SUPPORTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19:

WOMEN LEADING AND INFLUENCING IN THE PACIFIC

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This paper is based on research conducted by staff at the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University.

It examines the *Women Leading and Influencing* (formerly the Women's Leadership Initiative) (WLI) COVID-19 Leadership Fund, an Australia Awards scholarships enrichment program.

WLI is an Australian Government program developing the skills, confidence and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific through delivery of a range of developmental leadership offerings.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program introduced the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund, a small grants program to support participants and alumni to contribute to the COVID-19 responses in their countries. These grants aimed to provide women with an opportunity to put their developmental leadership skills and knowledge into practice and strengthen their networks and ability to collaborate with others in order to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 in the Pacific.

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KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Small grants provided through the Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (formerly the Women's Leadership Initiative) supported Pacific women to contribute to the COVID-19 response in their own countries, put their leadership skills into practice, and expand and activate their networks.

- Providing practical opportunities for emerging women leaders to work together and with others interested in social change can make a valuable contribution to developing the skills and relationships needed to exercise developmental leadership.

- The women's understanding of leadership and their ways of working with each other and with communities were framed in distinctly Pacific ways. There is scope for leadership development programs to better integrate non-Western understandings of leadership and explore the implications of these for how women can exercise leadership effectively within their own cultural contexts.

- The experiences of project leaders suggest that women make use of a range of strategies to navigate the space available for them to lead and to challenge gender norms relating to women's leadership. Women's leadership development programs could facilitate learning between emerging and experienced leaders to understand how and when to deploy these strategies to greatest effect.

- 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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (formerly the Women's Leadership Initiative) (WLI) is an Australian Government program developing the skills, confidence and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific through delivery of a range of developmental leadership offerings. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program introduced the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund; a small grants program to support participants and alumni to contribute to the COVID-19 responses in their respective countries. These grants aimed to provide women with an opportunity to put their developmental leadership skills and knowledge into practice and strengthen their networks and ability to collaborate with others to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 in the Pacific.

To understand how the women involved in the projects understood and exercised leadership – and how the grants supported this - five projects were selected as case studies. Together, the case studies suggest that the women saw their leadership as a way of 'giving back' to the community by sharing the new skills and knowledge they had gained while studying on Award in Australia. This sentiment was linked to social obligations and Pacific cultural values of sharing resources, caring for others, and contributing to the good of the wider community.

The women also 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 and collective aspects of leadership helped them to agree on and pursue their shared goals. 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 communities and provide them with credibility.

Exercising leadership required the women to navigate social and cultural norms in the communities in which they were working. This was new and challenging for many women and required them to be culturally agile to create trust and establish credibility.

At times, however, there were tensions between the women's role as leaders and social and cultural perceptions about leadership. Being a highly educated woman also created social pressures from families and communities at times. The women involved in the projects also navigated gender norms, including by making strategic choices about the issues they chose to address and how they framed their leadership roles.

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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.

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. This helped them develop relational skills and strengthen and expand their networks.

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.

These findings have several implications for how international development organisations can support women's leadership development in the Pacific. These are:

• 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.

• There is scope for leadership development programs to make local, non-Western understandings of leadership – and their implications for exercising leadership in culturally legitimate ways – more visible.

• There is value in leadership development programs providing opportunities for emerging women leaders to examine more explicitly the strategies that they can use to challenge gendered perspectives on leadership, including learning from more experienced leaders.

• 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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Contextualising Leadership: Looking for Leadership in the Everyday

INTRODUCTION

W omen 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 church, non-government, and community-based organisations as well as in the public service (McLeod, 2015; Howard, 2019; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2021).[1]

In recognition of this important role, the Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (WLI) program provides a range of developmental leadership offerings in Australia and the Pacific, which 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.

This paper draws on five case studies of small community projects implemented by WLI participants and alumni in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how the women leading the projects understood and exercised leadership in their different contexts and how WLI's approach to managing these projects facilitated effective leadership.

These case studies provide insights into how international development organisations can support emerging women leaders to develop the skills and resources they need to lead developmental change and – potentially – shift perceptions about women's leadership.

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1   In January 2022, there were 49 women MPs (8.8% of the total) in the Pacific Islands Forum countries, not including Australia and New Zealand (Pacific Women in Politics, n.d). Since then, To'omata Norah Leota has been sworn in as an additional member of parliament in Samoa and Rufina Peter has been elected governor of Papua New Guinea's Central Province (Keck, 2022; Chandler, 2022). Representation of women in business leadership across the Pacific compares well against global averages, with Pacific women holding on average 21% of board seats (compared to 16.9% globally), 11% of board chair positions (5.3% globally) and 13% of CEOs (4.4% globally) (Boxall, 2021).

WOMEN LEADING AND INFLUENCING

WLI is an Australian Government initiative that commenced its first four-year phase in 2017 as the Women's Leadership Initiative. In phase one, it provided a tiered program of learning and networking events (Tier 1), an 18-month leadership skills training and mentoring program (Tier 2), and workplace internships and tailored professional development opportunities (Tier 3) (Cardno, 2022).[2] The program is linked to Australia Awards scholarships, and women mostly take part in these activities alongside their in-Australia studies. Participation in the Tier 2 and Tier 3 programs is by application, with participants selected based on past leadership experience and future leadership aspirations.

