

Assessing career barriers of Samoan women: The intersectionality of race and *fa'aSamoa*

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the career experiences of Samoan women working in New Zealand within the sociopolitical context of *fa'aSamoa* (Samoan culture). Although gender and race have been shown to impact careers, it is unclear how Samoan women negotiate and make sense of their identities against this backdrop. Using intersectionality, *fa'aSamoa* and *Teu le va* methodology, this study explored the experiences of 16 Samoan women in senior management. Participants reported gender bias, racism, and cultural exclusion perpetrated by White New Zealanders, and Samoan and Pacific men. Career strategies included building alliances with unions, diversity groups, and other bi-racial colleagues that advocate for gender and race equality; confronting and reporting incidents of discrimination; mentorship with White New Zealand mentors; and prioritising work over negative thoughts and experiences. This study provides exclusive insights into the career complexities of Samoan women in managerial careers and the intersecting challenges perpetuating inequality. HR and management implications highlight the need to recognise intersectionality in careers, provide mentoring support, and ensure adherence to fair and equitable processes.

Keywords: Career barriers, *fa'aSamoa*, gender bias, intersectionality, racism, Samoans

INTRODUCTION

Research studies on diversity and inclusion, particularly concerning gender, race and ethnic minorities, are undergoing significant revision. Globalisation, equality and equity movements, and demographic shifts impact numerous countries' labour force, economies, and sectors. Consequently, the 'business case' and moral and social reasons for diversity management highlight the advantages of embracing inclusive practices. Increasing the representation of minorities, particularly in senior management positions, enhances an organisation's human capital by bringing a diverse range of knowledge, skills, and experiences, thereby improving overall effectiveness (Cox & Blake, 1991; Syed & Ozbilgin, 2020). However, a recent New Zealand Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA, 2023) survey revealed that 71% of 543 businesses surveyed needed help finding highly skilled and qualified workers. As such, New Zealand organisations face escalating pressure to delve into diverse talent pools and attract suitably skilled workers. One proposed solution to plug this skills deficiency is to increase the participation of women, particularly women from ethnic minority groups in the workforce (Perkins et al., 2000).

In New Zealand, a notable gender disparity in senior management positions, predominantly occupied by men, persists. A recent study examining gender representation and leadership revealed that New Zealand women are currently under-represented in senior management roles within the private sector. Specifically, they hold 28.5% of all director positions and 26% of executive management positions (Champions for Change, 2023; Ministry for Women, 2023). Alternatively, women's representation in the public sector is more favourable, with 53.1%

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representation across public boards and committee roles and 55.9% holding senior management roles (NZX, 2022). However, the representation of Samoans - the largest ethnic minority group categorised as ‘Pacific peoples’ (henceforth Pacific) in senior management positions remains significantly low.

This study defines ‘Pacific’ as individuals whose ancestry, language, and culture originate in the South Pacific hemisphere, specifically, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Fiji, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Samoa, and the smaller islands of Kiribati and Rotuma (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020). While many Pacific cultures share fundamental values such as family, spirituality, and communalism (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020), we acknowledge the presence of nuanced differences.

As of June 2023, Pacific accounts for 5.1% of senior management roles, (a slight increase of 2.6% from 2018) compared to White New Zealand representation at 78.3%, Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) at 16%, and Asian 3.1% (Public Service Commission, 2023). The representation of Pacific women in senior management positions within the public sector is merely 3%, where 61.4% of Pacific women occupy customer-facing roles compared to 40.7% who were not Pacific.

Across all ethnic groups, however, there is a consistent pattern of men receiving higher remuneration than women, with Pacific women receiving the lowest average salary in the public and private sectors (Human Rights Commission, 2021). This wage disparity is coined as the ‘Pacific pay gap’ and is attributed to racism, unconscious bias, and discriminatory workplace practices (Cochrane & Pacheco, 2022). Disparities observed in industries, sectors, and employment occupations could indicate that certain ethnic and gender groups face more pronounced obstacles than others.

Extensive research speaks to the importance of having a diverse workforce for promoting equality and equity and enhancing organisational effectiveness, particularly from underrepresented populations such as Indigenous and ethnic minority backgrounds (Baldwin et al., 2022; Kang et al., 2023; Staniland et al., 2019; Valizade et al., 2023). For example, researchers have identified that groups comprised of members from collectivist cultures, such as Asian and Latino populations, exhibit greater cooperative and cohesive behaviours in group projects when diversity is perceived as supported (Cox et al., 1991). A quantitative study conducted in 2020 examining glass ceilings in New Zealand universities highlighted the benefits of ethnic diversity in senior professorial positions, with a specific focus on Indigenous Māori and Pacific scholars conducting culturally relevant research beneficial to their respective communities (McAllister et al., 2020). As such, ethnic representation in senior leadership ensures that Indigenous and ethnic minority voices are heard and provides training for the next generation of Māori and Pacific researchers (Haar et al., 2019; Spiller et al., 2020). This perspective demonstrates that different viewpoints require creative and culturally appropriate approaches leading to improved performance (Choi, 2009). These findings suggest that systemic changes at the senior levels are imperative to address discrimination and inequity issues in New Zealand universities. Therefore, diversity management is significant in engaging and attracting diverse employees.

An intersectional approach is required to understand diversity, inequality, and inequity issues within organisations (Paik, 2017; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015). Intersectionality emphasises the interconnectedness of various dimensions of peoples’ social identities, such as gender and race, which cannot be separated into discrete or isolated strands (Crenshaw, 1991). Instead, these dimensions intersect, resulting in explicit outcomes of vulnerability, social exclusion, inequality, and discrimination (Crimmins et al. 2023; Fasang & Aisenbrey, 2023; Semu, 2020).

