Shifting leadership out of the backyard: Expanding opportunities for women leading in higher education in the Solomon Islands

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Abstract

In the Solomon Islands, the paucity of women represented in educational leadership positions is an issue of social justice. This is an area of concern as, although women experience opportunities to practise leadership in a range of community contexts, their access to leadership in the field of education is restricted by a number of social and cultural discourses that marginalize women leaders. This qualitative research investigated the leadership experiences of ten women leaders located in one cultural context, the unique island of Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were engaged to explore women's leadership perceptions and experiences and how these ideas were realized in the way they practised leadership. Findings indicated that women's perceptions of, and participation in, leadership was immersed in a cultural context which was founded on a belief of matrilineal leadership culture providing opportunities for women to have power and respect in community contexts but not necessarily organizational contexts. However, the findings also illustrated the challenges met by these women when they sought to extend their leadership practices beyond the home and their close communities, into organizations. Although a complex concept to negotiate, extending the cultural discourses of matrilineal leadership into educational leadership contexts may provide an alternative and supporting mechanism to enhance the representation of women in formal educational leadership positions in the Solomon Islands.

Keywords*: Women's leadership; educational leadership; matrilineal culture; Solomon Islands; Santa Isabel; community leadership; belief; practice; Melanesia; higher education, embodiment*

Introduction

The conceptualization and value of leadership in educational organizations both represent and reproduce the gender and power relations that exist in larger society (Fine, 2007). In the international research literature, a common feature of social justice discourse with regard to women's leadership is women's lack of representation in formal educational leadership positions, even though they are over-represented in the teaching population (see, for example, Blackmore, 1999; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Strachan, 2009). Embedded organizational structures, workplace policies, and cultural practices continue to marginalize women in the area of leadership and feature men, valorising "male modes of thinking, feeling, acting, and forming identities while devaluing their female counterparts" (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000, p. 130). This observation has encouraged Fine (2007) to further posit that the gendered nature of organizations shows "a masculine bias in leadership practices that devalues women's ways of leading" (p. 179).

Further to these debates is the nature of cultural context. Whilst the majority of literature exploring women's lack of representation draws from a western and euro-centric position, examples which relate to the indigenous and cultural leadership of women and, in the case of this article, the leadership of women from the Solomon Islands, are sparse (some recent exceptions include Akao, 2008; Elisha, 2012; Pollard, 2006). This region has lacked consideration in the current educational leadership discourses associated with women and educational leadership.

Recent scholarship, for example the work of Carli and Eagly (2012), Ely and Rhode, (2010), Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), and Sinclair (2013), argues persuasively that those who engage in research and work in the area of women and leadership must first seek to illuminate and then act to dismantle the emotional and physical barriers that exist for women seeking leadership roles. Similarly, Blackmore (1995) states that women leaders themselves have an obligation to make a difference and

> the lens of privilege … requires women leaders to consider their position, to better understand how and why they came to be in that position and how they can use that position to challenge and transform exclusive images of leadership into more inclusive ones. (p. 35)

Women's leadership in Solomon Islands

A number of studies undertaken in the Solomon Islands (for example, Akao, 2008; Elisha, 2012; Liki, 2010; Malasa, 2010; Pollard, 2006; Scales & Teakeni, 2006; and Sisiolo, 2010) confirm that women's leadership is significantly influenced by notions of culture, Christianity and colonialism. However, Akao and Strachan (2012), in particular, claim that "different cultures and Christianity also play important roles in how gender is constructed" (p. 1). This assumes, then, that the way women view and experience leadership in educational settings is highly contextual and in the Solomon Islands may also be different.

Cubillo and Brown's (2003) research highlights these points further, theorizing across the "macro - socio - political level, the meso - organizational level and the micro level which concerns the individual herself" (p. 281).The cultural and social structure that separates society into male and female arenas is also a major obstacle to women's access to leadership positions (Oplatka, 2006). Leadership positions are perceived as belonging to male members of society and women should refrain from attempting to attain this kind of position (Oplatka, 2006). The influence of tradition and culture has also been given as an explanation as to why women are under-represented in leadership positions in Melanesia. Strachan (2007) argues that in the Melanesian context, "culture significantly impacts on females' ability to participate in education and decision making at all levels, including educational leadership" (p. 104). In most developing countries, Oplatka (2006) and Strachan (2009) state that women's progress into senior leadership positions has been slow and irregular.

