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## LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT



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# Women leadership in business based on customary land: The concept of *wanbel*

*Hennah Steven, Glenn Banks and Regina Scheyvens, Massey University*

## Introduction

In indigenous entrepreneurial communities across the Pacific, women who own and run businesses are mostly respected and recognised. These women are seen as leaders, whereas those who provide supporting roles and do not own or run the businesses go unrecognised. However, the current study which focused on businesses based on customary land in Papua New Guinea (PNG) revealed that women who provide ‘supporting roles’ actually lead in connecting businesses to communities—providing stability and sustainability for the businesses.

This paper demonstrates that women involved in a case study business were able to maintain social well-being using values of *wanbel* (harmony, unity, agreement, being at peace, good feeling), an important local concept for good living and success in PNG communities. The research employed the Vanua Research Framework (Nabobo-Baba 2008) to do case studies of successful small businesses based on customary land in PNG and looked at how women maintained the local concept of *wanbel* for business success and well-being.

## Women and business in PNG

In PNG, women’s economic engagement occurs in various small and medium enterprises at local and household levels—mostly in local markets and particularly in the informal sector (Aiyus 2006). Many engage in informal fisheries, handicrafts, small-scale agriculture, vending and fresh food production and sales (Benediktsson 2002, Chang et al. 2010, Mikhailovich et al. 2016). Women participate directly in these forms of enterprises as managers, partners, workers and labourers or indirectly as mothers, sisters, aunts and daughters through their roles as household and family managers and making sure social needs and obligations are fulfilled (Koczberski 2002, Anderson 2008, Cox and Aitsi 1988).

In terms of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the informal sector, women dominate in two distinct economic sectors—agricultural production and open markets. However, women are also involved in formal SMEs, and there is increasing support for SME development with particular attention to include women from various national and international agencies and private organisations in the country. Such agencies have provided technical and financial support—with a major focus on economic empowerment—particularly inclusion of women to increase their participation and leadership in formal SMEs in the country. Thus, economic empowerment programs have been implemented through capacity building activities such as microfinance, book keeping courses, marketing assistance, business management, technical

consultations, business training and provision of low interest bank loans for start-up capital.

In spite of such capacity building efforts, the number of women-led SMEs remains low—at 990 out of 49,900 formal SMEs—which represents only 0.1 per cent of the total female population in PNG as at 2011 (PNG National Statistical Office 2011). Cultural and structural challenges may be hindering women’s ability to participate fully in formal SMEs, including women’s workloads at both household and community levels, as well as limited access to resources. Other factors such as lack of education, training and business skills may inhibit women from confidently approaching formal spaces—such as business training centres, banks and donors—to request business development assistance.

These are difficult challenges that may continue to hinder many women who would like to lead and own businesses. However, if we probe further we see that women are actually already engaging in leadership roles—often unrecognised—in the background of family businesses headed by men.

## Creating well-being and good living: Notions of *wanbel* in business

Recently there has been greater acknowledgement of the importance of understanding Pacific indigenous notions of well-being and development (Richardson, Hughes, McLennan and Meo-Sewabu 2019). Certainly, women in communal contexts such as the Pacific play important roles in maintaining the social well-being of families and societies. Using economic means and personal skills, they contribute toward sociocultural reproduction to maintain important social values (Horan 2002). In a relational economy like PNG, balancing social relationships and fulfilling social obligations is important and women work toward maintaining that. When they engage in economic activities, well-being of the family and community is paramount. For them, well-being is embedded in living well with others and making others happy. To be a ‘real woman’ or ‘true woman’, a woman must be seen to be performing tasks or contributing toward social obligations and make sure her children and family are well fed and clothed (Koczberski 2002, Cox and Aitsi 1988). She gains self-fulfilment, pride and satisfaction when the social well-being of family and community is intact. In other words, creating situations of *wanbel* (harmony, peace, agreement) is her paramount aim. Her family and relational needs come first. A woman who works in this way gains admiration and is recognised and respected in the community compared to a woman who creates disharmony, does not work and fails to contribute to family or community needs.

## The notion of wanbel

*Wanbel* is two words put together. *Wan* is ‘one’ and ‘bel’ is ‘belly’, ‘stomach’, or ‘heart’. The term *bel* is described as ‘the seat of thoughts and feelings’ (Street 2010:269, Troolin 2013). Thus, *wanbel* figuratively and metaphorically means one in mind, thought, conviction or feeling.

*Wanbel* can be understood from different contexts. For dispute resolution, *wanbel* is reconciliation or consensus. When two people are of *wanbel*, they share one good (positive) feeling (Tshudi 2013, Cooper 2019). From a community cohesiveness context, *wanbel* is being of one belly, one heart, in unity or agreement (Lohmann 2003, Troolin 2018). In a religious or Christian context, *wanbel* can be in agreement or at peace (Street 2014, Kelly-Haku, Aggleton and Shih 2014).

