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RESEARCH REPORT

Everyday Developmental Leadership:

How Pacific women drive change

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Acknowledgement

Elizabeth Erasito, whose leadership story is featured in this case study series, passed away in October 2025. WLI honours her legacy and the lasting impact of her work across Fiji and the Pacific.

Key insights

- Everyday leadership is motivated by service to the collective. Everyday leaders define their leadership not in reference to their formal role but by their ability to influence change that benefits their communities, organisations and countries.
- Leadership identity emerges through recognition by others and is shaped by social and cultural norms around gender, age, and family position.
- Everyday leaders derive legitimacy from their relationships and their embeddedness within communities, but also from experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, which often serve as powerful motivators and alternative sources of credibility.
- Everyday leadership is built on trust, humility, and care. Everyday leaders cultivate leadership in others by building their capacity and confidence.
- To change ideas and shift mindsets leaders engage in gradual, reflective, and culturally sensitive processes that help people see their role in change.
- Everyday leaders align different interests behind common goals by listening, communicating, negotiating, and identifying allies.
- Everyday leaders often begin by using their own time, skills, and networks, but sustaining change requires flexible and reliable funding.
- Support for everyday leadership needs to reflect a more relational and collaborative approach that is rooted in Pacific contexts. This involves focusing on the skills people need to work together, building collective leadership capacity, and making space for non-Western understandings of leadership.

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Executive Summary

This report explores how Pacific women understand and practice everyday leadership. Drawing on interviews with ten women leaders across diverse Pacific contexts, the report provides insights into how identity as a leader is defined in relation to the collective, and how this orientation shapes the way leaders practice leadership for social change.

The findings reveal that everyday leadership is not defined by formal positions, but by the roles people play in serving their communities, organisations and countries. Leadership identities are co-constructed with others within specific social and cultural contexts. These contexts shape how they see themselves and how others see them. In particular, shared identity or being seen as 'belonging' to a community can provide leaders with legitimacy and influence. Legitimacy is also shaped in both positive and negative ways by social and cultural norms around family position, gender, and age. Experiences of marginalisation can be powerful motivations for leadership, and lived experiences of exclusion provide an alternative source of legitimacy.

While everyday leaders can derive legitimacy from who they are and the roles they play in their communities and workplaces, they still need to work to build and maintain the relationships that underpin collaborative effort. Everyday leaders pay particular attention to how they interact with and position themselves in relation to others, with the aim of establishing horizontal relationships of trust, reciprocity and shared responsibility. In line with their view that leadership can be exercised 'wherever you are', they also seek to build others' capacity to lead by supporting, encouraging, and guiding others to identify and achieve goals.

An important aspect of the leadership 'work' that everyday leaders do is communicate ideas in ways that help people think differently about themselves, the development challenges they and others face, and their own role in change. This requires a gradual, reflective and culturally sensitive approach. The work of leadership also involves navigating different needs and interests through listening, discussing, negotiating and identifying common ground and shared goals. Doing this effectively means that leaders need to understand the roles, relationships and power of individuals within a community or organisation and leverage this understanding to support change efforts. Finally, leadership involves mobilising resources, not as an end in itself but as a means to realising shared interests. Leaders contribute significant resources of their own, particularly time and expertise, but also draw on their relationships to mobilise resources from others, but sustaining change requires access to flexible and reliable funding.

These findings underscore the importance of supporting everyday leaders in ways that reflect a more relational and collaborative approach to leadership embedded in diverse Pacific contexts. This includes identifying individuals motivated by the collective good, prioritising relational and collaborative skills, and creating space for non-Western ways of understanding and practicing leadership. This requires a shift in how leadership development is approached—moving away from a focus on 'heroic leaders' who single-handedly drive change towards approaches that build collective capacity to realise common goals. It also requires development programs and organisations to adapt monitoring, evaluation, and risk frameworks to reflect the realities of long-term, locally led change.

Introduction

Every day, in communities, churches, civil society organisations, businesses and government departments across the Pacific, women are collaborating with others to undertake the day-to-day work that helps influence positive change. They are improving the care that patients receive in hospitals, protecting their countries' natural heritage, supporting their communities to adapt to climate change, helping people with disabilities find their voice and exercise agency, and providing women with skills and access to loans to enable them to establish small businesses and be more financially secure. This everyday leadership work is not always given the attention it deserves, but it makes a critical difference to many people's lives.

In the last few decades there has been a shift in the focus of leadership theory, from 'heroic' leaders who single-handedly drive progress towards the idea of leadership as being about 'what leaders and collaborators do together' (Uhl-Bien, 2006, 660, see also Rost, 1993). This perspective on leadership emphasises the importance of relationships and trust, dialogue and collaboration, and interdependence and shared responsibility (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Fletcher and Käufer, 2003; Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Bolden, 2011; Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; Fletcher, 2012; Ospina et al, 2012; Ospina et al., 2020). Alongside this, there has also been increasing interest in leadership for social change and a growing recognition that this is often undertaken by individuals "who, regardless of formal title or authority, influence others to achieve shared objectives for the betterment of the collective." (Liu et al., 2022, 5). While these leadership theories have largely been developed in the context of Western organisations, they resonate with many Pacific values and ideas about leadership, both traditional and modern. This includes a focus on the collective good, the importance of relationships and connected-ness to kin and community, and values such as service, humility, loyalty and reciprocity (Johansson-Fua, 2009; Strachan et al., 2010; Sanga and Sanga, 2011; Maezama, 2016; Mata'afa, 2019; Sanga et al., 2020a; Finau, Paea and Reynolds, 2022; Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al., 2023).