Senior managerial positions are profound sites of unequal power dynamics and inequality concerning class, gender and race (Syed & Ozbilgin, 2020). As such, career advancement into senior roles remains challenging for marginalised and under-represented individuals, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Sommerlad, 2020). Moreover, when research on diversity focuses exclusively on singular identities such as gender, it unintentionally reinforces the perception that ‘woman’ is inherently synonymous with ‘White women’ (Davis 1983; Lewis, 2017) as legitimate representatives of all women experiencing inequality and inequity

(Applebaum, 2017). However, Crenshaw (1991) contends that experiences and lives cannot be compartmentalised into discrete identities. Instead, those identities (e.g., race, class, and gender) intersect and compound social inequalities depending on the context and circumstances. Hence, using an intersectional approach in examining inequality and inequity in senior management may provide deeper insights into addressing these issues, as evidenced in studies regarding criminology (Paik, 2017), women's health (Willett & Etowa, 2023), performance evaluations (Smith et al., 2019), and disabilities (Goethals et al., 2015).

This study explores the career barriers and facilitators of 16 Samoan women working in senior managerial roles. The unusual setting of New Zealand makes this study unique, given that Samoans have ethnic minority status but represent the largest Pacific nation residing in New Zealand. Utilising intersectionality and *fa'aSamoa* frameworks, and the Samoan methodology *Teu le va* (Anae et al., 2009) which focuses on how Samoans perceive and navigate the *va* (relational spaces) between themselves and others, we explore how various aspects of Samoan women's identities intersect and interact, shaping their experiences of disadvantage, perceived as career barriers.

The study is structured as follows: Firstly, it commences with an overview of Samoans and *fa'aSamoa*, laying the foundation for understanding gender dynamics and the socio-political context within which Samoans operate. Then, it introduces and discusses intersectionality, providing an additional framework to understand the participants' experiences. The subsequent sections review past and present research studies concerning ethnic minority and Samoan women, delving into their career challenges and facilitators. After describing the adopted Samoan research methods, the study presents and discusses the findings, using themes that identify the barriers and career strategies encountered by Samoan women. Thus, addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of gender, race, and *fa'aSamoa* on Samoan women's career experiences that perpetuate inequality?
2. What strategies do Samoan women employ to navigate inequality and assert their managerial agency, individually and collectively?

SAMOANS IN NEW ZEALAND

Samoans represent one of the most longstanding immigrant communities residing in New Zealand, constituting the largest ethnic group, accounting for 47% of the Pacific peoples' classification. Their presence significantly influences the nation's current and future socioeconomic progress, health, well-being, productivity, and labour force dynamics (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020). Samoans hail from the islands of Samoa and have a unique and controversial relationship with New Zealand that commenced at the outbreak of World War 1. At that time, New Zealand governed Samoa until 1962, when Samoa became the first Pacific nation to re-establish its independence. Before colonial rule, Samoa primarily operated as a self-sufficient and autonomous country (Leibowitz, 1989).

Since the 1950s, Samoans and other Pacific migrants from the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau immigrated to New Zealand primarily to fill labour shortages resulting from post-war losses and minimal population growth (Spoonley & Bedford, 2012). Then, greater waves of Tongans and Fijians arrived in the mid-80s and 90s (Poot, 1993). Working in the factories as labourers and manufacturers, construction workers and cleaners (Spoonley, 2006), many Pacific individuals left their island nations for New Zealand which offered better lifestyles, asset accumulation, and opportunities for generating financial remittances back to their island nations (De Bres et al., 1974; Spoonley, 2006). As such, this migration contributes to the mythical perception of New Zealand as the 'land of milk and honey' (Ofe-Grant, 2018).

Cultural Institutions and Values

The traditional governance structure that Samoans follow is the institution of *fa'aSamoa*, loosely translated as 'the Samoan way of doing' (Anae, 2002; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2004). This framework serves various social, economic, and political functions within Samoan society (Iati, 2000) and includes the complementary institution of *fa'amatai* (Samoan chieftainship) (Fadgen, 2020). Essentially, *fa'aSamoa* is a complex cultural code that guides and teaches Samoans about the rights, responsibilities, and behaviours that are acceptable or unacceptable, with a primary focus on providing welfare and respectful relationships (Iati, 2000). Although fluid and adaptable, *fa'aSamoa* remains deeply rooted in cultural norms and values, transcending national boundaries to accommodate variations such as *fa'aAukilani* (Auckland-Samoan way of doing) (Macpherson, 1997) and adaptations in Australian Samoan communities (Va'a, 2001).

Samoan cultural values include the concept of *aiga* (family) which extends beyond immediate relatives to encompass family members across geographical boundaries, for example, relatives living in New Zealand and Australia (Huffer & So'o, 2005; Pitt & Macpherson, 1974). Therefore, one *aiga* could reach 100+ people. *Aiga* members are assigned specific roles through *tautua* (service) to the family, village, church and government (Fadgen, 2020). Families are headed by a *Matai* (Chief) who assumes leadership roles, settles family disputes, and advances family prestige, dignity, and honour (Gaur et al., 2020). Each *Matai* (Chief) from numerous villages meets in the *fono* (village council), where all matters associated with the village are decided. Elderly and titled Samoans are valued and accorded respect and authority (Autagavaia, 2001), thus promoting gerontocracy. Therefore, many elderly Samoans live with their *aiga* rather than in rest homes.

Another cultural value is the concept of shared family responsibilities and cultural expectations (Gaur et al., 2020; Ravulo et al., 2019). For example, women have vital roles within *fa'aSamoa*, primarily centred around domestic activities, *aiga*, childcare, hospitality, community engagement, and church activities (Ofe-Grant, 2018). Moreover, their roles are closely tied to their husband's social status and responsibilities within the *aiga*, reflecting entrenched cultural and gendered expectations reinforced by Christian beliefs (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2000). Samoans who cannot fulfil their familial responsibilities are regarded with contempt and dishonour for violating the cultural institutions of *aiga* and *fa'aSamoa* (Rumbach & Foley, 2014).

