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Women's Leadership and Sports in the Pacific

Emerging Good Practice from the
Pacific Women Sports Administration



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Background

Sport is increasingly seen as a public policy opportunity in the Pacific Oceania region. The socioeconomic potential of sport has heightened policymakers' interest in 'sport for development' as Pacific Island nations tackle gender inequalities, youth unemployment, endemic non-communicable diseases and other development challenges.

Despite being chronically under resourced, sports organisations in the Pacific are committed to enhancing their capacity to support women's teams and athletes to compete at elite-levels (i.e., national, regional and international). Without institutional support, many of these sporting organisations and their women's teams and athletes are unable to capitalise on the economic, social and development benefits that come with high-performance sport careers. Investing in women's sport aligns with Australia's strategic objectives to strengthen people-to-people links, skills development and leadership pathways between Australia and the Pacific.

The Pacific Women Sports Administration Program (PWSAP) sits under the umbrella of the Pacific Women Lead Program (PWL), Australia's regional gender initiative aimed at ensuring that Pacific women and girls, in all their diversity, are safe and share equitably in resources, opportunities and decision-making, with men and boys. The overarching goal of PWSAP is to improve the administration of Pacific women's sporting organisations so that women and girls can access greater opportunities and career pathways in sport.

This good practice note aims to document examples of emerging good practice in promoting women's leadership through sport across the Pacific, based on the experiences and lessons learned during the implementation of PWSAP to date. The note brings together the innovative and effective models, practices and strategies implemented by partner organisations and extends knowledge base on effective support for women's leadership within the Pacific Oceania context.



- PWSAP has the following overarching End-of-Program Outcomes:
- Administration of Pacific sport organisations strengthened to improve women's high-performance pathways in sport.
- Women interests in sport are effectively represented through the leadership and strategic direction of Pacific sports org
- Inclusive sports competitions provide pathways for women to pursue careers in high performance sport.
- PWSAP is comprised of three projects implemented by partner organisations including Netball Australia, Oceania Rugby and Tennis Australia. FIBA Oceania came on board as a partner in 2024.

Partner	Project	Timeframe	Target countries
Netball Australia	Pacific Women Sports Administration Program Pilot	Phase 1: February 2021- March 2024	Fiji Samoa Tonga Papua New Guinea
Oceania Rugby	Rise Rugby	March 2022 – December 2024	Fiji Samoa Tonga Solomon Islands
Tennis Australia	Pacific Women and Girls in Tennis – Emerging onto the World Stage	August 2022 – August 2026	Fiji Vanuatu Papua New Guinea Samoa Solomon Islands (and all ODA eligible countries part of the Oceania Tennis Federation)

Pacific Women in Sports Administration Program

2021 – 2024 Progress Snapshot





**Administration
of Pacific sport
organisations
strengthened to
improve women's
high-performance
pathways in sport**



Support that powers transformation

Strengthen the organisational capacity of sports organisations to increase women and girls participation

Netball for Pacific women and girls, particularly at the community level, has always been more than just sport. It has been a safe place cultivated by women that has created opportunities and a platform often denied to them in other arenas. Unlike almost all other sports, Netball is predominately administered by women and played at the elite level almost exclusively by women and girls. Whilst this presents a powerful opportunity for social change, netball has not traditionally enjoyed the same level of government, commercial or institutional support as sports typically regarded as 'men's sports' in the Pacific. Consequently, many women volunteer their time as administrators, coaches and umpires without the necessary resources to establish effective organisational structures, policies, and processes. As a result, many federations report limited capacity in areas such as administration, human resources, finance, media and communications and commercial partnerships.

Recognising the unique and essential role that netball federations play in advancing gender equality and social inclusion, Netball Australia places a strong focus on building strong and well governed netball federations in the region. Netball Australia sought to strengthen the organisational capacity of netball federations through a combination of strategies:

1. federation-led capacity assessments and;
2. tailored short-term technical secondments (see Snapshot below).

BUILDING A FALE

Netball Australia's Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool

Netball Australia supported partner federations to undertake annual Organisational Capacity Assessments (OCAs). OCAs are facilitated self-assessments which measure the overall capacity of partner federations to deliver inclusive and sustainable partnerships and programs. OCAs cover five key domains: governance and administration, human resources management, financial management, information systems and technology and sports program management. A simple rating system is used by partner federations to assess their capacity in each domain – capacity is assessed on a spectrum from beginning to mature.

The value of Netball Australia's OCA model lies in the discussion and analysis process itself – supported by effective and experienced facilitators and using a process that is 'owned' by each federation has meant that tool is extremely useful, both for Netball Australia which supports and delivers a number of the capacity development initiatives, and for partner federations which dedicate the space and time to critically analyse and reflect on their own internal capacity. Based on joint discussion and analysis, an action plan setting out priorities for capacity strengthening is developed between Netball Australia and each federation. Tailored short-term technical secondments are a core component of any action plan – these entail the provision of in-country support and expertise from Netball Australia specialists. For example, Netball Australia seconded its EGM, Strategic Projects, Government and Community to Tonga Netball Association (TNA) to support the development of their 4-year strategic plan. Netball Australia supported TNA to deliver a series of strategic planning workshops, with a final workshop being held in Nuku'alofa. TNA brought its key stakeholders from the board, government ministries and local businesses together for a participatory and consultative session that involved participants 'interacting' with every aspect of the strategic plan so that they could read it, understand it and vote on it. For example, using coloured dots, participants voted on the vision, objectives, and strategies of the plan (green=I agree; orange=I have questions; red=I have concerns). The session co-delivered by Tonga Netball Association and Netball Australia played an important role in generating buy-in and ownership of the both the process and the plan itself as well strengthening robust partnerships with key stakeholders. As a result, TNA's strategic plan is widely supported and is due to launch mid-2024.

