



## CASE STUDY 3

### *PACIFIC LEADERSHIP PROGRAM: ADVOCACY FOR CEDAW IN TONGA*

**Country:** Tonga

**Focus:** Women's Empowerment

**Donor(s):** DFAT

**Organisation(s):** Pacific Leadership Program

**Budget:** c. AUD 100,000

**Timeframe:** 2015-2017



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### KEY POINTS

- Taking a degree of risk to support a controversial campaign
- Providing tailored resources to tackle specific gendered challenges
- Thinking politically about what goals are achievable and will gain public support

### OVERVIEW

This case study focuses on the work of the Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) with Tonga's Women in Leadership Coalition. This is one example of how the PLP has assisted coalitions to develop adaptive leadership strategies. In 2015, as part of fostering women's leadership and building the capacity of civil society organisations in the Pacific region, the PLP began supporting a coalition of women's organisations advocating for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in the Kingdom of Tonga. At that time, the coalition faced strong public opposition to its campaign, including large anti-CEDAW demonstrations in the country's capital. The PLP provided the Civil Society Forum of Tonga with adaptive leadership training, a retreat for reflection and strategy development and research and analysis. This enabled the coalition

to take an increasingly politically informed approach, build bridges with opponents, and address the specific gendered challenges it faces.

### GENDER AWARE WAYS OF WORKING

Women's leadership constitutes one of the PLP's six priority areas. Having previously identified and built the capacity of individual civil society organisations, the third phase of the program focused on coalitions, and on leadership reforms and mobilising people and resources.<sup>1</sup> For the Women in Leadership Coalition, this is exemplified by its initial campaign for the ratification of CEDAW, and its more recent work on a range of related issues which have secured wider public support. The PLP's approach to gender was noted for its sensitivity to the complexity and significance of gender roles and stereotypes in Tonga, as well as specific gendered challenges faced by women's organisations.

## POLITICALLY INFORMED

Being politically informed is a way of working that recognises that development outcomes are determined by the dynamics of power and politics. It is not about formal governance reforms, such as elections or civil service reforms. It involves analysing stakeholder interests and incentives to understand what is politically feasible.

Public opposition to CEDAW and attitudes to women's equality in Tonga are strongly informed by what has been characterised as the 'myth of female privilege' within the country.<sup>2</sup> Despite women's autonomy in certain prescribed domestic contexts such as the home, "there is profound unrest about the issue of gender equality because it challenges both traditional hierarchies that predate European contact and the patriarchal values embedded within Tonga's indigenized form of Christianity. At a fundamental level, gender equality is perceived as threatening Tongan culture and 'tradition', which most Tongans are deeply committed to retaining even as they engage with modernity on various levels".<sup>3</sup>

*"It was a test of who the real women's rights activists are"*

This presents a range of gendered challenges for actors working towards gender equality in Tonga, all of which relied on support from the PLP. Firstly, coalition members risked their reputation and standing by speaking on these issues publicly: **"It was a test of who the real women's rights activists are"**.<sup>4</sup> Second, many organisations in the coalition suffered from a lack of capacity because most of their members worked as service providers in demanding areas such

## GENDER AWARE

Being gender aware is a way of working that analyses how women and men, girls and boys, experience an issue differently and/or unequally, and the power relations that sustain these inequalities. A robust analysis also looks at how gender intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, religion, ethnicity, class and disability, and non-binary gender identities or diverse sexual preferences.

as gender-based violence meaning they were either fatigued or lacked available time. Third, there was an initial lack of trust within the coalition given its organisations were from the same sector and had a history of competing for funding.

PLP addressed these challenges by identifying and partnering with key actors such as Siale 'Ilolahia, Executive Director of the Civil Society Forum of Tonga. "Ilolahia has expertise in the concepts of developmental and adaptive leadership, and a long history of working with civil society organisations in Tonga, including, but not limited to those working on women's issues."<sup>5</sup> Through Ilolahia, the Civil Society Forum of Tonga (CSFT) provided organisational support such as facilitating meetings, disseminating information and, bringing together organisations and individual members with a variety of wider agendas.

While the coalition's initial strategy had been unsuccessful in winning over political opponents and the public, the PLP responded by providing a space for members to retreat and reflect on the campaign. The retreat allowed members to revise its strategy. For example, activities focussed on communication, crafting messages to specific audiences, mapping out networks, and identifying gatekeepers and strategies for influence. It became a turning point for the coalition

in working politically. The retreat also allowed members to renew relationships and build trust: "It was very useful because we had the space not to be hurried, and to think openly and reflectively."<sup>6</sup> Coalition members reported that, as a result: "We have left our differences aside and come together. It's a normal practice now for the coalition, if something comes up relating to women's issues, to circulate it to each other. There is a much more trusting relationship between us now."<sup>7</sup>

## POLITICALLY INFORMED WAYS OF WORKING

The PLP's support of Tonga's Women in Leadership coalition has demonstrated the importance of politically informed ways of working. Firstly, the program took an informed risk by supporting a coalition delivering a controversial campaign, without damaging its own reputation. Secondly, program staff's understanding of Tonga's political micro-climate and civil society landscape meant it could quickly identify, interpret and respond to events such as anti-CEDAW demonstrations and rapidly provide tailored support such as the retreat. Thirdly, the first two phases of PLP had allowed program staff to build strong relationships with partners - crucial to fostering candid dialogue: "The mixture of both local understanding and critical distance held by the PLP meant that representatives were also able to encourage participants to consider lessons learned from previous setbacks to achieve greater success in their collective aims in future."<sup>8</sup>

