					25
1980–1989	41	14	2			57
1990–1999	13	30	31			74
2000–2008	21	7	144	6	1	179
Total	100	51	177	6	1	335

Source: Ministry of Public Service, Master Civil List For 2009

Figure 2. Women in senior and mid-level government positions by qualifications in 2009 by year of graduation



Source: Ministry of Public Service, 2009

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT TRENDS

The emerging tendency among women in leadership positions is underpinned by a number of factors currently at play within and beyond Solomon Islands public service. Prominent in this study are three main factors: a growing number of women achieving tertiary qualifications, affirmative action policies and campaigns, and a shift in social attitudes within the government sector towards women as leaders.

TERTIARY-LEVEL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Information obtained from the Ministry of Public Service reveals strong evidence that more women have graduated from tertiary institutions in the last ten years, compared to previous decades. This increase is shown in Table 2. According to Myline Kuve, PS for the Ministry of Education and Human Resources:

... we are seeing some very good changes with more young women graduates being hired in the service. Most of them are placed in senior positions as principal officers or heads of divisions. We must give more opportunities for our girls to go up to higher school levels. Our situation will no doubt improve in the future.

For those who graduated with a first degree or diploma between the years 2000 and 2008, the average age was 28 years. This reflects the fact that while some of these women went straight from secondary schools to tertiary education there were also among them those who had worked in the public service for some years before having the opportunity to study.

For senior women who achieved their qualifications between 1970 and 1999, more than 50 per cent graduated from the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE). The most common qualifications were the Certificate of Nursing and the Certificate in Business Studies. It is obvious that for this

older cohort of graduates, work experience and long service in government have been additional reasons for their appointments to the managerial/administrative positions that they currently hold.

The major fields of study noted among the newer cohort of graduates are law, dentistry and medicine, and general bachelor degrees with majors in management, sociology, accounting, biology and education. A significant number obtained their diplomas and certificates from SICHE. About 60 per cent of the women graduated with degrees from the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and Vanuatu, and the rest from tertiary institutions in Papua New Guinea, Australia or New Zealand.

The total number of younger women graduates is, of course, higher. There are many qualified women who do not work in the public service. As indicated in the survey analysis, there are qualified women working outside government. Of the 50 women respondents from government, NGOs and para-public organizations: nine have Masters degrees (6 MBAs, 1 MSc and 2 MAs). Twenty have Bachelor degrees (5 in Education, 8 in Arts, 4 in Law, 2 in Science, and 1 in Engineering). Nineteen have diplomas (5 in human resource management, 3 in teaching; 2 each in nursing and accountancy; 1 each in midwifery, business studies, tropical agriculture, health inspection, dental therapy, secretarial studies, and community development). Two women have certificates in management and teaching. Kathleen Lega, for example, graduated with a Bachelor of Pharmacy from the University of Otago, New Zealand, in 2005 and now runs her own business, Le Pharmacy, in Honiara. Phyllis Maike, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Planning from the University of Hawai'i in 2004 and now operates her own consultancy firm, Positive Development Limited. Others, like Linda Au, Dr Joanna Daiwo, Dr Alice Pollard, Hazel Lulei and Nairie Alamu, are employed by either private companies, regional organizations (USP, Forum Fisheries Authority, South Pacific Commission and RAMSI) or para-public organizations (National Provident Fund, Central Bank and SICHE). Many more women in the provinces operate small family

