

5. In her own words

Melanesian women in media

Abstract: Representation of women in media has been a noted gender equity issue globally for decades. Given the increasing encroachments into press freedom in Melanesia, female journalists and media workers face serious challenges. With this in mind, the Melanesia Media Freedom Forum (MMFF) hosted a special session focusing specifically on the issues affecting women in the media in Melanesia. This article focuses on the discussions of female Melanesian journalists and the unique challenges they face in terms of representation in the media workforce, having their voices heard in the media, and the threats to their personal safety.

Keywords: female voices, gender, gender equity, journalists, media freedom, Melanesia, Melanesia Media Freedom Forum

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Introduction

I think that you're very challenged, but at the back of your head, when you know that you've got people that you're serving, you have to hold people to account, then it pushes you to do your job.

FEMALE journalists and media workers in Melanesia occupy a fraught and unenviable position. On the one hand, they are trailblazers and mentors, passionate and brave. On the other, they must fight to be taken seriously professionally and face threats to their livelihoods and personal safety. These challenges are compounded by the changing media environment of Melanesia. The Melanesia Media Freedom Forum (MMFF) at Griffith University, 11-12 November 2019 featured presentations from Melanesian female journalists. The event was attended by journalists from the Pacific, editors, publishers, press freedom advocates and journalism scholars. The Forum was developed to respond to increasing media repression in Melanesia and to future-proof press freedom through trans-national regional co-operation and knowledge-sharing among Melanesian journalists, editors, publishers, press-freedom advocates and journalism scholars. This provided a safe space for media leaders who work in

Melanesian countries and territories to work collaboratively to formulate strategies to counter increasing incidences of media repression. The event created pathways supporting those facing existential threats to freedom of expression and communication. This highlighted the need to provide more safe spaces for informed discussions to continue and a need for larger media organisations to continue to monitor this space and raise awareness about the plight of women in journalism in Melanesia and the effect this has on their capacity to do their jobs safely, without threats of silencing or violence. The focus of this article is the special session within the MMFF on women in media in Melanesia. This article brings the discussions that took place in this safe, collaborative space together with academic literature in order to make the argument for greater investment in women in the media in Melanesia, as well as for further research and spaces for collaboration like the MMFF.

Media freedom in Melanesia

There is a significant gap in the literature relating to the experiences of female journalists and media workers in Melanesia. There is a small number of works focused on female journalists in Melanesia. These include pieces about former *Wantok* editor Anna Solomon and *Wantok* journalist Veronica Hatutasi, *Vanuatu Daily Post* editor Jane Joshua, and Georgina Kekea in Solomon Islands. These profiles make valuable contributions to capturing the experience of women in media in Melanesia but they do not capture the complete experience of female journalists. While there are significant bodies of work on topics such as violence against women, political participation of women, and anthropological perspectives on the roles of women in Melanesian culture and society, there remains a sizable academic knowledge gap in terms of the experiences of Melanesian women in the media. There have been limited reports on violence against female journalists in the media around studies of gender and the media in Vanuatu by IFJ and violence against female journalists in Fiji such as the tragic death of journalist and gender issues advocate Losana McGowan. Mago-King (2019) investigating the representation of women in anti-violence campaigns in PNG interviewed several journalists who ‘highlighted the positive role they can play in alleviating violence’. However, they also point out that ‘this would involve transforming Papua New Guinean journalism into a more *talanoa* style of reporting where the people’s voices matter’. This study points to the multi-layered role female journalists have to play in both reporting and addressing gender-based discrimination violence, and experiencing discrimination and gender-based violence. Given the lack of literature on the specific topic, this review situates this research by drawing together literature from within related fields, namely press freedom in Melanesia and the status of women in Melanesia. This approach contextualises this article within its broader academic fields

and also highlights the dire need for further research specifically relating to women working within the media in Melanesia.

