Diverse experiences of women leading in higher education: locating networks and agency for leadership within a university context in Papua New Guinea

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The ways in which women deliberately press back against practices of oppression and demonstrate agency in higher education institutions are highly contextual and culturally bound. The formal and informal networks that women develop and maintain are important elements of generating agency and enhancing women’s access to and opportunities for leadership. This article presents a case study from research that explored women’s leadership experiences in a higher education context in the Pacific Islands – Papua New Guinea. Situated within a feminist poststructural methodology, the research examined women’s experiences of leadership and considered aspects that influenced women’s access to formal leadership roles. The findings illustrated that the women faced numerous barriers to formal leadership opportunities. A range of culturally and contextually located approaches supported women to demonstrate agency with regard to their own leadership development and practice. This research highlighted the importance of considering the relationship between networks and agency and the impact of associated cultural and contextual practices within organisations, providing insights into the culturally located complexities of women’s leadership in higher education contexts.

Keywords: agency; gender; higher education; leadership; social justice

Introduction: contextualising women’s leadership in higher education

The burgeoning literature on women and educational leadership has continued to direct scholarly attention to women’s overrepresentation in the teaching population, and their under-representation in educational leadership positions (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2009). Much of this literature serves the purpose of reminding us of the ever-present barriers, contradictions and achievements associated with women leading in education. The emergent literature on women and educational leadership in global contexts demonstrates the significance of sociocultural, historical, economic and political context with regard to women’s leadership. Historically, leadership in higher education has been organised in hierarchical structures that have continued to be reinforced by social formations of bureaucracies informed by liberal political theories premised upon individual merit (Blackmore 2005; Fletcher 2007). These structures have frequently favoured male academics in senior educational leadership positions (Shakeshaft et al. 2007), for example, as Faculty and Academic Deans, Pro-vice...
Chancellors, Departmental Chairpersons, and in positions chairing university-wide committees. Historic debates around gender focus on the numerical figures of women’s representation in formal leadership roles and the differing rates of female academics’ promotion compared to their male colleagues.

But leadership is situational (Fitzgerald 2006) and contextual (Strachan et al. 2010). Morley (2012, 121) argues that we need to ‘unmask the “rules of the game” that lurk beneath the surface rationality of academic meritocracy’. Some argue that further investigation is required to consider how women as a group understand what enhances or hinders their access to leadership positions (Airini et al. 2010). Again, Blackmore (1999) argues that the popularisation of discourses that relate to women’s ways of leading often fails to take into account the differences based on race, class and belief systems. These discourses treat women as a homogeneous group, marginalising many women from different racial, religious and class backgrounds. Much of the research is western-centric (for some exceptions see Akao 2008; McNae and Strachan 2010; Vali 2010; Warsal 2009), informed by a mainstream epistemology about women in educational leadership roles that has been constructed, classified and theorised from a white hegemonic perspective (with some exceptions, see Oplatka 2006). Fitzgerald (2006) notes that Western values and leadership practices homogenise, marginalise and silence women educational leaders from developing countries, arguing ‘there is a need to formulate Indigenous and non-western theories of educational leadership that are grounded in research that account for and explain Indigenous women’s ways of knowing and leading’ (6–7). Furthermore, with increasing attention being paid to the role of context in influencing leadership practice and experiences, Blackmore (2009, 80) states, ‘research is needed to further explore the significance of the relations between context and leadership practice in order to comprehend how context shapes the practice of leadership’ and how women leaders actively negotiate their positioning within specific contexts.

More diverse perspectives from developing countries and the Pacific Islands thus contribute to the growing debate about women’s representation in senior leadership positions in higher education. A key focus of this research in a higher education institution in Papua New Guinea (PNG) was to explore indigenous women’s experiences of leadership and the cultural and contextual meanings associated with these. Examining the situated meanings and understandings of the practice and learning and development of leadership illuminated the ways in which women demonstrate agency and deliberately and strategically align with or resist organisational discourses that generate systems and practices of oppression within their institution. The experiences of women leaders in this university were explored through three focus questions: What were the leadership experiences of women in a higher institution in PNG and what had influenced these? What influences women’s access to leadership positions within higher education and their career advancement within the formal university leadership structure? In what ways did women find and demonstrate agency with regard to their leadership development and practice?