This is an important notion in the relational PNG context. In order to live in peace and harmony with others for *gutpela sindaun* (a good situation), establishing or maintaining *wanbel* with others is significant. In situations of ‘*hevi*’ (social burdens), one must be seen to perform activities that create *wanbel*. *Gutpela sindaun* occurs if there is a situation of *wanbel*. *Wanbel* shares similar notions in other Pacific indigenous contexts such as *solesolevaki* (communal work for the collective good) in order for *sautu* (well-being) to occur in Fiji (Ratuvu 2010, Meo-Sewabu 2015, Nabobo-Baba 2006).

Women led in keeping *wanbel* within the businesses examined as part of this research, making them an important ‘social glue’ that connects business to the community and associated people. This will be explained below using the case study of Blue Kona Farm Limited—now known as Agro-business Consultants.

## Methodology

### Vanua Research Framework

This research utilised the Vanua Research Framework (VRF), which recognises indigenous values that ‘... supports and affirms existing protocols of relationships, ceremony, and knowledge acquisition. It ensures that the research benefits the *vanua*...’ (Nabobo-Baba 2006:25), and drives culturally appropriate research practices. This research framework represents common cultural protocols and processes in most South Pacific island nations, therefore it was used to access research sites. Intricate protocols such as gifting chiefs to access data did not occur in the PNG context. However, the socially embedded, relational nature of Papua New Guinea’s economy means that data collection relied on building and maintaining positive relationships with members of the local business families. For this research, relationship building began before fieldwork and continued after data collection. These relationships were reinforced through shared meals and gifts, participating in social gatherings, storytelling, ‘hanging out’, social telephone calls, and social media chats, all of which reinforced the *wantok*-ness of the connections (a *wantok* is someone with whom you share a close bond, usually based on language or same place of origin). These means of building relationships eased the

development of contacts with case study business owners and facilitated successful data collection. Further, the continual maintenance of being *wantoks* also resulted in *wanbel* relationships that created a sense of good feeling, belonging and harmony between the researcher and persons related to the case studies. This has led to progress updates of businesses being continually shared with the researcher even long after fieldwork ended.

## Case study

A case study is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth one or more individual cases. Researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Creswell 2009). Data collection in this research involved qualitative methods—specifically, *Talanoa* or *stori* in PNG Tok Pisin—storytelling or conversation that involves ‘interacting without a rigid framework’ (Vaiolleti 2006:23), observations, field notes and participation, elicited primary material.

Steven Pupune is the owner of Agro-business Consultants (previously Blue Kona Limited), a diversified family business located in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province. Agro-business Consultants is the umbrella name for various business activities, including commercial property, coffee plantations, vegetable gardens, small scale piggeries, and fisheries. These exist on the business owner’s customary land and on land purchased from customary landowners through *wantok* connections in Yonki Dam area, about three hours’ drive from Goroka town. Women are actively engaged in the business, and lead in keeping *wanbel* within this business.

## Findings

### Women’s direct involvement in the case study business

Steven’s daughter Anita and second wife Margret participate actively at Agro-business Consultants. Their involvement includes financial management, budgeting, preparing workers’ salaries, advising, organising, delegating and networking. They also sometimes collect rentals, do banking, sales, book keeping, farming, clean the workshops, cook for workers and other duties as required. Anita led many of these activities before she went to do tertiary study in New Zealand. Steven was openly emotional when he recounted her assistance:

I did not realise that Anita was doing a lot for Blue Kona when she was here. I never thought she was doing much. When she left, I was lost. I did not know what to do. She used to do all the banking stuff and drive here and there taking care of many things. Now that she is gone I am stuck. I cannot do everything that she does. I have to lease this property to only one person to make it easy. I do not have the energy to work like Anita (Steven 2018).

Although Margret has taken on some of these responsibilities, Anita’s involvement had a positive impact. The way she managed things and kept the business running exemplified strong leadership skills. This was important

for the well-being and smooth flow of business. According to Anita:

...I helped my father with things at the farm because I felt sorry for him. I grew up with him when mum left us around the time that I was two or three years old. Sometimes, others [stepsiblings] do not help him. He trusts me more than he trusts anybody so I even managed the finances and did all the other things. When I finished college in 2008, I stayed at the farm and helped him. It is our family business anyway, so I stayed on and assisted. That is where our food and money come from.

His wife Margret reasoned,

I am happy to do all these things because it makes me useful. I support papa (Stephen) 100% because when my husband died, he took me in as his wife and provides for my children and me. He gave me hope. Whatever business he wants to do, I stand beside him and support him. That makes me a true woman. Whether I take care of children or make money for papa's business, I give my full support. That is it.

