

# Thinking and Working Politically Following a Set Back

Regional Tonga Leadership And Decision-Making

November 25, 2016

Project name: Support for Women's Groups and Coalitions

Outcome area: Leadership and decision making

Project partner: Pacific Leadership Program (PLP)

Total funding: \$200,000\*

Funding timeframe: 2015–2016

The year 2015 was an extraordinary year for gender equality in Tongan politics. In February, the Government announced at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women that it would ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Six months later, it reversed this decision. Over the past year, Pacific Women has supported the PLP to work with Tonga's Women in Leadership coalition in understanding the events of 2015 and start developing strategies to regain momentum in the bid for Tonga's ratification of CEDAW.

Women's coalitions are often a crucial force in securing developmental reform. They utilise collective power and resources to amplify the strength of women who are otherwise politically marginalised.

Such coalitions need to adapt to local political contexts. This is called 'thinking and working politically'.

The Women in Leadership coalition has worked for over a decade to achieve CEDAW ratification in Tonga. During 2015, the coalition acted to explain the legal meaning and benefits of CEDAW ratification in response to the vocal anti-CEDAW campaigning, particularly from religious leaders, asserting ratification would result in uncomfortable social outcomes for Tongan society.

The anti-CEDAW demonstrations and reversal of the government position affected members of the coalition by uniting them in their aims. Recognising that a conventional workshop would be insufficient to foster the necessary reflection and dialogue for the coalition to strategise collectively, PLP organised an overnight retreat.

'It was very useful because we had the space not to be hurried, and to think openly and reflectively,' observed one participant.

Activities focussed on communication, crafting messages to specific audiences, mapping out networks, and identifying gatekeepers and strategies for influence. Participants also received an update from the Ministry of Internal Affairs on its plans for future consultations on CEDAW.

Following the retreat and reflections on the events of 2015, the coalition is highly motivated to build bridges where relationships have been problematic, and to widen its existing network of allies. They know this has challenges but are steadfast in thinking and working politically to progress their cause: 'You really have to come back in some other friendly way, trying to appeal to people that this is not just for a limited group, but this is for the rights of all women. Women are not the only beneficiaries, everybody else will benefit if we ratify CEDAW.'



Staff of Women and Children Crisis Center (WCCC) Tonga. WCCC Tonga is one of the key organisations lobbying for CEDAW ratification in the country.  
Photo: WCCC Tonga.

*This Story of Change was originally published in the [Pacific Women Annual Progress Report 2015-2016](#). All values are consisted with that reporting period. For the most up-to-date value of activities, visit our [interactive map](#).*

\*This activity is part of a larger program.