

## Effective Support for Women's Leadership in the Pacific: Lessons from the Evidence

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### Introduction

Exercising effective leadership with legitimacy and influence is a complex endeavour, particularly so for women operating in male-dominated domains, and potentially even more so for women in the Pacific. In Pacific Island countries,<sup>1</sup> women's leadership in formal spaces, such as politics or organisational leadership, is low in comparison to global standards. Researchers have also reported a lack of women's participation in decision-making at community and household levels. Women's leadership is a priority for development organisations and the barriers to leadership faced by women are well researched and documented. Yet, the task of translating evidence into policy and programs that address the gendered nature of leadership, particularly in Pacific Island contexts, remains perplexing. Most attention to date has focused on women's participation in formal political positions; other types of leadership require further understanding.

Evidence on leadership tends to group women's experiences and risks reducing diverse women to technical or passive objects that require 'fixing'. Alternatively, women may be described in ways that are oppositional to and/or subordinate to all men (Cornwall et al. 2007; Mohanty 2003). Leadership program participant voices are limited in women's leadership literature. Yet, Mohanty (ibid.) argues it is the nature of women's specific and contradictory experiences that provide important lessons on effective strategies for change; while Cornwall et al. (ibid.) call for policymakers to understand effective development from the position of women's experiences rather than universalised gender policies.

The Pacific Islands encompass diverse countries and cultures and women's lived experiences in this context are complex and unpredictable. They are shaped not only by their gender, but also by a range of other life circumstances including location, class, educational status, religion, and family connections. The Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) is part of a range of efforts to support women's leadership in the Pacific, including programs such as the Women's Leadership Initiative, and support for women candidates contesting PNG elections. Women participating in these programs have at times shared perspectives that challenge generalisations about women's leadership. Further work with these women will be undertaken in coming years to create a depth of understanding about the opportunities and challenges for emerging women leaders in the Pacific Islands. The perspectives of these upcoming leaders, while they do not represent the views of all women, are shared in this evidence review to challenge thinking around appropriate forms of leadership support.

Part One of this review explores three themes: common conceptualisations of leadership; the gendered nature of leadership; and understanding leadership in the Pacific. Part Two is in three sections. The first section draws out important lessons for policy and program design. In doing so it acknowledges the important work completed by development organisations in this space. Secondly, a summary of key lessons is given. The third and last section proposes future directions that would complement existing research.

## Part 1: Leadership

### Common conceptualisations of leadership

#### Collective or individual leadership?

Effective leadership has been recognised as key to promoting active and transparent democracies, well-functioning institutions and economic growth in developing country contexts (Leftwich and Hogg 2007). In response, development partners have invested in leadership development for quite some time, either through specialised leadership programs or as a part of programs in other areas such as peacebuilding, health or education (Pacific Women 2017). Leftwich and Hogg (2007) call for development partners to recognise the collective aspects of leadership exercised through coalitions and networks, as it is collectives rather than individuals that have the capacity to navigate and push for the change required to meet development challenges. The authors also point out that much work is still to be done to understand the nature of leadership, systems of power and influence and the politics (both formal and informal) of development. Yet a subsequent review of 67 leadership development programs (LDPs) aimed at potential ‘good’ men and women leaders found that program designs are mostly based on individualised notions of leadership. The review found that programs tend to invest in the leadership capabilities of ‘alleged “good” leaders and presuppose the existence of robust institutions in the context in which participants work’ (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). This descriptor of typical leadership programs is far removed from Leftwich and Hogg’s call for understanding how power, politics and influence affect leadership for sustainable development outcomes.

#### Defining leadership for development

In part, the disconnect between assertions of collective and politically informed developmental leadership and individualised program design can be attributed to the ambiguity of the concept of ‘leadership’, which can lead to diverse expectations and interpretations of how leadership programs should be implemented and measured (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). Lyne de Ver and Kennedy recommend that a first step in the creation of any LDP is to ‘articulate your own understanding of leadership and its role for development’ (ibid:44), as the ‘particular choice of the definition of leadership strongly influences the content

and method of programmes’ (ibid:5):

It seems important, therefore, that LDPs explicitly and clearly formulate and articulate their theoretical standpoint with regard to both the nature of leadership, and the way in which the programme will ‘develop’ or change the participants and their communities – both what leadership is and what LDPs should do and create. (ibid:5)

The notion of collective leadership to promote change has been adopted widely by development partners (Andrews et al. 2010; Denney and McLaren 2016) and is also recognised in women’s studies, as the following definitions reveal:

Developmental leadership is an inherently political process involving the organization and mobilization of people and resources in pursuit of particular goals, in given institutional contexts of authority, legitimacy and power (often of a hybrid kind). Achieving these goals, and overcoming the collective action problems which commonly obstruct their achievement, normally requires negotiating locally appropriate institutions by formal or informal coalitions of interests, elites and organizations, both vertical and horizontal. (Leftwich 2009:14)

Leadership capacity ... is ... the capacity of a human collectivity to generate needed decisions, actions and behavioural and/or role changes necessary for the pursuit of a shared goal. It refers to the group’s capacity to generate leadership initiatives and exercise influence over its authorized leaders. (UNDP 2006a:5)

Leadership is not a position or a person but a process of influence, often aimed at mobilising people towards change.... ‘adaptive leadership’ explores how to exercise leadership with less authority (the formal power that comes from position)...[and focuses] on complex public policy and community problems, where the leadership task might involve, for example, supporting groups to face realities and accept responsibilities, creating opportunities and encouraging aspiring leaders to foster social learning or sustainable problem-solving. In this version, leaders are less likely to be out front, telling followers what to do, and more likely to be in

groups, working from within, between, sometimes on the edge or from below. (Sinclair 2014:19)