The importance of media freedom needs little introduction. It is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under Article 19 (UN General Assembly, 1948), which states that: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.’ Yet there are many parts of the world where these rights and press freedom, most specifically, are being increasingly encroached upon. Melanesia is, unfortunately, one of those regions. While access to media is increasing (Tacchi, et al., 2013), media freedoms in the Asia-Pacific region have been steadily declining since 2007 (Robie, 2018). Laumaea (2010, p. 32) suggests that the three biggest threats to media freedom in Melanesia are ‘political and economic threats against and patronage of journalists’, management prerogatives and military dictatorships. There are also issues of increasingly restrictive legislation. In a review of media sector developments in four Melanesian countries—Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—Singh (2015, p. 15) wrote of the growing tension between governments and the media, and subsequent moves towards stronger media laws, ‘justified on the basis of national stability’. Singh (2017) also observed the lack of professional capacity of journalists, poor remuneration possibly resulting in high turnover of staff, government pressure to conform to a developmental model of journalism as opposed to the adversarial, watchdog model advocated for by the media and civil society organisations as key issues. Cass (2004, 2014), discusses the role of developmental and mainstream journalism in PNG and suggests, at least when the works were written, that a distinctive Pacific third wave of development journalism was developing and blending with the mainstream press.

Wantok Niuspepa in PNG continues to fulfil a development model while at the same time often being critical of the government. Finally, Indonesia-controlled West Papua remains one of the worst places in the Pacific for media freedom violations, with little signs of improvement (Blades, 2016; Perrottet & Robie, 2001). Media freedom is a long-standing challenge in Melanesia, with few signs of improvement on the horizon.

Women in Melanesia

There is a significant body of academic literature about the experiences of women in Melanesia, though much of it focuses on anthropological studies or the results of development initiatives. While it is problematic to generalise issues affecting women across a region as diverse as Melanesia, this section seeks to highlight two broad, common discussions in the literature that are relevant to women in media in Melanesia, namely gendered violence and the political role of women.

A large body of academic literature focuses on violence against women in Melanesia, exploring cultural causes, development interventions, and the links between constructions of masculinity and violence. While female propriety is culturally and economically linked with constraint and conservatism, male status is culturally and morally dependent on limiting the wider cultural and economic relationships of women (Knauft, 1997). This may be through the social mechanism of avoidance of female power, the rules of which vary from culture to culture, or it may be through denigration (Mantovani, 1993). Zimmer-Tamakoshi (2012) refers to this power imbalance as ‘troubled masculinity’ and links this concept, alongside *kastom* and marital and economic conflicts with gendered violence. Violence against women remains a significant issue and an ‘existential reality’ in many parts of Melanesia (Ellsberg et al., 2008; Onyeke, 2010).

Women play a significant political role in Melanesia. While underrepresented in official politics, women play a critical role at the grassroots level. With the exception of some matriarchal affected the way women see their place in society. As Soin (1998, p. 10) writes, ‘when women believe that differences in status are part of the “natural order of things”, they are less likely to challenge how society is organised to benefit men more than women’. Though culture and *kastom* have been invoked as a way of excluding women from political processes, there are those that argue that this is just one interpretation. Boseto (2000, p. 8) explains that in her vernacular (*babatana* from the Solomon Islands), the terms ‘woman’ and ‘female’ translate to slightly different concepts, one referring to ‘married woman’ and the other to ‘the female’s place and function in the family and the wider community’. The role of women in Melanesia is intrinsically linked both culturally and socially to family groups and the wider community, which Boseto goes on to explicitly link with citizenship. These arguments have been echoed in more recent research. Spark and Corbett (2018) discuss the low levels of female political representation in Melanesian countries. They observe that most of the literature surrounding the topic focusses on structural barriers to participation, implicitly conveying an image of Melanesian women as passive and powerless. In contrast, their research found that women were active political figures in civil society at the grassroots, community level. Many of the political figures they interviewed chose not to pursue a formal career in politics, instead exercising power and affecting change at the grassroots.