Table 3. Senior government and mid-level positions filled by women, 2009

Positions	Level & Salary Scale	Ministry
PS Clerk of Assembly	Senior, SS13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development, Planning & Aid Coordination (MDPAC) • Land, Housing & Survey (MLHS) • National Unity Reconciliation & Peace (MNUPR) • Women, Youth & Children's Affairs (MWYCA) • Education & Human Resources (MEHR) • National Legislative Assembly (NLA)
Deputy PS/U.Sec Senior/Registrars (medicine/dental) Principal Magistrate Head/Deputy Head of Nursing	Senior, SS12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Min. Public Service; • NLA, MWYCA, • Min. Foreign Affairs & External Trade (MFAET) • Min. Police, National Security & Prison Services (MPNSPS) • Min. Health & Medical Services • Min. Justice & Legal Affairs
Divisional Directors/ managers Asst Commissioners	Senior SS11 Senior SS11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Min. Rural Development & Indigenous Affairs, • MFAET; MEHR; Min. Culture & Tourism; • Min. Finance & Treasury, Office of the PM & Cabinet, MDPAC • MLHS; Min. Commerce, Industry & Employment
MID-LEVEL POSITIONS Principal officers, Supervisors, program coordinators		All Ministries except the Ministry of Mines, Energy and Rural Electrification

businesses or work in tourist resorts. Indeed, a more thorough survey would locate and confirm the total number of this group of women graduates.

The most common factor noted for the enhancement of the position of women and recognition of their leadership capacity in the Public Service is formal educational qualifications. In the survey, all 50 women respondents agreed that their educational qualifications have been a core factor in their journey to top positions in government. All five women in PS positions are highly quali-

fied and hold Masters degrees from universities in Australia and New Zealand. For Ruth Liloqula (2009), Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey, tertiary education is the bottom line for any change towards women's position in society. She contends, 'We can go on theorising about this women and leadership thing but the ground work is education. Education for girls from primary to university levels needs greater and serious attention if we are to see real change.' This perspective is shared by the other three women heads of ministries

interviewed, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, their deputies and under-secretaries who also agreed that the historical absence of women leaders in the public service is largely a result of limited educational opportunities for girls in the past.

The stories of these senior women reflect not so much a struggle to excel in the classroom, but rather the challenge of being girls in both cultural and educational systems that were so structured that they were blind to the disadvantages afforded to girls. Referring to their high school days in the 1970s, the women noted there were many boarding schools. However, not only were these too far away from the villages, but they had limited places for girls. Because of the distances involved, it was deemed unsuitable for girls to walk between school and home every day. It was also deemed culturally inappropriate for girls to stay in dormitory accommodation away from home for long periods of time. This was, as Alice Pollard noted (2000, 46), 'for fear that they might become involved in promiscuous sexual affairs that would diminish the whole family's social standing'. More dormitory spaces were reserved for boys than for girls, thus sustaining schooling environments that were not conducive for the latter. As a result, a higher proportion of young girls compared to boys had been pushed out of formal education.

These constraints may have contributed to the so-called cultural attitude of many parents to send their male children to school and keep the girls at home to help with domestic chores. Although they were top students in their schools, the women in this study considered themselves fortunate to have completed their education. They noted that the major period of discouragement for many girls was the last two years of secondary education (Forms 5 and 6). At these levels, not only were the school fees higher, which many parents could not afford, but it was also the age at which many girls could be married off by their families. When such a pattern is well established, it takes not only time but some radical thinking and action for transformation to occur.

Interestingly enough, the women's experiences also reveal that their fathers played a crucial role in ensuring that their daughters were successful at school. All the senior

women interviewed spoke fondly of their fathers who took an uncompromising stand from 'typical' villagers' approach to support their daughters' education. Jane Waitara, PS for the Ministry of Planning, Development and Aid Coordination, for example, recalled,

I'm very glad for my father...for his open-mindedness. I'm from Malaita where there's a strong culture of men as leaders. In that culture, if there were five of us, the first child to be dropped and not go to school is the girl. Your brother will go to school. There is not much choice when you have a big family. But my father made sure all five of us went to school. He was a great dad ...

The 'unusual' examples of positive experiences of these women having their fathers' encouragement and support should serve as evidence that possibilities exist for improvement in the situation of Solomon Islander women and society at large. Many Solomon Islanders know the value of education for their children. As Ethel Sigimanu (2009) pointed out, 'Education would be the biggest factor for us. Many parents know that educating our children is the best thing that we could give them. But many parents also fail to do so, for different reasons.' New Zealand volunteer, Ashley Wilson's (2009, 21) observation echoes the same sentiment: 'I had been only a few days in Lata [on Santa Cruz island] when I realised that Western-style development in this part of the world was inevitable ... The people wanted to better themselves for many reasons ... But by far the greatest need for money was to provide a better education for their children.'