Whether they had important responsibilities or performed supportive roles, the ultimate goal was to maintain harmonious family relationships. Thus, creating situations of *wanbel* from direct involvement in business was important for these women.

### *Women's indirect roles in the business through their social roles and responsibilities*

An important way through which women also led in the businesses was keeping elements of *wanbel* in social relationships. A significant means of creating social harmony was through their Christian values and beliefs. Strong involvement in church activities, *lotu* (worship/ prayers) and paying tithes were things that women performed faithfully. This influenced the way they acted and behaved when they had access to money, in their work and relationships with others. This spiritual grounding provided stability and good standing for Steven and his family in the community.

Other important social roles and responsibilities that Anita normally did before leaving for her studies—and Margret keeps doing—include taking care of workers' and family member's welfare, being present at life events and contributing to solving *hevi* (social burdens including funerals and bride price) in the community. Agro-business Consultants prioritises workers' and children's welfare. The women therefore make sure to meet their social and physical needs. Steven is often away on official trips. During his absences, Margret manages the family business, household and takes care of Steven's children from other relationships, and his grandchildren. She is 'happy to do all these things' because they make her a 'true woman' (Margret 2018). Whenever, Steven is away, he is not worried because he knows home and business are in Margret's 'good hands' (Steven 2018).

In consultation with Steven, Margret presents gifts or food to congratulate workers for life events such as at new births or graduation. When there are *hevi* (such as funerals

or bride price) in the community, Margret and Steven's daughters usually represent him. They bring contributions from Agro-business Consultants, in cash and kind, to the family in *hevi* to show respect and support. This establishes good thoughts toward the business family. When a business person is not seen to be contributing, jealousies from community members can result in a bad reputation and sometimes, violent repercussions. Therefore, to maintain family status and keep harmony with community members, 'we show face' during *hevi* times to support (Anita 2018).

### *Wanbel establishes peace and good situation/ good living*

As explained earlier, *wanbel* reinforces living well with others in a way that enables peace and harmony (Troolin 2018). For good working relationships to occur, *wanbel* has to be maintained among family members, workers and associated people. In situations where internal family arguments arise, Anita or Margret usually mediate and bring peace. For example, Steven and one adult family member argue from time to time and will not talk to one another. Anita usually becomes the medium of communication between these men. At times, she has mellowed 'hard situations' and brought peace again into the family.

Margret has taken on that responsibility and tries to keep harmonious relationships among all of Steven's children. One of the ways she keeps *wanbel* relationships between father and children, is by praying for each child, or by taking care of Steven's grandchildren or by calling those children who are not currently living with Steven. Such actions make her a valuable member not only in the family but in the business. This is because Margret's contributions in creating *wanbel* situations has attracted trust and support from relatives, workers, and the wider community. Most of the workers have been working for Steven for more than two decades and one of the justifications for staying on is the way their well-being is maintained. Thus, maintaining *wanbel* has directly or indirectly contributed to the sustainability of Agro-business Consultants for over three decades—and women seem to be the leaders in doing this.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Owning and running a business is not the only way in which women can be leaders in business. The ability to maintain important local values such as *wanbel* that drive business can be used to understand what leadership is. The desire to maintain *wanbel* influenced the way women acted and behaved and this helped the case study family businesses to run in a more harmonious way that contributed to business and community well-being. The ability to maintain *wanbel* gave women a sense of self-pride, fulfilment and satisfaction as workers, partners, mothers and daughters. It also gave them greater status in their communities.

As women in Agro-business Consultants show, working behind the scenes and performing important social roles within the business connects the business to

Pacific communities have systems and structures that can be interwoven with various approaches to development. Development is more sustainable and meaningful when people collectively make decisions with respect to their development pathways (Richardson et al. 2019). One such structure that can contribute to the collective good, community wellbeing, and quality of life for *itaukei* (indigenous Fijians) is *solesolevaki*—whereby people can work together for the common good without expectation of individual payment. *Solesolevaki* draws upon social capital, entails indigenous values and ethos (Movono and Becken 2018), and is linked to communal cohesiveness and collective wellbeing (Meo-Sewabu 2016). Researchers have noted that *solesolevaki* is utilised as a vehicle for development (Movono and Becken 2018) and for community-based natural resource management in Fiji (Clark 1999). We see *solesolevaki* as a form of culturally embedded agency executed to enhance social change (Meo-Sewabu and Walsh-Tapiata 2012). Specifically, *solesolevaki* involves clan members who collectively gather and use their resources, labour and land for agriculture-related development, then share the benefits (Kingi 2006).