### Transactional or transformational leadership?

As well as collective notions of leadership, LDPs tend to emphasise transformational rather than transactional leadership (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). Transformational leaders inspire and facilitate groups to aim for radical change. This type of leadership requires environments of trust, creativity and confidence (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011; Vetter 2010). In contrast, ‘a transactional leader engages in bargaining and negotiating, promising results or tangible goods in exchange for followership or cooperation’ (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011:10). Transformational and transactional leadership are often pitted as oppositional approaches; however, it may be appropriate at times to employ both approaches or enable some crossover at different points in time:

Leadership thus involves the capabilities for, and process of, mobilising people and resources. This includes the political aspect of mobilising people – that is the ability to navigate power relations, and secure desired outcomes through contestation or negotiation, by building strategic coalitions in formal political space and through informal networks and institutions, and by co-opting or blocking opponents. (Domingo et al. 2015:9)

### Leadership is a networked, collective and political process

Thus, common elements across these definitions suggest that effective leadership to promote sustainable development is not necessarily based on the traditional notions of an out-in-front, charismatic leader, but rather a network of leaders who, either overtly or subversively, influence agenda setting, decision-making, and resource allocation to create acceptance of different ways of doing things. Leadership is about influence and brokering through ‘inviting people, reaching out, facilitating engagement, bringing people together and coordinating’ based on knowledge of different people and groups, built on a foundation of trust and collaboration rather than an exercise of power through a formal leadership position (Andrews et al. 2010:17; UNDP 2006b). It is also about holding formal leaders to account for enacting policies, declarations and pledges (Andrews et al. 2010; Oxfam 2016). Leadership is an ongoing process, rather than a tangible outcome

at a set point in time, and occurs at many levels, including in formal and informal spaces, at national and sub-national levels, in institutions, organisations, communities and families.

### Investing in effective leadership networks

While development partners have been clear in articulating the political, collective and networked aspects of leadership, less clear is what effective networks might look like, how power manifests through less visible or tangible networks and how development partners can meaningfully invest in leadership network development:

Where change emerges from leadership, it involves many different ‘leaders’ fulfilling different functions and building space to solve problems. We believe that change is so seldom successful because at least in part, this type of leadership is seldom emphasised and practised. (Andrews et al. 2010:58)

As highlighted earlier, most LDPs continue to invest at the individual level of leader development — defined as ‘an investment in human capital to enhance intrapersonal competence of selected individuals’ (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011:7) — rather than investing in leadership development generally, which is ‘an investment in social capital to develop interpersonal networks and cooperation within organizations and other social systems’ (ibid:7):

If leadership is an individual attribute then it is perfectly sensible to bring together an international group of ‘leaders’ who can learn from one another and develop into better or more effective leaders when they return to their own environments. If leadership is a group process, however, it would make more sense to bring together a group of people from the same context who will continue to connect, interact, relate to, and work with one another in their real lives, in order to create ‘leadership’ within that group and in their context. (ibid:7)

Leadership programs may therefore need to consider how to provide participants with the best chance of developing and maintaining networks that have the potential for influencing change. Network development may not be sustained when commonalities are defined by donor rather than participant interests, as revealed

by this leadership program participant:

Two weeks together, we'll try to get along and go home and do better as leaders. Back in country there is no guidance. (Leadership Program Participant 1)

Programs focused on leadership as a group process and political activity would assist potential leaders to deepen their knowledge of key influencers and gatekeepers, learn about models of networked leadership and understand strategic influence and effective forms of social action for change. At a basic level, women are more likely to continue to interact and connect in their 'real lives' if they share common interests on the basis of their profession, sector, location, and/or the issue in which they seek change.

### What are the implications of investing in political and networked leadership?

Recent efforts to establish leadership coalitions and networks are yet to provide lessons on establishing sustainable and meaningful coalitions, partly due to the complexities in understanding influence, power and leadership networks (Pacific Women 2017). As highlighted earlier, it is important to interrogate program designs to ensure they are not based on benign assumptions, primarily that leadership program participants will return to well-functioning environments with robust institutions, and networks and people that are waiting to be changed or influenced (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). While donor partners may see coalition building as one answer to social change, for leadership program participants, their lived reality may mean that coalitions are defined on the basis of what it takes to get by:

When I don't involve them they get pissed off, they get nasty. I guess that is coalition making. (Leadership Program Participant 2)

Forging alliances and building coalitions requires leaders and leadership networks to be responsive to complex contexts (Domingo et al. 2015). Leaders may work within systems they do not agree with and may need to build relationships and influence decision-makers with substantially different agendas (Pratt and Yongvanit 2016). For leadership program participants, support may not necessarily come from other 'good' leaders but rather emerge from places where it is least expected, as observed by this

leadership program participant reflecting on a strong woman leader in her community:

She had coalitions, she always had people on her side who most of the time we thought were the least likely of people to bring forward her agenda, to be that change. (Leadership Program Participant 4)

In environments where corruption is widespread, developmental leaders may need to be mindful of 'the size of the bubble within which they work', as confronting corruption directly may risk 'undermin[ing] ... community relations, and potentially make them targets' (Pratt and Yongvanit 2016:72). These types of environments require leaders to know the difference between 'cooperation and co-optation, to know when oppositional tactics are likely to help or hinder the cause' (O'Neil 2016:24). This requires a well-developed sense of judgement, or the ability to weigh up which networks or power systems to connect with, the costs and benefits of creating change and when action is worthwhile (Charrad 2010). However, for emerging leaders,<sup>2</sup> translating theoretical knowledge to the realities of localised politics in small communities can be challenging, and while alliances may be fruitful in the short-term, they can also leave leadership program participants vulnerable to political change:

I was working under a different administrator and he was very supportive of leadership and change, but because ... a new person was elected as the governor, he was removed, sidelined ... so that's why I'm hanging ... I don't know what the new person will be like, you know. (Leadership Program Participant 3)

The role for developmental partners in this case may be to assist emerging leaders to acquire the skills to navigate these complex contexts and to know when to compromise (Pratt and Yongvanit 2016). Yet donor partners also need to recognise that forging alliances or 'coalition building' is an inherently political act, and the changing of people in influential positions is outside leadership program participants' control. Furthermore, leadership programs may need broad conceptualisations of influential networks, beyond formal decision-making networks or women's groups, and greater understanding of less visible forms of power. Power may be exercised through 'intensely informal, localised and personality-driven politics' in small island states (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018:5).