Having situated this research within discussions around press freedom and the status of women in Melanesia, this review concludes by offering some statistics from one of the very few studies that includes female Melanesian journalists. Layton (1995) collected demographic details of journalists from around the Pacific, including Melanesia. She found that Melanesia was by far the most male-dominated media system: just 25 percent of journalists were female in Melanesia, compared with 45 percent in Polynesia and 44 percent in Micronesia.

This research also highlighted the attrition rate of female journalists due to family responsibilities. While men were more likely to ‘test the waters’ and quickly make a decision about making a career in journalism, women showed a strong commitment until roughly their fifth year in the profession – ‘when they are in their mid-20s, and most likely marrying and starting families’ (Layton, 1995, p. 111). This research was conducted more than 25 years ago so there are limited conclusions that can be directly applied to this research, but it demonstrates the pervasive, ongoing issues associated with representation of women in the media and the challenges facing women in the media workforce in Melanesia.

A review of literature reveals a significant knowledge gap in terms of the experiences of female journalists in Melanesia. While literature about journalism in Melanesia reveals significant concerns about encroachments into press freedom, which affect female journalists as well as males, the body of work surrounding the issues facing women in Melanesia paint a more complex picture. Violence against women remains a prominent issue, as does the low levels of political participation among women. These findings combined with the most recent survey of female journalists and media workers in Melanesia go some way towards situating this research within the academic literature. Though given that the most recent research specifically relating to the experiences of Melanesian women in media is more than 25 years old, this literature review emphasises the urgent need for further research in this area.

Bringing together women in Melanesian media

The MMFF aimed to provide a safe space for journalists and advocates to meet, discuss the challenges they face in their work, and collaboratively develop strategies to improve press freedom and the safety of journalists. A critical part of the Forum was also to facilitate a session where female journalists from across Melanesia could meet and share their experiences. From personal safety to societal expectations, the pressures on female journalists in Melanesia are very different to those of their male colleagues. This article focuses on the facilitated discussions that took place within this session. It should be noted that research was not the primary focus of this session, but instead creating a space for female journalists to safely acknowledge and share their experiences. Participants consented to the session being recorded and analysed for research purposes, but the researcher was not involved in directing the session, conversations and topics flowed organically based on what the participants wanted to discuss. Comments, presented in this article, made by journalists during the panel discussion that may have identified the journalist have been edited to protect their identity. Participants were from the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG), with diverse experiences of reporting on Melanesia. Some participants had worked as Australia-based journalists covering the region, others

had worked as correspondents, while some worked as reporters for local media organisations. The participants have been deidentified because there is potential for backlash in their home countries. The discussion recordings were deidentified, transcribed and analysed using NVivo qualitative analysis software in order to identify key themes and areas of concern.

Representation in the newsroom

Based on the discussions at the MMFF, there were several key themes that emerged, the first of which was the representation of women in the media in Melanesia. The participants roundly agreed that representation of women in the media across Melanesia was generally quite poor. Solomon's assertion (1994) that the male-dominated media work force was changing and women were moving into upper and middle management has not been fully realised. In the Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu there were fewer female journalists in positions of authority in media organisations. This was highlighted by one participant who shared her experience of press conferences:

If we have a press conference, the female and the male reporters get together and they talk around the issue that we've covered in the press conference, and give ideas on whoever that will be at the press conference. For us in the [De-identified], they find it funny that I'm the only female inside the press conferences... I'm the only female. So I would be the only one, even when we have the Prime Minister from Australia coming over, the [Deidentified] issue... for the media, I was the only female, unfortunately.