Another strength of the OCA tool is that it is repeated annually – changes in scores can be used to show how capacity has changed within each federation and changes can be assessed on whether or how far they are the result of a particular capacity building intervention. Four OCAs were conducted for each partner federation over the course of the program, one at commencement, and annually every year thereafter. Program analysis demonstrates that partner federations have made significant progress in strengthening their governance and operational structures, policies, and processes.

¹ Fale – the Samoan word for all types of houses, small or large – is used to illustrate the importance and interlinkage of organisational elements. Governance is the foundational element that underpins all other elements. Management, human resources, and finances and other areas are the 'load-bearing posts' that build the structure of an organisation and allow it to collaborate and influence and, ultimately, to deliver the organisational mandate.



Play it Forward

Support sports organisations to develop strategic plans that explicitly promote gender equality

Making progress in gender equality should be reflected in a sports organisation policies, practices and operations – this is much easier with a whole-of-organisation strategic plan. Netball Australia places a particular emphasis on supporting partner federations to develop strategic plans as an important mechanism to elevate and prioritise actions to achieve gender equality and social inclusion.





CHARTING A PATH TO GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Netball Australia embeds gender equality and social inclusion in strategic plans

Netball Australia supports partner federations to embed gender equality and social inclusion considerations in their strategic planning processes, with the aim of improving participation opportunities for women and girls, men and boys and people with disabilities.

Netball Fiji with technical support from Netball Australia undertook a 2-year strategic planning process. Through extensive consultation and participatory planning sessions with key stakeholders, Netball Fiji mapped out its vision and commitment to promoting inclusivity and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in and enjoy the game of netball, regardless of age, gender or disability. Broad stakeholder consultation was highly valued – Netball Fiji viewed the process as fundamental in gaining ownership and buy-in from members and stakeholders, whilst members viewed it as an opportunity to build accountability for decision-making. Vivian Koster, CEO of Netball Fiji noted:

‘We provided many opportunities for our members to have a say on what would go into the strategic plan – what our big ideas were and what would work for us – it was a long process but because we got everyone involved there is strong ownership over the plan. Since the launch, our members refer to the strategic plan and check what activities they should be doing, or ask us about progress on activities. It was important for us that the plan was disseminated widely both in terms of holding us accountable and to guide others on what they can do in their districts. Having a plan that outlines what we are trying to achieve, and which is supported and owned by all of our members is the biggest plus – it is a document that will continue to live and guide us as we move forward.’

Netball Fiji officially launched its 5-year strategic plan in September 2023 during the Digicel Punjas National Championships in Suva. The plan outlines a clear and ambitious roadmap that aims to transform netball into a thriving, inclusive and internationally competitive sport in Fiji. Centred around the pillars of Grow, Sustain and Perform, Netball Fiji’s aim is to grow the sport through expanding into districts, delivering programs that sustain netball into the future including creating opportunities for men and boys and people with disabilities to participate, and perform at the elite-level and attract more partnerships.

Despite the fact that men have been participating in netball in Fiji for some time, the sport has traditionally been dominated by women, and men who chose to participate were often subject to ridicule in the past. However, the tides are turning, and since the launch of its strategic plan, Netball Fiji has continued to make strides in promoting men’s netball and creating an inclusive environment for all players. Last year, Netball Fiji hosted its first-ever Men’s National Netball Tournament, a historic event that marked a significant milestone in the growth of men’s netball in the country. The men’s division was also included in one of Netball Fiji’s major tournaments, the Punjas Digicel National Championship, later that year. Moving forward, Netball Fiji has plans to expand its men’s netball competitions in the coming years as more male prospects are drawn to the sport.

Netball Fiji is also working to increase the participation of people with disabilities in mainstream sport.



Change from the inside out

Conduct 'state of play' gender equality, disability, and social inclusion baseline assessments with sports organisations

Partners are working towards making associations, federations and unions fair and equitable workplaces where women feel equally connected, engaged and have access to equal opportunities. However, every national association, federation and union is at a different stage in their gender equality journey, and providing effective support requires understanding the current situation and areas for improvement.

Oceania Rugby and Tennis Australia developed 'gender equality scorecards' which have been rolled out to national associations and unions across the region. Although each 'scorecard' is specific to their sport, the scorecards are designed to be a practical and simple assessment /survey tool that national associations and unions can use to take stock of existing efforts, commitments, and programs to promote gender equality.

Both 'gender equality' scorecards aim to support national associations and unions to:

- establish a gender equality 'state of play' or baseline to track progress and achievements
- learn where strengths exist and where there are opportunities to grow
- identify practical actions to make positive change

Each scorecard is structured against best practice domains that are known to support gender equality within organisations and workplaces, including organisational culture, policies and practices; participation, competitions and pathways; leadership; media and visibility; investment and partnerships. Each of these areas are scored against a gender continuum that represents the overall status of the organisation ranging from being gender unaware through to gender transformative. Scorecards invite people from all levels of a sports organisation – board members, management, coaches, officials, administrators – to complete the assessment/survey online and contribute to an overall picture of how 'gender equal' the organisation is.