In most Melanesian cultural groups such as Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, leadership and power have been said to be 'traditionally' a male preserve, upheld by the 'big man' and 'chief' and further authenticated and strengthened by both church and colonial hierarchies in every aspect of society (Akao, 2008; Kilavanawa, 2004; Pollard, 2006; Strachan & Saunders, 2007). In these societies, leadership is essentially male dominated and thus, in most cases, males are the gate keepers to accessing education and leadership positions (Strachan & Saunders, 2007). This gate keeping marginalizes women and generally excludes them from aspects of society such as education.

The matrilineal leadership culture depicts an alternative view that could enhance the representation of women in formal leadership positions. Viewing women to have power and respect in this context demonstrates the many roles women can play in creating change in society. The notion that the matrilineal leadership culture recognizes the importance of founding strong leadership in the home may be seen as a pillar for educational and formal leadership organizations. In this way, both women and men may be encouraged to see leadership from both patrilineal and matrilineal perspectives.

Women's educational leadership in this context refers to women's ideas around leadership and how these ideas are realized in the way women practise leadership in a range of educative contexts. This notion concurs with Strachan's (2005) claim that "educational contexts are not just confined to the formal education sector: they exist in many contexts" (p. 48), such as in the village (various committees and groups), church

organization (Mothers' Union), and education institutions (early childhood, primary and secondary schools). Women's educational leadership in these various contexts in Santa Isabel Island forms the context for this study.

Despite the Solomon Islands having ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Solomon Island women continue to be invisible in formal leadership positions because of the cultural male hegemonic practices that deny women access to equal participation in society. However, some researchers critique this position, arguing that this is "not wholly supported by historical evidence" (Scales & Teakeni, 2006, p. 78). Scales and Teakeni contend that in the Solomon Islands' matrilineal societies there were women leaders. Bogesi (1948) explains that "Santa Isabel women are sometimes figured as chiefs" (p. 216) and, in Western and Guadalcanal Provinces, clan leaders were sometimes women (Kari, 2004). Thus, Scales and Teakeni (2006) questioned the prevailing assumptions about women and leadership in traditional society, arguing that in some "pre-colonial Melanesian societies, there was no categorical necessity for all leaders to be male" (p. 78). They further stated that the idea that only men can be leaders may well be a result of the rigid gender concepts brought about by colonialism in the village headman system and the beliefs of missionaries.

Furthermore, in Melanesian societies today, women are questioning women's roles and status. This is in large part due to the increasing number of women who have been exposed to western values through formal education, overseas travel, mass media, and the degree of exposure to modern technologies (Pollard, 2000; Tongamoa, 1988; Tuivaga, 1988). Some women who are well educated are beginning to question and see the gender division of labour as "unfair, degrading and biased against women" (Tongamoa, 1988, p. 89). This is in contrast to the Melanesian view that this labour division is complementary to the traditional system. Complementary or not, such labour division denies equal rights for women, thus continuously affirming their inferiority and subordination to men (Tongamoa, 1988).

Interestingly, Pollard (2000) also commented that even though women's role and status are undergoing rapid change, there is still reluctance among the women themselves to abandon tradition entirely. This view is similar to those expressed by Papua New Guinea (PNG) women leaders in Kilavanawa's (2004) study where the findings revealed that the ascribed roles of women are still very influential on women today in PNG; where all women regardless of whether they are educated or not, "still have a link to the traditional social norms even though their work place, environment and organizations are based on western systems" (p. 91). The roles of women cannot be isolated from family and community responsibilities because the intricate social network is interwoven with all aspects and issues of communal life.

Consequently, female participation in education in Melanesia is highest at the primary level but, at more advanced levels, the numbers start to lessen. Generally, more males than females are represented at every educational level because opportunities for education are largely taken by men. Also, because education in Melanesia is not compulsory (Strachan, 2007), females' access to education is lower because of the privileging of males' education; where males are encouraged to pursue further education and girls are not seriously encouraged (Strachan, 2007; Tuivaga, 1988). As Pollard (2000) posits,

> The inequality of participation in higher education does not necessarily reflect official policy
> or bias in favour of males; rather it is the consequence of the people's traditional world view,
> which includes the notion that a woman's place is at home. (p. 6)

As such, in Melanesian countries, despite policy reforms, planning and education restructuring, women are still disadvantaged and education is neither accessible nor equitable for women and girls (Kilavanawa, 2004; Sikua, 2002; Strachan, 2009; Strachan & Saunders, 2007).