**Research approach**

The project undertook feminist qualitative research that made women’s voices and experiences central in order to uncover and remove the blinders that obscure knowledge and observations concerning human experiences and behaviours that have traditionally been silenced by mainstream research (Ardovini-Brooker 2001). According to Reinhartz (1992), a key characteristic that identifies feminist research is that it is research
carried out by women who identify themselves as feminists and draws directly from the experiences of women who are central to the research process, as is the case of the researchers in this project. The two authors were located in two different cultural locations – McNae, a New Zealand European, worked in the higher education sector in New Zealand and Vali, a Papua New Guinean worked in the higher education sector in PNG. In both of our respective institutions, we had observed instances where women had been marginalised in their leadership endeavours and sought to understand the nature of this marginalisation and how these women made sense of these experiences. Lather (1988, 571) states that to do feminist research is to ‘… put the social construction of gender at the centre of one’s inquiry’. This investigation therefore sought to understand how internal organisational patterns and broader cultural and political influences impacted the gendered experiences of the women leaders of higher education.

The analysis was framed through the theoretical work of Bulbeck (1998) in Re-orienting Western feminisms which insists on shifting away from the dominant Western epistemological lens. In her critical analysis of political and social practices surrounding the social relations of gender, Bulbeck purports that cultural context is critical to understanding particular issues in terms of how its shapes and generates new questions around how we interpret the world and especially the role of women, highlighting tensions between the similarities and differences of women’s experiences. Bulbeck (1998, 2) argues that in these analytical practices we can ‘use the image of the other to make our familiar faces look strange, to offer new interpretations’. In so doing, there is an opportunity to disrupt the historical Western cultural discourses upon which many understandings of feminism and women’s experiences are founded thus ‘challenging the imaginative spaces “we” occupy in our own minds’ (Bulbeck 1998, 2). A critical analysis of the political and social practices that shape how we as researchers interpret the world offers new ways of understanding the experiences of women leaders in universities.

Bulbeck’s ‘re-orienting’ lens works in tandem with feminist poststructuralist positions that engage with the social construction of gendered subjectivities. Feminist poststructuralism recognises that both individual subjectivity and the collective culture of an organisation are socially and historically constructed and co-constructed. Furthermore, power relations (and therefore gender relations) are embedded in those constructions, which continue to exist and change over time through discourse and the formation of institutional structures (Weedon, 1992). Like Bulbeck’s work, feminist poststructuralism provides ‘a way of understanding the world through a rich plurality of voices and perspectives, which may lead to a greater recognition and connection between people of competing viewpoints’ and potentially will ‘prompt social and educational transformation’ (Baxter 2002, 5).

Methodologically, the issue for white feminist researchers is also how to represent the diverse responses generated among women in academic contexts in the analysis? Charlesworth (1999) suggests first, researchers must be aware of the limits of their experience, and be cautious about constructing realities based on their own lives. Second, asking questions and challenging the assumptions of women’s leadership in higher education settings might be seen as more valuable than attempting to reconcile core meanings and generate homogeneous and overarching theories of how women experience leadership, oppression and agency within their own contexts. Third, rather than invoking a conception of universal patriarchy, researchers must engage in the interrogation and appreciation of the different forms that oppression can take.
from a multitude of cultural positions and how the women themselves interpret these
instances in both their personal lives and their roles as leaders in higher education.

This approach might reveal ways in which dominant discourses positioned women
and their experiences through traditional meaning and ways of being (Davies 1990).
Weedon (1992) argues that the relationship between experience, social power and
resistance must be central to this theorising, and that women’s lived realities are sub-
jective realities, influenced by discursive practices within a specific context. This per-
spective calls for an understanding that, rather than existing as a unique, individual,
fundamental or essential self, meaning is given to experiences through language and
‘we speak ourselves into existence within the terms of available discourses’ (Davies
2000, 55). These lived realities are diverse, changing and located within and drawn
from hierarchical networks and structures, underscoring the importance of being
attuned to issues of power, subjectivity, discourse and language (Grogan 1996).