Tennis Australia conducted a regional 'Women and Girls in Tennis Scorecard' survey over 6 weeks from February - March 2024 and received close to 100 responses from Fiji, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Analysis for each of these countries is underway.

Oceania Rugby launched its 'Women in Rugby Scorecard' in March 2024 as part of its Women in Rugby Network Forum.



STATE OF PLAY IN PACIFIC OCEANIA

Oceania Rugby's Women in Rugby Scorecard

Oceania Rugby developed a Women in Rugby Scorecard as an accessible resource to help individuals and Unions explore their “state of play” regarding women in rugby. The scorecard is designed to provide a user-friendly assessment tool to evaluate each Union’s current efforts, recognise strengths and areas in need of improvement, and identify priorities moving forward. Users receive a score for each of the scorecard’s 6 categories, as well as an overall score indicating the organisation’s ranking against a gender effectiveness scale that ranges from gender-biased to gender influential.

The Women in Rugby scorecard features 6 categories:

- Governance and Business
- Participation, Pathways and Competitions
- Workforce Development
- Investments and Partnerships
- Communication and Engagement
- Individual Reflection

Oceania Rugby launched the scorecard in March 2024 in the leadup to the annual Women in Rugby Network Forum. 19 women forum attendees completed the scorecard before arrival, receiving an individual report tailored to their union highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. During the forum, each delegate was required to create an action plan for use within their union, based on the results of the scorecard. Delegates reported that the overall process was constructive and the opportunity to collaborate with others on potential solutions was highly valued:

“As women, we are quite isolated in our individual regions and organisations and unions and yet we all face similar challenges, similar experiences. Being able to see the bonds that were happening from women sharing their experiences or saying, ‘I’ve had this challenge, this was our approach, and these were the successes from it’ – I think that was really amazing.”

Women interests in sport are effectively represented through the leadership and strategic direction of Pacific sports organisations

Women's sport has undergone a rapid transformation across Pacific Oceania in recent years, with participation, commercial interest and media coverage increasing significantly. However, these achievements have not been reflected in the leadership and decision-making levels of sport, with board, executive and senior management positions continuing to be largely male-dominated. Structural barriers, discriminatory gender norms, values, and institutional practices in how sport is "done" still limit women's options and opportunities. Socio-cultural practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes about 'who' should play sport and 'who' should be a leader provide further challenges. The subsequent under investment that results as a legacy of this discrimination means that women are less likely than men to have the education, networks, or resources needed to become effective leaders within sports organisations.





Inclusion in the boardroom and beyond

Promote the advancement of women into leadership and decision-making positions across an entire sports organisation

Partners sought to achieve a more balanced representation of women and men in leadership through the appointment of women into priority senior leadership and/or influential whole-of-organisation decision-making positions.² Setting recruitment targets can be an effective approach for advancing women into leadership positions in a context where prevailing social norms and attitudes around women's role in society have prevented greater progress. Partners however, broadened their focus beyond the boardroom and senior management, and sought to address inclusion across their entire organisation, particularly for positions that influence whole-of-organisation decisions in a more nuanced way – by building audiences and brands (marketing, media and communication managers); by securing sponsorship and investment (partnerships managers) and by converting on-field success into real-life influence (high-performance managers).

Program analysis found this approach has been effective with partners successfully starting to create a pipeline of women who can move into senior roles, meaning equal representation of women at the leadership level is likely to be more sustainable. Netball Australia, Oceania Rugby and Tennis Australia worked with their counterparts to identify priority leadership positions within federations, unions and associations. Partners have successfully recruited 30 women into leadership and decision-making roles. Program analysis demonstrates that the impact of having women in these positions has gone far beyond equity itself. Women leaders have secured tangible benefits for partner organisations including significant increases in participation rates; growth in revenue streams and sponsorship portfolios; establishment and delivery of national competitions; strengthened relationships with existing domestic associations; establishment of new associations in rural/remote areas; and transformational changes to organisational structures and practices to enable more women to progress.

² Broadly, partners defined these positions as follows: 1) senior leadership positions included: chief executive officers; board members; committee members and 2) influential whole-of-organisation roles included: media and communications managers; marketing managers; high-performance managers and sports development managers.



SEEKING GENDER BALANCE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE BOARDROOM

Oceania Rugby makes substantive progress on gender equality at the leadership level

Oceania Rugby supported partner unions to recruit and appoint women into leadership positions identified as being a priority and meeting a strategic need. These leadership positions were located in key strategic and operational areas including: national women in rugby program/s; governance and business, media and communications; partnerships; marketing and commercial; high-performance development, strength and conditioning. There has been a significant growth in the number of women holding paid leadership positions within partner unions, with 11 women being appointed across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Solomon Islands. Program analysis found that increasing the number of women in leadership positions had led to tangible outcomes that reach far beyond gender equity in itself.

For example, Tonga Rugby Union's (TRU) Governance and Business Administrator, Unaloto Sili, was instrumental in developing TRU's constitution. As architect of the new constitution, Una led the way in developing a culturally grounded approach to good governance. She established a diverse Governance Review Sub-committee bringing together representatives from the public and rugby unions and undertook a broad consultative process that covered not only the main island Tongatapu, but also all of the outer islands, gathering views from grassroots clubs and sub-unions. The feedback from TRU's stakeholders was overwhelmingly positive with many noting this was the first time an opportunity to influence the union's direction had been put to them.