Given that this study explores the career experiences of Samoan women, we define 'Gender' as an identity category encompassing socially constructed norms that reinforce certain gendered divisions of labour within *fa'aSamoa*. Furthermore, we introduce the Samoan term *afa-kasi* (half-caste) which signifies a bi-racial identity of Samoan heritage and another ethnic race. Despite its derogatory and racist connotations that delegitimise Indigeneity, the contemporary usage of the term *afa-kasi* is widely accepted in *fa'aSamoa* and among the Samoan diasporas (Agee et al., 2013; Franklin, 2003; Keown, 2008). However, its origin is deeply rooted in British colonialism, originating in the late 19th century to describe poor people known as 'half-bloods or hybrids' perceived as troublemakers (Aspinall, 2013, p. 518). Similarly, in Samoan culture, *afa-kasi* are regarded as 'mischievous people with bad heredity' responsible for diluting the purity of the Samoan race (Salesa, 2000, p. 111). Consequently, *afa-kasi* experienced discrimination and imprisonment during and post-colonisation, facing hostility from both Samoans and early colonisers in Samoa, the latter perceiving *afa-kasi* as a threat to the English and other White races (New Zealand Ministry of Culture & Heritage, 2014). In this study, the terms *afa-kasi* and bi-racial will be used interchangeably to denote Samoan individuals with mixed ancestry.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality theory inspires our study, aiming to unravel the unique experiences of intersectional identities that create career inequalities for Samoan women. An intersectional perspective allows the consideration of multiple identity categories and highlights their interconnection and impact on outcomes such as career trajectories. As such, intersectional studies provide an agent-centred perspective on the experiences and highlight specific strategies in response to perceived threats and challenges to their identity (Collinson, 1992).

Since the 1970s, Black American feminist scholars, social activists, and feminists have studied intersectionality, focusing on the experiences of Black American, Chicana and Latina women with multiple forms of marginalisation and discrimination (Collins, 2015; hooks, 1986). Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectionality studies argued that experiences and lives cannot be separated into distinct identities of race, class and gender. Instead, she proposed that those identities overlap and cross into each other in various ways, depending on the context, alongside structural, political, and representational lines.

Using the experiences of Black American women, Crenshaw (1989) posited that structural intersectionality acknowledges the positioning of Black women in lower social statuses, resulting in inherent disadvantages that perpetuate inequality and heighten vulnerability compared to both White women and Black American men. Political intersectionality pertains to laws, policies and social services that silence or disempower the experiences of Black women by elevating the experiences of White women as the societal 'norm' (Paik, 2017). Representational intersectionality involves portraying Black individuals through platforms such as social media meant to support or marginalise their representation. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that a Black American woman is likely to encounter more discrimination at work compared to White American women or Black American men, as race and gender, being two categories of difference, are not uniformly experienced across different social groups and settings (Bowman et al., 2016; Dy et al., 2017). Consequently, studies that explore the diverse intersections of race, class, or gender and ethnic minorities should consider these intersecting identities.

In the context of increasing ethnic diversity in the workplace, understanding the career experiences of minority groups is necessary for illuminating the intersections of gender, race and other diversity dimensions that shape their identities, opportunities, and experiences (Crimmins et al., 2023). This is because senior career progression remains challenging for many ethnic minorities who tend to hold fewer positions of influence with less power, limited networks, and experience multiple 'glass ceilings' in large organisational hierarchies (Bloch et al., 2021; Ofe-Grant, 2018; Valizade et al., 2023).

This study examines the intersectionalities of race and *fa'aSamoa* in the career trajectories of Samoan women, specifically focusing on their pathways into senior management roles. It further analyses their experiences of bias, racism, and cultural exclusion within the New Zealand workplace. By adopting an intersectional lens, this approach acknowledges the broader contexts of identity that influence Samoan women differently, depending on the specific circumstances. Additionally, this approach highlights power relationships and acknowledges how human individuality is impacted by intersecting dimensions in the workplace.

ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN AND CAREER PROGRESSION

Many reasons have been proposed to account for career inequalities among ethnic minority women. Notably, labour market barriers such as race and gender discrimination can impact specific ethnic groups, leading to a concentration of women in low-skilled and low-paid jobs. In contrast, other migrant groups seem to thrive (Erskine et al., 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that White women migrants experience more mobility, faster career progression, and workforce inclusion compared to their Black or Brown counterparts (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020; Sang & Calvard, 2017). Similarly, Scheck and Haggis (2004) found that White migrants from the United Kingdom to Australia experienced considerable advantages in terms of jobs, mobility, housing, and lifestyles, which can be attributed to the cultural similarity between British and Australian cultures.

The recent global pandemic highlighted the unfairness and inequities experienced by New Zealand women, with Pacific and Māori women experiencing greater hardship, job losses, and poverty in contrast to their Pākehā (White New Zealand) counterparts (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). As such, the division of labour markets, power structures and socio-cultural norms construct powerful barriers that encourage class hierarchy, disproportionately affecting specific ethnic groups (Archer, 2011).

That said, many ethnic minority women find themselves confined to unskilled and low-paid areas of the peripheral sectors. They encounter challenges in ascending to higher-level positions, such as barriers in obtaining supportive mentors, access to career opportunities, engaging in interesting work, and high-quality training to enhance their professional development toward senior careers (Briggs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2019). Consequently, the glass ceiling metaphor highlights the numerous invisible barriers that ethnic minorities experience (Cotter et al., 2001). Individual factors beyond race and gender shape their enduring disadvantage, encompassing inadequate knowledge of the dominant host language, lack of insider cultural knowledge, and limited access to well-established social networks (Avola & Piccitto, 2020). While evidence supports these effects in isolation, they are rarely combined because they rely on separate theoretical arguments and measurement frameworks.

Gendered organisational norms suggest that women and ethnic minorities are expected to 'fit in' (Fearful & Kamenou, 2006) and comply with masculine norms, characterising the 'ideal worker' for career progression and survival (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015). Ironically, the ideal worker often corresponds to an immigrant, particularly a woman of colour (Hossfeld, 1994), willing to work in labour-intensive organisations with low pay and extended working hours. This perpetuates the dominance of the most privileged groups in top jobs while marginalising ethnic minority women who deviate from the concept of an ideal, typical worker. On the flip side, ethnic minority women who do make it into top jobs often face disapproval from male colleagues when displaying perceived masculine traits or exhibiting feminine qualities (Ibarra et al., 2010). As such, a 'double bind' occurs where career progression is achieved on the one hand, while on the other, internalised harmful messages and feelings of unworthiness may prevail.