Studies of discourse can seek to examine how institutions and organisations func-
tion as systems of control over individuals and how cultural and political nuances mate-
rialise as embodied experiences of women (Sawicki 1991). Key to feminist
poststructuralism are these embodied experiences which can provide insight into
women’s perceptions of how they exercise agency with regard to negotiating power
relations and interests that are historically and culturally embedded within their organ-
isation. Munro’s (1998) definition of agency was foundational for this research where
she defined agency as ‘… an individual’s multiple and conflicted negotiations of power
relations in a specific context’ (224). The notion of agency itself is not without its com-
plexities. Munro (1998) defines agency as ‘effective action by women against patriar-
chal oppression’ (133), thus requiring women to be ‘active citizens against [their] own
subordination’ (132). However, she also highlights that understandings about this sub-
ordination can be very different, subjective and culturally located. This engenders the
need for a shared understanding of agency between the two authors where agency was
considered to be a multifaceted and complex process in which both individual and col-
lective consciousness interacted with the organisational structures and cultural milieu of
the university. It was therefore important in this research to carefully examine the
women’s experiences within their own contexts. Situating this research within a femin-
ist poststructuralist theoretical framework enabled exploration into how the women
from different cultural and class backgrounds sought agency with regards to accessing
formal leadership positions within the discursive fields of power within a university
setting.

The research process

The research involved 13 Papua New Guinean women who were employed in one
higher education institution. Invitations were sent to all academic university staff at
the institution inviting women who held formal leadership positions to be involved
in the research. The women came from diverse disciplines/strands within different
schools of their institution and held senior leadership positions (e.g. Department Chair-
person, Head of Committees, Associate Dean and Programme Leader). As a precaution
of ethical means, pseudonyms will be used to protect their identities. Also, due to the
small number of women represented in leadership positions, the location of the
women’s specific roles or schools will not be reported in order to minimise the likeli-
hood of the women being identified. The investigation was purposefully designed to
elicit an in-depth account of the individual women’s leadership experiences within
their specific context in order ‘to open up an appreciation of the diversity and richness of […] competing perspectives’ (Baxter 2002, 17). Data were generated through semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes in duration that were digitally recorded, transcribed by the researchers and shared with the individual women to ensure accuracy and affirm meaning. Through a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013), emerging groups of data and observations of differences, absences and similarities of content and meanings were explored.

Women’s journey for empowerment in PNG
PNG is a Melanesian country situated on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea in the South Pacific Ocean. PNG shares international borders with Solomon Islands on the southeast and Australia to the south and was once an Australian protectorate until 16 September 1975, when it gained independence. Considered a developing country, PNG is the most highly populated nation in the Pacific Islands and has an estimated population of seven million people. It is ranked 153 out of 187 countries worldwide for gender equality. This inequality is evidenced in education, employment, health, safety and political representation (Wilson 2012). The PNG government subscribes to a multitude of documents spanning decades including the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1962), The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Education for All (United Nations Declaration 1990), the Beijing Declaration on Gender Issues (1995), CEDAW (1995), the National Gender Equity Policy (2003), Gender Equity Strategic Plan (2009–2014), Equal Employment Opportunity Policy (2009), and more recently, the National Policy for Women and Gender Equality (2011–2015), indicating the country’s commitment towards establishing equality for women. However, that has not been the case and in the context of this research higher education leadership opportunities have not been fully extended to women academics. In PNG, women academics represent a small proportion of those who contribute to the economic and social development of the country through higher education. Across the six PNG universities, there are 430 male academics compared to 128 female academics (Office of Higher Education 2011). The Office of Higher Education was unable to further segregate these statistics with employment data and leadership positions.

The influence of the sociocultural context on PNG women’s leadership experiences
The findings revealed that the ways in which PNG women perceived, experienced and practiced leadership were influenced significantly by the sociocultural context. Power manifested itself within both family and workplace contexts and was evidenced through traditional leadership practices, cultural ideals and expectations.

Traditional leadership practices
Traditional leadership practices shaped opportunities for women in leadership roles both within the university and in the community. ‘Big Man Leadership’ (putting men first as leaders) is a common term and practice in PNG and signifies the conflation of men with leadership. Described by Nanau (2011) as an acknowledged stance in Melanesian interpersonal relationships, rather than official title, many women identified how this practice excluded women from formal leadership roles and responsibilities.
For example, Jill identified the uneven distribution of leadership within her culture because of this cultural practice and commented:

From the cultural perspective, looking back into our traditional ways – men were always being the leader. Men were always being the provider and the fighter (tribal wars). So women were only to bear and cook … women’s place was at the kitchen and at the garden, bearing and rearing children. That is still part of our culture so men come to work with that mentality.

