Mentoring to Support Women's Leadership

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Executive summary

Mentoring has become an increasingly common form of assistance used by development partners to support women's leadership in Pacific Island contexts. This Policy Brief highlights the need for mentoring programs to be responsive to mentees' goals, learning processes and local contexts.

Currently, the design and implementation of mentoring programs in developing contexts are often underwritten by four key assumptions: that a mentor from a developed country can effectively and sustainably mentor a woman from a developing country context; that mentoring programs based outside a mentee's specific workplace (and country) context can transcend local structural barriers to women's leadership; that mentoring serves the same kinds of purposes in all contexts; and that mentoring methodologies used in corporate contexts can be implemented in developing contexts. These assumptions will be explored in this Policy Brief.

In order to more strongly align mentoring with meaningful policy impact in a development context, we propose the following evidence-based recommendations:

1. Complement mentorship programs with other developmental leadership programs, recognising the limitations of programs focused only on change driven by individuals.
2. Facilitate opportunities for women to find their own context-relevant mentors.
3. Match clearly, at the outset of the program, a woman's leadership objectives with the mentoring purpose.
4. Provide ongoing support to develop and strengthen mentoring relationships.
5. Support mentors to critically challenge and support the leadership aspirations and capacities of mentees within their sphere of influence.
6. Recognise the long-term and transitional nature of mentoring relationships.

What is the problem?

Women are significantly underrepresented in leadership in organisational and political contexts across the globe, including in Pacific Island countries. Mentoring is a much-touted solution to this problem, particularly in public sector and corporate governance settings. It is often positioned as a core component of professional leadership training in contexts as diverse as sports, politics and academia, and a significant body of literature has been dedicated to the success or otherwise of mentorship programs in these contexts.

The translation of mentoring as a development modality to support women's leadership has received much less academic (and development practitioner) attention. The dearth of literature, however, has not stemmed the enthusiasm for mentoring as a mechanism to support women's leadership in a development context — in politics, academia, government or the private sector — often designed with untested and unrealistic expectations of what mentoring can achieve.

What does the research show?

Our comparison of mentoring research with mentoring practices in Pacific contexts[1] shows that four key assumptions have been made in the transposition of mentoring from developed country and corporate contexts to developing country contexts.

Assumption 1: Different backgrounds do not matter in a mentoring relationship

In the last seven years, donor-funded mentoring programs have matched Pacific Island women mentees with Australian women mentors. Mentor matching is a formal process with an explicit intent to develop a mentoring relationship between mentees and people who are deemed to be an appropriately matched mentor. Bases for mentor and mentee matching might include perceived similarities in career pathways and aspirations, and/or shared experiences of marginalisation or discrimination (Ghosh and Reio 2013). For example, women mentors and mentees are often matched based on the assumption that the shared lived experience of being a woman will provide the most beneficial foundation for a mentoring relationship. However, identity and experiences of discrimination are multifaceted, and a mentee's identity as a woman cannot be separated from her cultural identity, her experiences of class difference or the legacies of colonisation.

Mentor matching where mentors have limited experiences of a mentee's cultural and social context have the potential to be counterproductive. Mentors often come from positions of advantage or privilege, while their mentees often continue to face various forms of marginalisation (Albright et al. 2017). The findings of youth development programs that match mentors and mentees of different ethnicities and socio-economic categories are illustrative in that they draw attention to the assumption that exposure to 'successful, middle-class, adult volunteers' is enough in itself to bring about change in the mentees' contexts (Albright et al. 2017). These programs fail to recognise the power imbalances that can occur in mentor matching across cultural and/or socio-economic boundaries, and the potential for these power imbalances to reinforce stereotypes.

Questions remain about whether it is more beneficial for mentees to be matched with mentors of similar gender, socio-economic, educational or cultural statuses. Appropriate matches will depend on a mentee's perceptions of their identity, the size of their community or workplace and their goals. At a practical level, mentor matching also needs to account for geography and distance. Open communication, understanding and trust are fundamental to the success of mentoring relationships, which tend to thrive through opportunities for face-to-face interaction (Dworkin et al. 2012).

