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Abstract

Aotearoa New Zealand's (NZ) cultural identities have expanded and intertwined through waves of immigration and cumulative experiences. As in other nations with an increasingly diverse population and labour force (OECD, 2020; Oxford Economics, 2012), the country's government has sought to implement workplace policies in public service agencies, including equity initiatives to accelerate diversity recognition and inclusion. However, these processes have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic's impacts on the labour market and more widely. This is particularly significant for NZ-based Pacific women workers, a substantial minority of the sector's workforce who often face more pronounced workplace inequities than other workers (Diversity Works NZ, 2022). Moreover, knowledge is scant about networks for Pacific employees and managers, including those in NZ public agencies, particularly around their role in progressing Pacific women workers' interests, skills and careers.

Responding to these key gaps in scholarship, this study employs a transdisciplinary and co-creational approach (also Authors' work, 2021) to provide inaugural insights on Pacific staff networks, focussing three public service agencies in NZ. As well as scoping the nature of these mechanisms, it examines the nature and 'ambition' of their equity-related pursuits, and the micro-, meso- and macro-factors which have influenced their equity progress and which may influence future gender and intersectional equity pursuits. Seventy-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews and talanoa (discussion forums) with senior sector experts, agency managers and staff, including Pacific women and men whose voices are often muted in the formulation of workplace responses (Maiava-Zajkowski, 2021), were conducted throughout

NZ in 2020 and early 2021. The research team collaborated with study participants to design fieldwork questions and make contact with further interviewees.

Thematic content analysis by the team, and reviewed by participants, revealed that the Pasifika networks in each agency vary in size, the cultural background and ethnicity of the staff they support, their activities which are shaped in part by their host organisation's remit and specificities, and environmental dynamics. Framing the analysis with a typology of equity approaches of differing ambition (i.e. from 'short' or liberal/sameness equity notions concerned with equal access and progress for all within existing organisational arrangements) through 'radical'/outcome measures (e.g. the development of identity-based positions in the workplace, quotas) (Jewson and Mason, 1986a, 1986b) to those of 'long' ambition wherein institutional structures and values are transformed to encourage full cultural and other forms of inclusion (Cockburn, 1989), shorter equity goals were found to prevail. This reflects in part the embryonic status of the networks, particularly compared to networks for other identity-based worker groups. Significantly, however, our transdisciplinary analysis also showed that there was evidence that these staff mechanisms have - despite facing organisational austerity policies and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic – mitigated some management-led curbs on workplace equity activity by harnessing the resilience and agency of their members to start taking more intersectional and culturally-informed equity approaches and initiatives. Furthermore, many informants perceived that refinement of their role and functions will facilitate the pursuit of 'longer' equity aims.

These ground-breaking findings indicate that Pacific staff networks have, and will likely continue, to provide a tool for empowering Pacific women at work and beyond. However, the largely masculinist ways in which the networks tend to function, along with external challenges to their activity, must be addressed, and opportunities capitalised upon, if they are to extend their equity impacts to pursue a 'long', culturally-nuanced equality agenda

of internal and organisational transformation. Against popular thinking, their membership diversity and context sensitivity also suggest that the wholesale sharing of 'best practice' by networks within and across agencies is unlikely to progress equity for Pacific women (or other genders) though the spread of *best principles* may usefully inform tailored equity pursuits in the public and private sectors of this and other countries with increasing workforce diversity.

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