Understandings of masculinity in PNG culture may have corresponding dualities in their identities as men too become socialised and shift their historical roles from being the hunter/gatherer provider for the family and the fighter in the community (roles of high status) to being the wage earner and assuming positions of power in PNG’s postcolonial society. Masculinity in PNG is in a process of hybridity as male identity is constructed through a negotiation of traditional, postcolonial and modern values. The association between leadership with masculinity is generated from, and substantiated by, multiple perspectives. Isaacs (2002) makes the case, however, that although men can be socialised and aspects of hybridity are evidenced, they are ‘socialized in ways that promote, rather than hinder their abilities to act in the world’ through processes of modernisation (142), and this contributes to the ‘patriarchal conditions that subordinate women’ (143). Hall (1995) cited in Bulbeck (1998) muses that in discussions of hybridity ‘Power always tends to gravitate back to the binary … and that binaries do not go away because hybridity is around, or because we make a theoretical critique of them. So you have to keep asking why the binaries reappear’ (54).

These binaries are played out in the professional lives of the women interviewed where many commented that some men, who seek or wish to retain for themselves positions of power and authority, actively undermined women leaders. Examples included instances where men were deliberately uncooperative and unproductive so that leadership became difficult, or poor performance of a department was deemed to reflect upon the woman who was in a leadership role. In one example, Jolly referred to a male colleague who chose to work in isolation when she was appointed the head of division, ‘Because of who and what he is [from a PNG region where traditional big man leadership was still persistent]’. Many of the women associated holding a leadership position with holding power over others. Comments such as Jolly’s above provide insight into the informal source of power where although men may not be in a formal leadership role, they still were in positions of significant influence within the institution and were continually holders of power informally as individuals and as men.

Many of the participants felt that the culmination of enduring traditional gender roles and stereotyping even within new postcolonial influences positioned them as subordinates in PNG society. Most of the women expressed how traditional principles of kinship predicated domestic life, and women’s roles were prescribed accordingly as caregivers, child bearers and having the role of preparing food for their families and village events. Some women spoke of how these culturally ascribed roles for women impacted on how they were viewed as leaders in their employment as these views held by men were then transferred into their higher education institution. For example, Betty commented, ‘Some of the Papua New Guineans [male] have this thing about women; a woman may be qualified but men still think that you are a woman [so] your place is at home in the kitchen.’ Jill made similar comments explaining that it was difficult for women to ‘shake off’ the gendered cultural assumptions.
associated with being a woman in PNG society commenting that ‘men think because they have power over women in the home that they can have authority over women even in professional circles’. Their comments indicate the transferability of values around gender identity from the social or personal to the organisational and professional, and how this impacts on women’s experiences of institutional leadership. Furthermore, the construction of PNG masculinity works at a collective level thus reproducing existing power structures and cultures of leadership. Consequently, many of the participants believed that this left most women congregated at the lower level of the institution’s leadership hierarchy. Monica explained:

Many of the positions such as acting deans, deans and chairpersons are headed by males even though they (male) know we are capable of doing that. I see that men are greedy because they do not want women to overtake them.

Furthermore, in PNG many of the women perceived men as gatekeepers in leadership, appointment processes and academic promotion. As men held the majority of senior leadership positions, they dominated appointment committee panels within the institution and on the highest authority body that endorsed overall appointments. Many women spoke of how they not only experienced limited career progress due to male gatekeepers but were also recipients of intensive surveillance after being appointed. In one example, a participant shared how she had difficulties in her re-appointment despite having the necessary credentials for the position. After challenging this appointment process and eventually being reappointed to her original contract, she was then closely monitored by a number of men and felt intimidated, as they did not use this practice with any other male staff members. In a further example, one woman stated, ‘… male colleagues keep challenging our work as if they are trying to see faults and not genuinely challenging with good intentions. They [males] look for every single loophole to target us’. Actions like this suggest that gatekeeping was a sustained and enduring practice within the institution.