Rather than assuming that a shared gender or career pathway will provide a relevant basis for a mentoring relationship, mentoring programs instead need to step back and consider where they are likely to find appropriate mentors who have the relevant context and connections for the mentees' goals. These findings point to the importance of a clear purpose to mentoring programs.

Assumption 2: Mentoring usually serves the same purpose

Mainstream mentoring literature divides mentoring purposes according to instrumental and developmental objectives (de Vries 2011). The purposes are not mutually exclusive and are best represented along a continuum (see Figure 1).

Continuum	Purpose	Description
Developmental	Facilitating critical awareness	Mentor supports mentee to develop capacity for critical questioning of power structures and to consider collective actions that can bring about change (Freire 1970; Mezirow 2000).
	Problem solving and strategising (including coaching)	Mentor supports mentee to improve contextual knowledge of the rules of the game to help the mentee better navigate their way through barriers to their leadership (Dworkin et al. 2012).
	Emotional/psychosocial support and confidence building	Mentor supports mentee to increase their confidence or knowledge and clarify their goals and directions (Harvey et al. 2009).
	Professional advice or knowledge transfer	Mentor assists the mentee with technical advice, professional development and strategies for working within existing systems (Harvey et al. 2009).
Instrumental	Sponsorship	Mentor uses influence and position of power to expose their mentee to developmental experiences through shadowing, internships, connecting with networks and advocating for the mentee when opportunities arise (de Vries and Binns 2018; Eby et al. 2008; Harvey et al. 2009).

Figure 1. Mentoring as an instrumental developmental continuum (informed by de Vries 2011).

Women tend to receive mentoring for the purposes of psychosocial support at the expense of intentional sponsorship for career progression (Ensher and Murphy 2011; Ibarra et al. 2010). In addition, mentoring for women often focuses on assisting them to change and adapt to fit in with existing systems, which can detract from the need for collective efforts to challenge barriers to women's success (de Vries 2011). The poor outcomes of many individual capacity-building programs have been linked to a focus on technical and knowledge gaps while ignoring the power and politics inherent in developmental challenges (Leftwich 2009).

Therefore, the purpose of mentoring relationships will depend on a number of factors: the interests of the mentee, mentor and, in some circumstances, the agency sponsoring the mentoring relationship; a mentee's level of agency and readiness for change; the mentor and mentee's professional, family and community connections; and the knowledge, capabilities and connections the mentor brings to the relationship. A mentor who has particular experience related to confidence building and emotional support might be poorly placed to help a mentee pursue a complex policy objective.

Assumption 3: Mentoring strategies are the same everywhere and over time

As with purpose, mentoring strategies also need to be responsive to where an individual mentee is in their leadership development. A relatively inexperienced mentee may be seeking some enabling skills and confidence for leadership (for example, public speaking or project planning). As a mentee's confidence builds, she may require different skills to critically question taken-for-granted aspects of her own and other people's lives and formulate possible actions for creating change. A mentee's positionality has consequences for the type of mentoring required, be it facilitation and guidance around thinking and reflection, opportunities for exposure and practice or encouragement to step outside personal and social boundaries and agitate for change.

Furthermore, women may be able to exercise leadership in some parts of their lives but not in others (Howard 2019). Women typically have to regenerate their leadership credentials as they transition from one sector, space, context or domain to another, for example transitioning from leading in the church to leading in local government, or leading in the workplace to leading community change (Morahan and Richman 2011). Mentoring relationships also need to evolve as women seek to apply their leadership skills in different domains. At transition points, the continued relevance of the mentoring relationship should be questioned, as well as whether a different mentor is required.