This strategy is based on the view that providing women who are already demonstrating leadership qualities and behaviour with enrichment and support can help strengthen women's leadership.

Developmental leadership emphasises that leadership does not only happen in formal political arenas but in the everyday practices of households, villages and communities.

Central to WLI's approach is the idea of developmental leadership: 'the strategic, collective and political process of building political will to secure pro-development outcomes.' (Hudson et al., 2018). Developmental leadership shifts the focus of analysis away from individual leaders towards collective leadership, how people work together to achieve positive social change. One of the key messages of the program is that leadership is about what people do, not the position they occupy. Developmental leadership also frames developmental change as inherently political and emphasises that leadership does not only happen in formal political arenas but in the everyday practices of households, villages and communities (ibid.). The political nature of development means that leaders need to 'think and work politically' to be effective in influencing change.

WLI's approach to leadership development is informed by ontological coaching and adaptive leadership. Ontological coaching focuses on helping people see themselves as leaders, while adaptive leadership approaches emphasise that strategies for change in complex contexts require ongoing experimentation and learning (Women's Leadership Initiative, 2019). These leadership frameworks inform the Tier 2 leadership training curriculum and the approach to coaching.

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2   By the end of Phase 1 of the program in June 2022, 128 women had completed the Tier 2 program. A further 183 women and 48 men completed the six-month LeadershipConnect online skills development and networking program introduced in 2021 and 2022. 33 women completed Tier 3 workplace internships and professional development. Tier 1 activities and LeadershipConnect are also open to men (Cardno, 2022).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, WLI introduced a small grants program - the COVID-19 Leadership Fund - to support women to contribute to the COVID-19 responses in their respective countries. The Fund aimed to provide women with an opportunity to put their leadership skills into practice and strengthen their networks and ability to work collaboratively with others in their home countries.

A total of 26 projects were successfully completed over two rounds (June 2020 – February 2021 and June 2021 – March 2022).[3] These small-scale initiatives, which averaged around AU$15,000 in cost, addressed a range of issues, including health, agriculture and food security, education, and community safety and security. The projects were all undertaken in Pacific countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu).[4]

METHODOLOGY

Five projects were selected as case studies, all of which received funding in both Round 1 and Round 2. This meant that in reflecting on their leadership, the women we interviewed were able to draw on their experiences during both Rounds. The WLI team also felt that these projects had been among the most impactful. To ensure some geographic representation, projects from three different countries were selected (see note at bottom of box).

Each project's initial activity and funding proposals, reports and project videos were reviewed. In-depth interviews with 14 project team members, either face to face, via telephone or online were also conducted. The interviews were largely carried out by Pacific members of the research team, and interviewers provided space for project team members to share their experiences by asking open questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories.

To analyse the data, interview notes for all projects were reviewed to identify key themes around how the women involved in the projects understood and practiced leadership, and how the Fund supported this. Interpretation of the data drew on literature on the Pacific as well as literature on developmental leadership more broadly. This was 'sense-checked' with Pacific members of the team. A draft report was also shared with interviewees for feedback, and their comments were incorporated into the final analysis.

Note: The country with the largest number of projects (8 in Round 1 and 7 in Round 2) was Papua New Guinea, with the second largest being Fiji (2 projects in Round 1 and 3 projects in Round 2). Of the other countries, only Samoa had a project in both Round 1 and Round 2. We therefore selected two projects from both Papua New Guinea and Fiji and the project from Samoa.

3   Implementing teams included 63 participants and alumni of the Leadership and Mentoring and LeadershipConnect programs, as well as members of the broader Australia Awards alumni network.

4   All of the project teams had at least one member who was based in the country, although some teams had members who were still in Australia or returned home during the course of the project. In many cases, the project teams undertook these projects alongside full-time work, although members of some project teams were still looking for work and were therefore able to devote more time to the projects.

CASE STUDIES

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

This project aimed to support women to protect the health and safety of their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project team delivered 16 workshops in rural communities on Savai'i and Upolu. These provided women with skills and knowledge on healthy eating, including growing crops for food and additional income, caring for sick family members during lockdowns, and cyber safety for children, reflecting the combined skills of the project team.

VEINANUMI (FIJI)

The Veinanumi project aimed to support women who had lost their jobs by providing them with immediate relief in the area of reproductive health. In Round 1, project team members provided sanitary pads and menstrual resources to women in 22 villages in six provinces and maternity pads to hospitals in Nadi, Lautoka and Nausori. They also collaborated with FRIEND Fiji and the Spinal Injury Association of Fiji to produce and distribute reusable pads to communities.

In Round 2, the project team worked with women's groups in informal settlements in Suva and Western Division to produce face masks and reusable sanitary pads which were distributed within their local communities. The team also donated sanitary pads to communities, schools and maternity hospitals in Western Division.

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

This project drew on its team's expertise in agriculture and fisheries and aimed to promote healthy eating and improve the livelihoods of families who experienced job losses in the tourism industry as a result of COVID-19. In Round 1, the project worked with a group of 15 women in a village in Nadroga to construct a fishpond and poultry shed and provide training in business management. In Round 2, the project was extended to a further two villages with a focus on poultry rearing and production of seedlings.