Despite the plethora of literature addressing systematic barriers marginalised groups face, some individuals overcome these obstacles. Career enablers include enhanced education and qualifications, strategic networking, and, for ethnic minority women - strong affiliations to one's ethnic identity and acculturation (Erskine et al., 2021; Phinney & Ong, 2007). These studies propose that individuals with positive ethnic group affiliation are less prone to internalising ethnic and racial stereotypes associated with their groups. Furthermore, these individuals exhibit, over time, the capability and self-assurance to challenge and overcome systemic barriers prevalent among ethnic minorities.

SAMOAN WOMEN AND CAREER PROGRESSION

Empirical studies thus far have focused limited attention on the position of Samoan women in senior management in New Zealand. However, broadening the scope to include Pacific women garnered a few findings, primarily in the form of master dissertations. For example, Tupou's (2011) qualitative study of glass ceiling barriers for ten Pacific women, including two Samoans, identified gender bias, racism and the cultural value of respect that restricted their career progression. Amoa's (2016) research, involving 15 Pacific women, supported Tupou's (2011) findings and proposed that organisational culture and practices, a lack of confidence, individual choices, and limited skills further hindered career progress. Interestingly, both studies confirmed that the Pacific cultural value of 'respect' exacerbated career barriers but needed to delve into what that means, which culture it stems from, and how it manifests in the workplace.

Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. (2014) found that barriers for Pacific women within the health sector included Pacific cultural protocol. While the study did not focus on careers, the findings suggested that the intersectional identities of Pacific women include numerous competing cultural priorities and responsibilities extending beyond traditional family roles that posed challenges for some women in seeking medical assistance. This difficulty stems from Indigenous cultural expectations that may sometimes precede their physical well-being. Therefore, the study underscored the significance of supporting Pacific women regarding engagement, emphasising it as a crucial facilitator and support mechanism.

Additionally, Tuiburelevu's (2018) investigation into the intersectional experiences of Pacific women within the New Zealand criminal justice system regarding race, class, and gender found

that the New Zealand justice system tended to ‘lump’ issues concerning Pacific women with Māori or within the experiences of Pacific men. Similarly, Parker et al.’s study (2021) revealed that the challenges associated with pay equity for Pākehā (White New Zealand) women might not necessarily align with prevailing notions for Pacific women when considering intersecting cultural protocol regarding gender, seniority, relationships, age, and respectful behaviour. Both studies support Crenshaw's (1989) earlier critique, which highlighted the incomparability of the experiences of bias and racism between White American women, Black American men, and Black American women.

Although the previously mentioned studies are admirable, it is imperative to note that they merge Pacific cultures and nations - eclipsing their cultural differences and explicit nuances. 'Pacific' does not represent a singular, homogenous ethnic group; rather, it denotes an ocean in the Southern Hemisphere. Consequently, it would be beneficial to discern which specific Pacific value or cultural protocol contributed to barriers and explain the underlying reasons. Furthermore, these studies overlooked a focus on gender combined with inter-racial differences or examined how individual perceptions are socially constructed at an individual level or within a group context. A more comprehensive inquiry is essential to understand how cultural values and perspectives impact careers, considering the intersectional identities of Samoans – the largest Pacific ethnic group in New Zealand, which we aim to address.

THE PRESENT STUDY

We situate this study within a larger study of the ‘Brown glass ceiling’ (Ofe-Grant, 2018) that explored the career barriers of 31 Samoan CEOs and senior managers working in New Zealand. The study intended to provide realistic career strategies and facilitators that support Samoans as ethnic minorities in New Zealand. Although we were focused on Samoans in general, it became evident that the career experiences of Samoan women were notably pronounced and influenced by *fa’aSamoa* cultural protocol. Therefore, it was necessary to initiate a separate discussion specifically addressing the intersectional inequalities experienced by Samoan women. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Auckland Ethics Committee.

METHODS

This qualitative study is grounded in a decolonising approach emphasising *fa’aSamoa*, utilising the Samoan *Teu le va* (Anae et al., 2009) methodology. A qualitative study is appropriate given the subject matter, research questions and methods chosen, access to the participants, and vested stakeholders of interest (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The focus of the study is on perceived career barriers regarding the intersections of race and *fa’aSamoa* for Samoan women working as senior managers in New Zealand. Furthermore, this study responds to the decolonisation agenda (Boussebaa, 2023; Smith, 2012; Zagelmeyer, 2023), where academics and scholars are urged to explore decolonisation given that academia and universities are grounded in colonialism that led to inequities in research practices that 'silence' (Nabobo-Baba, 2004; Smith, 2012) Indigenous research conducted by Indigenous researchers.

As the author, my Samoan heritage was pivotal in the research design choice, recruiting Samoan participants, navigating *fa’aSamoa*, and formulating cultural themes from the data. My predilection and position for employing an ethnic-specific methodology emphasises suitability, sensitivity, credibility, and legitimacy appropriate to Samoans and, ultimately, *fa’aSamoa* (Faleolo, 2013; Tuafuti, 2011). Additionally, utilising culturally appropriate Samoan methods can be regarded as a reclamation of Indigenous Pacific knowledge by returning to traditional ‘ways of knowing’ regarding Pacific peoples (Fairbairn-Dunlop et al., 2014). This methodological approach contributes to the growing articulation of decolonising research methodologies to reclaim existing research spaces within White-Western thought (Pidgeon, 2018; Smith, 2012; Staniland et al., 2019).