With few leadership opportunities available for women, the women themselves also acted in ways that could be considered gatekeeping. It would appear that in some cases women internalised and misused power within the hierarchical structures of the university in order to safeguard their own leadership positions. They created barriers to ensure that other women did not advance in their careers, especially if they were junior academics. As Geno explained, ‘The senior female would not want to see a junior female rising up; it’s not really rising up but they wouldn’t want to see you taking the lead’. Similarly, Jill explained:

They do not think big in terms of supporting women to advance to leadership positions once they are already there. We are jealous of other women and do not want them to excel because otherwise they will replace us.

Others found that tokenistic leadership positions were offered to project an image that women were represented in leadership positions. Instead, the women felt that their appointments to leadership positions should be based on their merits as an individual, for example, the case of Vavi who stated, ‘I always oppose the idea of people suggesting “we are going to nominate a woman” I don’t like that! I want to be nominated because of my merit that I can be a leader and they see quality in me … And not because I am just a mere woman!’
These discourses of individualism and individual merit butt up against the principles of the PNG’s kinship system, the wontok system which also plays a significant role in women’s opportunities for leadership, securing positions and academic promotion. According to Nanau (2011), the wantok system ‘is an important concept associated with networks of distinct tribal, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic groupings in Melanesia’ (32). This concept is founded on a cultural system based on kinship principles where people from similar tribes, families or ethnic groups showed favour to each other. This cultural practice is perceived by many as

an unwritten social contract, between those that speak the same language, to assist each other in times of need. This ranges from little things such as assistance in school fees to favours that border corruption, such as offering a job or contract to a person or persons because they are a wantok. (The Solomon Island Press 2008)

The women from PNG perceived this system as a mechanism which both hindered and enhanced their access to formal leadership positions. For example, this cultural practice of favouring a wontok member had a significant influence on the appointment and promotion processes within the university and was a concern for many of the women. Jill claimed, ‘… if they were to choose between me and them [wantoks], it’s the wantoks over me’. The negative attributes of the wantok system highlight the likelihood of how supporting a fellow wantok in times of need can also be perceived by others as corruption and nepotism (Nanau 2011). However, for some women the wantok system was an important network that provided support and opportunity (discussed further in the following section).

Navigating cultural discourses that influence opportunities for leadership was an important part of how the women went on to challenge existing practices of both men and women. An internalisation of individualism was also evidenced where many of the women felt personally responsible to respond to the insurmountable quest of changing cultural discourses, and some found this perceived responsibility overwhelming. Interestingly, many of the women showed high levels of strategy and planning, and even aligned with some of these cultural practices to assist them in their career. The women interviewed negotiated through the various contradictions and alignments involved in the meeting of cultural values of community and kin, and ideologies of individualism and merit. Bulbeck (1998, 93) writes that ‘western discourses are much more uneasy in their attempt to hold these apparently opposing aspects in view at once. Individual rights-claims are a powerful and popular currency’. However, as the following discussion demonstrates, the PNG interviewees draw on many discourses in their demonstrations of agency.

**Women’s networks in PNG: aligning and engaging existing cultural practices**

Evidence of agentic actions performed by the women was seen in the ways they interacted with and formed various networks to disrupt gendered leadership practices. One deliberate strategy employed by many of the PNG women involved engaging with the wantok system to best serve their own needs. By aligning themselves alongside relatives in positions of leadership, women were able to employ this system and gain leadership positions and academic promotions. One example of this was Rigo who, at the completion of her Master of Education, was handpicked by a relative for a position during an organisational restructuring process. However, although this supported her
progression into a leadership position within the institution, as she had not formally applied for the position she received significant backlash from her colleagues due to the lack of transparency. For many of the women the wantok system was also a key feature that assisted them to successfully manage a busy academic career and family life. Many of the women (especially those with children) mentioned the importance of involving relatives in caring for children and assisting with the day-to-day running of the household so that they could work full time. For example, Monica described how her relatives had shown sacrifice and loyalty and supported her in her decision to work and pursue her academic career:

I always had my family or wantoks assisting me to babysit although it was difficult at times when playing the role of a mother … trying to meet the demands of your job especially a teaching job that requires you longer hours at work and then you carry work back home to continue there.

Kinship networks were critical to women accessing leadership.