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

In Round 1, the project team focused on economic empowerment, providing sewing machines and material to 33 women living in informal settlements who sell bilum bags and meri blouses in one of Port Moresby's markets. The project team also led a COVID-19 awareness session and invited the Micro Bank to provide training on savings and loans and opening a bank account.

In Round 2, the team focused on women food vendors in the market. To promote good hygiene and food handling, the team distributed food coolers, storage containers and shade umbrellas and installed handwashing stations. This practical support provided an entry point for the team to engage on issues of gender-based violence through awareness sessions for women in three informal settlements.

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

This project aimed to promote good hygiene for primary school students. In Round 1, the project team provided educational materials and masks to three primary schools in Port Moresby and held an awareness session for students at one of the schools. The team also installed two water tanks in one of the communities and distributed hand sanitiser to the other two schools.

In Round 2, the project worked in two primary schools in West New Britain Province to construct handwashing stations, paint a colourful mural and install posters with handwashing hygiene messaging, and distribute face masks.

HOW DID PROJECT TEAMS UNDERSTAND AND EXERCISE LEADERSHIP?

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

Almost all the project leaders talked about their motivation for being involved in the projects in terms of a desire to serve the community. One of the project teams from Fiji, for example, described the project as enabling them to "… give back to the community … recognising that these are difficult times and [that] working together and sharing resources makes a difference". A project team member from Samoa likewise said that the project provided her with an opportunity to "give back to my country".

'Community' meant different things to the different project teams. Projects were implemented in a range of locations, from urban and peri-urban settings to rural villages. A number of the teams chose to focus their projects in their home communities. This had practical benefits in that they were more easily able to identify participants and build trust based on their 'connectedness'.

In some cases, it also meant they were largely able to continue their projects despite COVID-related movement restrictions. However, these choices also highlight the importance of the women's own communities as the focus of their social and kin obligations.

One project team member from Papua New Guinea explained this in the following way:

> "When we come back from Australia, we contribute to the organisations we work for. But one day we will no longer be working. We will go back to the community, to our land and our people in the villages … By engaging in community projects, we build our confidence in working with the people in our communities and establish networks, so when in later life we go back home, we can help our people."

An important benefit of being involved in the project for her was that she had a better understanding of her community's needs.[5] This was also mentioned by project team members from Fiji and Samoa. Regardless of whether they worked in their own community or elsewhere, many project team members found this aspect of the projects valuable. For many of them, working in local communities was a new experience which helped them understand what project participants' lives were like, how to communicate with them more effectively and confidently, and build relationships of trust and solidarity with community members. Such experiences are particularly important for emerging leaders in building legitimacy for their leadership not least because – as Spark, Cox and Corbett (2018) suggest – contributing to the community can be a prerequisite for political leadership. A history of community service can also offset some of the disadvantages that women entering politics face (ibid.).

For some of the women involved in the projects, their desire to give back to their communities was linked to their education. As a project team member in Papua New Guinea said, "I feel obligated to utilise … the skills that I've acquired down in Australia to … give something back to the community here". Similarly, a project team member from Samoa said: "Most of them did not have the opportunity to go overseas and study like us. This is our way of helping them learn new knowledge…". Other studies have found that a desire to contribute to their home communities is an important motivation for both male and female Pacific Islanders studying overseas (see for example Maron and Connell, 2008; Pearson, McNamara and McMichael, 2022; Lovai, Milli and Palmieri, 2022).

Other women linked their leadership to local cultural values. This was reflected in the name given to one project – 'Veinanumi' – which means 'to be thoughtful of others' in Fijian. Another project team stated that: "The project provides us an opportunity to strengthen our citizen and traditional obligations, establish the spirit of love/sharing or 'veilomani' during this challenging time, so that no one is left behind." For Fijians, everyday acts of thoughtfulness and compassion towards others are central to traditional kinship relationships, understood as encompassing not only immediate kin, but all Fijians (Toren, 1999; Nabobo-Baba, 2015).

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Women linked their leadership to local cultural values.… For Fijians, everyday acts of thoughtfulness and compassion towards others are central.

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5   See Dalsgaard (2013), Rasmussen (2015) and Cox (2021) for a discussion of the relationships between urban professionals and their 'home' communities in the context of Papua New Guinea.

The idea of leadership as being about serving others has a sound basis in the literature on 'servant leadership' (Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora, 2008; Sendjaya, 2010).[6] It is also aligned with Pacific understandings of leadership (see Sanga and Chu, 2009; Strachan et al., 2010; Johansson Fua, 2007; Maezama, 2016).

Samoan Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, for example, makes a strong link between Samoan culture and the idea of leadership as service:

> "We use the word 'we' a lot, the cultural, collective, communal 'we', and that 'we' means that we're always thinking about the greater good, about the community. We have an expression in Samoan, a proverb, that speaks to leadership and authority, and the proverb translates as, 'the path to authority is through service'" (Mata'afa, 2019).

LEADING TOGETHER

Pacific perspectives and ways of working were also reflected in the shared approach to leadership that project teams took. In line with the emphasis in the Pacific on relationships and communal problem solving (Mara, 1997; Finau, Paea and Reynolds, 2022, p. 144-145; Corbett, 2015; Roche et al., 2020), project teams emphasised the importance of working as a team.