In the context of development, those interested in understanding how change happens — and better supporting it — have also begun to pay greater attention to leaders and leadership. Matt Andrews and colleagues, for example, argue that leaders within government have an important role to play in providing an 'authorising environment' for reform efforts and that change often involves multiple people exercising leadership (Andrews, McConnell and Westcott, 2010; see also Andrews, 2013; Andrews, 2015; Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017). Learning from The Asia Foundation's Coalitions for Change program in the Philippines has identified the importance of 'development entrepreneurs', individuals who understand and can navigate the politics of an issue to help drive reform (Faustino and Booth, 2014; Sidel, 2014; Fabella et al., 2011; Fabella et al, 2014). A much larger body of research under the Developmental Leadership Program (2006 to 2023) has also sought to understand the role of leaders and leadership in change. This research has delved much deeper into how leadership is understood in different places, where leaders come from, what motivates them, and how they work to mobilise others and influence positive change (see Hudson et al., 2018; Corbett, 2019; Nazneen, 2019; Roche and Denney, 2019; Hudson et al., 2023). While acknowledging the role that leaders within the political elite play in change, research under the Developmental Leadership Program has broadened the focus to 'everyday agents of change' within communities and civil society. It has also emphasised the relational and collective aspects of leadership and highlighted the importance of context in shaping what leadership looks like (Hudson et al., 2018; Hudson et al., 2023).

As Hudson and colleagues argue, this is not just an academic exercise:

If we don't look at the fine-grained workings of leadership — in terms of lived realities, relationships, and how agents navigate them — then the real work of leadership is invisible. And if it remains invisible then we cannot understand how leadership works, or support it in ways that are conducive to enable it (Hudson et al., 2023, 6).

A better grasp of what everyday leadership looks like in different contexts is therefore critical for those interested in supporting development. Too often, outsiders make assumptions about what leadership 'should' look like and where it is to be found. But leadership can only be exercised effectively by those who are accepted and trusted by their communities and in ways that are sensitive to socially and culturally appropriate ways of doing things. We need to appreciate leadership as it is understood and practiced in context in order to support it effectively.

This report aims to contribute to the growing understanding of everyday leadership and how it is practiced, generating detailed insights into the 'work' of leadership in the Pacific. It does so by making visible the experiences of women who are leading change in their communities and professional lives in a range of Pacific countries, focusing on how they understand themselves as leaders and what their day-to-day practice of leadership looks like. In addition to contributing to knowledge, this report also has the very practical purpose of providing WLI participants and alumni — as well as other emerging leaders in the Pacific — with concrete examples that contextualise the concepts and approaches they learn about through the program to Pacific contexts. It provides models of women exercising leadership in the Pacific that they can use to inform their own practice.

The findings also offer insights into how programs such as WLI can support leadership in the Pacific by aligning their approaches to how Pacific women leaders actually lead.

This report is based on an analysis of interviews with 10 Pacific women leaders (see Box 1). Rather than the research team determining who was a leader, the study took a grounded approach. WLI participants and alumni were asked to nominate people they saw as leaders in their communities and workplaces, including those who were not necessarily in formal leadership positions. From the 36 nominations, the research team developed a shortlist of 10 women leaders representing countries across the Pacific, as well as diverse sectors and levels of experience. Pacific members of the team conducted in-depth interviews with these 10 leaders using a storytelling approach which drew on talanoa and tok stori methodologies (Vaioleti, 2006; Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Sanga et al., 2018; Sanga and Reynolds, 2021; Faleolo, 2021; Bloinga, 2023). The interviews explored participants' understandings and practice of leadership, their experiences and challenges. Each interview was written up as a short case study. The interview transcripts were also analysed using qualitative data analysis software to identify key themes. A draft version of the report was shared with the research team to validate the analysis. All 10 participants were also asked to review the draft report and their case study and to provide their feedback and consent for these to be published with their names. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee.

This report aims to contribute to the growing understanding of everyday leadership and how it is practiced, generating detailed insights into the 'work' of leadership in the Pacific.

Introducing the everyday leaders

Elizabeth Erasito, Fiji As Director of the National Trust of Fiji, Elizabeth Erasito leads Fiji's efforts to conserve it's natural and cultural heritage. She oversees nine protected areas in Fiji, including the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park, Waisali Rainforest Reserve, and the Yadua Taba Crested Iguana Sanctuary. During her almost 25 years with the National Trust, Elizabeth has been instrumental in securing funding for initiatives that protect Fiji's special places and connect people to their heritage.

Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee, Kiribati Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee is an advocate and mentor for women and young people in her home country of Kiribati and the founder of Nei Mom Uprising. In 2018, her work supporting women and young people to continue their education and set up businesses was recognised with a Queen's Young Leaders Award. Lily has also served her community through her professional roles, including her role with the Ministry of Commerce, where she helped individuals — particularly those living on outer islands — to establish and develop sustainable small businesses.

Ann Hubert, Nauru Ann Hubert — Nauru's 'Queen of Organising' — is a community leader and environmental advocate. Over the last 20 years, she has played a key role on the Executive Board of the Anabar Community, where she has mobilised community-led action on climate change and sustainable development and promoted community participation and self-reliance. Much of Ann's career was spent working for the Ministry of Health, where she supported Nauru's fight against diabetes and other non-communicable diseases. She currently manages Nauru's National Anti-Doping Unit, working closely with the Nauru Sports Department, National Federations and local sports clubs to promote clean sports at both national and regional levels.

Layana Menke, Nauru As Nauru's youngest female doctor, Dr Layana Menke performs life-saving surgery and provides clinical care for her country's approximately 12,0000 citizens at the Republic of Nauru Hospital. After growing up in Nauru, Layana left her home country to study medicine in Cuba, graduating in 2017. In 2024, she was elected President of the Nauru National Youth Council, where she leads advocacy and programs on youth issues and promotes youth inclusion in decision-making.

Angela Mandie-Filer, Papua New Guinea Angela Mandie-Filer is a researcher and activist whose work spans over four decades. As an academic at the University of Papua New Guinea and later as a researcher at the Commission for Higher Education, Angela sought to expand access to higher education, particularly for women. Her interest in gender issues has also been a key focus of her consultancy work over the last 25 years, where she advises government and development organisations on women's rights, health policy, and social development. Angela's commitment to making a difference in her country has also seen her run as a candidate in national elections in 2002, 2012 and 2017.