Women's access to patronage networks can provide a key form of influence, and family networks and elite backgrounds are an important enabler for leadership (O'Neil and Domingo 2016). It would be beneficial to undertake further research to understand appropriate roles for development partners in facilitating effective and influential network development.

### Networked leadership successes may be difficult to track

While change, in terms of the distribution of resources, power and opportunities, is the ultimate goal of developmental leadership, the World Bank offers a more nuanced view that 'leadership helps to create and expand' space for change by building acceptance of new ideas, securing resources, and creating accountability for change (Andrews et al. 2010). When leaders are operating through collective networks with subversive strategies to create room for change, their achievements may be more difficult to track (Pratt and Yongvanit 2016). The focus needs to shift from individual achievement or tangible outcomes at a set point in time and instead require us to consider the actions that can be taken to promote supportive environments for transparent and effective leadership.

While women leaders' capacity for success will be influenced by their individual agency, supportive environments for women's leadership are fundamental. For women in particular, their agency — referred to by donors as women's capacity or skills to exercise leadership — will be constrained by their access to resources, networks and opportunities. In addition, social relations at the household and community level will impact women's abilities to participate in public life. Finally, structures that inhibit or enable women's leadership may be tangible (such as workplace policies, quotas or legislation), yet are often intangible (such as social norms that impact women's daily lives) (Lokot et al. 2014). For example, as this leadership program participant illustrates, social norms around land ownership can indirectly impact on more tangible structural constraints, such as access to finance:

Because women can't own land, that really inhibits and impacts women's access to finance. We have women who have very good jobs, they have the money, but they just don't have the land. (Leadership Program Participant 6)

Development partner effort has lacked attention to these less tangible yet powerful factors that will

impact women's leadership (Lokot et al. 2014; Pacific Women 2017). Programs with a focus on women's leadership will need to consider the gendered nature of leadership and how this will affect women's capacity to develop influential networks and exercise leadership at household, community and institutional levels.

### *The gendered nature of leadership*

Leadership, either by individuals or networks, requires followers, and followers will shape expectations of and preferred forms of leadership. These expectations are shaped by cultural and social norms as well as economic and political contexts (Bullough and de Luque 2014:38) and can lead to preferences for men rather than women to be leaders. This means that the nature of accepted and expected forms of leadership, as well as the spaces in which leadership is exercised, is gendered:

Women cannot simply be 'added' to constructions that are literally defined by being masculine: the public sphere, rationality, political identity, objectivity, 'breadwinner.' Either women as feminine cannot be added (i.e. women must become like men) or the constructions themselves are transformed (i.e. adding women as feminine alters their masculine premise and changes their meaning) ... In short, adding women exposes how categories and frameworks themselves are biased toward masculine bodies, experience, interests, and knowledge claims. (Peterson and Spike 2004:31)

Research on women's leadership indicates that women leaders face a double bind in terms of how they present themselves and exercise authority. Women leaders who take charge and adopt more autonomous leadership styles can be penalised if their leadership style is perceived as too masculine (Bullough and de Luque 2014; Derks et al. 2016; Vetter 2010). On the other hand, women leaders who adopt more collaborative, empathetic or participative 'feminine' styles may then be criticised for not being assertive or tough enough. Thomas and Adams (2010) document how Michele Bachelet (Chile's first woman president) and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (the first woman head of state in Africa) worked with gendered constructions of leadership in their political campaigns. Both women directly rebutted public perceptions about women's inability to lead, but at the same time embraced stereotypes about women's nurturing and collaborative

styles to demonstrate to the public that these attributes would be a strength in office. Yet this is indicative of individual women's experiences where the 'rules of the game' (Barbara and Haley 2014:4) have normalised masculine leadership and cast women as the exception or aberration. The question of whether more women in power can start to normalise women's leadership and inspire other women — or the 'role model effect' — requires further research (Underhill-Sem et al. 2016:25).

### Bargaining, deception and subversion tactics

Women may exercise leadership through subtle forms of power because their relationships 'with power holders is complicated and so are the strategies that women develop to bargain, to make demands and to effect change' (Charrad 2010:518). These subtle forms of power are sometimes labelled as strategic or subversive agency and may take the form of 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance' (Kabeer 1999:438). Women's ability to exercise leadership therefore may come about through their strategic ability to:

- circumnavigate groups that suppress their agency (Kabeer 1999)
- respond to setbacks or failure (Cornwall and Goetz 2005) and
- make use of constraining structures to their advantage (Charrad 2010).

Yet, as this leadership program participant highlights, while women may be strategic, this can mean they do not receive recognition for their achievements or respect for their leadership:

What I found was, when I achieved a lot, they don't recognise what you achieved. That you worked hard. 'You've been strategic' or 'you used your connections to your advantage' ... I manoeuvre a lot. Like picking the right time, the right place ... But when I do it and I succeed ... they will never say 'oh she did it', they will always find a reason to say I got it in an unfair way — it's never accredited to me. (Leadership Program Participant 2)

Alternatively, when women break new ground, their achievements may be attributed to organisational commitments to gender equality rather than their knowledge and skills:

Family friends were already saying things like, 'Oh don't worry ... They will want to be seen as

a good organisation so they'll take you because you're a woman' ... And I was thinking in my head, 'No, I actually followed the process, so it's not because I'm a woman'. (Leadership Program Participant 1)