As a project team member from Samoa stated: "...leadership is not just about you leading, it's about making compromises and understanding each other and working as a team."

Many of the project team members also described their experience of working on the projects as a collective effort for which they had a mutual responsibility.

As a project team member from Fiji reflected: "Priorities sometimes meant that I couldn't go to the trainings. But I was thankful that my team members were there and that there was always back up. We always supported each other." Working effectively together meant that project teams had to understand and work to each other's strengths. As a team member in Samoa reflected:

> "Although we had the same goal, all four of us had different educational backgrounds, interests and expertise. This made it more challenging... I learnt to rely on my team and delegate tasks instead of trying to carry the weight by myself. We were able to work together to achieve our project goal."

A project team member from Fiji likewise felt that "[o]ne of the reasons our project was successful is because we didn't play any superiority game. It was all about supplementing and complementing each other and drawing on each other's strengths."

Project team members also highlighted the support and friendship that their project teams provided. This provided the basis for the teams to develop a shared sense of purpose.

A project team member from Papua New Guinea, for example, recounted that she and her team had "worked really well together" because they were able to "find common ground" and because they "understood each other".

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6 'Servant leaders' are motivated more by a desire to serve than by a desire to be in formal positions of leadership (Daft and Lengel, 2000 cited in Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora, 2008). Among the characteristics of servant leaders are a commitment to serving the needs of others, commitment to the growth and well-being of others, and building a sense of community with others (Spears, 2010). This is often driven by leaders' spiritual or religious beliefs or by their core values or ideals (Sendjaya, 2010).

Working collaboratively sometimes meant that team members needed to find respectful ways to hold each other accountable. A project team member from Samoa shared the following story:

> "There were times when only two of us from our project team were on task and the other two were not participating in planning and delivering our workshops ... Instead of letting my emotions get the better of me, I communicated with them, being empathetic to the reasons they weren't able to fully participate, and finding a way to work around it, such as postponing meeting times to later, or using the group chat for getting ideas together."

Project teams also took a shared approach to decision-making. A project team member in Fiji reflected that "[t]he team was ... always talking to each other and coming to a consensus and making decisions."

In some cases, this had to be done by distance. This was the case for one of the teams working in Papua New Guinea, where some project team members were still in Australia for part of the project: "We shared our ideas and plans for the project through our Facebook Messenger group. We all had a say in what we would do next and how much we would spend on this and that."

These reflections reinforce the importance of relationships to effective leadership. As McCauley and Palus (2021) argue, leadership is "...located in the relational processes that facilitate the collective achievements of organizing, cooperating, and adapting". For the project teams, 'leading together' involved supporting and understanding each other, taking shared responsibility, trusting each other, holding each other to account, and making decisions together. As Nazneen (2019) notes, building trusting, horizontal networks is key to successful collaborative action.

Beyond this, the relationships built between the project team members provide them with a supportive network of like-minded women on whom they can draw for support throughout their leadership journey. These supportive networks and friendships have been identified as important for supporting women to succeed in leadership (see for example Spark and Lee, 2018; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2021).

WORKING WITH AND THROUGH NETWORKS

The WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund encouraged project teams to work with other organisations. In their project proposals, applicants were asked to name project partners with whom they intended to collaborate and explain how their project would complement work already underway.

The projects were undertaken with a range of different types of organisations, including government agencies, community-based organisations, non-government organisations, professional organisations, schools, and businesses. Many of these organisations were part of project teams' existing personal and professional networks. However, project teams also actively sought out new collaborations.

Project teams used these networks for several different purposes. In Fiji, for example, one project team worked closely with the Ministry of Fisheries and Ministry of Agriculture, drawing on the expertise of local-level staff to provide advice and training for women participating in the project. One of the projects in Papua New Guinea likewise drew on expertise on gender-based violence from the Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee and expertise on financial literacy from the Micro Bank.

Networks and relationships were also used to promote the sustainability of projects. One project in Fiji linked participants with government agencies to enable them to access ongoing financial and other assistance. Another project sought to connect project participants to organisations or markets where they could sell the goods they produced as a way of continuing to generate income.

In other projects, teams drew on existing relationships to expand their own relationships and networks into new areas. For example, in Samoa, the project collaborated with Women in Business Development Inc. (WIBDI) – which has existing networks in over 180 villages in Samoa – to enable them to access the communities with which they wanted to work.

Project sites were selected from within WIBDI's network and representatives of WIBDI provided introductions to the communities, engaged with community leaders, and organised venues for workshops. By lending its 'social capital' to the project teams, WIBDI provided legitimacy to the projects, helped establish the credibility of the project teams and enabled them to work effectively in the communities (Nazneen, 2019, p. 22).

The experiences of the project teams highlight the critical role that personal and professional networks play in enabling leaders to 'get things done' (see also Roche et al., 2020). These networks provided the women involved in the projects with a range of resources, including expertise and donations of materials and time as well as less-tangible things such as relationships and credibility with communities. The projects also provided an opportunity to strengthen existing networks and build new networks on which leaders can draw in the future.