Ipul Powaseu, Papua New Guinea Ipul Powaseu is a disability rights and disability inclusion advocate. She was instrumental in Papua New Guinea's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Between 2009 and 2018, she led the Papua New Guinea Assembly of Disabled Persons. Her leadership saw the creation of a network of organisations of persons with disabilities across 20 provinces as well as a nation-wide network for women with disabilities. In 2021, Ipul's contribution to advancing disability rights was recognised with a Queen's Honour medal.

Box 1: The 10 everyday leaders

Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i, Samoa
Originally from Fiji, Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i is a social entrepreneur and co-founder of Women in Business Development Inc. (WIBDI), an organisation that empowers women in rural Samoa through village-based economic development. She also helped found the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community, which works with agricultural communities to promote organic agriculture. Adi's work has been recognised through numerous awards. In 2014, she was appointed to the Order of Merit of Samoa.

Hellen Orihao, Solomon Islands As Director of Nursing at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara, Hellen Orihao plays a key role in ensuring the delivery of quality clinical care, often in the face of challenges such as drug shortages, insufficient beds, and limited nursing staff. Through Hellen's leadership, there have been significant improvements in coordination among hospital stakeholders and delivery of clinical services. Hellen also plays an important role in building future capacity within the health sector by mentoring other staff.

Alice Pollard, Solomon Islands
Dr Alice Pollard is a women's rights and peace advocate. A former Director 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.

Kalisi Fe'ao, Tonga 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 part 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.

Box 1: The 10 everyday leaders

Findings

This section outlines the key findings from the analysis of the case studies. These are organised into six main themes. The first two — leadership and identity and belonging and exclusion — are focused on how everyday women leaders co-construct their identity as leaders with others and how the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded shape how they see themselves and how others see them. The remaining four themes outline how everyday women leaders practice leadership, including how they lead in and through relationships, contest ideas and change mindsets; build support for common goals; and mobilise resources.

Leadership and identity

For the everyday women leaders in this study, their identity as a leader is constructed in and through their relationships with others. When asked what leadership means to them and whether they see themselves as a leader, their answers suggested they understand their leadership as being about how they work with others — often across different areas of their lives — to influence change that benefits their community or organisation. They also defined leadership in relation to how others perceive them, which in turn shapes how they see themselves.

For some of the leaders, leadership went hand in hand with the position they occupy in their organisations or workplaces. However, leadership was not *only* positional. Rather, it was about how they *use* their position to guide and motivate others to work towards a collective goal. As Elizabeth Erasito described it:

I see myself as a leader for many reasons, but I'll pick one. That I lead to achieve change for the better. ... I'm making decisions that influence change... I look at the big picture and what it means for the organisation. Then I work individually with the staff... That's what helps achieve change at a strategic level and with staff individually. That's how we get the whole organisation moving. It means I don't have to direct them, because they have ownership.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

- Everyday leadership is not about the position you hold; it's about working with others towards the collective good.
- Everyday leaders develop their identity as a leader by reflecting on themselves and the roles they play as well as through their observations about how others act towards them.

Alice Pollard defined her leadership in terms of the role she plays in influencing change in different areas of her life, which she saw as being about service to others:

I see myself as a leader. Not in ... terms of ... position, but to me leadership is about influencing change wherever I am. So whether it's in my family unit or in the communities that I help with, or in my tribe or village, or even in any group I'm a member of, whether it's a church group or a women's group, I play 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.

Several leaders saw leadership as something that was 'granted' by others. As Kalisi Fe'ao expressed it, "leadership is not to be chased, but to be given". Others saw themselves as leaders because this was how other people behaved towards them and perceived them. Ann Hubert, for example, explained her leadership in terms of how she felt members of her community saw her. Like Alice, she saw her role as being to serve her community, providing them with help and support both through her community work and in her workplace:

I guess it's how the people in my community think of me ... They do approach me for advice or ... to help them find work... I'm only a leader because it's how the people think of me and how I support them. If they need my assistance, I'm there.

Layana Menke similarly understood herself as a leader because of the respect that others showed her:

Do I see myself as a leader? I guess in some ways. When I work with colleagues or in the community, I've been shown respect. They do listen to me...

These reflections also suggest that the leaders do not 'compartmentalise' their leadership. Rather, in line with findings from elsewhere in the Pacific they see their leadership as spanning their personal and professional lives (Roche et al., 2020; Craney and Hudson, 2020; Hudson et al, 2023, 15).

Being 'recognised' as a leader, either by being identified as someone with leadership qualities, or being asked to step into a leadership role often had a powerful influence on how the leaders saw themselves. Ipul Powaseu reflected:

Dame Carol [Kidu] saw my potential and pushed me to take on leadership in this space, at a time when they were asking for the reserve seats. She came to me and said, "You put in your application." I said, "For what?" She said, "We're trying to choose at least three women." And I looked at her and said, "Do you see any leadership in me?" And she said, "I do." So I put in my application and I went for an interview. I guess it's people who saw that in me, as I didn't see myself as a leader. It's someone's confidence in you which pushes you on.

Angela Mandie-Filer similarly recalled how, as a young university student in Papua New Guinea, she and another young woman were invited to the first convention of the National Council of Women alongside "very serious women leaders". Although she did not know what it was that led these women leaders to select her to attend, this experience was the beginning of her recognising herself as a leader:

[I]t gave me ideas about being a woman leader, just watching these women... even now as we're talking about it, I'm getting goose pimples because of the impression they made on me, and it was something that I probably unconsciously put in my head, that I will follow these ladies, and I will continue to stand out and be a leader and do what I can to help others.

