

Women's leadership: a conversation with Niki Rattle

Cook Islands Regional

SHARE

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Promoting women in leadership in formal and informal spaces as well as across the public, private and community sectors has been a longstanding challenge in the Pacific.

According to Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development's (*Pacific Women's*) [Women in Leadership Roadmap Synthesis Report](#), available evidence suggests that efforts to support women's leadership require locally-tailored strategies. There is also increasing agreement that change needs to be encouraged at different levels to address women's individual agency and

empowerment, gender relations within families and communities and gender roles within the overarching society and cultural context.

One woman leading change in her country and the region is Hon. Niki Rattle, Speaker of the Parliament of the Cook Islands. While she did not set out in her career with leadership in mind, she is leading the change in her country. Hon. Rattle outlined that it is the ingrained familial values of partnership that should inform how leadership at all levels should be practiced.

She discussed these issues and more with the *Pacific Women* Support Unit Communications Coordinator in May 2018:

Transcript: Women's leadership: a conversation with Niki Rattle

Listen to the interview: <https://pacificwomen.org/news/women's-leadership:-a-conversation-with-niki-rattle/>

Thank you so much, Niki Rattle, for making the time during the Balance of Power stakeholder workshop. We will start right from the top. The concept of leadership, what is it? What have you found it to be through your time, whether it is as Speaker of the house of Parliament back in the Cook Islands or in your career in the health world? What do you see it as?

I think the first thing is it is leading by example. You can talk about something but if you do not know exactly what it is that needs to be done and you do not know how to implement it or do it, it is very difficult to influence others to be active in doing things. I have found that by knowing what it is that needs to be done, and by actually doing it myself instead of just telling it and letting others go for it, it is actually doing it.

If I could just use a couple of examples in the case of my responsibility with Red Cross. A real important focus duty of Red Cross was to teach first aid. I started by being a trainer and then I trained others to be trainers. With disaster management, I learned what it was about and then [taught] others. I found through those exercises that if you are a doer, and then you do what you preach, you are most likely to lead with people beside you rather than not having people support what needs to be done.

I think to walk the talk, as I say, is a good way to be a leader. You do not want people following you. You want to walk along with people. That is how you build other people's capacity, not leave people behind. If you are at the same

level of understanding but able to deal with the difficult questions, when people are having difficulties, tell it like it is instead of making up stories which do not help people to learn.

[Leadership is] also encouraging people to create their own ideas and put them on the table. [It is] being able to give them the opportunity to do those things and then see how they work. Then, if there are problems, being able to bring the things that are going to enable them to do those things. Allow people to find themselves [and] their own leadership as well. I think that helps to be a leader.

Is it a form of working, leading [and] walking along others, that has been something that you have always wanted to do?

That has been my type of leadership. I did not actually plan to be a leader. It has happened along the way. It happened along the way by action. I think sometimes you can be a talker with no action and really get nowhere. But when you are demonstrating, doing what it is and also passionate about what you do, [you are a leader].

If you are passionate about something, it gives you that extra drive and not just be a job you have to do. [It is] not [like you] want to be in that position or not want to be in that space. Having a lot of passion and then also in what you are leading, it is going to make a difference to somebody's life, to somebody's own pathway. You are going to make a difference in creating other leaders in your pathway. That is something I also believe in.

In your journey in different areas of leadership [and] different organisations, have there been barriers along the way and have some of those barriers unfortunately related to your gender?

No, it has been the other way around. My gender has always been an advantage in my getting leadership roles. I think also the fact that I did not go into that role because I wanted to be a leader. I just did what I enjoyed. [I was doing] what I loved and, doing that, I did not really think that because I am a woman, I might not be able to do that. You just get it done.

But, I can honestly say that I have not experienced barriers myself but I have seen it for others. I have been able to help, in being able to put away or put aside those things that become barriers for others. By my supportive actual

activities or mechanisms, putting those in place to pave the way, [I have been able to help].

Coming to the house of parliament, [it is a] very important place for leadership and, as you have mentioned, you have done some work to bring a more equal space. Why is gender equality important in spaces like parliament or anywhere else?

Well, I do not think that is difficult to identify because, if you look at the population of the country, you have half men, half women in your population. If you also look within the home, in circumstances where there is a mother and a father, you have a family. You work together in developing your family.

What I do not understand in that equal responsibility of a mother and father in a family to a certain level of decision making [drops off]. Everything you do in your home, you are making a decision all the time whether it be education, health or your home or whatever. But then, when you get to the situation of the highest decision making body in a country, the women get dropped off. That mother figure, that mother nurturing, that mother soft side of decision making, just seems to get dropped off. It does not reach the parliament level.