NAVIGATING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

Exercising leadership required the project leaders to navigate social and cultural norms in their different contexts. These contexts were sometimes unfamiliar to project teams: customs and cultural protocols across the Pacific are diverse, even within countries. Even when they worked with communities in their local area, project team members often came from urban areas and had higher socio-economic backgrounds than the communities in which they worked. As a project team member from Samoa explained:

> "In Samoan culture, the matai (chief) system is very important, especially out in rural areas and this was one of our concerns before our project started. We knew we had to be careful in how we spoke to avoid offending the elders."

To earn the respect of elders in the community, the team needed to understand and adhere to local cultural protocols. Collaboration with WIBDI helped them to do so: "The WIBDI team acted as our contact persons. They would always help in dealing with the matai if we were not confident ourselves." This approach was also useful in resolving misunderstandings, such as when community members expected payment for participating in workshops.

Navigating social and cultural norms even required project teams to adjust to local understandings of time and local ways of doing things. As one project team member from Fiji said:

> "Working in community-based or grassroots projects with the villagers is not really as easy as we think. They have their own program. The way they do things in the village may be different and coming in as a project team trying to implement, we have to understand all that."

In addition to adjusting their own expectations, project teams were also able to navigate these challenges – and help keep projects moving – by emphasising their connections to communities. For example, a team member from one project had family connections in one of the villages in which the project was being implemented. She reflected that "…this relationship made it easy to tell them … what needs to be done." A project team member in Samoa similarly felt that her ability to connect with the community through shared language helped her establish her credibility. As she explained:

> "I was fortunate to use my knowledge and experience with Samoan oratory – gagana fa'a-failauga – to connect with the communities, introduce our group members … and explain our workshop agenda. I take this as a social mechanism. To be able to connect with the community over our own unique language."

These examples illustrate the capacity of project team members to be 'culturally agile', that is their "ability to work with people outside of their natural constituency" (Hudson and Mcloughlin, 2019).

Cultivating a shared identity and building trust and influence across cultures is critical for leaders' legitimacy and their ability to build coalitions which can push for change (ibid.)

However, some project team members acknowledged that they felt a tension between the leadership role they were taking in the projects and social and cultural expectations about leadership in the communities in which they were working. As a project leader from Samoa explained:

> "Most of the communities we worked with are in rural villages where Samoan traditions and oratory are strong… Our group were all women under the age of 35 and standing in front of our community elders trying to 'educate' them … was a challenge. There was this lingering doubt where we thought, 'Who are we - as young people - to teach our elders who have lived longer than us?' Thinking of the importance of our workshop was what gave me strength every time we visited different communities and these doubtful thoughts crept up on me."

These tensions reflect social perceptions across the Pacific that leadership is the domain of older or more experienced community members, often men. It also reflects the challenges that many women experience with 'speaking up'. A number of project team members reported that a key benefit of their involvement in the projects had been building their confidence in speaking in public (see also Lovai, Milli and Palmieri, 2022, p. 23).

As a project team member from Samoa explained: "Taking the lead in some of the community discussions and being taken seriously by the communities gave me a sense of being appreciated and boosted my confidence." A project team member from Papua New Guinea similarly said that the project "...made it possible for me to tell the community that I am a leader. It provided a platform for me to come out and be that woman leader in my space. And I gained respect and confidence".

Many of the project teams found that their education had a positive impact on how they were seen in communities. For some, higher education meant that communities respected them and was a source of legitimacy for the leadership role they were taking in the projects.

For example, a project team member from Samoa explained that "...hearing we have been taught in Australia, we were respected by the communities we went to". A project team member from Fiji likewise commented that: "These communities, they look up to you. Us as Fijian women, from growing up in a village then going back and giving back to the community ...."

This aligns with findings from other studies which indicate that higher education – particularly overseas education – is a common characteristic of formal leadership capability in the Pacific (Corbett, 2019).

Project team members in Papua New Guinea had a slightly different experience. They talked about their education as generating increased social expectations that they would help their communities, either by sharing their new knowledge or connecting them to people or resources.

While one project team member spoke about this in positive terms, expectations from families and communities – along with the women's own expectations of themselves – can be experienced as a pressure to contribute to the local community or provide for others.[7]

This was the experience of one of the project team members from Papua New Guinea for whom it took six months after her return to secure a job. Although this was a very stressful experience, she found it helpful to access coaching support through WLI and talk openly with her family about these expectations.

These different experiences reflect variation in how educated women in the Pacific are perceived. While some studies have shown that education is an important form of social capital which successful women leaders leverage to support their leadership (Corbett, 2019; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2018; see also Maezama, 2016), other studies have found that the greater income earning potential and career progression that higher education provides can make women the object of envy from men and other women. This can lead to gossip, discrimination in the workforce, and domestic violence (Spark, 2010; Spark, 2011).

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7   Lovai, Milli and Palmieri (2022) find that women can experience significant stress when the environment to which they return does not support their efforts to lead change in the way their education has led them to expect (see also Rasmussen, 2015).