In order to address this issue, Pollard (2000) suggested that basic changes in some of the fundamental attitudes, values and beliefs are required before full gender equality can be realized. One such change may

be in the perceptions that parents have about allowing girls to attend schools. Parents need to be aware of the benefits of educating girls. Strachan (2007) also raises similar sentiments and suggests that:

> While it is important to preserve those aspects of culture that help sustain and enrich people, it is also important to change those aspects that limit people's opportunities based on their gender. Both males and females need to be equally valued in all aspects of their lives, including education. (p. 105)

Thus, Strachan (2009) explains that the under-representation of women in educational leadership positions as well as in other formal sectors in Melanesia begins with gaining access to education. Since girls' access to education is limited, this may create a flow-on effect that impedes the participation of women economically and in decision making at all levels in the society, including educational leadership.

Of importance, also, is that while Pollard's (2006), Akao's (2008) and Elisha's (2012) work was informative and highlighted important issues inhibiting effective leadership and women's educational leadership participation, they did so in a very general way, and from a patriarchal culture, assuming that the views shared were homogenous. Their work did not specifically address women's leadership in the Santa Isabel context.

Similarly, Sanga and Walker (2005) give a very detailed account of what leadership should be in a Solomon Islands context. While they explain and give suggestions on how people can be good leaders within their own organizations, they do not necessarily address leadership from women's perspectives. Very little mention is made of women, and only then in collective terms such as 'women leaders' and 'women's groups'. This implies that all women leaders lead the same way and all women's groups lead and think the same; although this is not necessarily true.

In contrast, Akao (2008) and Elisha (2012) focused solely on women in educational leadership settings. Their work allows us to see into the experiences of the women leaders, as well as those who experience working with women leaders. These experiences are unique to women in Melanesia - especially the influence of the cultural context on women leaders in schools. For example, in Akao's (2008) study, Solomon Islands women expressed that the influences of the cultural patriarchal norms impacted on their leadership and that they felt discriminated against. Thus, Akao suggests that the reason Melanesian women are still struggling to address gender equity issues is the absence of women's experience and the silence of women's voice in the 'big man' leadership dominant society. Elisha's (2012) study, however, found that teachers valued and appreciated the leadership of women principals. She suggests that people's attitudes towards women leaders are slowing improving.

Nevertheless, when looking at women in leadership, there is a tendency to view it based on western ideas. Strachan (2007) raised an important point when she stated,

> we must resist imposing western colonial practices and solutions. Those of us that are not 'of' the culture must listen to how women in Melanesia might want that support to manifest. They know how best to work within their own cultural context. (p. 107)

Women do hold some leadership positions in Melanesia, but they are usually located in their communities and their churches and often women do not perceive these as leadership roles or see themselves as leaders (Strachan & Saunders, 2007).

Gender plays a large role in women's underrepresentation in Melanesia. Strachan (2009) insists that Melanesian girls lack women role models in leadership positions in education, in politics and, to a lesser extent, in the community. Thus, the support of both men and the churches is critical and needs to be included in any strategy for change (Pollard, 2006). The churches offer women informal leadership opportunities and experiences that can help prepare women for more formal leadership positions (Strachan, 2009).

Matrilineal culture in Santa Isabel Island in the Solomon Islands

The absence of a patriarchal culture in Santa Isabel makes the context for this research unique. Santa Isabel Island is one of the six large islands that make up the state of the Solomon Islands. Santa Isabel has a total land area of 4,136 square kilometres (Peterson, Hamilton, Pita, Atu, & James, 2012), with a sparsely settled population of about 26,000 residing in villages that range in size from 50 to a few hundred (Solomon Islands Government, 2011). Overland transport infrastructure is minimal, which makes reaching the interior only possible via foot tracks. Most villages lie on the coast and people usually rely on outboard motor boats, inter-island ferries and traditional canoes for transport. On the island of Santa Isabel, 96% of the population belong to a single church, the Anglican Church of Melanesia (Kinch, 2004; White, 1991), and Christianity is an important part of Solomon Island culture.

