

## Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

### CASE STUDY

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Islands

**This case study is one in a series exploring how ten Pacific women working in diverse roles and contexts understand and practice 'everyday leadership'. Regardless of their formal position or title, these women are undertaking the day-to-day work that helps influence positive change for their communities, organisations and countries.**

Dr Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard is a women's rights and peace advocate. A former Director of Women Development Division of the Ministry of Women, Children and Family Affairs, in 1999 she co-founded the West 'Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association, a rural-based women's organisation that promotes economic empowerment through savings and loans clubs. Alice was a key figure in the Women for Peace movement at the height of the Solomon Islands' civil conflict between 1998 and 2003. Through her academic work, she has contributed extensively to research on social issues and leadership in the Solomon Islands. In 2016, she was awarded the Woman of Courage Award by the United States Secretary of State.

In this discussion with Lanique Pitasua, she shares what everyday leadership looks like in her work. For Dr Pollard, leadership is not about the position you hold but about influencing change wherever you are. It is about serving others and speaking up for what is right. She has lived this through organising and mobilising women around collective issues to influence and create change.

## Do you see yourself as a leader and what does leadership mean to you?

I see myself as a leader – not in terms of holding a national position, but to me, leadership is about influencing change wherever I am. So whether that's in my family unit, in the communities that I help with, in my tribe or village, or in any group I'm a member of – whether it's a church or women's group – I take on the role of someone who is willing to serve and someone who is willing to work for the people to influence change. To me, that is leadership.

### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

**Everyday leaders are motivated by service to the collective.**

**They do not define leadership in reference to their formal role but by their ability to influence change that benefits their communities.**

I grew up in a rural village where I was part of the church, the community, and the women's group. Reflecting on my upbringing, I was able to be involved and engage in church and women's groups, and that helped me gain confidence to stand in front of women and congregations. Even from childhood, I was able to lead and be part of the community.

## You've highlighted how, as a leader, you have to influence people around you. Can you tell me about a time where you had to lead a difficult or complex change?

During the height of the conflict [the ethnic tensions from 1998 to 2003], I led the Women for Peace Group, together with other strong women including Ruth Liloqula, late Margaret Aihunu, and Catherine Adifaka. The conflict had reached its peak. The government was caught up in the situation, and our leaders didn't know what to do.

The conflict was hitting women hard. As a leader, when you see something like that and the impact it has on women, you have to respond quickly and not wait.

We involved ordinary women – not those in offices or government positions, but the women who went to the markets every day to earn their livelihoods. We called ourselves *Women for Peace*. These were women from all over the Solomon Islands who lived in Honiara. We rose up together – hundreds of us – and we called for normalcy.

We went into the militant camps and spoke to the militants, treating them like our own sons. Our key message was: *"Come home, my son. You have a home to go back to. Do not stay at the camp. Do not let mosquitos bite you. Do not make yourself suffer. The gun is not for you."*

### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

**Everyday leaders derive legitimacy from their relationships and their embeddedness within communities.**

When we went to the militants, we brought food, betel nut, and whatever else we could, so we could sit down and *tok stori* with them from a mother's perspective.

Some of the militants would swear at us. Once, we went to see one of the commanders who became very angry. He stood up, hit the table, and shouted at us to get out. We simply stood up, said thank you, and left quietly. Sometimes when we went to the camps, they would shoot their guns in the air to scare us. But we just kept going.

We also met with the government, the cabinet, the Governor General, the Prime Minister, and church leaders to make our voices be known. We emphasised that this call was coming from mothers who wanted the ethnic tension to end.

It was because of our persistence that the peace talks eventually happened.

## Can you tell me about other times when you have had to bring people with different interests together to achieve change?

I'll talk about the West 'Are'Are' Rokotanikeni Association (WARA), which I established. That association is my heart and baby.

In the constituency of West 'Are'Are' – similar to many rural areas in the country – there are no banking services, no mobile banking, M-SELEN or EZIPEI. Nothing of that sort. Transportation is also difficult; there are no roads or telecommunications. In such an environment, how can we create change using what we have available?

### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders contribute their own time and skills to address issues they feel strongly about.

This was part of my PhD research in 1995 and 2003. I asked women of West 'Are'Are' if they had received any support in the last ten years. They said no. No members of parliament had ever reached out to them. I also spoke with a village chief who said the women were willing to do something but lacked leadership and guidance. When I heard that, I knew I had to act, even if it meant resigning from my government job. So, I resigned.