A major change to the new constitution was the introduction of quotas as a mechanism for increasing women's representation across every level of the union including decision-making bodies such as the Board. Under the new constitution at least 2 positions on the 7-member board must be held by women. Crucially these are quotas for board members with voting rights (rather than board observers). Una noted that pushing for these changes meant taking on the old guard and persuading men that there was a better and more inclusive way to run a rugby union.

“The introduction of quotas is significant because the option to simply tick the box is no longer there – these quotas are about women having a voice. For example, in 2019 the union recruited one woman to join the Board as an observer – she had no voting rights. I was not happy with that situation. We are increasing women's participation on the field so why not off the field? There are 47 members in the general meeting and only one of them is a woman – yet we have 24 women's teams – where is their voice? So, this has been a big step forward for gender equity within the new constitution.

”





Empower women leaders to thrive not just survive

Provide tailored leadership and professional development opportunities for women sports administrators

Women who move into leadership positions within sports organisations find themselves in a landscape that is often male-dominated, and as such, often face unique challenges and biases. Exposure to new or different leadership skills is therefore essential for women to establish themselves as strong and effective leaders and decision-makers. Partners implemented strategies to enhance the leadership competencies, capabilities, and self-confidence of women holding leadership positions. Strategies included providing access to professional development opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable to them. 115 women sports administrators have completed intensive leadership programs across Fiji, Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Although partners deliver their intensive leadership programs through different modalities, the programs share a common objective: to support talented and motivated women to develop the skills needed to be strong and effective leaders and to advance their careers. Partner leadership programs are commonly targeted at administrators, coaches and officials and cover skills development in key areas including: creating and promoting leadership identity, brand, and style; improving communication, presentation, and negotiation skills; building power and networks; developing career roadmaps; building credibility and inspiring others; using emotional intelligence to problem-solve and lead teams; and effectively identifying and managing broader strategic priorities.

Tennis Australia delivers the Pacific Women Leaders in Tennis (PWLIT) program. The 4-month program consists of 2 components: a series of self-paced online modules and 2 face-to-face professional development workshops. The PWLiT program differs from other partner programs with a requirement for each woman leader to complete an Action Learning Project. These projects are an opportunity for women leaders to create action plans tailored to tackle specific gender-related challenges within their association. Participants present their projects and action plans during the final workshop, receive valuable feedback from peers and experts (i.e., Andrea Buckeridge, the Head of Women and Girls at Tennis Australia) and strategise ways to overcome obstacles or unexpected challenges that may arise when applying the lessons learned upon returning to their association. Another strength of the PWLiT program is that graduates remain connected as part of a cascading model whereby graduates of the previous cohort co-deliver the program to future cohorts.



Oceania Rugby together with the Institute of Directors NZ (IoDNZ) delivers the Rise Rugby Women's Leadership and Governance Program. The 2-month program consists of both facilitated and self-paced learning modules (online) and is designed to provide high-quality and tailored governance content specific to women in rugby leadership. Rise Rugby's governance program differs from other partner programs in its content offering. Firstly, rather than offering generic leadership skills-development, the program offers highly-relevant and structured modules focusing on governance and finance – essential skills for women leading sports organisations. For example, the governance module focusses on board relationships, robust organisational processes, good decision-making, and the main elements of board operations. The finance module focusses on: understanding financial information presented to a board or committee to perform the duties of a director or board member. Secondly, the program offers governance content grounded in both Western and Pacific cultural understandings and the operational context of rugby unions. Finally, the program offers graduates a one-year membership with IoDNZ for continued professional development.

Netball Australia delivers annual week-long strategic leadership workshops which bring together women sports administrators from across the region to learn, share and network. Although these workshops are of a shorter duration, the program differs from other partners in that the same cohort of women attend each workshop ensuring progressive learning and consolidation of skill sets over the entire lifetime of the program.



CHANGING THE LEADERSHIP LANDSCAPE

Netball Australia's Strategic Leadership Workshops

Netball Australia delivers annual face-to-face week-long strategic leadership workshops that provides women sports administrators with contemporary leadership techniques, valuable insights into sports management, and opportunities to foster connections with other women leaders in the region. Participants represent a cross-section of senior and influential whole-of-organisation positions including: Presidents, CEOs, Sport Development Managers, High Performance Managers, Finance and Office Managers and Communication and Marketing Officers. The same cohort of women attend each workshop ensuring progressive learning and consolidation of skill-sets over a number of years. 24 women leaders have been part of the program across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Papua New Guinea.

The leadership workshops involve a mix of highly interactive and engaging skill-building sessions, inspiring guest speakers and panel discussions and networking opportunities. Themes vary year-by-year but centre on: leadership competencies and capabilities (e.g., leading self, working in and with teams, and courage in leadership); strengthening self-confidence (e.g. opportunities for public-speaking); imparting valuable insights from best-practice governance and sports administration (e.g. high-profile guest speakers); and fostering connection among women leaders from across the region (e.g. networking events).