The current political structure recognizes the importance of local leadership that comprises the family leaders, village leaders, district house of chiefs, and the Isabel Council of chiefs. This structure supports and extends leadership from the village level through to the provincial level and gives the traditional leadership in Santa Isabel a greater role and partnership with the provincial government and church leadership. Importantly, it acknowledges women and their need to reclaim their chiefly/leadership roles at the village and house of chiefs' levels, playing complementary roles to their male counterparts (Whittington, Ospinard & Pollard, 2006). Such a role, as Whittington et al. (2006) argue, merits further examination since it may well prove an entry point for enabling "women's participation in formal decision making" (p. 8).

Santa Isabel has a deeply entrenched matrilineal society where women hold numerous informal roles associated with power and leadership within their communities. This understanding may relate to their cultural beliefs and practices that land ownership and descent is passed through a successive generation of women. Bogesi (1948), in particular, affirms that the existence of the matrilineal culture on the island can be traced way back before the missionaries and traders landed in the 1800s. Similarly, Naramana (1987) concludes that "people had already firmly established themselves into three tribal systems with women ancestresses under a tribal chief" (p. 42) when traders and missionaries arrived. This suggests that matrilineal beliefs and practices in tribal connections, land ownership, and roles and responsibilities are embodied in Santa Isabellians' ways of thinking and doing.

The Santa Isabel matrilineal beliefs and practices in leadership are consequently centred on land and kinship. Thus, it is significant that leadership is aligned with land and genealogy rituals and responsibilities. This assumption illustrates that leadership is crucial in the social structure of co-existence. In other words, it is vital for people to know their place and relationships within the extended family structure as well as within the tribal structure.

Women's leadership in Santa Isabel matrilineal culture

Although very little has been documented about them in the chiefs' leadership structure, Santa Isabel women display empowering and influential leadership roles in both traditional and contemporary times (Pollard, 2006; Poyer, 1996; Scales & Teakeni, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006). Such influence is displayed through word of mouth, participation and decision making in their families and communities, and sometimes at the national policy level. For example, when Solomon Islands women became eligible to vote in 1967, Lily Poznanski, a woman from Santa Isabel, was the first elected female member in the National Parliament (Pollard, 2006). At the Provincial level, there are currently two women provincial members and, at the community level, women participate in decision making and are the motors, soul and life of the village (Tetehu, 2005; Whittington et al., 2006).

The contention that a number of women have reclaimed leadership in contemporary instances (Marau, 2002; Pollard, 2006; Scales & Teakeni, 2006; Tetehu, 2005; Whittington et al., 2006) suggests

much unrealized cultural potential for women in matrilineal cultures to take up leadership roles. After all, there may be no absolute barriers to women emerging as leaders in Santa Isabel and other matrilineal societies in the Solomon Islands, and anecdotal evidence shows that the majority of women who take up leadership roles come from matrilineal cultures.

This said, men are usually seen as the women's spokespersons on decisions reached and often become the heads of the households. They dominate formal leadership positions in their communities, church, and provincial government. Their visibility as regional and political leaders has "influenced people to associate traditional leadership with men and has threatened to undermine women's traditional high status in Santa Isabel" (Whittington et al., 2006, p. 71). Thus, I concur with Strachan's (2009) contentions when she writes, "changing deeply embedded practices, attitudes and beliefs is slow. Making visible the factors that constrain women's lives and deny them human rights is important. Silence perpetuates discrimination" (p. 107).

The educational context of Santa Isabel

The Santa Isabel Education Authority, in conjunction with the school committees, school boards and school principals, manages sixty early childhood centres with an enrolment of 1,568 students, twenty primary schools with an enrolment of 5,077 students, seven secondary schools with an enrolment of 1,819 students, two technical and vocational centres with an enrolment of 142 students, and a total teaching establishment of 413 (141 early childhood, 187 primary, 75 secondary,10 tertiary) (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009).

However, although these schools exist within the Santa Isabel community context, where women claim to have power and authority in the local communities, there are hardly any women principals in the secondary schools, and very few women head teachers in the primary sector. Nevertheless, it is not surprising also to observe that there are elements of culture, colonization and Christianity in the way education processes of curriculum, recruitment and teacher promotion are structured. Although "sex-disaggregated data is not systematically collected" (Strachan, 2009, p. 103) in the Solomon Islands and quite difficult to obtain, the representation of women in educational leadership positions is low (Akao, 2008). For example, of the 211 secondary school principals and deputy principals, only 13% are female (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2009).

Whittington et al. (2006) argue that inadequate consideration of the role of culture in shaping attitudes to gender and leadership constitutes a major impediment to change. Therefore, this research intentionally engages in a process of remembering and exploring the traditional and current educational leadership experiences of women in the Santa Isabel matrilineal culture.