For the everyday women leaders in this study, therefore, leadership is about pursing a collective good. They see their role as being to serve and help others and to guide and motivate them towards achieving this collective good. Their identity as a leader is constructed through reflecting about themselves and the roles they play as well as through their experiences and observations about how others perceive them and act towards them. The insights they gain through their self-reflections, experiences and observations are often mutually reinforcing, working together to form a 'co-constructed' leadership identity. In this way, their individual identity as a leader 'flows from the collective' (Bordas, 2016, 62).

Belonging and exclusion

The process of developing an identity as a leader takes place within a broader social and cultural context and is shaped by norms, expectations, values and practices. Leaders who 'belong' can derive significant legitimacy through their connection to existing customs and ideas (Hudson et al., 2023, 16, 18). Not belonging can make it more difficult to be seen as representing the collective. But leaders' lived experiences of exclusion and marginalisation can also motivate them to mobilise others and provide an alternative source of legitimacy (Jackson et al., 2025).

The experiences of the leaders reveal some of the ways that social and cultural context shapes their identity as a leader. For Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee, for example, her position as the eldest child in her family whose father was also the oldest child meant that she was expected to be a 'role model'. Angela Mandie-Filer, who has run in elections three times, said that she was still seen as a leader by members of the urban constituency in which she ran, and that her wantoks (kin) would greet her when she was out in public and call her "Boss Meri" (Boss Woman) (see also Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2018). Alongside this leadership within her community, her position within her family meant her family members also treated her as a leader:

[I]n my own family, I'm a matriarch. There's us three sisters and two brothers. The boys don't make rulings on family matters. If there's family concern, they will consult me first, and then if I say, "Okay, let's do this", then they'll follow.

Several leaders spoke about how gender and age influenced how others perceived them (see also Spark, Cox, and Corbett, 2018, 9-10). As Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i reflected: "Even with all the things we do in our organisation, we are still seen as women. And it's not really as important as if a man had gone out and done that." For some leaders, the influence of gender and age differed depending on the context. Angela Mandie-Filer's position as a senior matriarch gave her influence within her extended family. However, in the context of her political role, she felt she was not given the same respect as a leader as male politicians:

As a leader, there's a double standard of judgment on what I can do and what my male colleagues can do. In the media too. I've purposely not been talking to the media, because they say, 'the grandmother'. I'm not talking to you as a grandmother! I'm talking to you as a leader. So why do you have to define me like that? You don't talk about the member of wherever as 'the grandfather'.

For younger leaders, gender and age often meant they faced additional challenges in being listened to or taken seriously because they were not seen as mature enough to be speaking in a leadership capacity. Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee explained that she had sometimes found engaging with other women's groups and organisations difficult:

The other women-led organisations are more mature women. It's hard ... to debate with them because they'll always put you in your place based on your age.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

- Being 'part of' a group or community shapes whether everyday leaders are seen as legitimate, and whether they can influence change.
- Legitimacy is influenced by social and cultural factors, including family role and position, gender, age and ability.
- Lived experience of exclusion and marginalisation can motivate leaders and give them a different kind of legitimacy.

Layana Menke reflected that as a young woman trying to speak up on behalf of vulnerable members of her community and youth, she had often felt as though others were not listening to her:

When you're young ... the elders don't really listen to you because they think, oh, you're just a kid... [And] with the [male leaders] ... it can get a bit difficult. Sometimes when I talk, I feel like I'm not heard. Sometimes I feel like I'm a joke. But I don't let that stop me because despite everything I know I am the voice of most of my people.

While 'belonging' to a community can support women's leadership roles, being seen as an outsider can make exercising leadership more challenging. Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i, for example, explained that although she has lived in Samoa for almost 60 years and is married to a Samoan, as someone who is originally from Fiji, she is still sometimes seen as an outsider. When the organisation she leads wanted to revive the art of weaving Samoan fine mats to support women earn an income, she faced criticism from some Samoan women because she "wasn't a Samoan". To navigate this, she had to take more of a backseat role, allowing her Samoan colleagues to lead the initiative.

For some of the leaders, their identity as a leader was shaped by overlapping social positions and the experiences of exclusion and marginalisation that went along with these. Kalisi Fe'ao's parents moved from the outer island of 'Eua to resettle in a village on the main island of Tongatapu in Tonga when she was a small child. She explained that while her community largely supported her role as a spokesperson on the rights of women, children, and people with disabilities, some had initially seen her as an outsider who did not have the "right to speak for others". Others also questioned "why they would let a woman, and a disabled woman at that, be a part of some big forums and decision-making processes." However, she later recognised that her lived experiences as a woman and as a person with a disability meant that she could legitimately speak on these issues:

I ...realised how my journey had prepared me, through my own disabilities and lack of access to education and low support to progress myself as a young woman, to now. I was able to speak with authority ...

She went on to explain that she now saw other aspects of her identity as integral to her leadership, and that she brought her 'whole self' to her leadership work:

I bring all things that I am passionate about — my views as a woman, as a traditional weaver, as a church member, as a disabled person, as an entrepreneur, as a carer of children — all of these I bring to my work.

Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee also drew on her experiences of exclusion to frame her leadership. As a teenage mother she and two friends who were also teenage mothers established an organisation focused on supporting young women to continue their education or start small businesses:

I was 17 years old when I first had my first child, and that's when I experienced the stigma of being excluded... It's a taboo to start a family so young. I didn't know whether I belonged with the young women or with the mature women. I struggled through completing my final year in high school and I saw that I could, if I put my mind to it, ignore all the noise. You can still get to where you want to be in the next 10 years... I wanted to provide that platform for all young women.

The dynamics of belonging and exclusion therefore shape the legitimacy that everyday women leaders have — in both their own and others' eyes — and the influence that they are able to have. These dynamics are rooted in the social and cultural contexts within which leaders are embedded and are shaped by important identity 'markers' such as family position, gender, age, and ability.

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Leading in and through relationships

As the discussion so far has outlined, the leaders in this study understood themselves and their leadership as defined by what they do to influence others to work towards a collective goal and how others perceive them, both of which are shaped by social and cultural context. In line with this relational, socially-constructed understanding of leadership, the leaders emphasised that much of their day-to-day leadership 'work' involves building and sustaining the kinds of relationships needed for effective collaboration and positioning themselves in ways that foster trust and reciprocity (Hudson et al 2023, 16, 17, 24).

