

Making kindness count – improving Pacific womens’ employment prospects

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Year 11 Economics, another stepping stone towards realising my father’s dream of an accountancy career for me. As a 15 year old this involved learning and attempting to apply definitions of choice, opportunity cost, limited means, and scarce resources. Despite moving away from economics (and accountancy) these ideas have continued to emerge in my life as a policy and research practitioner, online shopper and post Covid-19 Kiwi. Looking through an economic and human lens the situation and prospects for Pacific women in the labour market are deeply concerning. Stories generously shared with me show that even Pacific women still in employment are suffering within a system with rigid eligibility settings for social



support and with employers who fail to acknowledge and support their employees’ circumstances. Despite a government focus on kindness, this empathy still fails to permeate many of the spaces Pacific women are in. This paper looks at an opportunity to work with Pacific women using both economics and kindness to improve the social and economic wellbeing of Pacific women and their families.

Women all over the world — despite having a lower mortality rate from the virus compared with men — have been penalised in almost every other aspect.¹ In New Zealand, Pacific women are amongst the most vulnerable employee groups prior to Covid-19 raising the prospect that Pacific women workers will continue to suffer disproportionately.² While we won’t get a clearer picture until unemployment statistics from April to June are released in August, recently I talked to two Pacific women about how they and their community were faring through Covid-19. In Auckland, a single mum, prior to lockdown, lands a dream job in the tourism industry and is subsequently made redundant, while elsewhere in the world’s

¹ Falciani G. (2020). A gendered look at this pandemic: How have women been harmed? Retrieved 16 June from <https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2020/06/16/a-gendered-look-at-this-pandemic-how-have-women-been-harmed/>

² Human Rights Commission. (2018). *Pacific women paid the lowest in New Zealand’s Public Service*. Retrieved 20 June from <https://www.hrc.co.nz/news/pacific-women-paid-lowest-new-zealands-public-service/>

largest Polynesian city, a mum of eight is a year into a job with an organisation who are recruiting workers. Unexpectedly, the tourism worker required surgery and with no eligibility for income support, used her sick leave and then spent much of lockdown with no income. Employed by an expanding business, the mum of eight doubled her efficiency and devoted spare work time to support other workers. At the same time she was questioned about the number of children she has and their health conditions.

These early snapshots show New Zealand workplaces are still gendered, unresponsive, let alone understanding, to women and in particular Pacific women. With unemployment numbers due shortly also, there is greater impetus than ever for an innovative and targeted approach within the Government's post Covid-19 investment strategy to ensure that Pacific women maintain, gain and remain in employment. This also presents an opportunity to bring together the Government's informal motto of kindness together with economics developing substantive policy solutions for this vulnerable group.³

What would this integrated approach look like? For a Samoan woman, the practice of kindness is a relationship between a Samoan *fafine* with two or more of her *fanau* and *aiga*. A relationship well described by the *Teu Le Va* partnership model⁴ that nurtures relationships and facilitates a wellbeing situation benefiting all stakeholders and upholding the moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of social relationships for all participants. New Zealand workplaces represent another collective context where an economic component is measured, employment objectives are identified and Pacific women, including Samoan *fafine* work towards drawing from their values and *tunuma* (the Samoan word for a traditional tattooists' specialised box of implements) to achieve goals.

I'm talking about Pacific women working with other Pacific women as wellbeing navigators to maintain, gain and remain in employment in concert with family wellbeing. Women who are matched together at the earliest possible opportunity, understand each other's situation, identify any eligibility barriers and select from a *tunuma* of government or provider solutions. Women who are impartial, separate from WINZ, and training providers, but have the respect of all groups. Women who know how to pick their battles and who put their views forward understanding the economic context with both empathy and a knowledge base. A wellbeing navigator would broker solutions with tenacity and efficiency to ensure that a potential employer knows about their employee's family in their first meeting and makes a day long training happen, identifying one off afterschool care options for multiple children.

Is this navigator Mele Poppins? No she is not, she is a Sunday school teacher and a rugby league parent with the training and life skills to learn and extend her knowledge on how the

³ Curtin, J. (20 May 2020). 'Jacinda Ardern's global renown is great, but she must do more for women'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 16 June from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/may/21/jacinda-arderns-global-renown-is-great-but-she-must-do-more-for-women>

⁴ Airini, Anae, M., Mila-Schaaf, K., Coxon, E., Mara, D., & Sanga, K. (2010). *Teu Le Va - Relationships across research and policy in Pasifika Education: A collective approach to knowledge generation and policy development for action towards Pasifika education success*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

systems work. She could be based within a provider, but she could also be attached to a church. She is not afraid to refer people to employment services programmes but will keep meeting to check whether there is food in the cupboards and how the kids are getting on at school? She becomes a trusted friend and someone who knows where her role ends and where support of a mental health worker may start. The greatest risk is in the scope of her work expanding beyond a manageable workload. She will require support too and this could be done by senior social workers. She may not have three degrees or one degree but she has intelligence, life experience and kindness. She is unmotivated by anything except ensuring that women can be participating in the labour economy as mums, daughters and workers.

How to make this integrated navigator role happen? Start now. Look at the plethora of navigation programmes out there and identify whether adaptations can be made to what already exists, pin down the scope for this and scope out how these wellbeing navigators ensure that Pacific women's roles at home remain in sight throughout. Think about models and particularly the potential for innovation by having navigators employed by providers but located down at the rugby league club or in the church. Ensure that conversations can be initiated where there is already warmth and familiarity. Finally these women must be able to work smartly allowing compulsory information recording to be done but in a way which does not leave a worker's family suffering as she writes notes for three hours a night.