

From people of the sea to people of the land: The significant role of women

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The processes by which we create 'knowledge' and make sense of the world are produced and sustained through historically and culturally specific social processes. Social attitudes refer to the idea that individuals reflect their conduct to other individuals or what is considered appropriate amongst groups in society.



In Meg Luxton's (1980) book titled "More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home", Luxton interviewed mothers on their roles as housewives over three generations. One participant noted -

"Sure things are easier today. Modern houses are much easier to keep up, no one is denying that. But the same is true of mining. Mining today with power drills and trains and all that is much easier than mining was in my grandfather's day. But no one ever says that modern mining isn't work anymore. So, the people who say housework isn't full time, demanding, hard work are full of it. All that proves is they don't know what housework is really all about." (p20)

At different times throughout history, the perception of women providing "domestic labour or unpaid work" has varied. Traditionally, women who had careers were accused of being negligent mothers based on the perception that women would be unable to fulfil their role as mother and wife while trying to meet their professional responsibilities. Two generations later we have taken a 180-degree turn, where the importance once placed on "unpaid work" has been watered down by the social and economic pressure to earn an income. Diluting the significant role women outside the workforce makes.

Although the world has known pandemics before, COVID-19 is the most prominent pandemic in the era of social media and live streaming. It is hard not to think about it when we receive daily updates through our television screens, social media forums and political debates. In search of my "new-normal", as a Tongan woman in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have had to look back in order to go forward, recognising the significant role woman in Aotearoa have played throughout this pandemic and the importance of cultural context when pushing key messages

A year ago, I was asked to write a piece for the Ministry of Women on unpaid work or volunteering. At the time I saw it as an opportunity to highlight the contribution “women at home” made to social capital – a thread found in the NZ wellbeing budget and something our Pasifika communities are rich in.

According to Stats New Zealand, unpaid work within the household includes “household work, childcare and caring for another member of the household who is ill or has a disability.” In “redefining unpaid work through the eyes of a ta’ahine Tonga” I argued that as Pasifika, these are things that are difficult to measure because we do not view the categories that fall under “unpaid work” as work. These activities are our fatongia (duty) fuelled by the ‘ofa (love) and values that make us who we are as Pasifika. In a report published in 2018 titled “*Where There is a Will – encouraging Policy makers to value unpaid work,*” on average women in New Zealand spent 4 hours and 20 minutes a day on unpaid labour, with Maori and Pacific women carrying out more childcare than other ethnicities. Hours that I estimate has grown exponentially as a result of COVID-19.

When COVID-19 hit our shores, the catchphrase used by Prime Minister Ardern was “stay home, save lives.” Our Tongan communities were bombarded with messages (both accurate and inaccurate) that often-fuelled panic and fear among our most vulnerable. As a collective we needed to mobilise our communities in order to build COVID-19 literacy. It was not enough to say, “stay home, save lives” people needed to know a). the risks placed on households by those breaking the bubble” and b). the members of the family who would be most at risk. Within our Tongan homes, they were our elders and family members with chronic illnesses. Add the percentage of Pacific overcrowded households and the difficulties this would pose to social distancing, most at risk “looked like us”.

As a community we understood the importance of kin mobilisation and messaging that spoke to our cultural and social understandings. Despite the mounting risks attributed to us, there was an understanding that when it comes to protecting our kainga (kin), “*we don’t play*” and the figures attached to Pacific COVID-19 testing (highest in proportion to the other ethnic groups) and positive results (lowest compared to other ethnic groups) highlight that. However, what is often lost in translation is an acknowledgment that the success was largely due to what the English thesaurus would categorise as “unpaid work” or “domestic labour,” making the matriarchs of our families pivotal essential workers during this time.

In Helu’s book titled Critical Essays he writes about Tongans as “sea people or people of the sea”. As sea navigators, adult able bodies men would travel in their vaka in search of land. Once a new island (or islands) was discovered and a foothold gained, return trips were made to get the rest or what remained of the community or group.

Those remaining at 'home' would have been led by the women who had to care for elders and mould the way youth and children saw the world. Women had a double role; they had to execute all tasks required to keep their respective families alive and at the same time make all the decisions demanded by the duties in hand. They did this so that their families could survive and so that hope remained within the kainga. Centuries later, COVID-19 has

held a magnifying glass over the family home to show us that the role of women is still the same.

If staying at home saves lives, moving forward we must consider the contribution of our unpaid workers and the role of our Pacific matriarchs. There's a significant undertaking and although it has been recognised as being valuable, it has not yet been quantified or acknowledged within the accounting frameworks of our country. My hope is that after this pandemic passes, the contribution and significance of women at home is not water down or forgotten.