Legitimising leadership practice: the power of formal and informal networks for learning

Power was also evidenced on a more global scale where the women used education as a commodified form of social capital. Many of the women believed their influence within the organisation could be enhanced with the gaining of further qualifications. All of the women believed that higher qualifications (e.g. Masters of Education, Educational Administration or Ph.Ds) were essential in order to counteract discrimination and were vital for holding formal leadership roles within the institution. A number of participants believed the qualifications served to legitimize and validate women as leaders while others expressed they felt it gave them more authority within the organisation. As Vavi stated, ‘That is why women need educational merit (qualifications) to substantiate their leadership positions so they are not looked down on but instead treated with respect they deserve’. Eleven of the women had travelled abroad (e.g., to New Zealand or Australia) to gain higher qualifications, such as Masters or Ph.D. degrees. However, although many of the women were positive about this experience and the benefits which sometimes eventuated (e.g. more respect from colleagues, higher wages and in some cases promotions), some commented on the sacrifices they made in order for this to happen (e.g. including having to leave secure employment, the breakdown of personal relationships and being faced with professional jealousy from both men and women upon their return).

Other than the formal qualification pathways mentioned above, there were few formal leadership learning opportunities and much of the women’s learning about leadership came informally from outside of the university, for example, through their involvement in their church and through planning and leading events in the villages. Many of the women voiced concerns that there were few female role models in the university and that those women in senior positions were incredibly busy, leaving minimal time or inclination for them to mentor other women. Monica commented ‘there is no networking amongst women’. Similarly, Jill observed:

There is no such thing as women leaders coming down to young aspiring women leaders, encouraging them to bring each other up … Women are in isolation … You don’t find a
network of women coming together to work in achieving common goal or common interest for the betterment of women.

Some senior women admitted that they saw aspiring women leaders as a threat to their leadership roles and therefore they were reluctant to support and mentor them. To illustrate, one participant mentioned how a particular senior female academic undermined her leadership efforts by continually challenging her views and ideas, and opposing her involvement in professional learning. This led her to believe some women did not recognise the significance or the value of professional informal networking as a means of accessing leadership positions. However, many of the women engaged in activities and actions which generated networking opportunities and what could be recognised as a form of sisterhood in places within the community, for example, in the church they attended, the sports groups they belonged to and the interactions with others within their own village social activities. It was acknowledged that these networks outside of their institution provided emotional support when times were challenging, and support of physical means such as childcare and informal mentoring. It would appear that although the women understood the value of this sisterhood and solidarity in their personal lives, they did not see this extending to their place of employment.

In summary, the women identified numerous aspects that influenced their access to leadership positions within their university context. In the upper echelons of PNG universities there are many formal and informal, local and global ways for women to progress and substantiate their positions in leadership. The use of networks through kinship and extra-organisational connections were key features in assisting women in leadership positions. However, these networks were not without their tensions as women strived to balance the sometimes volatile and fragile relationships of home and work life. Similarly, being educated in a postgraduate degree in an international university is a double-edged sword: bringing benefits of social capital, but also the potential losses of ongoing connection with community and family.

Discussion

Despite the advances women have made in many areas of public life in the past two decades, in the area of leadership in higher education they are still a long way from participating on the same footing as men (Lumby and Coleman 2007). This is not only a feature of higher education systems reported in much of the literature on women and educational leadership in developed countries but also in developing countries such as PNG. The context of this research was significantly different with regard to culture in terms of Western culture, and women perceived a number of different cultural practices that created barriers and challenges to women practicing leadership.