As Beşpınar argues, 'romanticizing women's agency and strategies by not questioning their consequences for women's empowerment is ... problematic' (2010:525). Securing leadership for women without cultural and structural change can risk a worsening of gender relations (Charrad 2010). Women who succeed within male-dominated domains may need to align themselves with powerful groups as a survival mechanism, groups that benefit from the status quo (Derks et al. 2016). In addition, women leaders may themselves hold conservative beliefs about women and men's roles and reinforce rules to maintain women's status (Kabeer 1999; Tadros 2015). What women stand for partly depends on their beliefs and values, but also on who they are indebted to, or who they have bargained with, to increase their power — particularly if they are a member of a political party (Cornwall and Goetz 2005). Women who are promoted to leadership positions in the absence of strong, supportive networks, legitimacy and influence may be unable to exercise effective leadership and reinforce public perceptions that leadership is not a woman's domain (Derks et al. 2016; Newton Cain 2013; O'Neil 2016). Subversive or strategic forms of agency may lead to changes in the practical needs of women, for example, to appease husbands' concerns about their participation in employment outside of the home, but may not be transformative to gender relations or socio-cultural norms (Beşpınar 2010).

### Recognising gender norms

A gendered analysis of leadership goes beyond counting the leadership positions that are occupied by men and women or documenting the leadership styles that are typically associated with men and women. A gender analysis can draw attention to values and daily practices that are normalised and the positions that are considered 'natural' for men and women to occupy, as well as the topics on which women and men have authority. Noticing what is valued can also highlight what is devalued and the practices that reinforce inequality between men and women, inequality that is often considered inevitable or even natural (D'Costa

and Lee-Koo 2009; Peterson and Spike 2004). Paying attention to what is controversial can be a useful way to reveal entrenched gender norms (Charlesworth 2009), as noticing what has become normalised is more difficult, as highlighted by this leadership program participant:

I feel as if as women we have to do extra work to feel as if we've earned a seat at the table ... Whereas for men it's almost like they're already sitting at the table and we've got to come up for the reasons why they shouldn't. (Leadership Program Participant 5)

It is also important to note that gender roles are fluid and negotiated, so that what is acceptable in some contexts may be more controversial in others or at different points in time (Domingo et al. 2015; Petesch et al. 2018). For example, women's exercise of leadership in 'masculine' domains such as defence, international relations or finance may be considered less 'natural' than 'feminine' domains such as education, health or community. Yet these 'masculine' domains tend to have higher value and provide greater status and more pathways to influence, thus reinforcing gender inequality in formal leadership positions (Thomas and Adams 2010). Gender norms also affect women's beliefs about what is possible, or what is normal, and few women may have aspirations to participate in those domains which are considered masculine (Bullough and de Luque 2014).

### Implications for assessing change

Policymakers need to question the assumption that simply having more women in leadership will create change. Women's leadership programs may expand participants' imagination of what's possible (Kabeer 1999) and develop their skills to navigate complex contexts, but potential 'good' women leaders may not naturally seek to challenge structural barriers — or develop and enact strategies for positive social change. Women will act in accordance with their ideologies and priorities, which may or may not match with overall leadership program goals. Women's actions may also be informed by their pragmatic assessments of the conflicting pressures they face, as well as what they have to gain and what they have to lose. Leadership program participants face the challenge of returning to home communities and may need to take the time to fit in and be accepted prior to exercising leadership:

I feel that I will be going back and starting from scratch because I've been away for two years ... they will probably feel that I'll come back being a Miss Know-it-all and try and impose on them ... even if it's for their benefit ... they'll see me as trying to create waves. (Leadership Program Participant 6)

Measuring women's individual success therefore 'should not be focused on value laden questions, such as whether an individual has made "good" choices or made "good" achievements but rather what is the direction that their choices are taking, and what is the meaning of that for them' (Kabeer 1999:461). The choices women make can reveal their responses to complex contexts and the extent of their learning about effective leadership. Yet to avoid burdening women alone with the responsibility for creating positive social change, programs that develop individual capacity need to be complemented with additional supports and cross-program collaboration to address the structural barriers to women's leadership.

### Understanding leadership in the Pacific

#### A long history of women's leadership, yet high levels of political under-representation

Across the Pacific, women have demonstrated leadership not only in formal political positions, but also in public sector governance, private sector development, anti-nuclear campaigning, sports, education, cultural heritage and climate change activism (George 2012; Pacific Community 2017a; 2017b). Women also provide leadership in healthcare (Rumsey et al. 2016), tourism (Movono and Dahles 2017) and the informal economy (Underhill-Sem et al. 2014). Women's leadership is not a recent phenomenon. Women's groups (including church groups) have been active for quite some time at national and community levels (Douglas 2003; George 2012; Pollard 2003), women held political office positions in the Pacific before independence and in the early post-independence period and senior public sector positions since at least the 1970s (McIntyre 2017; Pollard and Waring 2009). However, the number of women represented in political and organisational leadership positions has been and continues to remain low by global standards. For example, the Pacific has the lowest level of political representation by women in the world, at an average of 6.1 per cent of positions

across the independent Pacific (Baker 2017). Women are under-represented at senior levels of the public sector and private sector organisations and 'there is also a lack of political will to implement measures to increase the participation of women in national and regional governments as well as in senior management positions' (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2016:10). Women's participation in leadership in the education sector is also low. For example, in 2006 and 2008 respectively, 2.9 per cent of principals in Solomon Islands and 3.9 per cent of school principals in Vanuatu were women (Strachan et al. 2010:67), while in Samoa men's representation in educational leadership is disproportionate to their overall participation in the education sector (Schoeffel et al. 2017).

### Gender in the Pacific

Gender constructions in the Pacific are country and even locally specific. Colonial influencers assumed and promoted men's rights over decision-making, natural resource management and property ownership, and encouraged beliefs that a man's place is in the public sphere while a woman's is the household (Brouwer et al. 1998; Jolly 2015). Men continue to hold the majority of formal leadership roles at village, community and national levels (Underhill-Sem et al. 2016), while women have been consistently represented as 'mothers, wives, daughters and sisters — as members of families, both nuclear and extended ... rather than as citizens with the same rights as male citizens' (Dickson-Waiko 2003:102). It is not only men who produce and reinforce these values; women also internalise the practices and beliefs that reproduce inequitable relations and, as mentioned earlier, this is not unique to the Pacific.