Several leaders — including Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i, Hellen Orihao and Kalisi Fe'ao - highlighted the value they placed on being part of a team, which stemmed from a recognition that they could not do everything on their own and needed others to work alongside them. Alice Pollard also reflected that "in leading change... people are more important than money or resources" (see also Hudson et al., 2023, 12), providing her with important input on ideas including "what will work and what won't work" as well as support for implementing these ideas.

The focus on building and maintaining relationships was clear in the importance that several leaders, including Layana Menke, Elizabeth Erasito and Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee, gave to being humble and approachable. They felt this helped people feel comfortable about coming to them for advice and support and enabled them to understand their perspectives and challenges (see also Spark, Cox, and Corbett, 2018, 7). Being humble and approachable also meant they didn't present themselves as being 'superior', which could undermine their work, as Layana Menke reflected:

You could be all 'high and mighty' because you're seen as a leader. But I try to be approachable. I see myself as a leader, but I try not to show it too much.

Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee said:

One of the things I've noticed is that if you want to [...] bring changes to the grassroots community, you have to be humble ...[so]... people you work with will know you're not sitting up high there [...] in terms of status, career, and everything. If you come from up high and try to make changes at the grassroots level, people will always judge you.

Building relationships based on equality rather than hierarchy was therefore seen an important part of being a good leader.

Several of the leaders emphasised the importance of taking the time to listen to others as a key part of the 'work' of leadership. Both Elizabeth Erasito and Hellen Orihao said that they made a point of connecting individually with their team members on a daily basis, so that they could "get to know them", build trust and signal that they are open to listening to them. Layana Menke also reflected that sitting down with people, communicating with them, and being open was critical in getting others to listen to her, and enabled her to set and achieve goals together with others.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

- The day-to-day work of everyday leadership involves creating and nurturing the relationships that enable people to work together.
- Everyday leaders pay close attention to how they relate and present themselves to those around them, focusing on building relationships of trust, equality and shared responsibility by being humble and approachable, listening attentively, and demonstrating care for others.
- Because they see leadership as a behaviour — not a position — everyday leaders foster leadership in others by building their capacity and confidence to lead.

Another key aspect of leading in and through relationships that leaders discussed was cultivating leadership in others by building others' capacity and confidence to lead (see also Jackson et al., 2025). This is linked to the leaders' understanding of leadership as a behaviour, not a position. Ipul Powaseu, for example, characterised her approach to leadership as 'walking together', which involves providing others with skills, knowledge and support to enable them to do things independently. She saw this approach as a way of ensuring that future leaders would be able to carry on the work — something that Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i, Hellen Orihao, Kalisi Fe'ao and Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee also emphasised. As Ipul expressed it: "I want to build the capacities of those that are working with me to take the lead, and I take a back step. For me, leadership is leading for transformation." Kalisi Fe'ao likewise said:

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. We are going to do this better, together and the new knowledge and experience I can bring will not be about me, it will be about sharing this and contributing this to the group of leaders here.

Fostering leadership in others was built into how Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i practiced leadership:

I'm not a leader who leads from the front, I'm actually a leader who leads from behind. What's important to me is being part of a team and making sure that as I work with people, especially with the emerging leaders, ...that we're asking them to pay things forward in their journeys ... I feel it's very important that we try to encourage each other and raise each other up. That's what leadership is all about, paying it forward.

Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee likewise explained that her organisation provided an opportunity for members to be involved in the governance of the organisation by rotating the leadership every year, with she and the other founders providing support to them.

For the everyday women leaders in this study, leadership was therefore exercised in and through relationships. The leaders made thoughtful and deliberate decisions about how they positioned themselves in relation to those they were working with. They sought to establish relationships of trust, equality and shared responsibility by being humble and approachable, listening attentively, and demonstrating care for others. In line with their understanding of leadership as a behaviour — not a position — they also sought to empower others to enable them to exercise leadership themselves.

Another key aspect of leading in and through relationships that leaders discussed was cultivating leadership in others by building others' capacity and confidence to lead.

Contesting ideas, changing mindsets

Cultivating shifts in mindsets and practices is often at the heart of social change efforts. An important part of the work that leaders do involves communicating ideas and articulating goals in ways that persuade people to see the change as being in their individual or collective interest (Hudson et al. 2023, 26). This often requires leaders to be reflective about how others are responding to their messages and adapting them, as well as developing new messages as the situation evolves (ibid., 11).

The everyday women leaders in the study used a range of different strategies to reframe ways of thinking and introduce new ideas. Ipul Powaseu described how she realised that to address disability rights, she needed to start by helping persons with disabilities "understand what we're fighting for" and see themselves as having agency so they could advocate for themselves:

People with disabilities saw themselves as turangu (helpless) ... and as victims. ...If you want something to change, you have to change yourself first. So I developed a set of training programs for the disability leaders in the country. It took quite a while...for them to change that mindset about being victims. [But] over the 10 years that I led the movement, I've seen a lot of changes in terms of them now fighting for their rights.

Having achieved this, she felt the next step was to help the government to implement the changes the disability activists were asking for through policy and institutional reforms. Her approach to this was to work with stakeholders to help them see their own role in change:

I realised that we cannot do it alone ... So we started meeting with governments and civil society organisations to discuss the issues together and see where each of us play a part in ... bringing about change. It was around that time when we started to have our own voice and agency that people began to see disability in a different context and that's when the policies were put in place... People started to realise that, 'Yes, we have a duty to do to what we need to in order for change to happen'.