Program analysis shows that leadership workshops are highly valued by women leaders and effective in developing capacity and supporting cross-federation networking and collaboration. Workshop evaluation data found 99% of women felt leadership workshops were highly relevant to their roles and 88% of women stated workshops supported them to develop new skills and knowledge they could apply in their current position. Skills considered particularly relevant included: strategic planning; financial management, leadership styles, human resources, partnerships and sponsorship, safeguarding and gender equality, disability and social inclusion. 90% of women noted they would recommend the workshop to a colleague. Qualitative data supports this with women participants stating:

“ I really enjoyed the workshop – It covered the reality of our netball environment and our role as leaders within it – I have more knowledge about my responsibilities and also my own attributes as a leader. It provided me with valuable networking links with other Pacific Island Sisters and also the chance to meet the Netball Australia Management Team. This workshop covered everything from the top down – there was something for everyone from governance and the board, the CEOs, the officers and even finance – It was intense but good. ”



Women leaders need a professional network

Invest in effective leadership networks for women sports administrators

Women in leadership positions within sports organisations report that professional and social networking is challenging as it is often male-dominated; conducted in settings outside the workplace where many women feel uncomfortable; and after hours or on weekends when some women have childcare responsibilities that preclude their participation. Partners established formal women's leadership networks as a central place for women sports administrators to meet, collaborate in a safe and supportive environment and extend their network for career advancement and personal development.

Partners invested in 2 main categories of women's leadership networks with each one providing unique benefits:

1. Networks of women in similar positions allow their members to share strategies (e.g. Tennis Australia's Coach Connect; Netball Australia's Strategic Leadership Workshops)
2. Networks of diverse women create the opportunity to meet women who are in different positions from themselves but who could be supportive mentors (e.g. Oceania Rugby's Women in Rugby Network).
3. Women's leadership network events were similar across partners and included a mix of scenario-based skill-building sessions, seminars and panel discussions with inspirational role models and social gatherings. Program analysis shows that women sports administrators commonly identify 5 key benefits that network membership provides them: education, access to role models, a supportive environment, confidence-building, friendship and collaboration.

THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

Tennis Australia's Coach Connect

Tennis Australia delivers the Coach Connect Network. The objective of the network is to develop and retain current women coaches by enabling a social environment for women coaches to come together, meet like-minded professionals and share their experiences and challenges. Coach Connect's winning formula is that it brings together women at different ages and stages within the coaching pathway. Network events include guest speakers on specific topics and targeted skill-building sessions. Since the program commenced, five women high-performance coaches from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have had the opportunity to participate in Coach Connect Network events.

Program analysis found that women coaches experienced a number of positive outcomes from their participation including a growth in their confidence and competence, increased awareness of high-performance career pathways, enhanced friendships and a support system they can draw on as they progress in their coaching careers. Women high-performance coaches from Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu described their experiences at Coach Connect:

“ I was a little nervous to be around such established and experienced coaches to be honest – I didn't feel like I could contribute as a coach – but it was an absolutely amazing experience and put me on a career pathway I couldn't have otherwise imagined for myself. ”

“ I could relate to all the coaches even though I was coming from PNG – especially the coaches from rural Australia as we face similar challenges around funding, tournaments and logistics. It was great to share stories with other coaches – It was a breath of fresh air actually – because in PNG there is only a handful of us (women coaches) and for the majority – we are working hard just to stay afloat and make a living – so even though it's important – we don't usually have that time to connect and support each other. ”

Coach Connect has provided a foundation for 2 women coaches to progress their coaching careers and achieve ITF accreditation to coach advanced players.



Women mentoring women works

Support the next generation of women sports administrators through women's mentorship

Partners found that women sports administrators starting in their careers were increasingly seeking mentors to gain necessary skills and experience to succeed in their leadership roles. Women expressed a desire to learn from other experienced women sports leaders, ask questions, and be candid about their career goals without fear of judgment or ridicule. Gender equity at the leadership level can accelerate much more quickly when women leaders who break through social and cultural barriers reach back and become mentors to other women.

Oceania Rugby positions women's mentorship as a core component of its professional leadership and governance program. Whilst Netball Australia and Tennis Australia do not offer formal mentorship components as part of their leadership programs and workshops, informal one-to-one mentoring is supported during leadership network events and other program activities.

WOMEN LEADERS REACH BACK

Oceania Rugby Women's Leadership and Governance Program

Oceania Rugby together with the Institute of Directors NZ (IoDNZ) delivers Rise Rugby Women's Leadership and Governance Program. The program has been designed to provide high-quality and tailored governance content specific to women in rugby leadership. In addition to facilitated modules on governance and finance essentials, each participant is also assigned to a small group (2-4 women) to work closely with an experienced mentor over a series of 32-hour sessions. Three cohorts totalling 72 women have been engaged in this region-wide initiative.

Oceania Rugby's model for women's mentorship highlights 2 core criteria for success:

Mentor matching: the program matches small groups of women sports administrators with experienced women sports leaders who offer advice and guidance. Mentors are matched with mentees based on each individual's role, leadership ambitions and challenges they are aiming to overcome. Going beyond the lived experience of identifying as a woman, the program also ensures that mentors and mentees share similar career pathways and cultural and social backgrounds, with the majority of mentors also being from Pacific Island nations.

Structured mentoring: the program offered structured mentoring where sessions were tailored to the specific needs and goals of mentees with suggested actions for mentees to take forward. Mentors were able to assist with breaking long-term goals down into smaller action items so that mentees could stay focused and on track.

