

# Getting a better balance and acceptance for both women and men as great leaders

Fiji Regional Tonga Vanuatu Leadership And Decision-Making

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‘There has been a lot of work around women in leadership at an individual level, giving them training and mentoring. While this has been effective in some instances, it is still not translating into more women in positions of decision making and (political) leadership,’ explained Jennifer Kalpokas Doan, Director Strategy and Programs for the Balance of Power program in Vanuatu.



At the Nation-builders – Celebrating Women in the Public Service’ photo exhibition for Vanuatu’s 40th Independence Day was Juliette Hakwa, Head of Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, Department of Strategy Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination. Photo credit: Balance of Power

‘So, it’s not about whether women are good leaders, people simply aren’t voting for them. The issue is about people, in Vanuatu and other Pacific countries, recognising women as legitimate leaders – it’s about social norms,’ Ms Kalpokas Doan said.

Supportive community attitudes are essential in improving women's involvement in leadership and decision making. Initiated through Pacific Women, the Balance of Power is a dedicated leadership program aiming to address the deeply entrenched social norms that define and legitimise leadership in the Pacific. It operates in Vanuatu and Tonga, and since late 2021, has expanded to Fiji.

Working to promote women as leaders poses many challenges in the Pacific, a region with the lowest levels of female parliamentary representation in the world underpinned by research that people's attitudes and social norms largely fail to perceive women as the excellent leaders they are factually proven to be.

"We are disappointed when we look around and see so few parliamentary seats occupied by women," said Executive Director for Balance of Power, Mereani Rokotuibau.

"Working to promote women leaders is difficult and requires flexibility in programming, addressing women in leadership at every level from the household to community, national, regional and global levels which requires smart political and social navigating," Ms Rokotuibau said.

In Vanuatu, Ms Kalpokas Doan and her colleagues employed Balance of Power's approach of 'influencing the influencer' by brokering a partnership with the Sanma Provincial Government and a prominent media production house to produce a video series.

Titled 'Frontliners in Disaster Response – Acknowledging the ni-Vanuatu Women on the Frontline of Disaster Response,' the video series was narrated by the high-status male Secretary General of Sanma Province and released on the province's Facebook page and shared through social media. Leader of the Opposition and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Ralph Regenvanu, shared the video with his advocacy message to support women in elections and promote more representational and inclusive leadership.

Harnessing the power of mainstream media, Balance of Power has also facilitated partnerships between the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS), SBS News Pacific and the Media Association of Vanuatu. The partnership resulted in a workshop focused on improving journalists' election reporting skills in the lead up to Vanuatu's 2020 general election, with a specific aim to improve coverage of female candidates. As a result, a high-

status male journalist interviewed three of the women who contested the election and drew widespread attention to their challenging journeys, their motivations and commitment. Balance of Power has also formalised its partnership with the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation, which has led to increased coverage of women in leadership in prime-time television.

Another way that Balance of Power has drawn community attention to the successful leadership roles that women play in Vanuatu was through supporting the 'Nation-builders – Celebrating Women in the Public Service' photo exhibition as part of Vanuatu's 40th Independence Day celebrations. Dorosday Kenneth Watson, former Director General of the Ministry of Justice and Community Services, noted that the exhibition highlighted that government support for the empowerment of women is evident in the number of women who have been appointed to senior management positions and other key roles across the public service. The exhibition was intentionally hosted by the Public Service Commission and its influential Secretary General. The profile and interest generated by the event led to attendance by Vanuatu's Prime Minister, who publicly endorsed the legitimacy and contribution of women in leadership positions.



Velma Karabani, Principal Investigator, Vanuatu Ombudsman Office receiving her photo from the Chairman of the Vanuatu Public Service, Mr Simil Johnson. Photo credit: Balance of Power

Balance of Power is also contributing to the evidence base in understanding people's perceptions of women in leadership and the persistent blockers and potential entry points for change. In Tonga, this includes supporting research by the Tupou Tertiary Institute in partnership with the Tonga National Youth Congress to explore voter perceptions of women candidates and voter motivation more broadly.

Positively, 80 per cent of respondents felt that a woman staying in her husband's village could participate in village meetings if she has been involved in village activities; and 57 per cent believed that both women and men could lead in the workplace. However, the survey also revealed discriminatory beliefs, such as 52 per cent of respondents stating that they would vote for a male candidate over a female candidate with exactly the same qualifications; and 69 per cent of respondents considering that women should stay at home while men attend and participate in village meetings. The findings are now being used as a basis to stimulate locally-led country level and regional discussions, and also to inform the development of targeted advocacy campaigns in Tonga through Balance of Power support. This includes working with the Tonga Broadcasting Commission to develop an ongoing public awareness campaign showcasing the value and benefits of women's leadership, including in times of crisis.

'The Pacific has women CEOs, CFOs, pilots and surgeons. Why do we trust a woman doctor to operate on us and save our life, and not to sit in a chair in parliament and make laws?' Ms Kalpokas Doan challenged. 'That doesn't make sense to me. Balance of Power wants to show that it's not about a woman doing a man's job, it's about doing a job that any human being can do. We need to redefine the notions of what is culturally appropriate,' she said.