

Giving metua va'ine Moana opportunities to 'create something big'

Mana Aro'a in post-COVID Aotearoa

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When we think of Moana communities, we think of South Auckland, Porirua or Tokoroa. But there are growing numbers of us in the South and this paper concerns the distinct challenges that metua va'ine Moana (mothers/female caregivers of Pacific heritage) faced during COVID-19 in Otago and South Canterbury. The challenges faced by sole care metua va'ine and/or beneficiaries are such that the scope of this paper cannot adequately



speak to them so I focus on how the dynamics of paid employment in Aotearoa has impacted metua va'ine Moana leading families with two caregivers during COVID-19 and I provide a culturally centred ideology for how these challenges could be addressed in post-COVID recovery.

When speaking to people who work with vulnerable Moana families, patterns emerged regarding how metua va'ine Moana were impacted during lockdown. Firstly, there were women who were employed in work considered 'essential', often cleaning or supermarket checkout work, some occasionally working two part-time jobs. These women risked their own health, and that of their families, working jobs that often paid minimum wage while managing extra child-care arrangements, loss of income if a partner experienced job loss/reduction, and the general emotional stress of the lockdown. Minimum wage, even when working a full-time job, is not enough to support a family and when finances are low, metua va'ine are most compromised. When metua va'ine became unwell, they continued to work because their families (both here and in their Moana nations of origin) rely on their income. They avoided going to the doctor because that would mean time off work and doctor's bills, reducing income needed for groceries, winter clothing, higher electricity bills or other unanticipated costs such as vehicle/household repairs.

Secondly, there were families described as 'hidden communities'. In Otago and South Canterbury, these families are new to the area and arrive from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji or Tuvalu with the help of employment agencies to work in primary industries/factories (eg, fisheries, freezing works, print mills). As the male parent worked, metua va'ine were left with little

support, sometimes for long periods, to sort the administration of establishing a life here. These women often come from rural areas with largely self-sustaining lifestyles and are unprepared for the bureaucracy attached to settling in New Zealand. Once COVID hit, these families (often supporting several children) found themselves in desperate situations where the main income earners' hours were greatly reduced. As they are not New Zealand citizens, they were not eligible for any social services assistance unless they were able to connect with agencies designed specifically to attend to Moana communities. Further, they are less likely to have access to transport, digital technologies, social connectedness and financial means to return home should their visas lapse.

So where does the solution lie?

There is a Cook Islands concept that could ensure more positive outcomes for metua va'ine Moana: **mana aro'a**. For the Aotearoa reader the term aro'a is similar to the term aroha,¹ both of which are commonly defined as 'love'. Similarly, the term mana is commonly reduced to English equivalents such as 'power' or 'strength'. Community group 'Sharing Mana Aro'a' demonstrates the term's significance when it outlines its missions to 'share the spirit of kindness and generosity'² which meant providing support for Rarotongan families during COVID-19. Aro'a can encompass generosity, hospitality, kindness and sorrow for others' pain.³ Aro'a is about social obligation and ensuring resources are distributed fairly to meet the needs of the wider group. There is an implication of reciprocity and social maintenance that is lost in simple definitions such as 'strength' or 'love'. One woman I spoke with described to me how she defined mana aro'a: "It is giving. You give generously, knowing there is power in being able to give. You give knowing that the person who has received might create something big out of it."⁴

When we ask a metua va'ine to risk her health to work in a supermarket for an income that doesn't provide enough, and that requires her to choose between whether she pays for food or the electricity bill, that is not mana aro'a. When we ask people to leave their homes in the Pacific to work in our factories and then leave them completely unsupported to establish a life here, let alone face a lockdown, that is not mana aro'a.

During our post-COVID recovery, we have an opportunity to address the weaknesses in our systems. Metua va'ine Moana who have long considered themselves primary caregivers are now entering the workforce to ensure their families' future wellbeing. This could be an opportunity for empowerment or a way to further demonstrate the lack of mana aro'a that exists in employment relations in Aotearoa, particularly for va'ine Moana who continue to be the lowest paid demographic in Aotearoa.⁵

¹ Aroha: 1. (verb) to love, feel pity, feel concern for, feel compassion, empathise. 2. (modifier) loving, affectionate, caring, compassionate, kindly, sympathetic, benevolent. 3. (noun) affection, sympathy, charity, compassion, love, empathy. Ref: <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>

² Ref: www.facebook.com/SharingManaAroa

³ Ref: Lokal magazine, Issue 1, p.42.

⁴ Name omitted for reasons of confidentiality

⁵ See: <https://www.hrc.co.nz/news/pacific-women-paid-lowest-new-zealands-public-service/>, <https://www.hrc.co.nz/news/pacific-women-paid-lowest-new-zealands-public-service/>

I am saddened by what I feel is the exploitation of the Moana labour force, particularly our women who put the well-being of their families first. The minimum wage is not enough and at the very least, New Zealand should be working towards a living wage for all workers. I want to live in a country where people will work and not have to make impossible choices to survive. I want to live in a country where employers pay and support employees sufficiently to live a dignified life for them and their families'. I want to live in a country where everyone is given enough to create something big. In post-COVID recovery we have an opportunity to reassess our priorities as a nation, and if we want to see success for metua va'ine Moana, working towards a return to the status quo is simply not an option.