Program analysis found that linking women mentees with women mentors is an effective way to encourage, retain and develop women leaders. Of particular note is the finding that when women mentor other women, both mentees and mentors benefit from the experience. Mentees reported that mentoring sessions had: deepened their understanding of governance, provided them with new learnings and knowledge they could apply in their roles, and inspired and motivated them to overcome obstacles. Mentees also highly valued the fact that mentors had 'real-life experience' specific to their sport and were therefore able to provide valuable perspectives and practical advice.

“Our mentor was very insightful – her experience was definitely the strongest point because of her ability to be across our challenges and prescribe some remedies to address them – she provided great advice for resources and existing initiatives with activities that could be adopted.”

“I found the mentoring sessions beneficial because we were able to share hardships and experiences with others and then problem-solve and find solutions together and with input from others.”



“ I found the guidance I got from my mentor on my timelines and vision for where I want to be in 5 years very beneficial. ”

Program analysis also found that being a mentor provides a sense of fulfillment while establishing leadership skills and enhancing the recognition of one's experience. Of particular note, is that the majority of mentees have been through the program themselves and are interested in becoming mentors for future cohorts of emerging women leaders in rugby. In the words of one mentee that has gone on to become a mentor herself:

“ When I chose to take on this leadership role, I had 2 choices—to sink or swim—I chose to swim! For the women who come after me – It doesn't have to be sink or swim. I would like to mentor these women and say to them – jump in! There are other women in the water swimming alongside you and we will support you. ”



Inclusive sports competitions provide pathways for women to pursue careers in high-performance sport

Sport is highly visible and one of the most powerful social institutions in society. People who are seen and well-known, particularly those in high-performance sporting careers (whether as athletes, coaches or officials), have an opportunity to challenge outdated gender norms and stereotypes about leadership, and send a strong message as to who and what is relevant and valued.

Despite progress being made in women's sport across the region, major challenges remain for women athletes when it comes to entering high-performance pathways, particularly regarding equal pay, visibility and training conditions. Many unions, associations and federations do not offer equal pay to their women athletes in national teams when compared to men. Women also face training conditions that are inadequate such as access to infrastructure and facilities, accommodation, transport when travelling and quality of outfits and footwear (compared to their male counterparts). Insufficient media coverage of women's sporting events compared to men's compounds these inequalities.

Although centralised gender-disaggregated data regarding high-performance coaches and officials across the region is limited, it is generally acknowledged that women coaches and officials are significantly under-represented across all levels of sport. Women represent a small minority of coaches employed at elite levels with the number of women coaches decreasing the higher the level of performance; women coaches are more likely to train athletes enrolled in what are perceived to be women's sports (e.g., netball) rather than traditional men's sports (e.g., rugby) and women coaches tend to almost exclusively train either women, youth or children. Under-representation of high-performance women coaches can be explained by intertwined professional and personal barriers that impede their entry and progression in elite sports. Research³ found that women commonly experience barriers such as social norms and stereotypes about coaching being a professional and male occupation; male-dominated workplaces and recruitment and career progression, family-unfriendly working environments, and a lack of high-performance women role models.

³ Semi-structured interviews with: 8 current women coaches from each sport focussed on their individual experiences in sports coaching; 8 women administrators focussed on the efficacy of recruitment practices for women coaches and the barriers faced by women entering the coaching pathway.



Change the system if you want to change the game

Create and promote effective and credible high-performance coaching and officiating career pathways for women

Although supporting women to navigate formal accreditation/certification systems and pathways is an important step in increasing representation in high-performance coaching and officiating, more work is needed to actively advance women in technical leadership positions/roles.

Partners have implemented a diverse range of education, training and support strategies aimed at increasing the representation and leadership of aspiring and early career high-performance women coaches and officials. To date, 84 women coaches and officials have successfully attained relevant accreditation/certification moving them further along a learning pathway and potentially a high-performance career pathway.

Netball Australia focusses on enhancing pathways for women coaches and officials at the community-level to strengthen and expand the coaching and umpiring talent pool. Through providing access to the Netball Australia Learning Management System (LMS) women can access online foundational training and accreditation options for umpires, bench officials and coaches. For those women that successfully complete foundation courses, Netball Australia then provides intensive guidance and support (on a case-by-case basis) that empowers women to identify their transferable skills and development potential and encourages them to undertake further assessment. For example, following foundation courses, Netball Australia provides an experienced and accredited umpire or coach to facilitate practical assessments and further accreditation for interested women.

Tennis Australia differs from other partners with a specific focus on aspiring and early-career high-performance pathways for women coaches and offers tailored development and financial support combined with experiential learning to ensure sustainable growth for women in high-performance coaching.



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGH-PERFORMANCE WOMEN COACHES

Tennis Australia's education plus scholarship model

Tennis Australia invests in early career high-performance women coaches using a unique combination of strategies designed to drive more women through the high-performance coaching pathway.

Tennis Australia's model works on 3 levels:

1. it directly targets individuals outside the coaching system who may lack awareness of how to engage (this includes current or former players);
2. it widens the focus from solely nurturing the next generation of coaches to identifying those who have left coaching but might consider returning (through the creation of flexible schedules that allow women to fulfill caring responsibilities); and
3. it ensures coaching is a viable income source for women coaches to sustain their engagement.

Key strategies include:

1) facilitating access to high-performance coaching education opportunities and 2) awarding touring scholarships for mentoring and experiential learning.

