

Supporting women's developmental leadership in the Pacific

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How does WLI promote local leadership of development by Pacific women?

What lessons has the program learnt about how women exercise developmental leadership and how external actors can support them?

Key points:

- Women's developmental leadership often takes place in 'everyday' spaces, including in workplaces and communities. Approaches to leadership development which support women to see themselves as leaders can enable them to take advantage of these everyday opportunities to lead.
- Women's leadership identity, their motivations, and their ability to navigate the complexities of their context are at least as important as the resources they have. Leadership development programs can usefully support women to further develop their skills and boost their motivation.
- Working collectively in pursuit of developmental change has additional benefits for women, including greater visibility, pooling of influence, and reducing risk. Leadership programs therefore need to pay particular attention to building women's relationships and networks.
- Exercising leadership requires women to navigate gender norms that are often a significant barrier. Women's leadership programs can help address this barrier by working more intentionally with men to build their support for women's leadership.

Background

Women across the Pacific play an active role in the development of their communities and their countries, including in business, politics, churches and community-based organisations.

Yet Pacific women often experience significant challenges in exercising leadership. Social norms about the nature and roles of men and women, caring responsibilities, lower levels of workforce participation, and unequal access to resources all impact on women's opportunities to lead.

This Practice Brief outlines how Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) promotes local leadership of development by Pacific women and what lessons the program has learnt to date about how women exercise leadership and how external actors can best support them.



WLI's support for women's developmental leadership

Strengthening women's leadership is an essential part of supporting greater Pacific leadership of development. In recognition of this, WLI supports emerging Pacific women leaders to understand the process of development and their part in it. It provides a structured program of leadership offerings that enhances women's knowledge, skills, confidence and networks and provides them with opportunities to work together to pursue positive social change. WLI provides support across four interlinked areas:

- 1. Developing leadership identity, skills and knowledge:** WLI's core offering is an 18-month leadership development program for a cohort of 30 women Australia Awards scholars from across the Pacific. This is complemented by the 6-month online *LeadershipConnect* program – open to male and female Australia Awards scholars from the Pacific – as well as individual leadership coaching, bespoke mentoring, and professional development opportunities.
- 2. Building relationships and networks:** WLI activities provide opportunities for participants to build relationships and networks with current and previous WLI participants, Pacific leaders, and individuals and organisations working to pursue change in their areas of interest.
- 3. Applying learning to practice:** While practical application of leadership skills is emphasised across all activities, selected participants also have the opportunity to apply for small grant to undertake projects in their home countries on development issues or challenges they identify. These projects enable them to put their leadership skills into practice.
- 4. Addressing gender-related barriers to women's leadership:** In recognition of the significant barrier that gender norms pose to women's leadership, the program is integrating a stronger focus on engaging with men to build their support for women's leadership.

WLI's approach is informed by a significant body of research on developmental leadership. Developmental leadership recognises that social change is inherently political because it is concerned with power, how it is exercised and by whom, and therefore necessarily involves contestation and risk. Change happens when 'motivated and strategic individuals who have the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change' work collectively to 'contest the ideas underpinning the status-quo and legitimise an alternative set that can promote change'.¹ WLI aims to contribute to change by providing women who already have the interest and drive to pursue change with experiences that help further develop their skills, knowledge, confidence and networks and their perception of themselves as leaders. In doing so, WLI helps equip women to lead change.

Emerging lessons

WLI's experience supporting women's leadership has generated a number of important lessons about how women lead and how external actors can best facilitate women to develop and exercise their leadership.

Women's leadership often takes place in 'everyday' spaces

WLI's experience underscores the fact that there are multiple and diverse ways that women can lead developmental change. This may be through leadership within families or communities, in women's professional lives, or through formal politics. A key early lesson of the program is that leadership is not about what position you hold, but what you do. For example, WLI alumni who have returned home are exercising developmental leadership in a range of different ways, from overseeing improvements in how provincial hospital departments operate to establishing community microbusinesses that can provide new sources of income for women. This highlights the importance

of shifting the focus of thinking about developmental leadership – and leadership development – away from 'elite' leadership that takes place in formal politics or national institutions to broader notions of 'everyday leadership' that happens through day-to-day interactions and practices in workplaces, communities, churches and families.²

'Everyday leadership' implies that everyone has the potential to lead developmental change within their own sphere of influence. The experience of WLI participants suggests that in the Pacific, the spheres of influence that women have access to often cross multiple domains – from the formal, to the religious, to the customary. Women's ability to lead change draws on their influence in these multiple domains and can also be exercised across them. This is in keeping with wider research about leadership and change in the Pacific.³



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As Australia Awards scholars undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate study in Australia the women who participate in WLI are highly educated. Many already have rich personal and professional networks. This means they are well-positioned to lead change. Recent research by the program also suggests that many see themselves as having an important role in contributing to developmental change and have a strong desire to use their new knowledge and skills to give back to their communities when they return home, which is boosted by the opportunities the program provides to exercise leadership.⁴ This highlights the fact that leaders' identity and intrinsic motivations are at least as important as the resources (skills, knowledge, influence) they have.⁵

Women's ability to exercise developmental leadership is also shaped by the diverse contexts they return to in the Pacific. Some of these contexts are more receptive to women's leadership than others. This impacts on the opportunities and entry points available to women to lead and requires women to be astute in how they navigate social, political and cultural norms and practices.

