

## How is WLI engaging with men?

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**Engagement with men to increase their support for women's leadership is an important new focus for the current phase of WLI.**

To ensure its work is evidence-informed and appropriate for a Pacific context, the program conducted a literature review of approaches to engaging men as well as consultations with WLI alumni and individuals and organisations working on men's engagement programs in the Pacific.<sup>1</sup>

Those consulted agreed that men's support is fundamental for shifting gender norms and promoting wider community acceptance and support for women's leadership in the Pacific. Because men often occupy a more powerful position in society, they need to get behind any change and be part of the solution, particularly as change requires men to be willing to share power or make space for women.

A range of WLI activities are currently open to men. In addition to learning and networking events, this includes *LeadershipConnect*, which is open to all Australia Awards scholars in the Pacific as well as WDLP participants, and Leadership Lab, which is open to WDLP and *LeadershipConnect* alumni. Men can also access the online Leaders Hub, as well as coaching and other support. They may also be included in projects and other initiatives funded under WLI's Leadership Fund at the invitation of women alumni leading these projects.

**WLI's approach to leadership focuses on what it means to 'be' a leader, with structured opportunities for self-reflection built into leadership training and individual coaching.**

Consultations with alumni indicated that these activities are providing valued spaces for interaction between men and women. However, the available literature and wider experience from the Pacific suggests that changing men's attitudes and behaviours is an intensive and long-term endeavour that requires dedicated spaces where men can be challenged to think critically about power and privilege. This is not something that a program with WLI's scope can realistically achieve within a 4 or even 8 year time frame, particularly given that WLI's core mandate and focus remains women and that efforts to engage men in the program should not detract attention and resources from women.

However, WLI can contribute to changing the attitudes and behaviours of a small number of men, particularly by engaging with those who are already somewhat sensitive to gender inequality but unsure about how they can address it. Furthermore, although WLI cannot hope to engage a large enough number of men to create a critical mass, the difference the program can potentially make to the attitudes and behaviours of some men may have a 'demonstration effect', that is, it may provide a good practice example for other men, particularly if WLI captures and disseminate the lessons it learns.

Given this, WLI has moderated its level of ambition to better reflect what can realistically be achieved. WLI now aims that men involved in the program understand and take steps to support women's developmental leadership.

Participation in program activities is expected to help build men's understanding of the ways that gender inequality creates barriers for women and women's leadership and encourage them to engage in deeper and more critical reflection on gender norms and on their own behaviour. This process of critical reflection is key to genuine allyship in which men develop a commitment to transforming harmful gender norms and put this into practice through the actions they take to support women's leadership, raise awareness among other men and, ultimately, share power with women.

Achieving this will require WLI to continue to be more intentional in its engagement with men through program activities. The review identified several ways in which programs such as WLI can engage effectively with men. These include:

### **Provide safe but challenging spaces**

Deep and sustainable change in men's attitudes towards women's leadership and their behaviour requires men to do more than build their awareness about gender inequality. It requires them to think critically about the power and privileges that they have and question social norms about men's and women's roles that perpetuate inequality. This requires a safe, open, learning environment where men feel comfortable talking about sensitive topics. However, those facilitating discussions should also adopt a 'pro-feminist pedagogy' which challenges men and holds them accountable. A combination of single-sex and mixed-sex groups is often best for achieving this.

### **Engage male advocates**

Male advocates can provide important role models for other men, particularly when they are people who have influence and authority. While some literature cautions against reinforcing gender stereotypes that 'men only listen to men', Pacific practitioners have used this strategy effectively to overcome resistance to discussions of gender equality.

### **Engage with men's knowledge, emotions and behaviour**

Good pedagogical practice suggests that active and participatory approaches that build men's knowledge and awareness, engage their emotions, and develop their allyship skills are most effective. However, practices such as *talanoa* (storytelling) or approaching the *tanoa* (kava bowl) can provide culturally recognised ways of engaging men in discussions.



### **Use language and framing that resonates in the context**

Western concepts and language such as gender and feminism can alienate men or provoke resistance. Gender equality needs to be communicated in a way that resonates with Pacific men (and women). Framing gender equality as being about men and women working together, for example, is in line with Pacific values around relationships and cooperation.

### **Consider ways that positive cultural norms can be repurposed in the service of gender equality**

While cultural norms around gender often contribute to inequality, there are also positive aspects of many Pacific cultures that can be harnessed in support of gender equality. This includes the emphasis on respect and avenues for women's voices to be heard at the community level.

### **Work with – and be accountable to – Pacific women's organisations**

Women's organisations in the Pacific have deep expertise and experience in working with men. They also have firsthand understanding of the nuances of different Pacific contexts and greater legitimacy among Pacific men and women. Partnerships with these organisations are therefore critical in ensuring that programs engaging with men are both effective and accountable to Pacific women's organisations.

Given the specialised knowledge and skills required for this kind of work, WLI will continue to draw on the experience of Pacific individuals and organisations with expertise in working with men. As noted above, this will also support accountability to women and the women's movement.

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Over the last 12 months, WLI has implemented a range of the steps recommended by the review to strengthen engagement with men. This has included:

- recruiting a Pacific GEDSI Specialist;
- reviewing and revising the GEDSI Strategy;
- reviewing and updating the content of WDLP, *LeadershipConnect* and the Leadership Lab to strengthen sessions focused on gender and mainstream gender more intentionally across all sessions;
- enhancing screening and onboarding processes for male *LeadershipConnect* applicants/participants; and
- delivering dedicated sessions within *LeadershipConnect* (and Leadership Lab, commencing June 2024) on addressing gender issues in leadership (featuring Pacific male advocates and experts).

WLI is also progressing discussions with standout male alumni and potential Australian partner organisations on creating and supporting a WLI Men's Group, to deepen critical reflection among men and support them to identify practical steps they can take to support women's leadership in their communities and workplaces.

Although WLI's approach is based on evidence from the literature and consultations with Pacific experts, it will be important that WLI uses data collected through its monitoring and evaluation system to reflect on how change is happening in practice and uses this to continuously improve program activities. These reflections can also be shared more widely with the development community as a way of contributing to growing knowledge of effective practice.

**The full report *Approaches to engaging men in support of women's leadership in the Pacific* is available on the WLI website <https://www.wliprogram.org/research-resources>**

## Endnotes

- 1 The findings of this research are outlined in a research report, 'Approaches to engaging men in support of women's leadership in the Pacific'. A separate internal discussion paper outlines the rationale and development of this outcome and the program team's current thinking on how to strengthen engagement with men in support of women's leadership.

**Interested?  
Want to know more?**

To learn more about WLI,  
please contact us:

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