Tennis Australia offers a diverse range of educational opportunities to women coaches at different stages of their career – from entry level courses such as community-coaching to more advanced qualifications such as ITF Level 1 (Coaching Beginner and Intermediate), ITF Level 2 (Coaching Advanced Players) and ITF-recognised National Tutor Training Courses. Achieving ITF accreditation enables women coaches to progress along the high-performance career pathway and to establish coaching as a viable livelihood where they can earn an income for their coaching services, either as a private coach or through running community-level coaching courses for volunteers. Nine women coaches from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have achieved ITF accreditation either at L1 (7) or L2 (2).

Touring scholarships ground women coaches in real-world learning situations such as the Billie Jean King Cup National Camp and other Tennis Australia tours and development programs. During tournaments, women coaches receive mentoring from and work alongside some of Australia's top women coaches in a high-performance training and competition environment. The combination of strategies enables women coaches to not only develop their leadership skills, but also their confidence and capacity to apply those skills with support extending beyond the completion of coach accreditation courses. Four women coaches have received touring and coaching scholarships. The model has proved effective with the latest cohort of high-performance women coaches making strides in their careers.



For example, Abigail Tere-Apish (PNG) recently stepped into the role of Head Touring Coach for the Pacific Oceania Junior Team at the Australian Team Championships on the Gold Coast:

“ As Head coach, it was my first time working at this level and scale, it was an incredible experience and so much more than just the technical tennis part – there is the fitness and organisation required in terms of itinerary, logistics, and people skills. I really drew on the knowledge and skills gained through the L2 course but also the confidence I’ve developed in myself as a coach thanks to the mentoring – and the players can feel that confidence which helps them play better. ”



Unlock peak performance for women and girl athletes

Offer genuine and equitable high-performance pathways for women and girl athletes

Within grassroots sports participation, some women and girl athletes will stand out as having the potential to succeed at the highest level. However, without a clear pathway to gain entry to high-performance/elite competition, women and girls may simply not know what opportunities exist to be noticed or to develop their capabilities. Partners have implemented diverse strategies to ensure the next steps in women's and girl athletes' journeys are visible and attainable.

Oceania Rugby has sought to offer access to high-performance pathways for women and girl athletes mainly through enhancing age-grade pathways and establishing professional national women's competitions.

Tennis Australia focusses on strengthening high-performance/elite pathways for talented junior girl athletes (U/18) and for young women elite players (18-24) to transition from junior to professional tours (i.e., ITF/WTA). It does this by investing in communication and resourcing for women's high-performance pathways.



PATHWAYS TO SPORTING SUCCESS FOR YOUNG STARS

Tennis Australia supports women and girls to train and compete against some of the best in the world

Tennis Australia focusses on strengthening high-performance/elite pathways for talented junior girl athletes (U/18) and for young women elite players (18-24) to transition from junior to the professional tours (i.e., ITF/WTB). Tennis Australia's model for strengthening high-performance/elite pathways is centred on two key strategies: 1) communication and 2) resourcing.

Working together with the Oceania Tennis Federation, Tennis Australia seeks to share information with tennis associations and their coaches on what opportunities exist for talented women and girl athletes to: assess their performance against common talent identification measures; train alongside other talented/elite women and girl athletes and coaches; try out for representative Pacific Oceania teams or feeder teams; train and compete using the same facilities as other high-performance/elite women and girl athletes.

Tennis Australia also supports talented junior girl athletes from across the region to come together and train and learn from each other during intensive player development camps. Over 3 days, the camps focus on building existing and new skills and tactics; reflecting on game strategies; building connections with other players; and providing exposure to different coaching styles. The camps are delivered alongside elite-level competitions (i.e., ITF events or similar) and Tennis Australia provides travel grants to talented junior girl athletes to facilitate participation. Competing at this elite-level provides girl athletes with the opportunity to compete and test themselves against some of the regions best young players, further increasing their confidence and skill on court. For example, during the 2024 Australian Open the program delivered a player development camp for talented Pacific Oceania Juniors in Hume, Craigieburn. These junior players had just finished competing in the Margaret Court Cup Tournament in Albury Wodonga Tour and one player (Colita Hakena from PNG) was preparing to compete in the Australian Open Asia-Pacific Elite U/14s Championship. Colita stated:

“Coming from PNG, the tournament in Albury-Wodonga was the first time I played on natural grass. Having that chance taught me a lot about myself and what I can do on court – how to adapt and play smarter. It really helped my mental strength and technique, especially my backhand slice. Working with Tennis Australia Coach Emily during the camp has been amazing. She knows how to be fun and firm at the same time. Her coaching brings the best out in you, she really tests you and pushes you to your limit – but she is also kind and supportive at the same time.”

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Pacific Oceania has a strong junior touring program supported by the ITF through Grand Slam Player Development Pathway (GSPDP) Oceania Tennis Federation (OTF) grants, however, when players turn 18, they are no longer eligible for the GSPDP touring grants. Tennis Australia therefore provides travel/tournament grants that target and support players at a crucial time when they are trying to transition to becoming professional athletes.

