



Gender and Politics  
in Practice

# Pacific Leadership Program - CEDAW and Tonga

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#genderpp

DISCUSSION PAPER  
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PACIFIC LEADERSHIP  
PROGRAM  
An initiative of the Australian aid program



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# History of Pacific Leadership Program

- PLP aimed to support locally-determined leadership and collective action in Pacific countries
- Phase 1 began in 2008 – Phase 3 ended in December 2017
  - In 10 years, the program supported numerous initiatives focused on strengthening leadership practice and knowledge about developmental leadership
  - A number of initiatives addressed gender reforms
- In 2016, a history of PLP considered the program through the lens of thinking and working politically, which found:
  - The appetite for the kinds of change envisaged by PLP varied over time
  - A range of factors associated with the politics of the donor influenced the ability of PLP to succeed (risk aversion, desire for measureable results, discomfort with uncertainty etc)

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# Example of one case study: CEDAW in Tonga

- Context of Tonga:
  - High hierarchical cultural values
  - Strong influence of church institutions on all aspects of life
  - Shift in power: changes in political leadership
  - Gender inequality in all aspects of society and economic life

# PLP Role

- In 2014, PLP was exploring opportunities to support women coalitions for change





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# What did we learn?

- Importance of front-liners to be strategic and have political capital:
  - have a good enough knowledge of context
  - ability to recognize an opportunity
  - relevant network to support change processes
- Balancing power dynamics:
  - ability to manage expectations of both the donor and the coalition
- Framing of information is critical when supporting and communicating sensitive reforms
- Timing is critical

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# What has happened since?

- Government of Tonga has still not ratified CEDAW but have agreed to do more awareness-raising, as requested by the coalition of women and the public
- Change has occurred in people's understanding of CEDAW
  - In December 2017, during a radio talk-show, after the elections people talked about CEDAW as not being as threatening as they thought it would be and agreed that it was okay for women to be leaders
  - In 2014, only 6% of the population voted for women, and by 2017, 14% of the population did
- Women who were working in silos, are now working collectively
- Women are now strategizing differently to working and thinking politically, working inclusively and using other methods to address change

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# Reflections

- Deep knowledge of the context is essential
  - Continuity and cultural competency of Pacific Islander staff, and particularly their ability to understand the context, the cultural values/norms and the potential for change, were crucial for any of the success achieved
- Its highly important to be able to identify what kind of input is needed at particular times
- PLP's experience shows that program work with leaders and coalitions can play a role in contributing to leadership-led developmental change, as long as there is a supportive donor enabling environment.