I used some of my own money with some money from the Member of Parliament (Hon. Alfred Hairiu) to hold the first forum in 1999. We invited chiefs and church leaders to attend, as they could provide insights into how they saw the new initiative, how women could contribute, and what support we could receive – especially from the chiefs.

## Why did you think involving chiefs and church leaders was important?

I think bringing together thinkers, people who are experts in village life, who live in the village and have knowledge about the village is important. We were able to pull different ideas together from these people and understand how each of them sees things. One person may see things one way, while another sees them differently. The knowledge of our chiefs and church leaders was especially important because they live in the village and understand things that I do not – and I think that perspective is invaluable.

## Do you see this as a success?

Yes. This organisation has now existed for more than 20 years. I started WARA with one or two volunteers based in Honiara. We financed ourselves, and when we travelled to villages, the women there would feed and look after us.

Today, I have 7 full-time staff and five volunteers. WARA's membership is well over 1,300. Donors are now willing to assist us, and the organisation has expanded beyond West 'Are'Are' to other provinces such as Makira, Western, and Central (in Tulagi).

### KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders align different interests behind common goals by listening, communicating and negotiating.

Since 1999, we've grown in both membership and savings. Our primary role is to manage and safeguard women's money. They can deposit and withdraw funds monthly. In the villages, without banking services, women used to say, "No matter where I hide my money – under a mattress or pillow – the men find it and take it." Now, with WARA, they feel secure. If their husbands or sons ask for money, they can say, "There's no money here – it's in the bank in Honiara. If you want it, you'll have to go there."

## When you started WARA, did you encounter any resistance?

Yes, there was some resistance, although it wasn't very obvious. It came mainly from a few leaders. When we first started WARA, there wasn't much support from national women's organisations. But now that WARA is well established, they are beginning to recognise us.

I think it was more of a "tall poppy" or territorial thing. There are limited positions for women at decision-making levels. So when one woman rises, others sometimes try to pull her down.

**I've also seen that when women want to speak up on issues, we are faced with factors that put us down. As a woman leader did you face any challenge linked to your gender?**

It's interesting. I contested for political leadership twice but didn't get through. However, I noticed that both men and women supported me. Through WARA, we also work closely with chiefs, and the men are very happy with what we do.

To me, regardless of whether the leader is a man or woman, if you see something wrong, don't be afraid to call it out. For example, I've spoken out strongly against logging. I've told men directly that logging is bad, and I've written letters about it. Whether they listen or not, that's their choice – but I have to speak up because the impact of logging is not good. I think it was because of the large amounts of money logging brought that they decided to proceed. Now that they have finished logging the forests, people can see its impact.

Our society is both patriarchal and matriarchal – women have some space in decision-making. But it's true that when women speak up, they are sometimes not taken seriously. Still, it's important that we say something and don't hide what we believe.

**Did people view you differently after you spoke up?**

Some people supported me and understood my perspective. Others I was able to influence through dialogue. But there were also those who remained defiant.

**What do you think is the most difficult and challenging thing about leading change?**

For me, in leading change, people are more important than money or resources. The biggest challenge comes when you don't have people's support.

When I started WARA, some men told me it wouldn't work. They said, "We've already tried this through the Ma'asina Ruru and 'Are'Are' Ma'asina movements – it didn't work for us, so it won't work for you."

**KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT**

**Everyday leaders bring people together to work towards a shared vision and drive collective change.**

But after WARA had been running for five years, those men stopped talking. Now, they are my good friends. All the chiefs come to meet with us, and they're happy with what WARA has achieved.

**What has helped you become leader – then and now?**

Experience is important. The life we go through helps us grow into our leadership. Education also plays a big role – it contributes to what we do.

**In your everyday leadership journey, who would you say are your support systems?**

My husband, Bob, has always supported me. Even when I pursued my studies, he was willing to look after our children. This is true for when I was working as well.

My family is another strong support system. My father, in particular, pushed us to go to school, even though he didn't have much money. With what he earned from his coconut plantation and selling copra, he made sure we got an education. I believe education is very important for both girls and boys.

**How do you manage your energy levels and take care of yourself?**

When I was studying in Melbourne and Wellington, I focused on my studies full time. On weekends, my family and I would go on short trips to relax.

Now, I enjoy doing practical things like gardening, crocheting, and sewing. When I feel like reading, I pick up a book.

**Is there anything else you want to add?**

Community engagement is really my strength. When I'm involved with the community – working together, doing things practically, and having fun – it brings me joy.

My main point is that leadership is not about position, power, or fame. For me, leadership is about finding joy in what you do and influencing change wherever you are – in the community, family, or church. Wherever we are, we must influence change.

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