However, the gendered nature of leadership in the Pacific is more nuanced than these generalisations (Eves and Koredong 2015; Haley and Zubrinich 2016). For example, as this leadership program participant reveals, women may be able to draw on family status and networks to find windows for exercising leadership:

Because from my dad's side I come from a chieftan family, so I use that. I have the provision to speak and although they are much older than me, they gave me respect ... It is a small place and most of the people already in senior positions are locals and they kind of know ... Otherwise it's not normal for women to speak up in public places unless you come from a chieftan family

... They still think culturally, so I might as well practice that. (Leadership Program Participant 3)

### Understanding leadership and gender relations through social groups

Researchers have highlighted that gender relations in the Pacific are best understood through social groups. Relations with siblings can be equally as, if not more, important as relations with elders or spouses in defining women's decision-making power (Brouwer et al. 1998; Saovana-Spriggs 2007). Complementarity or 'power sharing arrangements between men and women' (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:26) may be more relevant than comparing the status of 'women to men as populations of isolated individuals' (Jolly et al. 2015:4). Similarly, notions of leadership may also emphasise social relationships rather than individual attributes. For example, women in Maezama's study perceived leadership to be founded on the 'notion of service and working across networks' and in relation to others in their community, especially men and 'big men' (2015:58). Similarly, in Strachan et al. (2010) women described leadership in relation to family and community obligations, and in Alver (2017) in service of God and to husbands. Young women in the Pacific Young Women's Leadership Alliance (PYWLA) online dialogue series (2013) and Eves and Koredong's study (2015) also echoed the role of leaders in providing service to others through role modelling, taking responsibility and collective and inclusive decision making. Therefore, what might be best suited to Pacific contexts is integrated programs that consider women's leadership as a collective attribute exercised through relationships with men and women in extended family and community settings, as well as organisations.

### Recognising the heterogeneity of Pacific women

It is important to avoid viewing Pacific women as one group, as various forms of social status — such as family connections, socio-economic statuses, and religious affiliations — also shape women's lived experiences (Underhill-Sem et al. 2016):

I had this view that because we're from the Pacific that my situation was the same as theirs. But it's not. (Leadership Program Participant 8)

Women's leadership in more formal political positions has been linked to their levels of education, family



status, service to community, wealth and traditional ranks (Schoeffel et al. 2017). Yet as this leadership program participant highlights, international educational experiences may not automatically create leadership legitimacy:

I was at school abroad and then went back to Papua New Guinea to work. I think my first two years were actually just learning how do you relate to people and then ... about what you can offer up. That helps to not only engage them but help win their trust and then, that you know people will know whether you're sincere or not. (Leadership Program Participant 5)

Large divides may exist on the basis of women's age, geographic location and/or educational status (Eves and Koredong 2015; Jolly et al. 2015; PYWLA 2013; Spark and Lee 2018). Young women in particular are under-represented in leadership (Eves and Koredong 2015; PYWLA 2013).

### The gap between informal and formal leadership opportunities

Gender roles are fluid and negotiated, so women may be able to exercise leadership and experience success in some contexts but not in others (Domingo et al. 2015). Schoeffel et al. (2017) find that women's leadership in Samoa has increased in business and government as women have become more educated, however, governance at both village and national levels remains bound by traditional beliefs that position decision-making and leadership in the men's domain. In Solomon Islands, McDougall (2014) finds that women are moving into traditional local decision-making roles, however, the author hypothesises that this represents a shift in the way these roles are perceived — becoming less powerful and more feminised — rather than women taking up increasing power. Maezama's study in Solomon Islands (2015) and Motusaga (2016) and Schoeffel et al. (2017) in Samoa find that women's experiences of leadership at the community level do not translate to institutional or more formal chances for leadership. In more formal domains, women feel difficulty in finding voice and lack role models and support.

Women may face differing levels of acceptance of their leadership in local or national, organisational or community spaces. Donor partners have turned their attention to local level leadership in response to a lack of inroads at national levels and the perception that

the local level is more accessible for women. However, as these leadership program participants highlight, the local level may be more embedded in tradition and more difficult for women to navigate:

She always said if you're capable ... nothing should hold you back. You should always have the courage to stand up, we should always fight for it. At the same time ... she can step into that professional role as a leader but she knows how to step back when it comes to a traditional setting. (Leadership Program Participant 4)

It is not easy, it is not easy in the public service in Papua New Guinea. It is not easy being a woman, and also cultural perceptions. It might have been easier at the national level but not in the provincial level. It takes a lot of courage and manoeuvring through the bureaucratic process ... I would face a lot of challenges because most of the positions were men and they would think this gender thing is some kind of feminist women's movement, they didn't understand. (Leadership Program Participant 3)

Further research is required to understand the relationship, if any, between traditional leadership roles at local levels and organisational and national leadership positions. Assumptions that pathways exist between local and national leadership need further unpacking and exploration (Underhill-Sem et al. 2016).

### The importance of working with men and the whole community

At times, gender equity programs are reduced to working with women only, yet Charlesworth highlights that conflating gender and women

...causes a number of problems. First, it links gender with biology, implying that gender is a fixed, objective fact about a person. It does not capture the ways that gender is constructed in society ... It... obscure(s) the ways that gender shapes our understanding of the world. *It requires women to change, but not men.* (2009:31, author's emphasis).