In the survey, 45 out of 50 women identified two main factors as to why there were so few women in senior government positions: many women do not have high educational qualifications, and cultural (male) attitudes against women as leaders. The call for serious attention to improved educational opportunities for Solomon Islander girls in particular has never been stronger. Not only has there been keen advocacy by international women's groups (UNIFEM etc.), but the unyielding stand of the local women themselves indicates that change is inevi-

table. Almost a decade ago, Alice Pollard (2000, 16) argued:

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

Now, Pollard's observations about the unavoidable changes that both women and men would have to adjust to are noticeably evident. Obviously an analysis of the change towards enhancing the status of women must be contextualized within the broader societal setting as well as the sphere of formal national policy. It cannot ignore the primacy of early conditioning and training for both girls and boys. The current efforts of women's groups and the government to bring women's leadership to the foreground should be viewed as part and parcel of the inevitable transitions that Solomon Islands society is experiencing. Hence, education—encompassing improved opportunities for girls and building awareness among the young and old populations of the importance of women's partnership in decision-making—is a crucial pillar.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION POLICIES AND CAMPAIGNS

Another defining mark of this current period of transition in relation to women and public leadership is the concentrated effort among women's groups as well as the government and aid donors to advance this cause. This research was conducted at a crucial time in Solomon Islands, and particularly in Honiara, where the issue of women's

leadership has been hotly debated both formally and informally. As noted earlier, the foundation for raising the public awareness of women leaders has been laid through a combined effort of women's organizations, the government and RAMSI's Women in Government program as well as through the local media. In February 2008 the Solomon Islands Government established an Action for Women policy framework, which includes a review of national women's policy, developing a policy to eliminate violence against women, ensuring gender equality through equal treatment of girls and women, boys and men in schools and the workplace, and securing places for women in parliament and provincial governments (Office of the Prime Minister, 2009). From the government's perspective, addressing these policy concerns is part of its obligation to the CEDAW, and its commitment to both the UN's Millennium Development Goal 3 (Promote gender equality and empower women) and to the regional agreement (the Pacific Plan).

Of these various concerns, the issue of women's representation in parliament and the proposed TSM has been at the forefront and dominated local discussions. The Women in Shared Decision Making (formerly the TSM Working Group)—whose active members are representatives from the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs, The Solomon Islands National Council of Women and several other government ministries—has not only consulted with individual MPs, but also met several times with caucus to explain and discuss the rationale of the proposal. Although the proposal did not pass the vote in caucus, consultations between the WSDM and the government are continuing to ensure that women are represented in the house after the 2010 elections (Kuper, 2009).

The government's affirmative action policies are said to be complimented by RAMSI's program on Women in Government (Solomon Islands Government, 2009). Part of this program focuses on training and capacity building for women in the public service. However, it was not possible to access any form of program evaluation, hence my reliance on the women and men in this study

for feedback. Besides the women PSs, none of the other women I spoke with have been involved in this program. There seemed to be a general feeling that either it was only for the PSs or that the turn of women in other senior or mid-level positions was yet to come.

While affirmative action takes place within the spheres of formal government circles, none of this would have reached and been appreciated by the general public without the local media. One of the most interesting scenes on the local streets, in public places and government offices is people sitting by themselves or in pairs reading the newspaper. When mentioning this observation to Selina Boso (2009), Director of Rural Development Division of the Ministry of Rural Development, she commented, 'People here read the paper like a novel. It's not just the news they're interested in but also the advertisement and entertainment. Everything.' The two local newspapers—*Solomon Star* and *National Express*—provide an informal platform for discussions on women and leadership. The Letters to the Editor section is the most interesting where people debate the pros and cons of the issue. Reflected in all this is evidence that people are informed of this current concern for women in leadership and through the newspaper and radio are talking to each other.