Research design

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study research approach, in an effort to gain rich insight into the influences of the matrilineal culture leadership on women leaders' ideas about leadership and how these ideas are realized in the way they practised leadership. Data were generated in two phases using semi-structured questions and focus group discussions. In phase one, individual interviews were conducted with ten women leaders drawn from formal educational settings (schools and higher education contexts) in the Bugotu region of Santa Isabel. The questions that guided this research were:

1.   What are the influences of the matrilineal culture on women leaders' leadership beliefs and practices?
2.   What factors contribute to the formation of women leaders' matrilineal leadership cultural beliefs and practices?
3.   What are the women leaders' leadership practices in the matrilineal leadership culture?

Women shared their understandings and experiences of leadership with regard to both their work and community involvement. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English, and then analysed using NVivo10 and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2014) to identify emerging themes. The emerging themes guided the second phase of data generation that involved three focus group discussions with some of the participants and a second round of individual interviews. Data were again transcribed and translated into English and followed the same process of analysis to come up with further emerging themes.

Findings

The findings illustrated some common understandings that the women held about leadership. Based on recurring themes that emerged from individual interview data and focus group discussion, key areas of findings were associated with the impact of matrilineal culture on women's positioning as leaders in their communities and homes.

Theme 1: The impact of matrilineal culture on women's leadership

Links to the land

All ten women leaders interviewed in this research indicated the powerful nature of matrilineal society and how this cultural foundation was influential in positioning women with regard to having power and respect in their communities. All women indicated this through comments that linked women to the land by birth and, in particular, the connection that women have to the land and the tribe through childbirth. The burying of the placenta and cord stump is culturally significant in that the return of the afterbirth into the ground establishes a relationship between women, as mothers, the land and the tribe.

In the focus group discussions, some women leaders commented that the connection that mothers make with people and land played a significant part in forming the foundation for personal leadership. Iona commented,

> *In our culture in Santa Isabel, our women are foremost, very important, the reason being that the tribal land and lineage starts and ends with women as mothers. In our view, as far as leadership is concerned, this is why women were and are able to hold positions of power and leadership in the community.*

Hence, women leaders' beliefs about leadership may have been shaped by the embodied nature of the relationships founded from women's bodies (their 'being'), which aligns with current relational leadership discourses.

Many of the women believed this gave them the space and right to think highly of themselves because it was through this historical ritual that they connected future generations to the land and the tribe. Iona stated, "I have strong beliefs that our women are very important to us because it is mothers who connect us to our land and our tribe," and this was a view shared by most. Nine of the ten women leaders indicated how important this connection was with regards to their feelings of being valued in this society. Hanai expressed that the worth of women as mothers is manifested in Solomon Island culture through the respect people have for women: "This cultural practice is still very strong in Santa Isabel. Thus, people in this society listen to women when they are told to do or not to do something. They still respect and honour women."

Hanai's view was reiterated by seven of the ten women leaders who commented that thoughts about women's value and importance in Solomon Island society stemmed from this cultural history. The women felt significant responsibility and, in some cases, pressure to sustain this cultural practice. Me'a recalled,

> *My mother told me when I was still in my early ages that if I was going to be the only girl child and*
> *do not get married and have daughters, land ownership rights and tribal links will end with me.*

It was therefore not surprising that the majority of women leaders suggested that motherhood was recognized as important leadership because of the responsibilities it has in ensuring the continuity of the tribe and culture. For example, Diana commented, "In Santa Isabel matrilineal culture, mothers are thought of very highly because it is through them that the tribe and culture stays alive…This, nowadays, is understood as a position of leadership and responsibility that women hold." However, although it would appear that practices associated with matrilineal culture provided leadership opportunities for women, there were also drawbacks and significant expectations linked to this which impacted upon women's choices and freedom within their communities. These aspects were linked to the women's learning experiences of leadership.