The findings illustrated that the women faced a range of barriers in their context that impacted on their experiences of leadership. Although the women used similar words to label these barriers, the descriptions and associated meanings were highly contextual, located in broader political discourses with differences within the context and even within individual responses. The notion of agency (choice), as Bulbeck points out (1998, 96) is revealed ‘within structural constraints and social meanings’, and understanding it in this way ‘expands our understanding of decision made in both the east and the west’. The findings demonstrated the ways in which the women actively sought agency within their institution to address these barriers, although largely at an
individual rather than collective level. Underpinning these findings were the key features of networks (both formal and informal), and the male-dominant centralised location of power within the workplace. In Melanesia, the views, perceptions and values about what constitutes leadership and who should be a leader are based on enduring and strongly embedded societal discourses, cultural practices, beliefs and values systems which are based on older patriarchal systems of leadership in PNG (Akao 2008; Strachan 2009; Warsal 2009). Based on the traditional social construction of masculinity, leadership has become the ‘technology of [the] masculine’ (Theobald 1996, 174). According to Strachan et al. (2010, 73), ‘… big man leadership is normalised and sets a superior and privileged standard’, which positions men as the most suitable candidates for leadership roles (Kilavanwa 2004). This ingrained cultural practice was enacted in both private and public spheres, and as Warsal (2009) found investigating women’s leadership in Vanuatu, fundamental and significant inequalities were generated between men and women with regard to access to leadership opportunities. Eagly and Johannesen (2001) highlight that ‘gender roles spill over to influence leadership behaviour in organisations’ (787), and as found in this research, gender socialisation can influence what could be the respective roles and behaviours for men and women leaders. Gender regimes in Western organisations are also not fixed and are ‘… part of the wider gender order of society’ (Grogan 2014, 8).

Many women found that the cultural practices from outside of the university were so embedded that it was difficult to change or shift existing university structures and processes (e.g. committee representation and appointment processes), and there was little senior political will to do so. Furthermore, in PNG a number of the women felt they were not necessarily well-positioned or prepared to challenge and change the system that created the barriers for them. In fact to challenge these existing cultural practices may be very dangerous with high levels of violence against women commonplace in PNG society. Critically reflecting on cultural and social discourses can expose unfair practices that marginalise women. But it is important to realise that not all discourses are perceived by all women as oppressive. Some are cultural practices that the women participate in and accommodate. However, what is clear is that the notion of power and masculinity is firmly entrenched within cultural discourses. Uncovering and critiquing cultural practices in ways that also allow women to remain safe, both personally and professionally, were important future actions identified by these women.

In the context of this higher education setting, networks were central to the women’s leadership. Whether the networks are crafted from circumstance such as cultural practices or whether they were developed through deliberate planning and strategic encounters, the important role of networks to assist women to be agentic cannot be overlooked. The nature of networks within the context highlighted the locations of power, especially in decision-making roles. The culturally embedded nature of the wantok system was a key example of this. Findings supported the work of Tivinarlik and Wanat (2006) who also found that the wantok system created instances of nepotism in the selection and appointment process in education settings, and lesser qualified relatives were preferred over more suitable applicants, many of them women. Instead, some of the women in this study chose to embrace the system and use it to progress in their professional position. This finding is not restricted to PNG. Warsal’s (2009) study in Vanuatu also indicated that although the wantok system restricted women’s access to leadership opportunities, it also provided some women with a ‘gateway to occupying leadership roles’ (116) and supportive networks. The issue raised in this paper is whether
individual women see their leadership position as being used to facilitate other women moving up.

With regard to appointment processes and promotion, the practice of gatekeeping continued to impede women accessing leadership positions, mirroring key themes in Western literature (e.g. Acker 1994; Bagilhole and White 2008; Blackmore 1999; Blackmore, Thomson, and Barty 2006; Coleman 2007, 2009) and similarly, literature from non-Western sources such as Uganda (Sperandio and Kagoda 2008), China (Coleman, Haiyan, and Yanping 1998), Nigeria (Uwazurike 1991) and Vanuatu (Strachan and Saunders 2007). In PNG, self-preservation led to a number of women acting as gatekeepers. This finding is similar to Cooper and Strachan’s (2006) study that examined the experiences of women academics in three countries: USA, New Zealand and Romania. They found that in one case in New Zealand, a department woman chairperson attempted to sabotage another woman’s tenure application in order to protect her own positioning with the university. The woman applicant confronted the woman and also filed a personal grievance to her faculty union. This is one of the few studies that mentioned such an action within educational settings.

Mavin (2008) acknowledges the concept of ‘Queen Bees’, a phrase coined by Staines, Tavris, and Jayaratne (1974) and used to describe a general phenomenon where women who had been individually successful in male-dominated contexts were less likely to support other women to gain similar experiences. However, rather than blaming women for this behaviour, she emphasises the importance of examining the underpinning gender systems ‘embedded in organizations [which] socially construct and impact upon women’s behaviour towards women …’ (83). Certainly, the assumption that all women will support other women in their careers was challenged. However, irrespective of gender, the importance of confronting such behaviour and exposing unjust practices was clearly an important action. This highlights the need to critically examine the broader contexts in which women practice their leadership and are modelled leadership (Walker and Dimmock 2002), and not just the inter-relationships between women within their institution.