Teu le va is underpinned by the Samoan principle of *va* (relational space), where individuals maintain and nurture relationships for collaboration and as a way of life. Consequently, *Teu le va* acknowledges the unique connections and relationships intrinsic to Samoan culture that fortify *fa'aSamoa*. Therefore, *Teu le va* comprehensively explores how participants perceive and navigate relationships between themselves and others (e.g., work colleagues) that shape their experiences, and as articulated by them. In accordance with *fa'aSamoa*, the nurturing of peaceful and harmonious relationships is posited to yield positive outcomes and enhance well-being across the dimensions of *tinu* (body), *mafaufau* (mind) and *agaga* (soul) (Seiuli, 2016). An intersectional approach is included to elicit inequalities and discrimination that are associated with identity categories of race and *fa'aSamoa*. Therefore, *Teu le va*, *fa'aSamoa* and intersectionality converge due to their shared emphasis on understanding others within relational contexts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Auckland, Waikato, Wellington, Christchurch, Oamaru, and Dunedin. Utilising semi-structured interviews is deemed suitable considering the well-documented nature of the glass ceiling in existing careers literature. Nevertheless, a discernible lacuna persists in comprehending the experiences of Samoans. Additionally, interviews afford flexibility and create a less formal discussion setting (Cater, 2011).

Participants

Samoans who identified as women and employed as senior managers in the New Zealand workforce were invited to participate in this study. Similar to other glass ceiling research (Biswas et al., 2023; Callahan et al., 2024; Cohen et al., 2018) this study contends that interviewing Samoan women in senior management, generally defined as the top executives who have a direct influence in the organisation's strategy (Nielsen, 2010), administers the best insight of career barriers based on their experiences, mobility, and work history in New Zealand.

The 16 Samoan women comprised 12 New Zealand-born, four Samoa-born, and six who identified as *afa-kasi* (half-caste) (see Table 1). Ages ranged from 36 to 65 years, with a higher proportion of women aged 46-55 working as CEO, Director, or Senior Manager. Two of the five *Matai* (Chief) identified as *afa-kasi*, thus, signifying prestigious cultural titles alongside senior positions in the workplace. This association between *Matai* (Chief) titles and senior roles will be revisited later in the discussion. To preserve anonymity, *afa-kasi* (half-caste) ethnicities were omitted, given the small number of Samoan women in senior managerial positions who could be identified.

Table 1

Demographic data (n=16)

Ethnicity:	Total
Samoan	10
<i>Afa-kasi</i> (half-caste)	6
Nationality:	
New Zealand-born	12
Samoa-born	4
Age Brackets:	
36-45 years	3
46-55	11
56-65	2
Occupation:	
CEO	4
Director	1
Senior Manager	11
<i>Matai</i> (Samoan Chief)	5

Materials and Procedures

Informed consent via email was obtained from all participants, each receiving a comprehensive set of questions designed to encourage early reflection on their career experiences. Interviews occurred at various workplaces, cafés, and participants’ homes. The questions sought insights into the participants’ paths to senior management, prompting reflections on the challenges and barriers that might have delayed career progression, including the influence of *fa’aSamoa*.

Interviews were conducted in English, averaged an hour, and audio recorded to ensure meticulous data capture. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their responses and the option to withdraw, with a guarantee of anonymity. Lotu (prayers) often marked the interviews’ commencement and conclusion, and participants received a Countdown gift voucher. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and emailed to the participants for verification. This step was undertaken to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts in reflecting their words and incorporate any additional reflections they wished to contribute to the discussions (Merriam, 2009).

The transcriptions were imported to NVivo version 11, which helped store extensive data, categorise, and generate queries such as Word Frequency, text search, and generating nodes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014). Each node was checked for potential duplication, where the highest number of sources and references generated the first set of preliminary themes. Additionally, an iterative process of manual thematic analysis ‘by hand’ utilising coloured highlighters and reading through the transcripts was used to identify patterns of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that contextual cues, Samoan institutions, values, phrases and terminology are not identifiable or understood by NVivo, manual analysis was crucial for refining and picking up these cultural concepts. Comparing both analyses corroborated the final themes.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings as themes and sub-themes, drawing on quotes from the Samoan women. We begin with highlighting the three main barriers: (1) *Gender*, (2) *Gender and Race*, and sub-theme *Intra-ethnic racism and Afa-kasi*, and (3) *Gender and fa'aSamoa*. The first theme, *Gender*, explores its impact on Samoan women's career experiences, highlighting how gendered inequalities were perpetuated. The second theme, *Gender and Race*, delves into the intersectionality of these dimensions, revealing how they led to feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and interpersonal conflict. Within this theme, the sub-themes of *Intra-ethnic racism* and *Afa-kasi* further examine how intersectionality shapes career experiences for bi-racial Samoan women. The third theme, *Gender and fa'aSamoa*, investigates how traditional gender roles and cultural expectations ascribed to Samoan women act as barriers in the New Zealand workplace. Career strategies and facilitators within each theme that supported and helped participants navigate these challenges are also provided (see Table 2).

Table 2

Barriers and Strategies of Samoan Women

Barriers of Inequality	Career Strategies
Gender	Establish alliances with unions and organisations that advocate for gender equality Attend and promote workplace diversity and inclusion training and initiatives Serve as ‘diversity champions’ within the organisation Report incidents of discrimination through appropriate channels, such as Human Resources
Gender and Race Intra-ethnic racism Afa-kasi	Maintain a professional mindset, focusing on performance and doing the job well Address challenges with resilience, courage and positivity Seek mentorship, particularly from White New Zealand mentors (cross-race mentorship) Build strategic alliances with bi-racial colleagues to strengthen support networks
Gender and <i>fa’aSamoa</i>	Confront bias assertively when encountered in the workplace Prioritise work-related responsibilities and avoid distractions that detract from career goals Be discerning when attending meetings or events where bias might surface If discrimination persists despite efforts, consider seeking employment elsewhere as a last resort

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Theme 1: Gender

At the beginning of the interviews, it was observed that many women indicated high satisfaction and contentment with their careers. Participants expressed that they were “*happy*” with their jobs and “*worked hard*” to overcome challenges such as English language proficiency, lack of qualifications, and limited work experience.