Participants suggested several potential reasons for the lack of women in newsrooms, the foremost of which related to journalist salaries. Participants believed this was a key factor in the number of women leaving journalism to pursue other avenues. The gender pay gap alongside low journalist salaries were seen as a key reason for young female journalists abandoning the profession. The meagre pay of Melanesian journalists has been widely criticised and cited as a key barrier to further media development (Robie, 2008). The participants noted the salaries for female reporters were even lower than for male reporters, so females ended up leaving the profession to work in communications and public relations roles which were deemed more suitable for women, were safer and paid better. One reporter had to take a pay cut so she could work in another news department to gain experience. One participant noted women were leaving the media industry and there was also a lack of interest from women in media studies:

They have just gone out into other areas, more into care work. Some managed to secure work from government. We do have women, girls in journalism schools now. But they have yet to come up into the field. And at the local university, I think only three are females, while the rest are blokes.

Despite the low number of female journalists, participants observed that times are slowly beginning to change.

Now we have new young feminists. Mostly they have women in the newsrooms, and we also have more women as the announcers, both radio and other stations. So it shows that more women back home are coming into the broadcasting section. Like, when I talk about broadcasting, like where I work, we are doing both radio and TV. So, it gives us a picture that in the past, like, people would think that only males could do this job. But then we would find, like, after we're there for over 25 years, it gives us a picture that women can also do this work. And we have to stand to give out information to people about issues that are facing people.

Silencing female journalists

A further challenge facing female journalists in Melanesia is that their voices are often silenced. This took place in several different ways. First and foremost was literally erasing the voices of female journalists. One participant recalled newsgathering during the 1980s and 1990s when she would write stories which would then be re-voiced by male reporters. The silencing of female journalists was a common experience: either where female journalists would generate content and men would revoice it, or the female reporters would simply not get a byline on the story.

The stories I filed didn't go through, unfortunately. I didn't get credit for it. I wasn't getting my name credited in the content. It was used by the editor at that time.

Another way that female journalists are silenced is through limiting access to sources. This may take place at an institutional or a cultural level. One participant shared the experience of one of her colleagues who has been reporting on climate change:

I have one reporter down in Bougainville, she's been reporting on climate change on the islands that are sinking and she's been reporting the story a number of times, but her voice has not been heard on the island. And you know, interviewing, speaking to those in authority, the government, they just don't seem to even care what's happening. Maybe they do, funding is an issue. But I always wonder why. Maybe with her reporting, if it was a male that went out and reported on this, would there be reaction from the government? Or is it because she's a female?

This silencing was also enacted through access to sources. Participants recounted stories of female journalists seeking interviews with authorities and either not receiving a response or having the interviewee request a male journalist.

I'll give an example: there was one of our woman journalists who interviewed one of our ministers, and just by giving the interview, the wife complained that a female journalist interviewed her husband. And the wife said that she prepared for a male journalist. Again, we said, it doesn't mean that her husband is a minister and a male [that] she preferred a male to do the interview. She asked us not to do the interview. So we ended up apologising.

Violence and harassment

There was considerable evidence that female reporters feared for their safety when out in the field covering stories. There was evidence of backlash against women for covering stories and courageous examples of female reporters and their media organisations standing ground to ensure the coverage was aired providing audiences with fair and accurate reporting. One participant relayed the following story:

Being from the mainland of [deidentified], I'm quite different from [deidentified]. And being a female and a manager of a media organisation in [deidentified] is quite challenging. Some of the decisions I make on the ground, I've got to be very mindful of closer impact back on me. So yes, there was a case about a month ago. We had a programme that was recorded in Port Moseby at the University of Papua New Guinea. Nine Bougainville students held a rally for greater autonomy and independence, which are the two options that are going to go to the polls in two weeks time. And there were 'for' and 'against'. For the benefit of the local Bougainville audience, I decided we should have that replayed on our local network. And after that got aired, there was a lot of criticism against the organisation. We were attacked as a propaganda station. And so I came out to say that we have our code of ethics, we have policy guidelines which we are guided by, and we will continue to maintain reporting on Bougainville. And then there was a threatening comment that came out on social media that said, 'And be ready to pack up and leave.' So I'm not sure whether that was, you know, aimed at the organisation, or myself as the manager. You find that with readers, and I'm not sure maybe with the [deidentified] government, but with the autonomous [deidentified] government, the leaders are still not aware of the importance of the role media plays. And I think, if they're more informed about that, they'll learn to appreciate the work of the media on the ground. And also, people, the public in Bougainville as well.