Research has shown that the gendered nature of universities has enforced a gendered research economy (Morley 2014) where ‘research performance is implicitly associated with the prestige economy in Higher Education, and is a pathway to academic seniority and an indicator for promotion’ (116). Blackmore (1999) identified ways in which power relations are reproduced and maintained within educational settings. She concluded that it was these power dynamics that created assumptions with regard to the normative role and the position of male leaders within the institution. These dynamics also reinforced causal hegemonic links between masculinity, hierarchy and leadership.

With many women located in lower ranked positions that were teaching-intensive, women are influenced into a position described by Cubillo and Brown (2003, 278) as ‘the sticky floor’. This culture has also positioned women to occupy the lower level of the institutional hierarchy and compete in a hostile environment and one that is difficult for them to have impact on the masculine organisational cultures and hierarchal structures (Bagilhole and White 2005; Court 1998; Weyer 2007). The phrase ‘chilly climate’ coined by Sandler and Hall (1986) refers to women’s experiences within many Western university cultures (Cooper and Strachan 2006). This research indicates that a similar climate was experienced by most women in PNG. Unless challenged, this climate will continue to reproduce structures that continue to exclude and/or marginalise women leaders.

The relational aspects of women’s leadership in higher education settings purported in Western literature were not as extensive nor as evident in the PNG context. The work
of Newcombe (2014) highlights the value of relationships formed between academic women in Western universities arguing that these relationships can assist with identity construction, developing research agendas and research strategies, and addressing feelings of being isolated in their professional work. In PNG, the interviewees did not intensively engage in these formal professional networks. Instead, informal networks from outside of the university provide opportunities for women to learn about leadership, even though the skills they learnt in these environments did not transfer as valuable for the university organisation. Harris, Ravenswood, and Myers (2013, 232) state that informal networks within organisations are just as ‘important for mentoring, information, decision making on appointments and research collaborations’. According to Grogan (2002), ‘mentoring leads to networking’ (125), and arguably the lack of networking within the professional sphere contributes to a sense of academic isolation for the women in PNG. It would appear that developing and sustaining both formal and informal opportunities for women to network, within and outside of the university, are important aspects for supporting and enhancing women’s leadership within the academy.

Concluding remarks

According to Yoder (2001, 815), we must never lose sight of the fact that the leaders we are discussing are women, ‘that doing leadership may differ for women and men and that leadership does not take place in a genderless vacuum.’ Coming to understand women’s experiences of leadership within and across diverse contexts is crucial in exposing gendered discourses that marginalise women within higher education. Bulbeck highlights that ‘women of the world are connected both through shared language and ideas and in structures of unequal power’ (1998, 6). However, how these are expressed, felt, acted upon and valued can often be very different. This research has illustrated that there are some significant differences in the ways women develop their understandings about leadership and perceive their leadership practice and although similar phrases and words may have been used to describe these, the lived experiences themselves were in fact very diverse.

This research has illustrated how women are simultaneously constrained by and resist normative, dominant culture. The culture of the university posed many challenges for the women educational leaders in PNG. Evidence of discrimination within the structures of the university, unclear appointment processes, gatekeeping and in some cases the lack of support systems (e.g. mentoring, professional learning about leadership and networking among women) were identified as key areas that influenced women’s representation in leadership. Although these barriers to leadership are not exclusive to the context of PNG, the pervasive and culturally embedded nature makes addressing change within the systems of the academy very difficult. The findings also highlighted aspects of university culture, which had a positive influence on the women and their leadership. Interestingly, many of the aspects that supported, inhibited and outright prevented women from gaining positions of leadership in higher education were similar in name to those reported in Western literature. However, the cultural complexities provided significant differences in the ways women identified these. This research highlighted the importance of considering cultural and contextual practices with regard to leadership practice and development for women leaders in higher education. It makes an important contribution to extending the knowledge associated with women’s educational leadership in the Pacific and identifies ways in which
women sought and demonstrate agency with regard to their leadership within their university.

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