However, all participants recognised and acknowledged the existence of gender bias in the New Zealand workplace, as exemplified by the following statements from the participants D2 and C7 (respectively):

I think one of the biggest barriers in our New Zealand and Pacific community is gender, which limits women from successfully moving forward. I think there are very few open and progressive senior Pacific men.

Yeah, there's gender bias, you can tell, because men move a lot faster up the ladder than women. My [senior] position came eventually, and it was a lot slower than theirs [men].

C7's comment above highlights her observation of the rapid promotion of Samoan and Pacific (SP) men to senior positions with the support of their male counterparts. This observation aligns with existing research on the glass ceiling, where gender plays a critical role in career advancement (Allen et al., 2016; Cook & Glass, 2014). More specifically, men are often fast-tracked into leadership and senior management roles, while women's career progression tends to plateau at mid-level positions, reflecting systemic barriers to their upward mobility.

Furthermore, the participants reported that SP men tended to exclude Samoan women in work activities, preferring managerial advice and assistance from male colleagues and sometimes "White women." The participants expressed their concerns that they were held to "much higher standards than their White colleagues" and were often perceived as less qualified, despite their seniority, credentials, and extensive work experience. This perception of preference resulted in feelings of hurt, desperation, and humiliation, with common sentiments relating to "cultural isolation" and "cultural betrayal". These participants felt undervalued and having to prove their competence repeatedly in comparison to their White peers.

Strategies to address gender bias included forming alliances with industry unions, such as the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, which offers workplace training to combat bias and discrimination. Additionally, reporting incidents of workplace discrimination to Human Resources was highlighted as another strategy to ensure protective measures are enacted to prevent further bias. As participant D2 mentioned:

I had to ignore the cultural bullshit from Samoan men and move along, keep going until I had no choice but to report it higher up [Human Resources] and let them handle it.

Another proposed strategy involved participants becoming "diversity champions," that is, individuals who advocate for inclusive practices, promote employee diversification, and ensure diverse perspectives are presented and valued. Although these strategies provided some relief, the interviews revealed that their implementation required time to develop effectively. Moreover, the notion of championing diversity was not universally accepted, with more assertive participants being more 'vocal' in support of this approach. A few participants also expressed reluctance to report gender bias due to fears of potential retaliation and further exclusion within their professional environments.

Theme 2: Gender and Race

In the context of this study, the second theme illustrates how gender inequalities intersect with racial inequalities, shaping the lived experiences for Samoan women. From an intersectional perspective, these two dimensions combine to create unique identity challenges, as they are often associated with stigma, being "devalued by persons within a particular culture at a particular point of time" (Paetzold et al., 2008, p.186). This compounded marginalisation emphasises the complex nature of discrimination encountered by Samoan women leading to feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and interpersonal conflict. This sentiment is demonstrated in the following email to staff regarding a newly recruited senior manager (Samoan participant):

To all staff, we have a new member joining our team, our new “Pacific Princess” [name withheld].

This email concerned one of the participants who had not previously met or interacted with any staff members. Upon receiving the email, she found the language used to be offensive, particularly the reference to her race as “Pacific” and the use of “Princess” in relation to her gender. She interpreted these terms as discriminatory characterisations. Additionally, other data indicated that some New Zealand managers openly used gendered and racialised slurs regarding Samoan women, further reinforcing the intersectional experiences of bias and discrimination within the workplace. For example, participant L3 reported:

I was constantly referred to as the “Samoan Superwoman” lawyer even though English was my first language, and I hadn’t been to Samoa, and was adopted into a White family.

Similarly, participant L6 shared her experience regarding her colleagues’ use of racialised and gendered slurs:

Yeah, I get called “Pacific Superwoman”, and it feels nice, but none of the others get called by their race in that way, so deep down, what are they actually saying?

These examples illustrate the complexities in identity construction and the challenges in navigating self-perception according to their intersectional identities and affiliated groups. Furthermore, they highlight how such language perpetuates harmful and inaccurate stereotypes and reinforces discriminatory attitudes in the workplace, accentuating the ongoing challenges faced by Samoan women in navigating both racial and gender bias.

Strategies aimed at addressing gender bias and racism were provided. For example, participant S2 coped by focusing on the broader context or “*the bigger picture*” to mitigate the negative impact of gender bias and racist slurs. In other words, she chose to “*focus on performance*” and prioritise doing her job well, rather than dwelling on negative thoughts or experiences. This approach allowed her to maintain a professional mindset and focus on achieving positive outcomes despite the challenges she faced. While acknowledging that initially ignoring slurs was difficult, she observed that over time it “*became easier*” to disregard such comments. This suggests an adaptive coping mechanism that allowed her to manage and mitigate the emotional impact of discriminatory behaviour in the workplace. Furthermore, this sentiment resonated with other participants, including participant E10, who advocated for “*not thinking about the negative stuff*”, and participant D2, who emphasised the need to “*be courageous, be positive.*”

Sub-theme: Intra-ethnic Racism and Afa-kasi

Six participants self-identified as *afa-kasi* and were conscious of their self-positioning relative to other Samoans, where their mixed race became their most dominant Samoan cultural identity. These participants were categorised by other Samoan colleagues as “*too White*” or “*too Black*,” with their perceived attitudes aligning with “*White people.*” In other words, bi-racial Samoan women were identified by their ethnic skin colour and perceived as non-Samoans.

Labelled as “*Fake Samoans*,” “*Plastic Black Barbie*,” and “*Kinder Surprise*” (egg-shaped White chocolate that is filled with brown chocolate cream), they endured abuse characterised by exclusion, vilification, and demonisation within the workplace. For example, participant D2 stated that other Samoan men would make “*light jokes*” about her bi-racial heritage, often labelling her “*the afa-kasi*”. Additionally, she mentioned that on one occasion where she made a work error, a Samoan male colleague facetiously said that she was the “*afa-kasi wanna-be fia palagi who stuffed up*”.