NAVIGATING GENDER NORMS

Almost all of the project team members experienced tensions in balancing their leadership roles with their careers and with social expectations about women's domestic roles. This reflects the observation that effective leaders in the Pacific regularly occupy multiple social roles across personal, professional and faith-based arenas (Roche et al., 2020; Craney and Hudson, 2020).[8]

These tensions came out particularly strongly in interviews with project team members from Fiji, but were also mentioned by team members from Papua New Guinea and Samoa. As a project team member from Fiji explained: "Sometimes it's a challenge because as a woman we have work at home and then in the office, and then we have the voluntary commitments."

The ways in which project teams navigated gender norms was reflected in the issues they chose to address through their projects. Almost all the project teams focused on issues which are culturally seen as being women's domain, such as health and education, or engaged women as project participants. While this undoubtedly reflects a desire to support and empower other women, it may also have been a strategic choice: by working on issues that are in line with women's prescribed gender roles, project teams avoid being perceived as challenging male authority.

Making deliberate choices to minimise conflict with men or avoid alienating them is a common strategy for women activists and politicians in the Pacific (Eves, 2018; Dyer, 2017 cited in Howard, 2019; Spark, Cox, and Corbett, 2021).

Several studies from the Pacific also find that women use their socially and culturally determined gender roles in politically astute ways. Monson (2013), for example, describes how women involved in peace negotiations in Solomon Islands used the language of motherhood to legitimise their role in the peace process (see also George, 2010; George, 2011; McLeod 2015).

This strategy is reflected in how the 'Empowering Mothers' project in Samoa explained its objective:

> "Mothers are like a knitting thread that collectively holds families together. Mothers are seen as nurturers, advisors and teachers in their household. We believe that empowering mothers (women) by … providing them with useful information and skill sets, they will then share this within their households and communities … to keep them safe and healthy during COVID-19."

This framing positions Samoan women as leaders in the COVID-19 response at the family and community level, drawing on their role as 'nurturers, advisers and teachers'.

Rather than being interpreted as reinforcing gender stereotypes, these strategies can be seen as a way of affirming women's leadership roles in line with cultural values, avoiding negative responses and helping expanding space for women's leadership (see also Roche et al., 2018; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2021).

This was also evident in the way one project leader from Samoa spoke about the team's leadership: "Each of us is from a family where our mothers were strong nurturers and leaders. We have seen our mothers take charge when natural disasters have befallen our country."

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8   The multiple roles that women play also meant that finding time to meet with project team members to conduct interviews for this research was often difficult due to their full schedules.

Similarly, a project team member in Papua New Guinea explained how she leveraged patrilineal social structures, using her wantok (kinship) connections to gain entry into the communities:

> "As a woman leader myself and coming from a patrilineal society, we talk a lot about patriarchy and those systems that suppress women. But I like to look at it from the positive side. [In my project] I used the fact that I am my father's daughter to help me. I leveraged his networks and connections to enter the community and connect with people.

> "My father is the chairman of the local oil palm committee. He has standing in the community. So when I come in, they don't only see me, they also see my father and the respect that would be given to my father is also given to me. ... When I was standing there, launching the project, I could feel that respect from my community. In a way it gives me security. It gives me a platform to stand on."

Using social capital from family connections is one of the ways that leaders 'think and work politically'. This is a common strategy for leaders in the Pacific (Corbett, 2019) – and Pacific women leaders in particular (Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2018).

For the project team member from Papua New Guinea, this strategy was particularly important in ensuring her project engaged with men. Through previous work with a non-government organisation, she realised that "if I want to make a difference as a woman in my community, I have to bring men on board with me, with my ideas".

When a conflict arose with young men from the community over payment for their labour on the project, she drew on her knowledge of the local culture, her understanding of the impacts COVID-19 had on people's livelihoods and what she wanted to achieve through the project to develop a strategy for resolving the conflict. This involved discussing the issue openly with the young men, listening to their point of view, and presenting her own position. She also brought in a family member from the local community to help explain the situation. As a result, she was able to successfully negotiate a compromise.

She also actively worked to 'blend in', including taking on traditional gender roles. As she explained:

> "It was quite a challenge for me as a woman to travel in and out of the community ... [T]o ensure my safety, I took care of the little things such as refreshments and drinks to keep the boys going. I tried not to be different from everyone else. I sat with them, cooked and shared stories and jokes while they worked."

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Several studies from the Pacific also find that women use their socially and culturally determined gender roles in politically astute ways.

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

The support provided through the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund – and WLI more broadly – aligns with what is known about how developmental change takes place and how organisations – including those focused on international development – can best support this.

This includes the fact that social change is more likely to result from the efforts of networks and coalitions than individual leaders, and that such efforts are more likely to be both effective and sustainable when they are driven by local actors, respond to local priorities, and take into account the fact that change is complex and non-linear (Andrews, McConnell and Wescott, 2010; Craney and Hudson, 2020; Roche et al., 2020; Denney and McLaren, 2016; Leftwich, 2011; Institute of Development Studies, 2010; Nazneen, 2019; Storberg-Walker, 2018).

The role of international development organisations is to facilitate these locally-driven processes, including by brokering relationships, supporting networks and coalitions, and providing space for learning and adaptation (Bain, 2016; Craney and Hudson, 2020; Honig and Gulrajani, 2018; Gibert, 2021).

WLI's approach drew heavily on lessons learned through the Pacific Leadership Program (PLP), an Australian-funded program that ran between 2008 and 2017, which was underpinned by the literature on developmental leadership.

