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SUPPORTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19: WOMEN LEADING AND INFLUENCING IN THE PACIFIC - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Women across the Pacific are active contributors to the development of their communities and their countries. Although it can be more difficult for women to assume leadership positions in politics and to some extent in business, women play important leadership roles in churches, non-government organisations, and community-based organisations.

In recognition of this important role, the Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (formerly the Women's Leadership Initiative) (WLI) provides a program of enrichment and leadership development that supports emerging Pacific women (and men) leaders to develop their skills, confidence, and networks, providing them with opportunities to work together to pursue positive social change.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, WLI introduced a small grants program – the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund – to support WLI participants and alumni to contribute to the COVID-19 responses in their respective countries.

A flexible approach to the grants enabled the women to work on issues they identified as priorities in ways that fit the different contexts in which they were working. This supported the women to learn from their experience and adapt projects to the changing environment during COVID-19.

The grants also provided a valuable opportunity for the women to put their leadership skills into practice and expand and activate their networks.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings from the study have several implications for how international development organisations can support women's leadership development in the Pacific.

BUILD INDIVIDUAL SKILLS FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund provided the vehicle for putting ideas around collective leadership into practice. Leadership development programs that emphasise the relational and collective aspects of leadership and provide practical opportunities for emerging leaders to work with others can make a valuable contribution to developing the skills and relationships needed for developmental leadership.

MAKE LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF LEADERSHIP MORE VISIBLE

Women's understanding of leadership and their ways of working with each other and with communities were framed in distinctly Pacific ways. Making local, non-Western understandings of leadership more visible in leadership development programs can help emerging women leaders to build their knowledge and skills in exercising leadership in culturally legitimate ways.

EXPLORE STRATEGIES FOR EXPANDING THE SPACE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Women's experiences on the projects suggest that they make use of a range of strategies to navigate the space available for them to lead and to challenge gender norms about women's leadership. More explicit discussion of these strategies can provide valuable learning for emerging women leaders. Women's leadership development programs could facilitate emerging leaders to learn from those who are more experienced about how and when to deploy these strategies to greatest effect.

SUPPORT 'EVERYDAY' WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Emphasising the importance of women's 'everyday' leadership – rather than only formal leadership – can open opportunities for women to build their skills and networks, serve as role models for other women, and can help shift broader perceptions about women's leadership.

SUPPORT LOCAL PRIORITIES AND FLEXIBLE WAYS OF WORKING

International development organisations can most usefully support women to exercise leadership by providing space for them to determine priorities and strategies for change, being flexible, and focusing on learning rather than compliance.

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CASE STUDIES

EMPOWERING MOTHERS TO KEEP FAMILIES SAFE DURING COVID-19 (SAMOA)

This project provided women in rural communities on Savai'i and Upolu with information to help them protect the health and safety of their families, including nutrition and cyber safety.

VEINANUMI (THOUGHT FOR OTHERS) (FIJI)

This project provided immediate relief to women who had lost their jobs, with a focus on reproductive health, by distributing sanitary pads and maternity pads to women in both rural and urban communities.

INTEGRATED FARMING OF FISH AND POULTRY/INTEGRATED AGRO-FORESTRY (FIJI)

This project promoted healthy eating and helped improve livelihoods by supporting women in three villages to establish small-scale fish, poultry and vegetable businesses.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IMPACTED BY COVID-19/ GBV CAPACITY BUILDING AND PROMOTING WASH AT STREET FOOD VENDING SITES (PAPUA NEW GUINEA)

This project promoted economic empowerment for women, providing them with sewing machines and information on savings and loans as well as information on COVID-19. A second phase of the project aimed to improve hygiene and food handling among food vendors and raise women's awareness of where to seek help for gender-based violence.

COMBATting COVID-19 THROUGH WASH IN SCHOOLS/HANDS UP FOR HYGIENE (PAPUA NEW GUINEA)

This project aimed to promote good hygiene practices among primary school students by providing educational materials, conducting awareness sessions and installing handwashing stations.

HOW DID THE WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE PROJECTS UNDERSTAND AND PRACTICE LEADERSHIP?

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

Women involved in the projects saw their leadership as a way of 'giving back' to the community by sharing the new skills and knowledge they had gained while studying in Australia. This was linked to social obligations and Pacific cultural values of sharing resources, caring for others and contributing to the good of the wider community.

LEADING TOGETHER

The women took a 'shared leadership' approach to their projects, supporting each other, taking mutual responsibility for work, holding each other to account and making decisions together. This focus on the relational aspects of leadership helped them to agree on and pursue their shared goals.

WORKING WITH AND THROUGH NETWORKS

The women used their personal and professional networks to access expertise and resources and promote the sustainability of their projects. They also sought links with government agencies and non-government organisations to expand their access to new communities and provide them with credibility.

NAVIGATING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

Exercising leadership required the women to be 'culturally agile' to create trust, establish credibility and build community members' understanding of and commitment to the projects. But there were sometimes tensions between the women's role as leaders on the projects and social and cultural perceptions about leadership in the communities where they were working. At times, being a highly educated woman created social pressures from families and communities.

NAVIGATING GENDER NORMS

In carrying out their projects, the women had to navigate gender norms, including by making strategic choices about the issues they chose to address in their projects and how they framed their leadership roles.

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[Being the First: Women Leaders in the Pacific Islands](#)

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HOW DID THE WLI COVID-19 LEADERSHIP FUND SUPPORT THE WOMEN TO EXERCISE LEADERSHIP?

DEVELOPING SKILLS AND RELATIONSHIPS FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund supported the women to exercise leadership by providing them with an opportunity to put ideas around collective leadership into practice. The grant - and the broader leadership development programs offered through WLI - supported the women to develop the relational skills needed for collective leadership and to strengthen and expand relationships which would help them throughout their leadership journeys.

SUPPORTING LOCAL PRIORITIES AND FLEXIBLE WAYS OF WORKING

The Fund was designed and managed in a way that provided the women with space to work on issues they identified as priorities, in ways that were appropriate to the contexts in which they were working and could be easily adapted in response to changing circumstances, community priorities, and what they were learning through implementation.

IMAGE CREDITS

- Cover image: Two women from preventing gender-based violence project in Papua New Guinea. Kindly provided by the WLI.



The **Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)** is an international research collaboration supported by the Australian Government. DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

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