I consider parliament to be the family of the nation. If there are decisions to be made at the parliament level and then you only have all men making decisions with a couple of women, that strong woman decision making voice is not there. It cannot be right. I am not saying women are better than men as leader, I am just saying that we need to be balanced in that.

I think the term that we are using at this workshop, the “balance of power” in parliament is really important. Then the women are able to talk about the things that relate to women, that are important whether it be about fishing or roading, water, education, health or whatever. There is a view that a woman has that is different to a man.

I think that bringing those two views together, the woman and the man together, gives much better decisions. [It gives] much better leadership decisions which the whole nation can benefit from. Maybe I did not see that so strongly until I am now sitting in parliament. As the Speaker, I see it.

I see it in the debate. I hear it in the debate. I see some of the practices within parliament. When you set up a committee for a particular infrastructure area, you just have a team of men and there are not women included. You say, “well, why? Why are women not there?” “Oh, well, it is about either fishing or either roading or water or whatever.”

Well, actually, women equally use those infrastructures like men. Women equally have to be responsible for those [decisions] within the home and women can contribute to the discussions at that level. I think it is very important that there is a balance of power at the highest decision making house in the country being the parliament.

One of those things that you mentioned [is] that you are trying to work and address some of the gender inequalities is the women’s parliament caucus. Where has that come from, what is it going to do, how is it going to work?

We have four women parliamentarians and myself as the Speaker. In the 50 years term of the self-governing in the Cook Islands, we have only ever had four women parliamentarians as the highest number in parliament. So, you cannot tell me that there is nothing else that we can do. You cannot tell me that that is it. That is all that we are going to be able to have in parliament. The fact of the matter is there are many heads of ministries [that are women]. [It is] almost half and half in the major ministries like the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs and Immigration. [They are] all women leaders. So, you cannot tell me that that leadership strength is not in women to be able to be sitting as members of parliament.

With just the four of us, I thought “well, individually, women can do what they can out in the field, out in their electorates and out whenever they are out in the community”. But, this is cross-party now. You have three women from the opposition, one woman from the party and myself as the Speaker, as the neutral person. I thought, “if we form ourselves and agree in setting up a vision, we set some objectives and we set some activities, then we are looking at women of the Cook Islands, generally, from our point of view”.

Our objectives would be to see how we can encourage, entice and bring it about that the women of the Cook Islands can feel comfortable to become members of parliament. When they decide if they would like to, how do you provide that support? What sort of training and what sort of encouragement

do they need in taking up that role? But, not only that. It is also very important that you work with men as well. We are then looking at the men in the major parties and having them involved as well in our caucus. The idea is, in bringing that synergy together with everybody from both sides, they can work together in promoting women in parliament.

And, just to round off our conversation: as you said, leadership is about helping to contribute, doing [and] demonstrating. Say, a woman is doing [and] demonstrating and she wants to help lead the change that she wants to see, whether it is in her industry [or] in her community. Where should she start to realise her own leadership?

I think it is different for everybody. I did not have a very good start in my life. I was very challenged. There were some things that happened in my life as a teenager and then I had to leave home and had to grow up very fast.

What is important, for anybody, is that you take the negatives that happen in your life. If negatives happen in your life, you turn them into a positive something. So, if this happened to me, “oh, I feel so bad about it. I am so hurt. I am this, I am that”. Okay, then. How do I move on?

How can I then use that experience, lessons learned? How do I learn that lesson from that experience that I can actually use to my advantage? Also, do not feel afraid to ask for help.

I have never been afraid to ask question when I do not understand something. I think too many people pretend they know what it is that they are listening to. So, they are disadvantaged by that. I have never been in that boat. If I hear something and I am listening, “oh, I don’t understand that”, then [I] come forward. Do not be afraid to be seen that you do not know everything because we never do. Do not be afraid to say “yes” to things.

In fact, one of my mottos when I was growing up and as I started in my working life as a nurse was to never say no to anything. That is still my motto in life. If somebody asked me to do something [and] I am not comfortable about it, I never say “no, I do not know how to do it”. I say “yes, I will” and then I go and find out how to do it. I may not be very good at the beginning, but I soon become very good because I have learned it.

[My advice also is] be nice to people and do good by people. Never put yourself on a pedestal. Be with the crowd as well. You can be a leader within

the crowd. You do not have to be isolated and be on a pedestal to be a leader. I think that is where it is a problem for some people. I think a good leader is always amongst the people that they are working with. That is certainly how I work, even in parliament. [I work] within the staff. That is where I want to be.