Ann Hubert also took the approach of changing mindsets by helping others to see the part they play. Her work is focused on building her community's capacity to "stand on their own" and drive their own development. A key part of this is shifting ideas about leadership and responsibility, particularly among the younger generation. Ann recalled that when the government began paying workers to clean up her local community, community members were no longer willing to volunteer to help as they had previously done. Her response was to highlight that everyone has a role to play in keeping the community clean and that this was something they could take pride in, particularly in representing their community to others. She also emphasised that helping to clean up was a way of supporting those who were being paid.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

- Change requires people to think and behave differently. Everyday leaders understand that this takes time and that new ideas need to be framed in ways that are sensitive to the social and cultural context.
- One way that everyday leaders work to contest ideas and change mindsets is by helping people understand that they have an important part to play in change.

Changing mindsets is often a long-term process. Acknowledging this, Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee emphasised the importance of introducing new ideas gradually, thoughtfully and in culturally sensitive ways:

We observe. We learn. And because we want this change, we analyse. If we take this route, we'll bring more chaos rather than the positive change that we want. There's also an island thing that you wait for it to ripen. If you want to eat a sweet pawpaw, you don't just take it, you have to wait for it to be ripe. So that's our approach. If you want to change the mentality, you try to introduce it slowly.

She explained that one of the aims of her organisation is to empower young women, including in their relationships. One way her organisation approached this was to frame programs as being about health and fitness and the idea that 'a healthy mum will raise a healthy family'. Their programs are designed to fit with women's other responsibilities and ensure women are safe:

When we do our group exercises, we always choose a place that's convenient and culturally sensitive... [I]f their spouses don't trust them, they can just walk by and see they're here doing exercise.

Engaging with men and convincing them of the value of the organisation's work is a key part of the organisation's strategy. But their approach is a gradual one that is based on ongoing reflection:

If we introduce the idea, but we see that there are obstacles, we pause and try to understand what the forces are and how we need to change. We always have a male champion. If one of our member's spouses is the most difficult person, we try to convince him, share stories, and then when he understands what we're trying to do, it is more influential if he talks to the other spouses rather than us women...

The changes that we want are not that aggressive... We want peace rather than chaos. We've analysed ... the domestic violence groups, and they're too focused on gender equality... There are things that we want, but that culturally we are not entitled to. But we know that if we are given them, we can do more good. So we'll work slowly, then by the time we demand it, they ... already know the positive impacts.

These reflections highlight some of the strategies that everyday women leaders use to reshape how individuals and communities see themselves, their roles, and their responsibilities. Whether through supporting persons with disabilities to claim agency, working with governments to recognise disability rights, encouraging communities to take ownership of their development, or empowering young women, these leaders described change as a gradual process, anchored in reflection and analysis, and undertaken in socially and culturally sensitive ways. Central to their strategies was supporting people to recognise their own capacity to act and see themselves as part of the collective work of change.

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Building support for a common goal

Leading change is rarely straightforward. Change can disrupt existing ways of doing things. It can also make people feel threatened, particularly when it means they might 'lose' something. The leaders in this study were acutely aware of this. Elizabeth Erasito reflected that people often resist change that is "outside their comfort zone" and Angela Mandie-Filer said that one of the most difficult aspects of leading change was that it often involves "pushing an unknown". Angela also acknowledged that leading change requires leaders to understand and find a way to accommodate the needs and interests of different stakeholders because "in any environment you are in ... no two people turn up to a meeting on the same page". For these leaders, discussing, negotiating and identifying common ground was a key part of the work of leadership (Hudson et al. 2023, 26). Part of this, as Angela explained, involves ensuring that those you are trying to work with understand the end goal: "You have to explain very clearly how the change will lead to a good thing, or where it is likely to end up". This helps address concerns about the uncertainty that change can bring and builds trust.

For Elizabeth Erasito, balancing the needs and interests of different stakeholders involves listening to and understanding their concerns, explaining the potential gains from change, addressing difficult issues, and finding solutions that offer benefits for everyone. She gave an example from her work in which a local community had initially been against a conservation initiative that aimed to breed and reintroduce a critically endangered species of iguana on the island of Monuriki because it would require them to remove the goats which provided their livelihoods. Her approach was to "sit down with the community and talk things through". Together with staff from her organisation, she explained why protecting the iguana was important, listened to the community's concerns about their livelihoods, and discussed the potential for conservation tourism as an alternative. After the community came to the decision to support the initiative, Elizabeth and her team negotiated and agreed with the community where the goats would be relocated and how the community would be compensated. This consultative, patient approach paid off, as Elizabeth reflected: "It took 10 years, but eventually the breeding pairs were successfully reintroduced."

Alice Pollard also reflected on the value of taking time to understand different perspectives and build support. When she first established the West 'Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association, she made a point of engaging chiefs and church leaders to get their views on the idea and build a common vision for how the savings and loans clubs would 'fit' and contribute to the community. This process was important in surfacing diverse perspectives and legitimising the new association:

I think that this bringing together of people ... 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.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

- The work of everyday leadership involves aligning people's needs and interests behind a common goal.
- Everyday leaders build support for common goals by communicating about the change they want, listening to people's concerns and views, and finding solutions that consider what's best for everyone.
- Everyday leaders work strategically: they take time to understand the context, figure out 'who's who' and find allies to support change.

Navigating different needs and interests requires leaders to take a deliberate and reflective approach. For Elizabeth Erasito, this means taking the time to understand a situation before acting:

[When] you're leading change, you really have to understand the context of the community... If you come in without that knowledge, [even] with all your good intentions, the change you're trying to implement will be difficult.

Leaders also need to understand the roles and relationships of those within a community or organisation, who has power and how are they likely to respond to change (Sanga et al., 2022, 10; Spark, Cox, and Corbett, 2018, 7). Angela Mandie Filer emphasised the importance of "consulting those in the know so you get a sense of who's who in the community", and respecting formal and informal authority and culturally appropriate processes of consultation:

There are protocols you follow in the village... You don't go and do your own thing ... There are certain ways of doing things, and certain people you must consult ...