The program provided support in the form of knowledge and research, funding, communication, tools, mentoring, and coaching to Pacific organisations, leaders, and coalitions to enable them to work collectively in pursuit of policy and institutional reforms (Mander-Jones, Heather-Latu and Collins, 2017). The WLI Team Leader had previously been the Team Leader on PLP and brought strong practical experience of supporting developmental leadership in a Pacific context. Her experience shaped the way the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund was implemented.

Social change is more likely to result from the efforts of networks and coalitions than individual leaders.

DEVELOPING SKILLS AND RELATIONSHIPS FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

In recognition of the role of networks and coalitions in driving change, the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund provided an opportunity for project team members to develop the relational skills required for collective approaches to leadership.
It also provided opportunities to strengthen and expand relationships which they can leverage throughout their leadership journeys. Importantly, this built on a strong foundation of individual reflection and growth through Tier 2 activities.

The core of the WLI program is an intensive program of individual leadership development (Tier 2 activities). In line with the ontological approach, this component of the program encourages participants to reflect on how they see themselves. This approach is based on the assumption that self-perception has a powerful influence on behaviour: when people see themselves as being leaders, they are more likely to act in ways that reflect that perception (Werner, Jensen and Granger, 2012). The program also provides opportunities for participants to think about their values and their personal and professional goals.

The focus on individual development in Tier 2 activities is not inconsistent with the idea that leadership is a collective endeavour. Rather, the ontological approach encourages participants to see themselves as having the capacity to effect change, including through working with others.

In addition, material delivered through the program introduces ideas around developmental leadership and working with others to pursue social change. There are also multiple opportunities to make connections with other participants, including through the residential leadership intensives and through online and face to face networking events.

The WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund provided the vehicle for putting ideas around collective leadership into practice. The Fund was designed as an opportunity for WLI participants and alumni to apply and further develop their leadership skills through experiential learning. Many project team members felt that this practical experience was particularly valuable.

Alongside organisational and management skills such as planning, budgeting and financial management, many identified the experience of working with others as among the most valuable aspects of the projects. This practical experience supported them to develop a range of relational skills including communication (with other project team members and with communities), delegation of tasks, empathy, shared decision-making, and understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. These skills are critical for individuals to work together effectively and are best learned through practice.

The experience of the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund also provided opportunities for project team members to strengthen and expand their relationships with others. These relationships – including with other project team members, organisations working in their area of interest, and communities – provide critical resources in the form of friendship and support, expertise, funding, access to other networks and relationships, and legitimacy.

SUPPORTING LOCAL PRIORITIES AND FLEXIBLE WAYS OF WORKING

In line with a locally-led approach, the WLI COVID 19 Leadership Fund was designed and managed in a way that enabled project team members to define the issues that they felt were priorities and address these in ways they saw as appropriate to the local context (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Denney and McLaren, 2016).

Projects were only required to address at least one key thematic area linked to the COVID-19 response, namely health, education, agriculture and food security, or community safety and protection, including gender-based violence.

Apart from some group coaching and support during proposal design and implementation – and two online learning sessions at the end of Round 1 – the WLI team took a relatively hands-off approach to the details of how projects were designed and implemented, trusting project teams to understand and be able to navigate the social, cultural and political contexts of the communities with which they were engaging. This approach meant that project teams gained valuable experience in consulting with communities, understanding their interests and priorities and designing projects which were relevant to communities' needs.

WLI also made an effort to ensure that the administrative and reporting requirements of the grant were proportionate, maximising the time project teams spent on implementing projects.

Project reporting was focused on learning rather than compliance, with teams asked to reflect on what they had learned about leadership through the project and how they would use these lessons (Honig and Gulrajani, 2018; Natsios, 2010).[9]

WLI also provided space for project teams to adapt their projects to respond to changing circumstances, community priorities, and what they were learning through implementation (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017; Denney and McLaren, 2016). This provided project teams with the 'space' to lead effectively.

Almost all of the teams needed to adapt their projects in some way, mostly because of COVID-19-related restrictions or needs, but in other cases because projects needed to fit with communities' own schedules, or because aspects of their original design were not feasible or practical. The WLI team actively supported the projects to be adaptable by taking a flexible approach, including extending project timelines, approving changes to budget line items and providing additional funding.

One of the projects in Papua New Guinea, for example, had originally planned to install handwashing stations in schools. However, after consultations with schools indicated that these were easily damaged, the team decided to install water tanks in the grounds of a local church. This had implications for the project budget as well as how the project was delivered. The WLI team's flexible approach ensured that the project was successful but, importantly, was implemented in a way that supported community engagement and ownership.

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9   This light touch approach was possible because of the small size of the grants and because the funds were provided as 'awards' to individual WLI participants rather than as grants to organisations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

These findings have several implications for how international development organisations can support women's leadership development in the Pacific.

BUILD INDIVIDUAL SKILLS FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

There are a range of ways that international development organisations can support collective leadership. This includes convening spaces where actors can come together, and providing financial and other support to organisations and networks (Roche and Denney, 2019; Hudson et al., 2018).

