

Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

CASE STUDY

Kalisi Fe'ao, Tonga

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

Kalisi Fe'ao is a community leader and advocate for women, children, and people with disabilities in her village of Popua just outside of Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga. As chair of the Vaasikoula Disability Committee, she provides skills training and develops income-generating initiatives to support the livelihoods of people with disabilities. Kalisi also draws on her lived experience as a wheelchair user to engage in policy dialogue to promote inclusion for women, children and people with disabilities. In this discussion with Ruth Faleolo, Kalisi shares what leadership means to her and how she's overcome challenges in leading change.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I've been a wheelchair user for 51 years. I was injured when I was 2 years old, after an accident on a building site where our family home was being built. I fell and landed badly on a pile of wood that damaged the nerves in my spinal area connected to my legs. Since then, my legs have not been strong enough for me to stand.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Lived experience of exclusion and marginalisation can motivate leaders and give them a different kind of legitimacy

By the time I was 4 years old, it became clear to my family that I would not be able to attend school. From a young age, I wanted to do something that didn't require formal schooling, as long as it could help me build a future. My mother encouraged me to find something useful I could do with my hands.

I began helping my mother with her handicrafts and weaving. I have now been practising these skills and making handicrafts for over 30 years. Through this work, I have helped other women learn these skills and continue our cultural traditions. I also work closely with people with disabilities in Tonga, teaching them these same skills to support their independence. I also work with international donors on their community development programs and provide advice on services that can better support people with disabilities.

Alongside this, I lead the Vaasikoula Disability Committee. We have 68 members, all living with disabilities, and I serve as chairperson. Our community and committee have now been running for two years.

Several people have previously led initiatives to promote the needs of people with disabilities. However, it is different when someone with a disability leads that work. I am the first female leader of a disability community in Tonga, and while the role comes with challenges — particularly as a woman — I am deeply committed to it. One thought that helps me overcome challenges is, "If I don't do it, who will?"

You mentioned that your mother played an important role in helping you to become a leader?

Each time my mother cut down the leaves, I would help her. She taught me weaving, sewing, and all kinds of household work. I never once heard her tell others to 'keep an eye on me' or treat me as if I couldn't do things myself. Because of her, I've always carried the belief that I can do anything. She made sure I felt supported as a full member of our family — not as someone with a disability.

I've kept that spirit throughout my adult life: I can stand up for myself, and I don't have to rely on others to do it for me.

I also became interested in politics when I was about 12 years old. I loved listening to parliamentary discussions on the radio and became fascinated by issues affecting women and children. During that time, I developed a strong understanding of political systems and the importance of people's rights. I remember when Akilisi Pohiva —

an advocate for people's rights and democracy in Tonga — first joined Parliament. I realised that we needed a stronger voice, as many people were unaware of their rights. Since then, I have been a strong voice advocating for women, children, and people living with disabilities in Tonga.

What are some of the challenges for women leaders?

In May 2024, I attended a four-day meeting in the Federated States of Micronesia with my daughter. Representatives from seven or eight Pacific nations were there, and I attended as a representative of the Vaasikoula Disability Committee. It was my first time travelling overseas and taking part in something like this. I realised that gender inequality remains a challenge across many Pacific nations, not just Tonga.

Even though our women are well educated, there are fewer opportunities for us. Men are often prioritised for leadership roles and top jobs, which widens the economic gap and limits women's ability to make decisions that affect their lives.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Leaders' identity and legitimacy is shaped in both positive and negative ways by social and cultural norms including gender, ability and education

I have chosen to focus on three key groups: women, children, and people with disabilities. Many in my community have encouraged me to stand for Parliament as a spokesperson for the disabled community.

I have also been a caregiver for many years, and this role has allowed me to see how vulnerable young children can be. I have cared for at least ten children who are not part of my immediate family but belong to the wider community I support.

Have there been times when the change you've advocated for has involved challenges?

Yes, especially here in my village of Popua. There are people who encourage me to persevere – but there are also those who have spoken against me. Some have questioned how I reached this position or what right I have to speak for others.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders create and nurture relationships that enable people to work together

There are also village politics involved. My family originally came from the smaller island of Eua to the main island after a cyclone in the 1970s, so some people feel that I shouldn't be representing them.

How did you overcome this?

Many of the same leaders who once opposed me now work alongside me. I focus on our community work, not the politics, because things often work themselves out.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders cultivate leadership in others by building their capacity and confidence

I knew that some questioned my education and social standing, so I openly shared my story – how my disability limited my access to schooling. This helped others understand that many in Tonga face similar challenges.

Through my leadership role, I've been given opportunities to develop my skills through workshops with delegates from across the Pacific representing Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and other organisations. At these meetings, I've realised that my voice as a person with a disability brings a unique and valuable perspective to regional discussions.

Our team has also supported other non-profit organisations to access funding and build projects for the disability community. Those who once doubted me now see that we're making real, visible change.

It's important for people to understand that those of us living with disabilities are not helpless. We can contribute meaningfully to our communities when we're empowered and supported – and we should lead the changes that affect us.

I also recognise that I need to keep learning and improving. That's why I'm currently studying, gaining qualifications to be more effective in this space. I hope the leadership processes I've developed will help others take on this role in the future. I don't see that this space is just for me. There are so many others who will need to come through and lead too.

Who is your support system? How do you manage your energy levels and care for yourself?

My parents are the reason I am who I am. They faced many challenges, but they always worked together to overcome them. I learned resilience and determination from them, and I am also a strong believer in God.

One strategy I've learned as a woman with a disability and a leader is that I cannot do everything alone. My strength lies in delegating responsibilities and empowering others to work alongside me so that we can achieve more, together.

I am now exploring scholarship opportunities to further my studies, so I won't be dependent on my family while I learn. The children I've cared for are now grown, and I finally have the time to pursue this dream. Although studying is a personal goal, it is also deeply connected to my commitment to serve my community.

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