Women leading for change is inevitably a disruption to the existing ways of doing things and can be perceived as a zero-sum game: women win, and men lose. As modernisation brings about changes in gender roles, there has been a notable increase in gender violence, which is sometimes attributed to

men's 'troubled masculinities' (Jolly 2012; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012:81). The narrative of 'troubled masculinities' positions men as the victims and women as the beneficiaries of modernisation (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012). Yet the assumption that women will automatically be empowered through increased access to opportunities needs to be tested.

Research by Eves (2018) highlights that men may use a number of strategies to reduce women's ability to participate in public life. Controlling behaviour by men was noted as women's economic opportunities increased. For example, if women's income-generation activities interfered with their fulfilment of expected gender roles (such as domestic or childcare responsibilities) men may limit women's permission to attend or travel to meetings outside of the home. Jolly et al. (2015) report similar experiences for women in Vanuatu, and Pacific Women (2017) and Strachan et al. (2010) also note that women's risk of violence, particularly in close relationships, can prevent women from speaking out or seeking to exercise leadership. At a practical level, women seeking to exercise leadership need freedom of movement to attend meetings (including in the evening), both formal and informal, where decisions are made (Uteng 2011). As this leadership program participant reveals, freedom of movement can be constrained just as much by cultural expectations as by security concerns:

I don't want her (participant's daughter) to go through what I went through growing up in Honiara. Just being controlled, not feeling like you have freedom and more choice in situations. In Honiara you can't stay out after dark, you have to be in and you have to be cooking ... even now that I'm married and have children if there is a thing that means I'm out of the house at like seven at night my mother is like, 'Why aren't you home? It's dark now.' I'm like, 'Mum, I'm 38, I have a teenage daughter.' And she is like, 'old people talk, you are married, you have in-laws, you have to think about them.' (Leadership Program Participant 1)

A number of authors highlight how women have found strategies to work with men to open doors and influence decision making, or to enable them to take up opportunities to improve their wellbeing or livelihoods. Men are often the leaders and/or gatekeepers to key decision making, and so women's ability to form

alliances with influential men at the household, community and institutional level is important (O'Neil and Domingo 2016):

You can't work without men, honest, it doesn't work ... Just women, women, women, it will never work ... [but] you have to recognise if they're doing it for their own interests or whether they're being genuine ... You can tell from how they talk, how they treat their wives and children. (Leadership Program Participant 2)

Women are strategic and can navigate entrenched social norms and cultural beliefs 'to avoid alienating those resistant to change' (McLeod 2015:4). For example, Eves (2018:4) finds that women act strategically to 'minimise marital discord and violence' and Dyer (2017:194) describes a form of 'permitted empowerment' for women in Solomon Islands that avoids humiliation or shame for men. Yet, as highlighted earlier, these forms of strategic agency may sometimes challenge existing social norms, but also may risk reinforcing them. Donor partners need to broaden their focus on women and the choices they make, including their adaptations to circumnavigate challenging situations, and develop strategies for addressing men's attitudes, and for some, their violent and controlling behaviour.

As Charlesworth (2009) points out, promoting gender equity through focusing on women only is problematic; programs also need to facilitate change for men. In their evidence review of women's leadership, Lokot et al. (2014) find gaps in evidence on working with men to promote the spaces for and acceptance of women's leadership. Underhill-Sem et al. (2016:25) call for a change of 'mindsets of leaders and the rest of society' to address the contradictions between regional gender equity declarations and a lack of national and local action to support women's leadership. In addition, exploration of men's role as champions for change is worthy of further investigation:

I began to see men as ... partners for us women to effect change. All the time we have all these negative things about men doing this and men doing that, but not every man in PNG society is a violent person. (Leadership Program Participant 9)

Promoting widespread acceptance of women's leadership is a complex task that requires a long-term commitment to coordinate efforts on multiple

fronts. This includes at the institutional (e.g. media, public sector, religious organisations), community (peers, community leaders) and household levels (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2014). While donor partner projects may be based on short-term (3–5 year) timeframes, for leadership program participants, change can be viewed as a lifetime or even intergenerational endeavour:

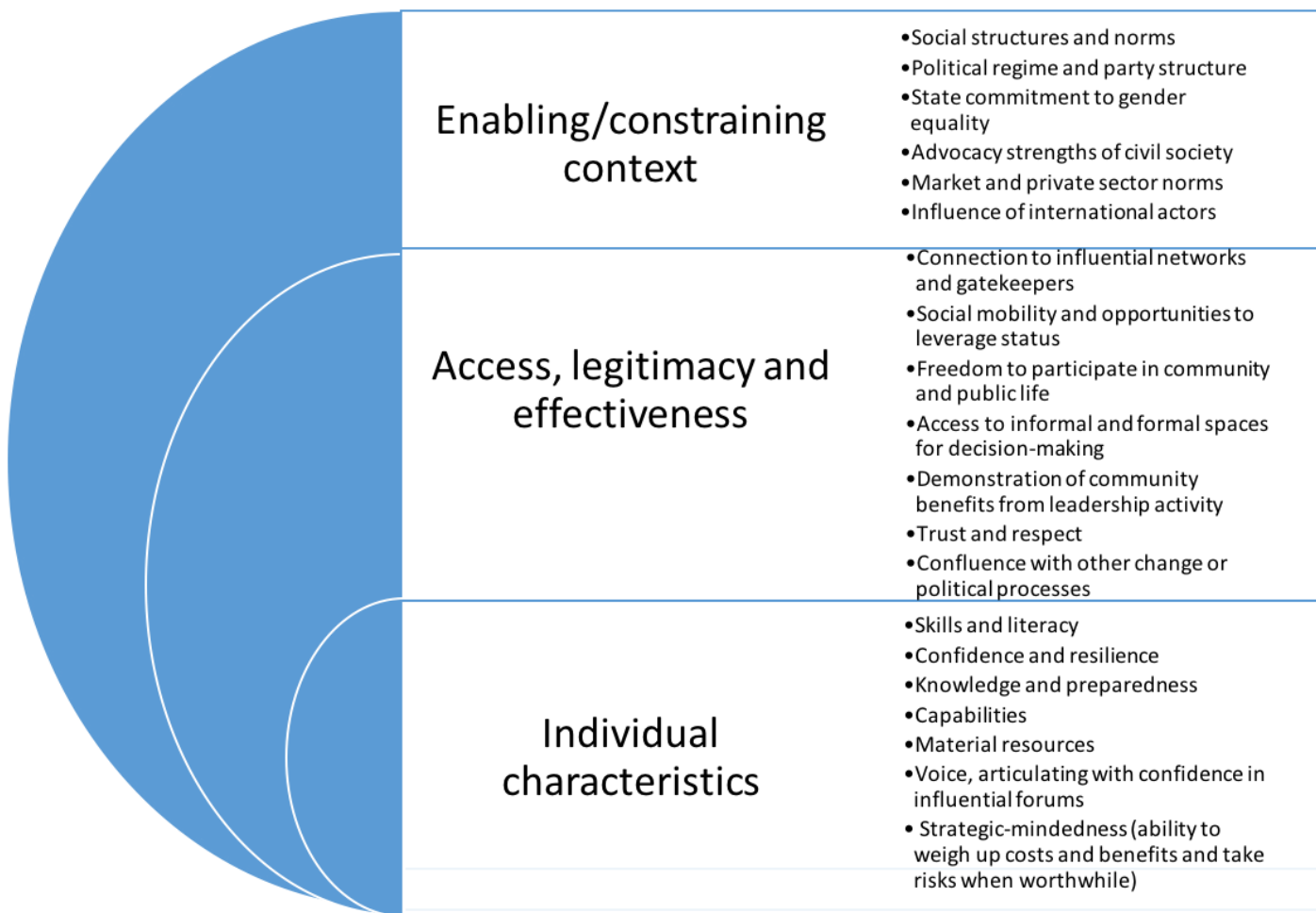
I said this as a joke [but] sometimes we have to wait for a whole generation to die ... and that's okay because we play our part and I'm completely at peace with that ... my generation will be remembered as the ones that got to fight to get this far. I think you can't be over-ambitious, you can be disappointed. So we do what is within our capability, our means and environment and that's okay. (Leadership Program Participant 5)

## Part 2: Lessons

### *Policy and program implications: factors affecting women's exercise of leadership*

As highlighted in the earlier discussion, women's leadership is affected not only by individual skills, confidence and capacity but also by legislative and institutional contexts and gender relations. This evidence review highlights that leadership development requires a combination of efforts to build individuals' capacities as well as address the gendered nature of leadership, women's access to the resources and pathways that enable leadership and institutional and legislative environments, as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conditions or factors affecting women's leadership.<sup>3</sup>



While this diagram may seem to present a list of pre-conditions to women's leadership, it may be best viewed as a system. Some conditions may support women's leadership, but it is unlikely that all or even most of these conditions will be favourable to women. In addition, the conditions may be favourable in some settings, such as workplaces, but not in others, such as the household or community.

Yet, it is this system that shapes what is 'normal' and what is 'controversial', meaning that women operating in unfavourable contexts may stand out, be regarded as the exception to the norm or create controversy when they seek to exercise leadership.

Revisiting Lyne de Ver and Kennedy's assertion that:

It seems important, therefore, that LDPs explicitly and clearly formulate and articulate their theoretical standpoint with regard to both the nature of leadership, and the way in which the programme will 'develop' or change the participants and their communities — both what leadership is and what LDPs should do and create. (2011:5)

The intention behind acknowledging the three levels in Figure 1 is not to design programs that place onus on individual women to bring about structural change, but rather for policymakers and program designers to consider:

1. Which aspects of women's access, legitimacy and effectiveness can be addressed through a program?
2. Which further contextual challenges will need to be addressed by broader policies or programs?
3. What extent of change can be expected to be achieved?

The enabling or constraining context is the most critical and difficult level to influence. Change at this level requires a long-term (intergenerational) outlook and recognition that formal structural changes — such as gender discrimination laws, quotas or reserved places for women in leadership forums — can still be resisted by informal structural constraints such as unspoken, yet widely adhered to, social norms (Baker 2018). For leadership development programs, the more enticing and tangible level to target for change is in individual characteristics, and this is the focus of many women's leadership programs (Lokot et al. 2014; Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). However, as stated earlier, focusing on individual women in the absence

of broader efforts to promote gender equity risks reinforcing gendered constructions of leadership.

A tangible approach to effective leadership development may lie, therefore, somewhere in the middle. There are examples where women living in challenging contexts have exercised agency, persistence and resilience and made use of opportunistic strategies to bring about change. Barbara and Haley highlight 'the importance of individual developmental leaders who can mobilise a small but effective coalition that can fly under the radar ... and do the necessary legwork for successful reform' (2014:48). Leadership is an incremental process of personal and group development, and achievements may come in small steps — or sometimes backward or sideways steps. For policymakers and program designers, it is important to recognise that 'sometimes the strategies can result in meaningful changes and at other times women are strangled within the politics of survival with a continuous struggle but no change' (Charrad 2010:518).

Programs can assist women to engage with networks and build coalitions, but greater understanding is needed of how networks and collectives can navigate constraints and opportunities to create change. Greater understanding is also required about the broader actions policymakers can take to address the enabling or constraining context for women's leadership.

### **Summary: What do we know about women's leadership?**

The key lessons from this literature review are:

1. **Leadership is an ambiguous concept and networks of power and influence are often informal and lack visibility.** Leadership programs are widespread and development partners have invested in them in a range of forms to promote effective development. Yet the intangible nature of effective leadership can mean that leadership programs often default to individualised, focused programs that assume participants' return to well-functioning environments. Testing the connection between program goals and program implementation can assist with determining whether programs are truly investing in networked leadership development rather than individualised leader development.