Two women elite players, Saoirse Breen (Fiji) and Eleanor Schuster (Samoa), were awarded grants to play pro events. Saoirse received a grant to complete in the ITF Women's World Tennis Tour (W25) in Monastir, Tunisia (May 2023) where she achieved her first points towards a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) ranking, ultimately leading to her selection for the Pacific Oceania Billie Jean King Cup team. Saoirse described what the grant has meant for her:

“ This grant has been instrumental in helping me to compete on the ITF Women's World Tour. It is always challenging to get into events when initially unranked and the travel combined with accommodation is extremely costly adding to the pressure of competing. This grant has made the difference in enabling me to play more events. Off the back of this I have recently been selected for the Pacific Oceania Billie Jean King Cup team competing in Malaysia. ”



Level the playing field

Kickstart women's national competitions and talent identification programs

Establishing professional and semi-professional national competitions is pivotal for women athletes to pursue viable careers in sport. For example, whilst rugby unions are successfully driving women's and girls' participation at the community-level and World Rugby and Oceania Rugby provide opportunities for international competition, there is a significant gap between the two in terms of a competitive national women's competition. Women's national competitions are limited or non-existent due to constrained resources that unions must utilise to service the established and significant demand for men's rugby and the persistent conscious and unconscious bias toward women in what is historically a 'men's game.' The process of building national women's competitions is always going to be a long-term prospect when the balance of power, resources and participation rates are not uniform, but there are signs partners are building a strong foundation for women's competition at national levels.

Netball Australia and Tennis Australia focussed on offering high-performance pathways for women athletes/teams through supporting their participation in regional tournaments and championships. Oceania Rugby is the only partner with a focus on filling gaps in playing pathways and establishing new professional national women's competitions. Rise Rugby has successfully kickstarted four women's national competitions across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Solomon Islands.

GAME ON THE RISE

Oceania Rugby kickstarts professional women's national competitions

Oceania Rugby has taken a multi-pronged approach to the development of women and girls' participation in rugby – the model emphasises grass-roots development as essential for sustainability but to facilitate this, the model also places importance on raising the profile of women in rugby at the top level through the development of professional national women's competitions. Cementing those two elements is the key to national women's teams becoming more competitive at regional and international levels. Oceania Rugby has established 4 new professional national women's competitions across the Solomon Islands, Tonga, PNG and Fiji.

In Tonga, women's rugby is surging, with the number of women's rugby clubs in the country recently leapfrogging from 8 - 20. This is in large part due to the program providing direct support for the development of two new women's national competitions – the Women's U18 Sevens and the Women's 15s Competition. The Women's U18 7's kicked off in 2022 and to date, 2 tournaments have been held between 2022-2024. The competition has proved immensely popular with the number of club teams participating more than quadrupling, and audience numbers, media attention and sponsorship growing with each progressive tournament. 2023 also saw Tonga's first ever rugby 15s women's competition kick off with 5 teams. The 15s competition focused on safe and supportive player transition from the 7s format and preparation leading into a number of international tournaments. Complementing these national competitions, TRU delivers the Women's National Development Squad featuring weekly training sessions to identify, develop and support women players with the potential to be selected for a national quad.

Siutite Ma'ake, a 26-year-old player, believes that increased domestic 15s competitions in Tonga can help on-island players stake their claim for test recognition.

“More competitions mean more opportunities and experience for us local girls. Tonga hasn't had any women's 15s competition for a few years now. There are many opportunities for Tonga to participate in Oceania Rugby – tournaments – but local girls cannot get there without competitions to compete in here in order to be selected for the national team. Game time is the most important thing for a player as we will gain experience, learn and grow to be better because the talent is here, we just don't have enough resources to run the competitions and tournaments that will improve everyone and get us to a better level.”

From a sport that focused on the pursuits of sporting excellence for men, rugby in Tonga now offers women and girls an elite competition with talent pathways to provide both inspiration and aspiration.



You can't be what you can't see

Shifting gender norms and stereotypes through increased visibility of women coaches, officials and players

When working towards positive social change, showcasing women role models as either athletes, coaches or officials, can make a significant contribution by challenging accepted gender norms and stereotypes. Research shows that when men and boys experience women as competent leaders and athletes within the sporting sphere, they are more likely to respect them in other areas of life, including at work, as friends and in intimate partner relationships. Partners have sought to increase the visibility of women coaches, officials and athletes, showcasing strength, leadership and resilience as female traits in order to support a public narrative that recognises the worth of all women and girls.

Tennis Australia works towards shifting accepted gender norms and beliefs through investing in community-level women coaches.





CREATING AN EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENT WHERE GIRLS ARE VALUED AS MUCH AS BOYS

Tennis Australia community-level coaching courses for volunteer women coaches

Tennis Australia works towards shifting accepted gender norms and beliefs through investing in women coaches at the community-level, which is not only a worthwhile end in itself in terms of participation rates and growth but also changes attitudes and beliefs about women and girls' capabilities within families and communities. Evidence shows that gender biases and stereotypes are shaped through social environments such as sport – and these social norms can be shifted for both girls and boys by providing them with an opportunity to experience women as coaches and at an early age.

Tennis Australia delivers community-level coaching courses for volunteer women coaches so they can develop the skills needed to deliver tennis activities in a school or village setting. Course content includes: benefits of tennis for children; principles of effective coaching; how to structure lessons and deliver safe and inclusive activities; an introduction to balls, rackets, nets and courts; game situations and tactics.

To date, 12 community-level coaching courses have been delivered in Fiji, Tuvalu and Tonga with almost 50 women participating. 75% of women volunteer coaches agreed their confidence and technical skills and ability to deliver tennis activities had increased and 80% of women volunteer coaches agreed they were motivated to deliver tennis coaching and activities in their communities.