The beginning and founding of their strong leadership begins at home

For all ten women leaders, the genesis of their leadership was at home where granddaughters were watching their grandmothers and mothers teaching their daughters. The women recognized the importance of beginning and founding strong leadership in the home first. Iona felt happy and comfortable leading from her backyard:

> *Although women are quiet or silent, we have a place to speak. We are quiet and silent but*
> *we are the ones that do all the leading in our village and school. Our men only speak but it*
> *is we women who do most things.*

The women leaders reported that they practised leadership that was collaborative, consensus making and caring. Elena reflected that,

> *As leaders, we are always searching for ways to make things better for our people in the*
> *village. In our observation, women are also doing the same in their families and in their*
> *communities. We see that we women have feelings and we value ourselves in the sense that*
> *we do not take negative responses as obstacles to our leading but challenges that needed*
> *to be thought about to make things better…the care for people is in the forefront in how we*
> *women lead.*

Furthermore, women also perceive their leadership was founded on the notion of service and working across networks. According to seven of the ten women leaders, these were significant aspects of their leadership practice. They also claimed that a fundamental feature of their leadership practice was their contribution to the greater good. Diana said,

> *In my thinking, the way a person gets to be a leader, I do not know, but maybe to help, in*
> *those ways, I mean. It is to help in the area of women, I mean. In the area of our lives, our*
> *children [and] our daily living, I mean.*

The women used their networks to further the greater good of women in other regions:

> *We also work with other Mothers' Union members in other regions in Solomon Islands such*
> *as Western, Central, Makira and Malaita Provinces and in the Pacific like Vanuatu, Fiji and*
> *Papua New Guinea and other Australia New Zealand and England. (Diana, IID)*

Similarly, women leaders also suggested that a common practice in their leadership was providing for those less fortunate. Thus, sharing what you have with those who do not have and sharing what you have with your relatives and peers was the right thing to do. As Guri said, "One thing that is different in our matrilineal culture is the way we care for others, such that when people come and ask for food or other things we just give them freely."

In addition, women leaders claimed that the notion of resource re-distribution is seen in their leadership practice. For example, a large contribution that Mothers' Union members make during natural disasters such as cyclones and floods, earthquakes and tsunamis, is the collection of food, mats, and building materials to give to families in other Solomon or Pacific islands. This is demonstrated in Diana's response: "Our roles reach those of other dioceses and worldwide too. Our collection, we take them to those who are poor, those who have nothing to eat and those who are affected by natural disasters."

In the same way, women leaders mentioned that their leadership practice is based on negotiating first, before resorting to other ways in solving issues. This is because they believe in dealing with people with respect. For example, women do not participate in war, but they negotiate with men involved in the warring factions and the head hunting to stop. As Me'a said, "We handle conflicts through talk. This shows how we should solve problems and is an example of showing respect for people so that we can understand each other work to together."

Nevertheless, all women leaders stated that while, in reality, they face many leadership challenges, this does not weaken their determination to keep practising what they believe in. The majority of participants claimed that the biggest challenge in their practice related to some people not following them:

> *Some of the challenges that we experience are, sometimes…we see that people are tired and do not want to follow the leaders and the leaders too are having difficulty in making the people to follow them, which results in tasks not attended to. (Elena, FGD)*

All ten women leaders took their challenges as helping them to stay firm in their leadership beliefs and purposes. According to Anika, "We must learn to be patient in what we do. This is one of the things we see in most women leaders, we never give up."

Theme 2: The challenges and barriers to educational leadership

The women also acknowledged a number of barriers which influenced their access to, and practice of, leadership in their educational contexts. The two main areas included a lack of recognition of matrilineal leadership practices in educational contexts and the paucity of role models for the women who wanted to develop their educational leadership.

Absence of matrilineal cultural practices in formal education

The ten women leaders reported that although there is a long cultural practice of matrilineal acceptance in the Santa Isabel context, this does not necessarily translate into the social sphere beyond the family domain. For example, in focus group discussion, Me'a expressed that "matrilineal cultural practices are absent in the formal education system." This indicates that the challenges that women experience in educational leadership begin with leadership development in the education system. As Te'e explained, "We sometimes recall and say, why we were not given this kind [matrilineal culture] of schooling. If we had schooling about these, we might understand and reinforce our importance." Te'e alludes to the challenges for women leaders in education that stem from patriarchal discourses predicated on the Solomon Islands context. For example, six out of the ten women expressed that they feel less important when working with men from patrilineal societies. Iona said,

> *In our school, there are men who come from patriarchal societies. These men do not understand and respect us, which make us feel less important when working with them, although our women were brought up in the matriarchal culture.*

In addition, all women leaders felt that they were not professionally supported to lead in formal education. This was shown in Haidu's statement: "Sometimes we feel that we are not encouraged to take up leadership

roles in schools." However, all women leaders saw the matriarchal power as a feeling that encouraged them to pursue leadership roles in education. This was indicated by Me'a who said,

> *Those of us who have gained broad idea or knowledge about our matrilineal system, and who we say that we are the mother of land … should encourage our women to think and feel good about themselves and that we are equally important with men.*

However, the challenge was that many of the tenets of matrilineal leadership that the women experienced in the community did not transfer to the contexts of education, where male dominated discourses of leadership held prominence and continued to exclude women from leadership opportunities.

