

# The importance of building women's leadership at all levels

Papua New Guinea Regional Tonga Leadership And Decision-Making

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In the early years of Pacific Women's programming, a high proportion of the projects to support women's leadership and decision making were focused on women's political leadership. These projects both supported women to develop campaigning skills to increase their chance to win a place in parliament; and also provided opportunities to ensure elected women have the skills and networks needed to lead effectively.

Over the life of the program, lessons arising from leadership and decision-making projects have highlighted that leadership is multi-layered and connected with social norms change. Work to increase women's decision making at all levels is needed to promote women as leaders in national parliaments.

The Balance of Power program commissioned a study of voters' perceptions of women as leaders in Tonga. The results demonstrated that the path to leadership for women at national level is underpinned by social expectations of leadership at all levels of society. One of the main themes arising from the research is that the majority of surveyed Tongans believe that men are the 'leaders' of families in a traditional vertical hierarchy. This means men should attend village meetings (Fono) and be leaders in other higher decision-making circles, such as parliament. Women are expected to support men in these positions and follow their decisions. The role of women as mothers and carers continues to be viewed as the most appropriate and important role for women.

Perceptions of women as leaders were again addressed by Balance of Power through journalist training it supported in Vanuatu. Working with journalists, media trainers addressed gender-biased language and gender-neutral topics for news stories, with the training resulting in increased and fairer reporting of women candidates before the election.

However, examples from around the region of local level change show how these types of perceptions can begin to change.



Celestine Tomie the president of the Malasang women's group stands with other members outside their Resource Centre. The women all come from Malasang 1 village, they themselves have received training and also provide training for women across Bougainville working on inclusive development projects. Photo credit: World Bank / Conor Ashleigh

When both women and men experience women as successful leaders in one sphere of community life, this can lead to them being accepted in other areas of leadership. In the World Bank's Inclusive Development in post-conflict Bougainville project, women's groups were responsible for delivering community development projects. Key stakeholders from 82 per cent of the villages involved, reported significant positive changes in their communities' perceptions of the role of women in communities as a result of the project. Also in Bougainville, the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation provides training and a network for women human rights defenders through the Gender Justice and Healing project. At the 2017 local elections, 34 out of 47 communities elected women (who had been leaders in one or both of these projects) as their woman ward representatives.<sup>1</sup> Two are their community government chairpersons. This indicates women's increased skills and confidence to take on leadership roles and the communities' trust and respect in these women as their representatives.

Also in Papua New Guinea, the Women in Leadership Support program conducted studies with women who had been involved in local level government training workshops. Being deeply connected to their constituents and having the support of male local leaders were considered highly important factors to performing well in local level government elections.

This story has been developed for the [Pacific Women Final Report 2012–2021](#), featuring Pacific Women-funded initiatives and partners.

1. In Bougainville, all 47 wards are represented by both a woman and man at the community government level.