

IN CONVERSATION WITH
JANICE ASHWIN:

“I know I’ve
got people
supporting me”



This article is one of a series highlighting how WLI alumni are leading and influencing change in their workplaces and communities on their return home.

Janice Ashwin may have only been 27 years old at the time of this interview, but she has already made a name for herself in her chosen field. This is a testament to her hard work and commitment, but Janice has also very much taken on board the message from WLI that leadership involves seizing opportunities and being prepared to take risks.


Janice credits her fellow WLI participants with supporting and encouraging her and helping her navigate the intricacies of working in government. We sat down with Janice in late 2023 to hear more about her leadership journey.

What have you been doing since you returned home?

I came back to Solomon Islands towards the end of 2018 after completing a Bachelor of Business majoring in International Trade at Victoria University. When I got home, I was eager to get out and work. I was able to secure a job at the World Bank Group office in Honiara as a Health Finance Consultant, then in mid-2020, I left to take up the position of Senior Trade Officer within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade. Since then, I have moved into the role of Chief Trade Officer.

The WLI program gave me the confidence to take advantage of opportunities beyond my professional work. This included voluntary engagements with associations, including the Solomon Islands-Australia Alumni Association where I held the role of Secretary for two terms. I also hold voluntary roles with the Pacific-Australia Youth Association and serve as one of the WLI Alumni Representatives for Solomon Islands. It's been a rewarding experience, because I've had the opportunity to connect with not only WLI, but other Australia Awards scholars and alumni scholars who studied in the Pacific and in Australia. That's allowed me to expand my networks, including with very senior people.

Taking on voluntary work is often a challenge one has to commit to. I was coming straight out of university and I wanted to grow, not only professionally, but in building my leadership capability. That's one of the key reasons why I decided to take on voluntary roles.



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What is something you're proud of from the last few years?

Thinking back on my journey, since I've come back to Solomon Islands my rule of thumb has always been: never give up. When I see a problem that needs solving or something that needs doing, I know I have the potential to do it. I believe in putting all efforts into the tasks at hand and making time, whether it's submitting an application or attending an event.

My career started in the health sector and at first I was a bit hesitant because it wasn't the area I studied, but I knew I wanted to get out into the workforce. I was open minded and I took the job as a challenge and an opportunity to build my professional skills and see how I could apply those skills later. It took me a year and a half to develop the skills I wanted before I felt I was ready to move on to my next job. That was a driving force contributing to my career journey that has brought me to where I am today.

Another achievement I am fond of is the COVID-19 project delivered through the WLI Leadership Fund in 2021. Some of my fellow WLI participants and I were fortunate to be given the opportunity to implement a community engagement project. This involved getting menstrual hygiene kits to girls at a boarding school in Solomon Islands and raising awareness of on reproductive health issues. This was the first time I had been chosen to lead a team to implement a project that had monetary support attached to it. The project gave me the opportunity to work collaboratively and engage with WLI women from other cohorts and different implementing partners. It brought a real sense of responsibility and accountability to oversee such project.

It was challenging because we implemented it during the COVID-19 pandemic. I recall having to take strategic approaches and consultations with team members on how the project will be implemented. For instance, funding support was delivered in phrases and prioritizing what resources to acquire enabled us to acquire the equipment we needed from certain shops before they were burnt down during the 2021 unrest.

I was just thinking, 'Oh, if I hadn't made that decision, or suggested to the team that we should use the money in the first phase to buy the equipment, we would be stuck in trying to source it from vendors other than the preferred supplier.' That did help me feel a sense of accomplishment.

It's taken hard work and commitment to do these things. Of course, I look back, and I think of how hard it was to juggle all this – family, work and community engagement. It can be stressful. I've had times where it's challenging for me to keep going. Sometimes I do feel burnout. But there's always this push at the back of my mind saying, 'You can do this.'

What challenges or barriers you have faced since you returned home?

During the WLI program we did a lot of teambuilding exercises. All the participants in my cohort were from different backgrounds and levels of education — I was one of the youngest undergraduates amongst Masters and PhD students.

At the time, I was worried the others knew more than me. But what I learned is that even with these differences, everyone worked together as a team. They shared their knowledge and respected each other's views. I've tried to carry that kind of teamwork over into my professional and community work.

Everyone has different views and different ways of doing things. But I try to remember that at the end of the day, achieving our goals is what's important. Teamwork and respecting everyone's opinions is critical to meeting those goals. And if there are stumbling blocks, we need to find other ways to get things done.

What kinds of new relationships and connections have you made through WLI?

I've really benefited from the connections with other WLI participants both from Solomon Islands, as well as within the Pacific region. I still keep in touch with many of them. Many of them hold senior positions in government, the private sector, and within NGOs and regional organisations. I've had instances where my work crosses over with theirs and it's really helpful because I can get advice from people who have worked in government for a long time and know the processes. I can just send an email or message and say, 'How did you go about it doing this?'

I'm also able to get great advice about my career. Many of the WLI alumni I am connected to have already done their Master's degrees. Sometimes I ask them, 'Should I apply for this? Should I do this or that?' And they say, 'Yeah, go for it!' They encourage me and that really motivates me, knowing I've got people supporting me, besides my family and friends, and backing my choices.

Recognising competing priorities and schedules, it's also good to take time out to just meet and catch up with my fellow WLI women. That really helps, because it provides a platform to share and openly discuss issues related to work and family or just encourage each other. It's a kind of empowerment, in a sense — I have the space to look at things from a different perspective and redirect my course as young person who's still learning and growing through the discovery of my own leadership journey.

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 info@wliprogram.org
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