CHANGING ATTITUDES ABOUT WOMEN AS LEADERS

Anyone doing field interviews in the Pacific would have gone through an experience of 'a long wait' for the interviewees either outside an office, at the market, in a cafeteria or at a house. During my visits to the government offices in Honiara, I was always politely told by a male or female officer to take a seat and wait outside. Some of the people I conversed with during these times were male public servants. As it turned out, longer conversations with these men developed as I began to tell them about my visit and ask questions about their take on the issue of women in government leadership. It was indeed during these informal talks, besides the formal interviews, that I got a better sense of a more receptive

attitude towards Solomon Islander women as leaders.

The most fascinating aspect of my informal conversations with the male informants was their extensive knowledge of the current debate on women in national leadership. They were all aware of the then proposed TSM for women in parliament and this was almost immediately referred to at the beginning of our conversations. Generally, the men think it would be an interesting change for the country if there were more women in parliament. When probed further about this response, there was usually a pause to ponder, and a little sigh followed by a broad smile that suggested some hesitancy. Yet, this should not be equated with resistance to women assuming leadership roles. Rather, it reflects a combination of both excitement and caution because, as John Kimi (2009) pointed out:

This move is a very new thing in our country. And for us, any new thing or person coming to our society, you don't immediately go up and embrace them like your wantoks. No. You take time to observe...more like checking it out to see if it's really a friend or an enemy.

This process of 'checking it out' is extremely important to understanding Melanesians and Pacific Islanders in general and their reaction to such issues. Unlike the common approach of governments and aid donors whose projects are to be undertaken within specific time frames, Pacific Islanders do not always operate that way. The latter are 'activity-oriented', valuing more than anything else sociocultural relations that are embedded in, and define, an activity.

Baddeley Wasi (2009) gave an interesting view that while it was much easier for the educated, urban-based and well-travelled Solomon Islander to understand why having women in leadership positions would be a good change for the country, the folks in the villages and the provinces would find it hard to accept change that does not align with what they understand to be the normal roles expected of women and men. Moreover, there are those (both women and men) who are well educated and still believe in men as

the ordained leaders of the country. For any change to come into effect, therefore, time is required for dialogue, education and training.

When caucus voted against the proposed TSM on 16 June 2009, this was interpreted by many observers as resistance to the women's cause and gender equality. This interpretation has also strongly polarized the seemingly opposing sides of men versus women, and would no doubt fuel the already dominant perspective that Solomon Islander women are desperately in need of being saved from their fate. Yet, the reality seems to be much more complex. For one thing, it was not a 'men versus women' issue, because there were a lot of women (formally educated and otherwise) who were ambivalent about the proposal (Kuper, 2009). Many were quiet, preferring to observe and check it out first. It was obvious from my interviews prior to the vote, that while the women PSs were fully supportive of having more women in national leadership positions, there were also important concerns about contextualizing the process through which to achieve this. As one woman PS pointed out, 'Whether we like it or not, Solomon Islanders are cultural beings. The TSM proposal is like band-aiding a big wound. It doesn't work.' Obviously, a large part of the 'wound' comes from abused cultural beliefs and practices (Pollard, 2006). With this context, placing women in leadership positions is one dimension of change. Continuing dialogue and attitudinal shifts are equally important considerations. The rejection of the TSM proposal therefore should be viewed not merely as a failure but a significant component of the process of social and political change and continuity in Solomon Islands.

There is little doubt of the support for women taking up senior positions in the public service. The fact that already there are women at this level as well as an impressive base at the mid-level provides evidence that long standing structural barriers in government can change. In addition, women in decision-making positions in the public service are clearly well-qualified for their respective fields. That their appointments were directed by the government through the Ministry of Public Service implied established connections within the

service. Generally, the younger male public servants are more receptive to women's leadership than some of the older ones. Already, the men in women-headed ministries and divisions are adjusting to new expectations that come with these new arrangements. A legal officer at the Office of the Legislative Assembly commented, 'Having more women leaders would be like a dynamite, and we need them in the Service.'