2. **Leadership for sustainable development should be understood as a collective, networked and political process with the intention to create space for change** by building acceptance of new ideas, holding decision-makers to account and influencing agenda setting, decision-making and resource allocation. Leadership does not have to be exercised 'out in front', but through a network of leaders who mobilise groups and work from below or within to influence change for positive development outcomes. Leadership is an ongoing process, rather than a tangible outcome at a set point in time, and occurs at many levels, including in formal and informal settings, at national and sub-national levels and in institutions, organisations, communities and families.
3. **Women seeking to exercise leadership face a number of obstacles. At an individual level, women leaders need to be more strategic than men** by embracing and/or diffusing stereotypes; making choices to act either overtly or by flying 'under the radar' (Barbara and Haley 2014:48); connecting with influential people and networks; and establishing legitimacy by engaging in actions that bring community benefit. Effective leadership requires the patience to know when to take action or when to accept second best as good enough (O'Neil and Domingo 2016).
4. **For program designers, the task beyond building individual capacity is to increase women's access to decision-making forums and influential networks and facilitate the development of sustainable and effective coalitions and networks across organisations with shared goals.** Coalitions are most likely to be sustainable when they provide benefits to participants and their organisations, connect people and organisations with shared goals, interests and backgrounds and where participation can be incorporated as a routine aspect of women's 'real lives' (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). Accessing pockets of influence requires a sound understanding of the politics of an issue and knowledge of the entry points, gatekeepers and decision-makers. It also requires an awareness of other changes, processes and groups that could enhance a coalition's actions and opportune times to pursue change.
5. **Policymakers should aim to expand the spaces in which women can exercise leadership and build acceptance of women's ways of working.** Leadership is gendered and there will be times and places where a woman's leadership is not welcomed, considered controversial or devalued. Many leadership programs continue to focus on developing individuals, perhaps because this is the most tangible or enticing form of intervention. However, individual leaders alone cannot be expected to bring about the types of structural change that will create an enabling environment for women's leadership. Addressing social, political and economic structures requires working with men (including male champions of change) and the broader community, civil society, advocacy organisations and social institutions such as the media, and addressing the more formal political and organisational structures that reinforce inequality. At a very practical but fundamental level, women also need security, safety and freedom of movement and time to participate actively in public life.
6. **Measuring leadership success requires a long-term view as a process akin to 'snakes and ladders' rather than a linear approach to pursuing change.** While some enablers to leadership will be in place, it is not likely that all enablers will be in place at the same time. Leadership success can be tracked through a long-term exploratory approach to map the processes that create opportunities for change. This requires networks that can build acceptance of new ideas, secure resources and hold decision-makers to account, while also recognising the difficulties that 'sometimes the strategies can result in meaningful changes and at other times women are strangled within the politics of survival with a continuous struggle but no change' (Charrad 2010:518).

### **Research gaps: What do we need to find out?**

1. **Further research is required on the 'pathways through which presence becomes influence' (Haley and Zubrinich 2016:17) and the bridges between informal and formal leadership opportunities (Domingo et al. 2015).** Much of the existing research explores women's leadership in formal political representation or women's participation in civil society and women's groups (Eves and Koredong 2015; Lokot et al. 2014;

Newton-Cain 2013; Pacific Women 2017). Women's groups may provide a forum for developing women's leadership skills and progressing women's issues, yet there is a lack of research in this area as a pathway to promoting women's leadership outside of the 'woman's domain'.

2. **Rather than solely focusing on 'adding women' by building capacity, greater understanding is also required about the broader actions that policymakers can take to address the enabling or constraining context for women's leadership**, including working with men, community and decision-makers to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change. For decades women have demonstrated a strong capacity to exercise leadership and strategies for circumnavigating challenging circumstances. Yet women continue to face significant impediments to exercising leadership and participating in public life. The relationship between traditional and formal leadership roles, and the 'role-model' effect of promoting women to power, needs greater exploration (Underhill-Sem et al. 2016). Strategies to make gender equity a priority for everyone, not just a women's agenda, would lessen the burden on women to create change.
3. **Rather than leadership programs focusing on individual leader development, greater understanding of establishing and sustaining influential networks for change is required.** This includes exploring how programs can work with individuals to understand the systems they operate within and the gendered nature of leadership; develop their knowledge of influential groups and decision-makers; learn about models of networked leadership and how to develop strategic networks; and understand strategic influence. It also requires understanding of how to develop effective forms of social action for change and how networks and collectives can sustain action, navigate constraints and make the most of opportunities to make change possible.
4. **An important gap worth exploring is how women can exercise leadership through sectoral-based approaches instead of why they are not exercising leadership in a particular sector (Pacific Women 2017).** Greater evidence and lessons could be drawn from women who are active in pursuing issues that are important to the region outside of traditional

women's domains. Issues-based advocacy can be an effective ground for exercising leadership, yet 'there has been less systematic exploration of how this could be an effective entry-point for women to develop and demonstrate leadership skills in a particular sector' (Pacific Women 2017:7).

Women are exercising leadership in non-traditional domains, yet there are gaps in research on women's leadership in local and provincial level public service, the private sector and on boards; climate change and environmental advocacy and policy; and natural resource management including ocean and land use, such as marine, forestry or mining developments. There are also gaps in research and understanding of strategies for institutional and organisational culture change (Underhill-Sem et al. 2016).

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### Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this paper, 'Pacific Island countries' and 'the Pacific' refer to the participating countries in the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships program: Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna.
2. The nine women interview participants come from PNG, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Fiji. The women were interviewed by Marlon Butler from DPA and Nicolette Solomon of Cardno in September 2018.
3. This figure has been developed in light of this literature review and in particular with reference to a number of documents

and analysis frameworks for women's leadership: Barbara and Hayley 2014; CARE 2014; Domingo et al. 2015; Hayley and Zubrinich 2016; Lokot et al. 2014; McLeod 2015; O'Neil and Domingo 2016; Oxfam 2016; Pacific Women 2017.

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