In July 2016 and following the retreat, the PLP began to provide core members of the coalition with further adaptive leadership training. The results have been substantial: "The coalition is now being much more strategic about how they are engaging with a wide range of issues to build a broad base of support, rather than only talking about CEDAW."<sup>9</sup> For example, issues around water management and women's access to

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“Tackling issues head on doesn’t always work. Particularly if you are a woman and you are trying to change the status quo.”

finance in Tonga: “This shows how the coalition is thinking about what other women are interested and involved in.”<sup>10</sup> Broadening the range of issues on which it works has also helped the coalition to “build relationships both with a broader range of women, and with relevant ministers”.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, adaptive leadership training has helped members to identify key junctures where they can influence outcomes. For example, the coalition’s support of networks of female candidates for local government resulted in the first women in the country to be elected as District Officer and Town Officer. While these are important successes, the coalition’s support of women in Tongan politics may have long-term benefits such as creating allies among future political power brokers.

Furthermore, the coalition has also begun to improve trust with women’s groups who were previously in opposition to the coalition: “They realised they didn’t do the necessary groundwork before the campaign for CEDAW.”<sup>12</sup> More recently, it has been possible to build bridges with the Catholic Women’s League and women of the Free Wesleyan Church (both of which campaigned against CEDAW and the coalition) through a Women’s Forum organised for International Women’s Day 2017.

## CONVERGENCE OR TENSION?

This case is an example of how a politically informed approach can be necessary to achieve gender equality outcomes. Conversely, it also shows how the links between gender and issues such as religion, tradition and the political system mean that political analysis is strengthened by a gender lens. However, in this instance, the large opposition to

CEDAW in Tonga has meant that taking a politically informed approach has involved temporarily putting aside the goal of ratification in favour of less controversial causes: “I think there is always a trade-off between sticking to your message and being politically adaptive, a more nuanced, softer approach is needed, especially on gender issues in a place that is dominated by the church.”<sup>13</sup> This is evidenced by the coalition’s more recent achievements: “Women who are doing adaptive leadership with us are making better progress than if they are just sticking to their guns, because that just ends up with nothing.”<sup>14</sup>

## EFFECTIVENESS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

The two factors which have been most crucial to PLP’s ability to support of the Women in Leadership coalition have been the program’s degree of autonomy, and the strength of its relationships with partners. “The PLP has been able to provide nimble support, without necessarily always working to a clearly defined path, mucking in together and seeing where it takes us. That supports thinking and working politically by allowing us to be accommodating and flexible, trusting partners to identify opportunities themselves”.<sup>15</sup> However, the program’s initial focus on building relationships also “allows us to challenge as well as support partners, and that’s just as important”.<sup>16</sup>

Both these factors have allowed the program to meet its greatest challenges working with a coalition. Firstly, “the country is such a small place and therefore the risks for those women are enormous and the drain on them personally and professionally<sup>17</sup> is so high, our relationships and support have helped them simply keep going, personally and professionally”. Secondly, the ability to challenge partners has been important to “manage the dynamics of a group of strong personalities, keeping a balance between diversity and consensus, and continuing to work toward greater trust”.<sup>18</sup>

## METHODS

A rapid review of select program documentation, combined with confidential interviews with at least two key informants per case. Informants include project staff, independent reviewers, donors and other stakeholders. Identifying and listening to local and/or female informants has been prioritised. Interviews for this case took place on 22.02.2017.

## SELECTED RESOURCES

Lee, H. (2017). ‘CEDAW smokescreens: Gender politics in contemporary Tonga.’ *The Contemporary Pacific* 29:1.

Ward, O. & vanHeerde-Hudson, J. (2016). *Case Study: The Women in Leadership coalition – Lessons learned on thinking and working politically and advocacy for the ratification of CEDAW in Tonga*. Suva: Pacific Leadership Program. Available at [http://www.plp.org.fj/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PLP\\_Tonga-CEDAW\\_Discussion-Paper-August-2016.pdf](http://www.plp.org.fj/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PLP_Tonga-CEDAW_Discussion-Paper-August-2016.pdf)

1. Ward & Hudson
2. Lee 2016, p.82
3. Lee 2016, p.82
4. Informant cited in Ward & Hudson, 2016
5. Informant cited in Ward & Hudson, 2016
6. Informant cited in Ward & Hudson, 2016
7. Informant cited in Ward & Hudson, 2016
8. Informant cited in Ward & Hudson, 2016
9. Key informant, 22.02.2017
10. Key informant, 22.02.2017
11. Key informant, 22.02.2017
12. Key informant, 22.02.2017
13. Key informant, 22.02.2017
14. Key informant, 22.02.2017
15. Key informant, 22.02.2017
16. Key informant, 22.02.2017
17. Key informant, 22.02.2017
18. Key informant, 22.02.2017

This case study was written by **Orlanda Siow** of UCL as part of the Gender and Politics in Practice (GAPP) research project. It is one of 14 short case studies focusing on development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware. See *From Silos to Synergy* for a synthesis of the lessons that emerge. Explore all GAPP publications at [dlprog.org/gapp](http://dlprog.org/gapp).

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DFAT Tongan women awaiting the Governor General's visit: AusAID



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