The Samoan term “*fia palagi*” (acting White) was common in the discussions. This term is best understood as Samoans ‘masking’ themselves as White New Zealand-Europeans so that they can blend or ‘fit in’ with another race, as expressed by participant S1:

They [Samoan and Pacific peoples] don't see me as Pacific-enough but 'fia palagi' because I am afa-kasi. I think it's about feeling insecure and threatened when suddenly their pureness is gone, and whether this person is going to challenge them, and they are not pure blood like them.

One of the unanticipated findings perceived as a career strategy for Samoan women is the role of cross-race mentors, with a preference for White New Zealand mentors. Cross-race mentors were perceived to offer insights into leadership and management, facilitate access to strategic connections, offer guidance and function as a form of ‘support and protection’ during challenging times. Participant M2 noted that “*the people who are hiring are most often Palagi [White New Zealand] with a non-Pacific worldview*” that appeared to resonate within the business context of New Zealand organisations. Interestingly, a few bi-racial Samoan participants formed friendships with other bi-racial colleagues, who promoted solidarity and pride within their respective groups. This, too, was perceived to be a career facilitator and “safety net” for bi-racial Samoans.

Theme 3: Gender and *fa'aSamoa*

The final theme focuses on the intersection of gender and *fa'aSamoa*, where traditional gender roles and expectations ascribed to Samoan women were identified as persistent barriers within the New Zealand workplace. Specifically, the expectation that Samoan women should be subservient and submissive to Samoan men emerged as a significant cultural challenge, limiting their career progression and reinforcing gender inequalities. These cultural norms, deeply rooted in *fa'aSamoa*, continue to influence workplace dynamics, as exemplified by participant L4's comments:

What he [Samoan male colleague] did was shut me down. He relied on me to behave in a Samoan way, which would not involve challenging him. He expected me not to do things that way because of the cultural stuff.

In this example, participant L4 recounted a workplace disagreement with a male Samoan colleague who consistently arrived late for meetings and was slow in completing project work. This prompted L4 to contemplate on whether such behaviour was attributed to *fa'aSamoa*, influenced by gender and lack of *Matai* (Chief) title. She questioned whether the cultural expectations embedded in *fa'aSamoa*, which emphasise respect for hierarchy and authority, particularly in relation to male figures and those with a *Matai* title, might have influenced her colleague's conduct towards her.

Similarly, E13 highlighted how her untitled Samoan status and gender led to discrimination, where a Samoan male and *Matai* colleague expected her to “*be quiet during meetings when he was present because he is Matai.*” Notably, when she did speak, his disapproving glare induced fear and hesitation, reminiscent of other examples where women in senior roles are met with disapproval for exhibiting perceived masculine traits (Ibarra et al., 2010). This dynamic emphasises the intersection of cultural and gender norms that shape power relations in the workplace. Furthermore, several comments alluded to the expression “*know your place*”; for example, participant S7 remarked:

Oh yeah, I had to know my place because he is Matai, and I'm just a nobody in that sense. I had to really control myself and say nothing while he was speaking even though that is not being proactive or who I am.

These comments reflect the socio-political stratification inherent in Samoan culture, where untitled individuals occupy the lowest positions and are not expected to speak or actively participate in formal discussions with other titled Samoans (Gershon, 2012).

Interestingly, the data also highlighted experiences where some Samoan women, including those with *Matai* status, intentionally portrayed themselves as "dumb" when interacting with male Samoan colleagues. This behaviour stemmed from their perceived lower status and a desire to avoid appearing "more intelligent." As participant E9 described:

What we do as Samoans, we play it down so well that we do not show our intelligence.

When asked about strategies to overcome the challenges posed by gender and *fa'aSamoa*, participants offered varied responses. Some chose to confront SP male colleagues directly, asserting their subordinate status, which resulted in immediate positive outcomes but unintentionally fostered feelings of cultural exclusion. Others emphasised a commitment to "remain steadfast and true to the job" as a career strategy. Regrettably, some Samoan women avoided meetings and events where SP male colleagues were present, and a few either resigned or transferred to different departments. A common sentiment among participants was a sense of demotivation and apprehension about pursuing senior roles or participating in conferences and meetings, reflecting the pervasive influence of cultural and gendered power dynamics in their professional environments.

DISCUSSION

Using intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and *fa'aSamoa*, this study focused on the experiences of Samoan women who achieved senior positions in the New Zealand workplace. The primary objective was to uncover the barriers hindering career progression and identify strategies that supported higher careers. We discovered that Samoan women encounter numerous obstacles that delay, challenge, and contribute further layers of oppression, leading to disparities and inequities. More specifically, this study highlighted the pervasive nature of race and *fa'aSamoa* as intersectional career barriers in the professional lives of Samoan women. Consequently, they are more likely to encounter extraneous career impediments than White people and Samoan and Pacific men.

Gender as a barrier is well-documented in studies exploring glass ceilings, career progression, and pay equity, preventing women and ethnic minorities from reaching the upper echelons of the management tiers (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Bloch et al., 2020; Cook & Glass, 2014). Racism and other ethnic factors contribute to the domination and exploitation experienced by ethnic minorities in the workplace (Kele et al., 2021). Consequently, ethnic minority women aspiring to senior positions are known to encounter gender bias and racism. The unintentional or intentional result is the over-representation of privileged White men in top-tier jobs, while ethnic minority women remain persistently under-represented in low to mid-level positions.