Practicing *solesolevaki* enables accomplishment of important tasks as responsibilities are shared. These tasks can be for a communal need—such as building footpaths through a village—or for comradeship, where people work together on an individual’s farm or tasks. This work system is a form of burden-sharing activity that usually involves much laughter—‘the hands of many eases the workload’ (Meo-Sewabu 2016). Ratuva stated that *solesolevaki* is also a form of social protection for *itaukei* communities, where formal systems of state, aid agencies, and civil society are merged with informal systems—community, family, cultural systems, social networks, social safety net—for a significant chance of sustainability (Ratuva 2010).

## Methodology

### *Vanua Research Framework*

The Vanua Research Framework (VRF) (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) is a widely accepted cultural research framework used in the Pacific. The VRF acknowledges the concept of vanua (tribe) and the integrated nature of land, people and culture) as central to the identity of being an *itaukei* (indigenous Fijian). The framework—similar to Kaupapa Maori research (Smith 2013)—is strongly driven to include indigenous worldviews by developing and encouraging relevant approaches in research that value cultural ways of being (Nabobo-Baba 2008). Adhering to the VRF principles helps to build a web of trust, respect, and lifelong relationships with research participants.

### *Case Study: The enabling environment of solesolevaki*

The Nayarabale Youth Farm was established in 2008 through discussion after a church service—recognising the challenges faced by villagers to contribute to multiple sociocultural obligations. The farm is located at Nayarabale

village, Vaturova district, Cakaudrove province, on the island of Vanua Levu, Fiji. The farm is positioned 60 km off gravelled and rough terrain from Labasa, the nearest town, and is only accessible by a river without a bridge. During periods of flooding, the village is isolated from communication and electric grids.

Villagers looked at their resources (land, culture and people) and agreed to do *solesolevaki* on land given by the *mataqali* (clan-based land owning unit), to run a farm managed by youths using a specific work structure (Table 1, see next page). They focused on kava and taro as main commodities and progressed over the years in scale and scope. From an initial target of 300 kava plants per year in 2008, the target was raised in 2019 to 25,000 kava plants, 10,000 taro plants, 12,000 yam plants, and 10,000 cassava plants per year. The farm also diversified to include pineapple and sandalwood farms. Every year the farm put aside fifteen thousand dollars (FJ\$15,000) in three separate accounts for the church, cultural ceremonies and education—which catered for all of the sociocultural obligations previously shouldered by families living in the area. *Solesolevaki* is practised at the *vanua* level in Narayabale, and has been working successfully for eight years.

### *Work structure*

*Solesolevaki* functions well in the Narayabale case because there is a clear working structure. The Nayarabale youth group monthly work structure divides a month into four different periods of activities: week one is *solesolevaki* for the Nayarabale Youth Farm which earns money that pays for sociocultural obligations; week two entails *solesolevaki* for individual farms where smaller youth groups work together depending on the location of their individual farms; week three is designated for *solesolevaki* on the clan’s food security; and week four, the last week, is for the *vanua*, church and the government to organise any activity that requires local people’s involvement. The latter means that, for example, if the Ministry of Agriculture wants to send officials to the village to run a workshop for farmers, they are instructed to only come in the fourth week of each month, as this will not disrupt the village routine. Table 1 (next page) depicts this work structure. While there are now payments made to youth members who work on the youth farm—this was not possible at the start of the farm’s operation—so youth members worked in an unpaid fashion as part of *solesolevaki* until the farm was economically viable.

### *Leadership*

A *solesolevaki* group is like an organisation where people of different backgrounds work together to achieve a goal—thus good leadership is vital. The leaders in the case study do not have formal leadership qualifications but through experience and values embedded in the *bula vakavanua* (culture, tradition and way of being *itaukei*), they contribute to the success of *solesolevaki* initiatives. *Vanua* leadership entails valuing and respecting other people, and reflecting love and compassion. This is important as people are more likely to be loyal to a common cause when

community. They became the ‘hands’ and ‘face’ of the business, sharing business benefits with workers and the community. The good standing of the business partly depended on the social responsibilities that these women performed. Further, being grounded in important social and spiritual values, women became the social pillars of the business. They helped create harmonious situations between family members, which was important for business progress. Thus, *gutpela sindaun* was based upon their ability to maintain elements of *wanbel* within family members, business and the community. This partly contributed to the sustainability of Agro-business Consultants.

There is a need to understand important social roles and local concepts that define what makes a good leader, especially with relation to indigenous businesses. It is also important to understand what success and well-being means for indigenous people, such as the Papua New Guineans in this study. In this example, having a business based on customary land and efforts to maintain social harmony led to a successful business. Additionally, economic-centred intentions should be understood alongside the sociocultural need for harmony and well-being to inform context-specific, gender sensitive and inclusive development.

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