Assumption 4: Workplace culture and structural barriers can be changed through the empowerment of individual women

Mentoring programs that support individual women to develop their leadership potential while temporarily outside their usual environment (for example while on scholarship or short-term visit to Australia) anticipate that skills learnt and relationships developed in Australia are transferrable to other contexts. Yet, individual capacity-building does not occur in a vacuum and needs to be complemented by a broad range of initiatives that engage with relevant structural and organisational factors inhibiting personal capacity (Vallejo and When 2016).

Pacific women need to negotiate and secure a sufficient resource and support base to sustain their leadership (Barbara and Baker 2016), and this will require much more than a mentoring relationship. There are often unrealistic expectations about what mentoring can achieve (Eby et al. 2008), and the attribution of women's success to mentoring is difficult given that mentoring programs tend to attract high achievers (Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge 2008).

Meaningful change is likely to engender resistance from those benefiting from the status quo. Effective change strategies require reformists to be able to analyse power relationships, anticipate points of resistance, identify entry points for change and respond to the specific circumstances that frame the distribution of power. Mentoring can have the greatest impact when women are matched with a mentor who extends their legitimacy and power, or who is tapped into influential networks (Johnson and Smith 2018; Ramaswani et al. 2010).

Recommendations

In applying lessons drawn from the literature on mentoring to those from the literature on developmental leadership, a number of policy recommendations arise:

1. Mentoring programs should be complemented with broader efforts to change entrenched social norms and institutional barriers.

Mentoring should be enhanced by linking participants with broader efforts to develop change coalitions, influence reforms and bring about social change, so as to avoid making individual women responsible for social transformation in Pacific Island contexts.

2. Facilitate regular introductions and other opportunities that enable potential mentors and mentees to come together, rather than defaulting to one-on-one mentor matching.

Opportunities for women to find supportive mentors through exposure to influential networks should be encouraged and facilitated, but it must be recognised that relationships will grow where there is mutual identification of common ground and a basis for trust. Where mentor matching must be used, it should be on the basis of the mentor's understanding of and/or connection to the mentee's local context. It should also be noted that not all women will benefit from the mentorship of other women, and that men should also be considered as potential mentors.

3. The needs and goals of each mentee and each mentor should be clearly articulated at the outset of the program.

Programs should invest resources in supporting mentees to continue to reflect on and clarify their leadership goals and aspirations throughout the program's life cycle. Mentor goals and perceived benefits should also be acknowledged.

4. Provide support for mentoring relationships to develop.

Whether the mentor is found organically or matched with the mentee, mentoring programs should provide opportunities for mentors and mentees to meet regularly — preferably face-to-face — and work together on structured activities.

5. Mentors may need support to be able to critically challenge mentees and adequately support their leadership aspirations.

Programs might need to support mentors to engage in reflective processes about their own positions. This would include reflecting on their potential to reinforce or challenge stereotypes, or overemphasise individual choice narratives as a precursor to a mentee's success.

6. Mentoring should be understood as a long-term initiative.

Mentoring relationships need to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances, depending on the goals of the mentee and the progress made towards achieving them. This means a program may need to consider the different types of mentoring relationships required at different points in time.

This Policy Brief summarises key findings and lessons learned from research supported by the Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI). WLI offers emerging leaders from Pacific countries, who are Australia Awards recipients, skills development and mentoring opportunities to build leadership capability and boost gender equality. The aim of this Policy Brief is to inform policymakers and practitioners on themes and issues emerging from WLI's work and to consider their implications for developmental leadership policy and practice more broadly.

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Endnote

1. Two donor-funded programs that have used mentoring as a strategy of women's empowerment include the Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) and the former Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnerships program (PWPP). WLI is a five-year initiative of the Australian government that seeks to promote women's leadership and build a future generation of women leaders in the Pacific region by establishing partnerships between Australia-based women leaders and Pacific Island women who are on scholarship in Australia. PWPP was also a five-year program (2012–17) funded under the Australian government's Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative, primarily to support elected women in Pacific legislatures, including through a mentoring component. The mid-term evaluation of PWPP was particularly critical of its mentoring component.

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