

# Fijian Researcher Explores Underrepresentation of Women in Educational Leadership

Fiji Regional

SHARE

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Ms. Jasmine Mohammed at the Pacific Gender Research Symposium and Workshop, 21-23 June 2016. Photo: Shazia Usman, Pacific Women Support Unit.

The Pacific Gender Research Symposium and Workshop held from 21 to 23 June this year was an exciting space for academics and practitioners to discuss their work in advancing the gender research capacity-building agenda among Pacific Island Countries.

Ms. Jasmine Mohammed was one of the 50 participants at the regional workshop organised by the University of the South Pacific, UN Women, the Fiji Women's Right Movement, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Pacific

Community and the Australian Government through Pacific Women. Read more about the workshop [here](#).

Ms. Mohammed is the Acting Head of the School of Education, at the Fiji National University's Lautoka Education Campus. During the three days, she participated in discussions with colleagues from around the Pacific on the different approaches to research and shared her own experience in undertaking research to determine the factors contributing to underrepresentation of women in educational leadership in Fiji.

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Tell us a bit about yourself...

I am based at the School of Education, Department of Primary at the Fiji National University's (FNU) Lautoka Education Campus. Currently I am the Acting Head of the School of Education. At FNU we are involved in the training of quality teachers for Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education. Our objective is to address all education issues and we are beginning to incorporate gender into the conversations surrounding teacher education, citizenship education and literacy and numeracy issues.

Have you always been interested in gender research?

The interest deepened gradually over the years. I had been a primary school teacher for more than two decades, before pursuing my postgraduate studies and joining the university as an educator/teacher trainer. Through my observations, experiences and talanoa [conversation] sessions with women and men I came to realise that gender discrimination and gender inequality persists in both the workforce and personal spaces, at different levels and in different forms.

Through my observations, I had so many questions, for example, why were women treated the way they were? What could be done to bring parity? I was also looking at the practices prevalent in the school I was teaching at, and found that women generally did a lot of work with regards to improvement of instruction but were mostly in the background and not in decision making positions – so I began to ask questions such as why was there a gap? When we look at the system and number of women teachers in regards to the

teacher population, women generally outnumber men in the profession. I found the gap in educational leadership disturbing. Could gender discrimination be a contributing factor? Could there be other contributing factors, such as religion and culture? Perhaps the women teachers at that particular time were not interested in pursuing leadership? This prompted me to conduct a study on why women were underrepresented in educational leadership, with a particular focus on head teachers at the primary school level. The research was part of my postgraduate studies at the University of the South Pacific. I was lucky enough to get a full-time Australian Aid scholarship which enabled me to pursue a Master of Arts in Education through research and write a thesis. I discovered during my research that women were not only underrepresented in primary school head teacher positions, but also in the school management boards.

What were some other key findings of the research and was it Fiji-wide?

A phenomenological study of women teachers/head teachers was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews. One of the key findings of my study was that women primary school teachers generally found it very challenging to access and retain school leadership positions. In the context of Fiji during the two year study, I found that women's advancement to school leadership is snail paced. Generally, women's progression to leadership is very sluggish. The participants of the study said they were interested in school leadership positions and had registered their interests but their advancement to leadership was impeded by the 'invisible barriers'. The 'invisible barriers' take many different forms which include the traditional mindsets, the perception that women cannot or should not be in positions of leadership; cultural inhibitions; and cultural, gender and sexual stereotypes. Historically leadership has been assigned to men so the perception is that it is the men who should be leading and women should be just play a supporting and a subordinate role in leadership. The entrenched patriarchal cultures in the rural areas also affect the traditional mindset of the society at large.

Does FNU have a gender studies program?

FNU doesn't have a gender studies program at the moment but I think there is huge potential in forming one because as I mentioned in my presentation during the Workshop, we have a gender studies group who is working on the development of at least two units in gender studies to begin with. However, the establishment and the further collaboration with international universities in setting up our own gender program is subject to the formal processes of the institution and the report that I give on this Workshop. As a national

university we feel that we need to address the day to day social issues by incorporating it into our program. Gender issues/challenges are increasingly rearing its ugly head in these recent times and has become one of the major social issues. Being mindful that our graduate teachers serve in the 732 primary and 278 secondary schools, they have the potential to change mindsets on gender and sex stereotyping and in turn impact profoundly on the students they teach. Education plays a very powerful role contributing to positive mindsets. Through our teachers and through school communities , we hope to cultivate positive gender mindsets but I believe that we have to first look at strengthening our teacher training program. While our teacher training programmes have integrated basic components of gender education in the Social Education and Social Sciences, we hope to strengthen it further by making it more gender inclusive.

We have recently restructured the Diploma in Postgraduate Education Program and during the restructure, we were mindful of integrating gender issues into one of our core units. It's got a very critical gender component. However, the programme will be subjected to the formal processes before it can be offered to students. With the way that FNU is rapidly growing, we hope to become key players in promoting gender equality and equity in and through the education curriculum and also try to make a visible impact on policy making in education and other social areas.

How was the Pacific Gender Research Workshop for you? Being part of a broader Pacific gender research space in relation to your work with FNU, did it meet your expectations?

For me, personally and professionally as an academic, it has been very empowering and inspirational because it has connected me with academics that are very well established; are senior faculty members doing research; and have published extensively in reputable publication outlets. Interacting with a host of gender specialists has been a very rewarding experience in terms of enhancing gender research capabilities and creating visibility. I think in Fiji we need more gender specialist academics – it's very important for doing our own research and bridging the gap in local gender research. This Workshop has brought women from the NGOs, and those that are interested in doing research regardless of whether they are academics or not, and provided a good opportunity and platform for networking. The workshop has also opened up opportunities for future research collaborations. We hope more similar workshops are conducted in future.