Working collectively has additional advantages for women

Research on developmental leadership demonstrates that change is often achieved through collective efforts, rather than by individual leaders acting alone.⁶ This is consistent with the emphasis on communal and relational ways of being in the Pacific. An important learning for WLI is that working collectively can be particularly important for women in the Pacific, who are often less influential or well-connected than men.

For women, working collectively provides a range of benefits, including access to resources and other networks, greater visibility, pooling of power and influence, and peer support. It also reduces some of the risks which individual women leaders may face, including backlash. WLI alumni who received funding to lead small community development projects during COVID-19, for example, found that their ability to implement their projects successfully was highly dependent on the resources they had access to through their relationships and networks.⁷ Programs which aim to support women's developmental leadership therefore need to pay particular attention to connecting women to other women – and men – who can work with them to achieve their aspirations for change.

Men's allyship is critical for addressing gender-related barriers to leadership

Given that gender norms are significant barrier to women's exercise of leadership in many Pacific contexts, an important area of learning for the program is the need to be intentional about engaging with men. WLI's experience – and the experience of other organisations working to promote gender equality in the Pacific and globally⁸ – has highlighted the importance of men's support for women's leadership, both in demonstrating allyship for women leaders at an individual level and in helping shift wider social norms about women's leadership. Because men often hold more power, change requires them to make space for women to lead. Men can also help challenge gender norms that perpetuate inequality. Involving men in efforts to promote gender equality is also consistent with the emphasis in many Pacific societies on maintaining harmonious relationships and working together cooperatively.

Program implications

These emerging lessons are already informing the support that the program provides.

Given the importance of women's 'everyday' leadership, 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.⁹ This approach assumes that self-perception has a powerful influence on behaviour; when people see themselves as being leaders, they are more likely to act in ways that reflect this.¹⁰ WLI's leadership training and coaching therefore aims to support women to develop their leadership identity and to see themselves as having the capability to lead and influence change, including through working with others.

WLI's focus on experiential learning provides participants with opportunities to exercise everyday leadership and learn through doing. This approach also helps them step out of their comfort zone and develops their confidence and appetite for taking informed risks. WLI-supported workplace internships and Leadership Fund projects provide valuable opportunities for self-driven experiential learning. Recent research by the program found that leading the design and implementation of a Leadership Fund project provided space for WLI participants to define the issues that they felt were important and address these in ways they saw as appropriate to the local context. The projects also provided women with valuable practical experience of working with others to achieve change, supporting them to develop critical relational leadership skills and providing a vehicle for putting ideas around collective leadership into practice.¹¹

Given the political nature of developmental change and the very different Pacific contexts in which leaders operate, WLI emphasises the importance of thinking and working politically. This provides a way of thinking about development challenges that helps women better understand



the institutional structures, interests and incentives that sustain the status quo and identify opportunities and develop strategies for promoting change. The program also emphasises adaptive leadership, which supports women to increase their level of comfort with uncertainty and to reflect on and learn from their experiences and adapt their leadership practice in response.¹²

In keeping with the view that developmental change is achieved through collective efforts, WLI emphasises the development of skills and knowledge that can support women to build and maintain relationships and networks and work effectively with others in coalitions. This includes building women's understanding of how they can activate and use relationships to achieve change as well as developing interpersonal skills such as collaborative problem-solving, shared decision-making, communication, negotiation and conflict resolution.

WLI activities also connect participants with each other both within and across cohorts and with more experienced leaders. These experiences provide opportunities for women to develop

relationships that they can draw on for personal and professional support throughout their leadership journeys.¹³ The relationships and networks developed through the program are highly valued by participants. Recent research by the program shows that participants continue to draw on these networks once they return home for friendship and support, overcoming professional challenges, connecting with others pursuing change in their area of interest, and accessing expertise.¹⁴

Finally, in recognition of the importance of addressing the underlying barriers to women's leadership, the program has expanded its focus on working with men to build male allyship for women's leadership. Building on research commissioned by the program into effective approaches to engaging with men in the Pacific, the program is revitalising the *LeadershipConnect* curriculum to mainstream gender issues as well as providing targeted opportunities for men to critically examine the gendered nature of leadership in their different cultural contexts.



Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) is an on-Award (in Australia) and reintegration (in Pacific) enrichment program supporting Pacific women to lead and influence change that promotes positive development outcomes.

For more information see: <https://www.wliprogram.org/>

Implications for policy and practice

- External actors can play an important role in supporting women to develop and exercise developmental leadership, including providing resources in the form of skills and knowledge, funding, technical expertise or logistical support, and opportunities to build relationships and networks.
- Investments in the development of women leaders are most likely to deliver returns when they involve women with an intrinsic motivation to drive positive social change in their workplaces and communities, although opportunities to exercise leadership can also boost motivation.
- A focus on individual leaders is not inconsistent with the view that change happens through collective action, provided it is informed by a 'collective lens'. This means that leadership development programs need to build participants' understanding of the importance of collective action, provide them with political and interpersonal skills, and help them expand and activate their networks.
- Efforts to promote gender equality and women's leadership will be most effective when they include a focus on changing the social norms that perpetuate gender inequality. This requires recognition of the importance of engaging with men and boys to promote more equitable gender relations.

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Endnotes

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