Similar positive comments are common. It is believed that the visibility of well qualified women at mid-level positions, as either colleagues or supervisors of male staff is an important underlying factor to men's receptive attitudes. These women would have a lot more work-related interactions with their male counterparts and, as is evident in the women's accounts, they get along well with the male employees in their Ministries. With a sense of pride and enthusiasm, Ethel Sigimanu (2009) pointed out that 'there is a change of language within the Service ... more women are taking up mid-level positions, and men and women are continually talking about and debating the issue of leadership in government.'

CONCLUSION

At the outset, this study aimed to identify the reasons behind the established claim that Solomon Islander women are poorly represented in national leadership. Much of the debate on the issue has focussed on the push for more women in parliament and neglected the situation in the public service. Initial interviews with senior women in the public service revealed a sense that women's positions in government might be improving. This provided a new focus for this study which investigated emerging trends of women's involvement in leadership positions.

The improvement of women's levels of participation in decision-making circles in this sector should be cause for celebration. The efforts of government, women's groups and international partners ought to be congratulated. At the same time, it is important to remember that other societal aspects must also play a crucial role if improvement is to

be meaningful. Placing more women in decision-making positions reflects their recognition as capable individuals. But it should also be read as a reflection of changes resulting from the combined efforts of government agencies, NGOs, women's organizations and international interest groups and governments through awareness programs aimed at recognizing women's capacities beyond the home.

Many of these changes are not known or documented. Yet, Solomon Islander men and women are continually talking to each other through the media and by other means. To a large extent, the campaign on women's issues focuses on and involves primarily adult women. Both men and the younger generation of school-aged girls and boys have been ignored. The danger of this approach is that not only is it ahistorical, but it portrays a gender divide on the issue of women and leadership. In the context of Solomon Island society where complex kin and sociocultural relations have historically been highly valued, consideration of the advancement of the position of women must be placed against these relations. Women's status is linked to men's status as defined through culture. It also connects to the systemic lapse in the schooling system, inherited conditions of the formal employment environment as well as people's attitudes and thinking.

This study has argued that change *vis-a-vis* women in leadership positions is inevitable in Solomon Islands. Change is also characterized by steps forward as well as delays and setbacks, as with the TSM issue. The advancement of women is already happening in the public service. Both men and women civil servants are witnessing the emerging tendency of there being more qualified women in government jobs. The senior women in this study have acknowledged the anticipated contribution of the broad base of qualified women in mid-level positions. As echoed in the words of Florence Naesol (2009), Deputy Clerk to the National Parliament, 'Women taking up senior positions in the Public Service are becoming acceptable among us and I'm seeing a brighter future with Solomon Islands women assuming leadership roles in government'. The challenge

for proponents of women in national leadership is to pay attention to where possibilities and change exist no matter how insignificant they seem. It is in small changes that growth originates and flourishes and will be worth the investment of development partners.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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ENDNOTES

1. A Samoan phrase meaning 'gift from the travelling party'. The phrase explains a cultural practice where travelers would make a presentation to their hosts to reciprocate for their hospitality and receiving the travelers.
2. Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; Education and Human Resources; Lands, Housing and Survey, Rural Development and Indigenous Affairs, Women, Youth and Children's Affairs, National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace, Development, Planning and Aid Coordination; and Finance and Treasury, Office of the Legislative Assembly.
3. Ministry of Development, Planning and Aid Coordination; Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey; Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs; Ministry of National

Unity, Reconciliation and Peace; Ministry of Education and Human Resources.

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List of People Interviewed

Florence Naesol
 Ethel Sigimanu
 Doreen Kuper
 Ruth Liloqula
 Jane Waitara
 John Kimi
 Baddeley Wasi
 Selina Boso
 Taeasi Sanga
 Nancy Legua
 Rose Sulu
 Ashley Wickham
 Helen Sinclair
 Phyllis Maike
 Alison Sio
 Mia Rimon
 Sarah Dyer
 Natalina Hong
 Margaret Qoloni
 Myline Kuve
 Ana Luvu
 Timothy Ngele
 Trish Bata
 Ruth Piko
 Alice Willy
 John Whiteside
 Douglas Kauhue
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