Facing threats of violence and suppression is a daily occurrence for many female journalists in Melanesia, and remains a significant issue to be overcome.

Women supporting women

During the panel discussion, the role of women supporting women and their

role working in media was a common theme. One journalist was criticised because she did not have formal journalism qualifications. A second indicated academically qualified female journalists were rare. Mentoring of junior female reporters was undertaken by the participants from the Solomon Islands and PNG who noted it was valuable to develop and keep the women reporters in the industry. The continued presence of women in media roles and the success of female journalists relied upon on an inner circle of women supporting each other. As in other regions, women in Melanesian media's success depends on the support and guidance of other women and allies.

In [deidentified], yes, I do a lot of mentoring of younger supporters. They'll be designing questions because they get quite nervous when they see male colleagues. They feel intimidated that 'I'm going to be asking a dumb question'. So you end up mentoring.

Findings from research about women achieving leadership positions within organisations identified the need for a 'female-dominated inner circle of 1-3 women' (Yang, Chawla, & Uzzi, 2019). Women having to carve their own niche in media is not unique to Melanesia, women working in media have 'struggled to attain real influence in editorial decision-making roles across all media platforms' (North, 2010).

In the Solomons, we have... now the women are speaking up more, we know that because from the Ministry of Women they do activities that focus on women issues and all that, so they have been really up front with how they carry out the work with the support from NGOs like... from NGOs, NDP, Oxfam, so they are quite vocal in that area. we say that it's the same for the rural areas, but when you add up, it's really all together, you can see women going forward.

We've had one of our female reporters covering the climate change issue, and there's been so many things that have been happening. She has the job to report anything that is connecting involving children, and just not children, but the local communities. Sometimes when she's out there doing her reports, people tend to be questioning her, like, 'Why are you doing this?' The same with the governor. She says, 'I have to—it is my job to get information, get it out, and let people here know what you are facing. If I don't do my job, people won't be able to hear a word you are saying. So, it's my job to do the reporting.

Conclusion

The discussions thus far have painted a somewhat bleak picture of the Melanesian media landscape for women. There are many driven, passionate female journalists and media workers throughout Melanesia, just several of whom were

represented at the MMFF. These women generously shared their experiences in the hope of bringing these issues to light and engaging in critical discussions on how to address the Melanesian media's gender problems.

The Melanesia Media Freedom Forum created a safe space for leading journalists across the Melanesian region to meet face-to-face outside the Melanesian political theatre. The participation and robust discussion highlighted the need for future opportunities to gather to continue to learn from experiences, share knowledge about current and emerging challenges, and identify potential strategies for the future.

This article highlights that unless there is fair representation of Melanesian women who are employed in the media, there will not be a female voice sharing key issues relating to all news, but particularly to news about women. Further, without female journalists in media to talk to, sources have no avenue to raise awareness about key human rights issues such as sexual abuse, domestic violence and child abuse. Culturally these are issues women discuss with women. If there are no women in the media to talk to, the stories are not told and the capacity to raise awareness about the issues is lost. The critical role press freedom plays is not able to be optimised because women are not fairly represented and protected in Melanesia.

Secondly, the loss of a voice for female journalists who do the hard work to gather stories and then have it taken by male colleagues suggests an organisational discrimination in the workplace. These media organisations need to enable the content from their female journalists who created it and put protections in place to ensure these female journalists remain safe as is their duty of care to all staff equally.

Finally, firsthand accounts of the persecution of senior female Melanesian journalists is an indicator of the repressive regimes. This highlights the need for global attention to this region and a media focus to hold those responsible to account.

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