Understanding the constellation of stakeholders can also help identify potential supporters of change. Ipul Powaseu reflected on the importance of "knowing the network" and using this to build social capital:

As a leader you need to know who is going to help you to make change happen. I actually surveyed who was out there. I started looking for champions within different spaces. When I tried to get political will, I looked at the wives of political leaders, and I worked through them, so they would talk to their husbands or partners...

These reflections highlight the different strategies that everyday women leaders use to navigate the often-competing needs and interests that accompany processes of change. This involves building understanding and trust by communicating the goals and benefits of change, listening to others' perspectives, respecting local knowledge and ways of doing things, and identifying solutions that balance different needs. Everyday leaders also work strategically to build alliances and mobilise support for change, drawing on their understanding of 'who's who' and identifying allies who can help facilitate change.

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Mobilising resources

Change is often powered — particularly in its initial stages — by the voluntary contribution of people's time, labour, expertise and other resources. For many of the leaders, their work started out as a voluntary initiative or project, motivated by their commitment to addressing an issue, as Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i reflected about the beginnings of her organisation:

It was really difficult in the beginning. We started basically using our own resources. We had no funding. We had nothing. But we just felt so strongly about this that we went ahead and did it.

Alice Pollard also recalled that the savings and loans association started with only a small amount of funding and that they 'operated by faith'. Like Adi, she and her colleagues were motivated by the need to 'do something' for the community: "We just did it. We tried... We did not wait for the government to help us. We did not wait for anyone."

Working with limited resourcing often means that leaders have to assume a certain amount of risk, as Elizabeth Erasito explained:

In order to progress, we have to take risks. Because otherwise you won't grow. You'll just be limited by the resources that you have. So, risk taking is a big factor of my work. But ... I just wear the consequences. I think about ways that we can mitigate the negative outcomes, and ultimately, we go ahead and take the risk."

While leaders contribute significant amounts of their own resources, they also play an important role in mobilising resources from others, including community members, local politicians, donors, and businesses. Relationships are often key to securing these resources. Reflecting on her experience organising community clean-ups, Ann Hubert said that good relationships with the local Member of Parliament helped them secure financial and in-kind resources such as transportation or equipment.

Leaders were acutely aware that resources are the 'means to realising shared ideas', and not the end goal (Hudson et al., 2023, 11, 19). But many said that finding funding and resources to support their work was a key challenge. They also underscored the time and effort that goes into this, as Lily Brechtefeld Kumkee reflected: "We're trying to tap into funds, but then sometimes we're too overwhelmed with the work ... We miss due dates and such...". Finding flexible funding to work on the priorities they determined as important was also as a challenge, with funding from donors often restricted to certain areas and activities. For this reason, Angela Mandie-Filer felt that formal politics would provide her with access to the resources and influence needed to make change happen:

I've been trying to get into parliament where ... resource distribution decisions are made.... From the outside, no amount of shouting will make a difference. You need to be inside and at the table where decisions are made.

These reflections show that leaders often use their own time, skills and networks to initiate change and start to build momentum. Money is not always the most important resource: other people's skills and time can help keep things moving forward. But while funding is not the 'end game', it can help leaders expand and continue their work, particularly when it is flexible, reliable and enables them to work on the issues they see as most important.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

- Everyday leaders often begin by using their own time, skills, and resources to address issues they feel strongly about. This means they have to take risks.
- As their efforts grow, leaders build and use their relationships to mobilise other resources.
- While funding is not the ultimate goal, it can help leaders grow and sustain their work—especially when it is flexible, reliable, and supports the priorities they see as most important.

Implications for supporting everyday leadership

The findings outlined in this report highlight the relational and collaborative nature of everyday leadership. They provide insights into the work that leaders do to build and sustain trust-based relationships, shift mindsets, and mobilise support for change that benefits the collective. These findings have several implications for those interested in supporting everyday leaders and everyday leadership.

Many leadership development programs are based on the 'heroic leader' model. They are focused on preparing *individuals* to lead and on the traits and capabilities that make these kinds of leaders (Bordas, 2016; Dugan, Turman and Torrez, 2015; Nagda and Roper, 2019). However, the relational, collective and culturally-attuned perspective on leadership outlined in this report requires a different approach, one 'in which individual capacities are transformed into collective capacities greater than the sum of their parts' (Dugan, Turman and Torrez, 2015, 11) in ways that are distinctly Pacific. Within international development, there is already a growing body of practice-informed literature on how development organisations and programs can support the work of networks and coalitions to engage in collective action. This involves identifying and bringing together individuals and organisations with shared interests and providing flexible, 'arm's length' support to organisations and networks (Denney and McLaren, 2016; Roche and Denney, 2019; Hudson et al., 2018; Booth, 2013; Faustino and Booth, 2014; Fabella et al., 2011; Fabella et al, 2014; Sidel and Faustino, 2019). However, much less has been said about how to support young and emerging leaders to develop the skills, knowledge and attributes that prepare them to lead coalitions and other collective efforts for change. This is of particular interest to WLI, which is focused on early and mid-career women from the Pacific undertaking study on Australia Awards scholarships. These women are highly educated and motivated to pursue change, and in some cases are already doing so. The following discussion therefore focuses on how programs such as WLI can identify emerging leaders and support them to further develop their everyday leadership capacities.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

To support everyday leadership in the Pacific, development programs and organisations need to:

- identify individuals who are motivated by the collective good and build collective leadership capacity that enables groups and networks to drive change together.
- prioritise the skills needed to work collaboratively and provide opportunities for leaders to learn from peers and more experienced Pacific leaders.
- make Pacific understandings of leadership more visible, creating space for culturally legitimate approaches to leadership.
- align approaches to monitoring and evaluation and risk with the reality of social change and facilitate greater local leadership of change.

