

Have we earned your respect yet?

Seeking Workplace Equity for va'ine in Aotearoa

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Cook Islands va'ine are New Zealand citizens by birth yet our stories are often included in Aotearoa's migrant history. In the 1940s, New Zealand families brought us here to work as 'housegirls' and later we filled labour shortages in manufacturing. In Ōtepoti, we filled factory floors at Cadburys, Sealord and Fisher & Paykel. We were seen as capable of long hours of hard, physical work but not much else.

That's where our story begins.

Recent statistics demonstrate the inequity that Pacific women experience in Aotearoa's workplaces. To gain some personal insight, I interviewed a group of professional va'ine Kūki 'Āirani working in Ōtepoti. These women work hard, often retraining, gaining tertiary qualifications, advocating for communities, even establishing organisations. But somehow it is never enough.

Each woman had an experience, some blatantly racist but others represented an ever-present undercurrent of antagonism: "You have a tertiary degree?", "Do you have a work permit?", "Oh, you're a member of the academic staff!" The encounters were not with hateful people but normal New Zealanders, acting upon a sub-conscious but dehumanising, internalised bias against Pacific women.

Statistics maintain our status at the bottom of the workplace heap. We earn \$0.73 against the pākeha male dollar. The inaction to address inequity for Pacific women in tangible, life-changing ways makes a statement: We're sorry but you were only brought here to fill our factory floors and clean our houses.

I am not saying that cleaning and factory work roles lack worth. Covid has shown us that this work is essential. But va'ine should be able to work anywhere and feel respected and that their work is valued.

What more do we have to do to earn respect and pay equity in Aotearoa? And is it our job to ensure it happens?