Lack of professional support

Many of the women acknowledged the lack of professional support in their institutions and shared their concerns about the lack of women role models and structures which supported women to be involved in decision making and higher leadership responsibilities. Seven spoke about having resource people who would encourage women to speak out about the feelings that they felt less important. One participant expressed that these "feelings could impact on women's taking up leadership in education because this is a barrier that we have" (Haidu, IID). The significance of having resource people was further highlighted by Iona who said,

> *If we have some people who can encourage, or to support us … we feel that we can progress because we see it now that we women from Isabel are always putting ourselves at the back when it comes to leading in formal institutions.*

All women leaders felt that a barrier they face in education leadership is their difficulty in speaking up and challenging patriarchal practices in educational contexts. For example, in the focus group discussions, Joska explicitly stated:

> *These are our strong feelings that we want to share … that we women can be encouraged to speak up and out because this is the main thing that some of us are really having difficulty with. We women are very capable in the way we think, care, and in carrying out our leadership roles. It is only how to stand up and talk in front of the people in gatherings and meetings that some of us women are not confident to do.*

This was further reiterated by Diana who, in her individual interview, expressed that:

> *Being a participant in this research has given us the avenue to speak about what these leadership roles mean to us because some of us are not brave enough to talk about these (leadership) to people around us. So it has been a great opportunity for all of us to be part of your study because, it is now that we are able to talk about our feelings, thoughts and also our desires for our women now and in the future because we have been so quiet, scared and most times just passive and uncritical leaders.*

Implications and concluding thoughts

In Santa Isabel, leadership that was founded on the intimate connection women have with the land and kinship ties positioned women to hold elements of power and respect in their communities. The matriarchal cultural practice of burying the placenta is similar to the Tahitian notion of *pufenua,* which literally means returning the placenta to "centre, heart of land" (Saura, 2002, p. 128) and symbolizes the relationship between people and their environment. Likewise, this embodiment of belonging forms a powerful connection in regards to people's sense of place (Kenny, 2012; Louv, 2012; Reedy, 2003). Thus, as Hanai (IID) stated, continuing the matriarchal practices of burying the placenta reaffirms women's connection to the land.

This relationship, according to Bourdieu (1984), is the connection "between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products" (p. 170). This means "habitus is a cyclical-but alterable series of behaviours that determines how individuals see and act within their environments" (Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012, p. 11). Nevertheless, this intimate connection to the land and the embodied notion of belonging might diminish and actually disrupt or rupture the matriarchal lineage. This is because, while this is powerful, there is little practice evident to make this commonplace and more present in women's lives.

The genesis of women's leadership starts in their homes, in their sleeping, cooking or birthing houses, under the shady trees, in their gardens, rivers, forests and seas, where granddaughters are watching their grandmothers and mothers teaching their daughters. Locating leadership in this way affirms that leadership and context cannot be separated (Klenke, 2011; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). The women leaders in this study created a worldview of leadership that shaped their beliefs from within their context. This is supported by Sharpnack (2011) who contends that contextual thinking is the basis for appropriate leadership beliefs and practices to emerge. However, the connection between leading in the community and leading in their educational institutions was not upheld and there were a number of barriers and challenges that the women faced in order to establish themselves in leadership roles in their employment.

The disjuncture between the women's experiences was shaped by Western ways of defining and practising leadership and this continued to marginalize women in their workplace. Historical and cultural ways of leading became undervalued as women struggled to find space in their male dominated institutions. On the same contention, Fitzgerald (2003) adds that "position[ing] indigenous ways of knowing and leading at the centre of practice and theory" (p. 20) may contribute to changing the deafening silence of indigenous women and, in particular, women from Santa Isabel's Bugotu speaking matrilineal culture. I argue that women's voices and presence in leadership can only be realized if this alternative view of leadership is integrated in Solomon Islands' national policy, legislated, and included in the school curriculum.

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