However, a collective understanding of leadership does not mean doing away with efforts to develop individual leaders. Collectives are, after all, made up of people, and work better when people understand each other, communicate clearly, have empathy, and make decisions in an inclusive way.

In this sense, developing individual relational skills is even more critical for collective forms of leadership. This requires both an approach to leadership development which emphasises these relational aspects and - given that relational skills are often best learned through practice - practical opportunities to develop these skills through 'action learning' in real-life situations (McCauley and Palus, 2021). This 'action learning' was highly valued by the women involved in the projects.

MAKE LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF LEADERSHIP MORE VISIBLE

Leadership theory and approaches to leadership development have been dominated by Western understandings of leadership (Roche and Denney, 2019).

But understandings of leadership are not universal and nor are approaches to learning (Javidan et al., 2006; Johansson Fua et al., 2021).

There is significant scope for leadership development programs to engage more explicitly with local, non-Western understandings of leadership and pedagogy (see also Hudson and Mcloughlin, 2019). These are already gaining ground in Africa (see for example Bolden and Kirk, 2009; Pérezts, Russon, and Painter, 2020) and the Pacific (see for example Johansson Fua, 2007; McLeod, 2015; Sanga and Reynolds, 2018; Sanga et al., 2020; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2019), including through the valuing of non-Western ways of seeing the world and the use of storytelling as pedagogy.

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 their implications are for exercising leadership in culturally legitimate ways. This could help make non-Western understandings of leadership more visible and valued.

The WLI team actively supported the projects to be adaptable by taking a flexible approach, including extending project timelines and providing additional funding.

EXPLORE STRATEGIES FOR EXPANDING THE SPACE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

The experiences of women implementing the projects – and broader literature from the Pacific – point to the fact that women leaders employ a range of strategies to navigate the space available – or potentially available - to them to exercise leadership. Such strategies can work to push against social and cultural norms around women's leadership by 'playing the game to change the rules' (Roche et al., 2018). This is central to the contestation of ideas that is at the heart of developmental change (Hudson et al., 2018).

There is value in examining these strategies more explicitly in leadership development programs, including through discussion and dialogue among emerging and more experienced women leaders about what has worked, in what contexts and why. Further exploration can draw inspiration from Spark, Cox and Corbett's (2018) study of pioneering women politicians of the Pacific that identified common characteristics and strategies that women can use to navigate male-dominated spaces of leadership. This would support emerging leaders to better understand how they can challenge gendered perspectives on leadership in ways that are politically and culturally savvy and, in some cases, avoid backlash.

SUPPORT 'EVERYDAY' WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

There is a tendency for international development organisations to focus their support on increasing the representation of women in formal leadership positions, for example in parliament, the public service, or businesses. However, women seeking leadership in these spaces face numerous challenges. While pursuing greater representation of women in formal leadership should remain a priority, providing women with the skills, knowledge and confidence to exercise informal leadership opens up possibilities for shifting social norms around women's leadership 'from the ground up' (Denney and McLaren, 2016). This is consistent with the idea that gender relations are reproduced in 'the politics of the everyday', through interactions in households, communities and workplaces and that transforming day to day relationships can create broader patterns of change (see Roche and Denney, 2019, p. 15). By exercising leadership in these micro-level spaces – in safe and culturally- and politically-attuned ways - women not only build their own skills and networks, they can also 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

Finally, the experience of the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund aligns with the literature on effective approaches to supporting developmental leadership. This includes the importance of providing space for local actors to determine priorities for change by taking a more 'hands off' approach to how projects are designed and implemented, providing flexibility to enable project teams to adapt, and focusing on learning rather than compliance.

There is significant scope for leadership development programs to engage more explicitly with local, non-western understandings of leadership and pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

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Women's ability to exercise developmental leadership depends on a range of factors, including their individual characteristics, their relationships and networks with others, their access to decision-making spaces, and their credibility. Crucially, it also depends on the social, cultural and political contexts in which they operate and the space this provides for women to lead (Howard, 2019, p. 11).

The WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund – and WLI more broadly - did not aim to address all these factors. Rather, it focused primarily on developing women's skills, knowledge and confidence and building their relationships and networks and their links to communities. It also provided them with a small amount of material resources to put their leadership aspirations into practice.

Inevitably, in undertaking their projects, project team members had to navigate social and cultural norms which were not necessarily supportive of women's leadership.

As a project team member from Papua New Guinea reflected:

> "If we are to have an equal playing field with our male counterparts in influencing change ... we need to support women to lead development initiatives that target the needs of communities... Men use money to influence change. We women will change the status quo through initiatives that have a real impact in communities."

Shifting social norms about women's leadership is a long-term endeavour, which requires a whole-of society effort.

While acknowledging this considerable challenge, the WLI COVID-19 Leadership Fund has helped to equip project team members to contribute to this effort in their own way.

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IMAGE CREDITS AND DETAIL

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Cover Image – WLI alumna Laisani Macedru displays boxes of sanitary products, Veinanumi Project (Fiji) (WLI).

Page 9 – Two women from preventing gender-based violence project, Papua New Guinea (WLI).

Page 14 – Two women from economic empowerment of women during COVID project, Papua New Guinea (WLI).

Page 23 – Empowering mothers to keep families safe project (WLI).