The reflections and experiences of the leaders in this study underscore the fact that everyday leadership is motivated by the collective good. Identifying who is motivated in this way could be undertaken in several ways. First, individuals oriented to serving others and passionate about a cause are often known to those in their communities or organisations. This is particularly so if they are already speaking up about issues or trying to initiate change, although having a track record of leadership need not be a key criterion. A 'ground up' approach could therefore involve asking those embedded within communities and organisations to identify such individuals, similar to the process undertaken to identify leaders for this study. Experienced local staff in development organisations and programs, who often have deep knowledge of their contexts, can be well-placed in this regard (Wild, Kelly and Roche, 2021). The process should also aim to identify leaders from diverse backgrounds, including those from different geographic areas, classes, education levels, ethnic backgrounds and abilities. This can help mitigate the risk of 'elite capture' (Craney, 2020). A more 'formal' approach could use one of a number of measures of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), which focuses on identifying behaviours such as willingness to serve others, authenticity, a capacity to develop trusted, reciprocal relationships, and a commitment to developing self and others (Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora, 2008). These measures often involve some self-assessment as well as seeking the views of those around the individual, including those they supervise. Given that everyday leadership is often granted by others and everyday leaders do not necessarily self-identify as such, soliciting others' opinions in this way is likely to be valuable. In addition, and in line with the view that leadership is a behaviour, leadership development programs could focus on teams or (small) organisations, thereby building collective capacity.

The content of leadership development programs also needs to be aligned with the objective of preparing participants for collective leadership, as we have suggested elsewhere (Jackson et al., 2022, 21). Such leadership programs could take an explicitly relational and collective perspective, introducing key ideas from these leadership theories and using examples where change has been driven by people working together (Dugan, Turman and Torrez, 2015). Another important focus for relational leadership development is building and enhancing the skills needed to work collaboratively. The leadership skills that everyday women leaders in this study drew on provide a sense of the kinds of skills that are needed. Some of these overlap with what might be thought of as typical leadership skills, others less so. These skills include diagnosing problems, understanding the context, listening to learn, connecting with people individually, coaching and mentoring others, communicating purposefully, knowing 'who's who', negotiating with a view to finding solutions that meet everyone's needs, being reflective and adaptive, and taking risks. While emerging leaders may already have developed some of these skills, there are nonetheless tools and frameworks which can help them to apply these more systematically or think differently and more consciously about how they lead.

Another important focus for relational leadership development is building and enhancing the skills needed to work collaboratively.

Within WLI, for example, participants are introduced to ideas from ontological leadership, which focuses on a person's 'way of being': how they think, feel, speak and hold themselves in their body (Sieler, 2007, 2024). This approach provides tools which can help leaders become more aware of and shift different aspects of their 'way of being', including how to use language to seek clarity, coordinate action and hold others accountable; how moods and emotions influence how people see the issues they are facing and what decisions they make; and how leaders can adjust their posture in ways that enable them to be more productive and open (ibid.). By using these tools, leaders can shift how they see themselves and their capacity to bring about change, express their ideas in ways that make their views and objectives clearer, and interact with others more intentionally (Jackson and Liston, 2025). WLI participants are also introduced to other practical tools they can use in their leadership, including political economy analysis, stakeholder mapping, negotiation techniques, partnership brokering and public speaking. Importantly, they have access to individual and group leadership coaching, which provides opportunities to reflect on and learn from their experiences and try out new approaches. One of the things that WLI participants find most valuable about the program are the opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and learning from more experienced Pacific leaders. With peers in their cohort, they are able to discuss the issues and challenges they face and how they have addressed these. They also have opportunities to engage with leaders from the Pacific and to hear directly about their experiences and challenges, either through virtual or face to face sessions or through more formal mentoring arrangements. Importantly, WLI participants are provided with ongoing support in their leadership journeys. Beyond leadership training, participants have access to coaching, counselling, mentoring, professional development, small grants, and opportunities to continue their engagement with their peers.

Leadership development programs could also engage explicitly with non-Western understandings of leadership. There are already examples of this in the context of educational leadership in the Pacific (see for example Johansson Fua, 2007; Sanga and Reynolds, 2018; Sanga et al., 2020b; Johansson Fua et al., 2021; Si'ilata et al., 2023). In practice, this might mean that leadership development programs encourage participants to reflect and engage in a dialogue about understandings of leadership within their own contexts - and how they differ from Western understandings of leadership - and what the implications are for exercising leadership in culturally legitimate ways. This could help make Pacific understandings of leadership more visible and valued.

More broadly, supporting everyday leadership requires development programs and organisations to adapt how they operate. In particular, it requires approaches to monitoring and evaluation that accept that social change is a long-term effort and the impacts that everyday leaders have may not be apparent for many years. It also requires an approach to risk that accepts that not all investments in leaders will deliver a development dividend. This is not necessarily because the 'wrong' leaders were selected, but because change does not always happen, despite the best efforts of reformers, or may happen incrementally. Finally, it requires a much stronger commitment to locally-led development that recognises that the role of external organisations is to support everyday leaders to pursue the change that they see as important for their communities and organisations.

More broadly, supporting everyday leadership requires development programs and organisations to adapt how they operate.

Conclusion

This report set out to explore how Pacific women understand and practice everyday leadership, aiming to make visible the experiences of women who are leading change in their communities and professional lives in a range of Pacific countries. Drawing on insights from women leaders working in diverse contexts and on different issues, the report has highlighted how everyday leadership is understood in terms of service to the collective and conferred through recognition by others. It has also outlined how identity, belonging, and lived experiences of exclusion intersect to shape leaders' ability to influence change, and how leaders work relationally to shift mindsets, build support for common goals, and mobilise resources.

Together, these insights offer a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of leadership — one that challenges individualistic models and foregrounds the relational and collective nature of leadership in the Pacific. Supporting this kind of leadership means shifting from a focus on 'heroic leaders' to supporting motivated individuals and teams to develop the skills needed to work collaboratively towards common goals and creating space for non-Western ways of understanding and practicing leadership. Ultimately, recognising and supporting everyday leadership as it is practiced — in context, in and through relationships, and in service to the collective — offers a powerful way to help drive more inclusive social change.

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