These Samoan women experienced stress, demotivation, and a sense of powerlessness when facing career challenges from their community, specifically SP men who held subordinate positions. Samoan women hesitated and felt uncertain about whether to succumb to the pressures of gendered and racialised expectations of *fa'aSamoa*, compounded with challenges from White New Zealand and SP men. Their stories align with recent New Zealand studies highlighting workplace inequities that privilege Pākehā (White New Zealand) men (Donnelly et al., 2018; Haar, 2019), emphasising how organisational processes such as performance appraisals and promotions are shaped by power structures that reproduce and sustain gendered and racialised hierarchies. In this way, they promote and support White men and, in this case, SP men. This observation further underscores and reinforces existing gender and ethnic inequities, as seen in the ethnic pay gap in New Zealand, where Pacific women continue to receive the lowest average hourly earnings (Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The gendered and racialised slurs mentioned in the data are determined by ethnicity, geographic origin, skin colour, and social status. Notably, individuals of Samoan descent who excel in their roles find themselves at the upper end of the ‘superstar spectrum’ exemplified by S2 being dubbed “*Pacific Princess*.” What is disheartening is that the data indicated that Samoan slurs were normalised within the workplace. This normalisation perpetuates bias and norms of privileged groups, contributing to discrimination and stalled careers (Williams, 2001) that continue to hurt ethnic minorities, and in this case, Samoan women.

However, Samoan women collectively agreed that overcoming such challenges necessitated a shift in mindset. This involved a determined focus on performance, resilience, and courage while actively avoiding negative distractions. Cultivating a positive attitude and maintaining a clear sense of purpose became crucial to their career development. These strategies of resilience and focus on professional goals were consistently identified as pivotal in shaping their career trajectories, enabling them to navigate barriers they encountered in the workplace.

Afa-kasi women reported experiencing racism from both Samoan men and women. However, some adopted ‘*afa-kasi* solidarity’ as a career strategy, finding kinship with other bi-racial colleagues. This solidarity emphasised a sense of pride and unity (Ashforth et al., 2008), enabling *afa-kasi* women to collectively confront oppressive behaviours. Thus, they exhibited an emotional attachment to their ‘in-group’ identity as *afa-kasi*, perceiving SP men as part of the ‘out-group’ (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Consequently, this career strategy of allyship not only strengthened their group identity but also reinforced positive self-perceptions, allowing them to navigate the challenges of racial and gender-based oppression in the workplace.

Mentorship, particularly the preference for White New Zealand mentors, was perceived by participants as a key career strategy integral to their professional development. The transfer of cross-cultural knowledge is crucial for ethnic minorities encountering career barriers such as lack of networks and isolation, both of which delay career progression (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014). Additionally, some viewed their work relationships with White mentors as a ‘safety net’ providing protection against gender and racial biases in the workplace.

This perspective of White mentors reflects a broader celebration of diversity, indicative of changes in the globalised world concerning inclusive relationships, equality, and equity. Interestingly, the preference for White mentors contradicts previous studies that emphasise ethnically matched mentorship as a primary factor for the success of ethnic minorities (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Rhodes et al., 2002). The findings thus challenge traditional understandings of mentorship, suggesting that cross-cultural mentorship can be equally, if not more, beneficial in certain contexts.

The findings of this study indicate that *fa’aSamoa* and the gendered expectations placed on Samoan women are career barriers. Gender and *fa’aSamoa* pertains to the adherence to Samoan cultural protocols, where Samoan women are categorically positioned as ‘quiet and humble’ women who conform to the rules and decisions coordinated by Samoan men, further reinforced by Christian principles (Ofe-Grant, 2018). This perspective solidifies the traditional role of Samoan women, deeply rooted in domestic responsibilities, childcare, church activities, and community services. Hence, Samoan women in the New Zealand workplace may encounter extra challenges from entrenched hegemonic cultural expectations, compelling them to uphold their role as the ‘ideal Samoan woman’ according to *fa’aSamoa* and perceived assumptions of how Samoan women should behave.

Other strategies to address gender and racial biases included attending workshops that promote diversity and inclusion, as well as taking on roles as diversity champions. These positions make a visible stand against biases within organisations, signalling that such behaviour will not be tolerated (Hyers, 2007). While these roles can hold significant influence in the workplace, they may unintentionally provoke further marginalisation and discrimination (Ellefsen et al., 2022). Additionally, reporting discrimination and unfair treatment to HR was commonly endorsed as a strategy, though participants acknowledged the risk that this could backfire, potentially resulting in increased cultural exclusion.

As a precautionary measure, some participants advised the Samoan women to be selective about attending meetings or events where SP men would be present, suggesting that such environments might exacerbate discriminatory dynamics. For those unable to navigate these challenges effectively, and as a last resort, strategies included transferring to another department or leaving their job entirely, reflecting the severe impact of gender and racial oppression in the workplace for some Samoan women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HR PRACTICE

The findings of this study enhance our comprehension of the intersectional identities that impose limitations on the careers of Samoan women, potentially revealing the hesitancy and under-representation in senior careers. Consequently, these cultural aspects must be integral to a comprehensive analysis and future career planning. As such, it becomes imperative for organisations, HR and management to understand *fa'aSamoa* and its ramifications on Samoans, which can either enhance or diminish their career empowerment.

HR and management can enrich their efforts to identify potential gender and racial biases for ethnic minorities, by ensuring fair and equitable processes are followed in performance appraisals and interviews (Coyne et al., 2004) and diverse representation in the recruitment, selection processes, and promotion panel (Public Service Commission, 2023). Moreover, guiding Samoan women in their career trajectories will attract engagement and the attention of other ethnic minority women and marginalised groups seeking to become part of an organisation emphasising equality, equity and diversity. Furthermore, HR could consider assigning White New Zealand mentors to Samoan women to address complex work issues such as gender, race and intra-ethnic racism, which may help career development.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the present study offers valuable insights into the career experiences of Samoan women, some caveats should be mentioned. The small and singular ethnic sample size limits the generalisability of the study, given that the data originated from a broader investigation into the 'Brown Glass Ceiling' (Ofe-Grant, 2018), which explored career barriers and enablers for Samoans. Consequently, the sample size does not allow robust comparisons across various identity intersections. A more comprehensive examination of the career experiences of Pacific women in Western contexts, utilising intersectionality and considering cultural protocols, could reveal similarities and differences across smaller Pacific nations that can be important in strategy career development. The data suggested that Samoan men may have intersectional experiences that manifest as career advantages and a form of 'Brown privilege' akin to those observed in White New Zealand men. Further investigation into these dynamics is warranted.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and to Nigel Haworth and Helen Delaney for their invaluable support.

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