# Policy Brief
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## Power, Politics and Coalitions in the Pacific: Lessons from Collective Action on Gender and Power

This brief summarises findings from case studies of five gender-focused coalitions in the Pacific, and discusses the implications for coalitions and their supporters. It highlights four key factors influencing the formation and functioning of the coalitions: formative events; shared purpose; forms of leadership; and the nature of ownership.

The qualitative research was carried out over 18 months during 2015–16 by Developmental Leadership Program researchers at La Trobe University, and was funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

*"Coalitions take many forms. Some may be formal and regard themselves as a constituted coalition (perhaps even with a name). Others may be less formal (and nameless) but nonetheless conscious of themselves as groups of players with a common objective. And yet others may simply be loose networks [or] groups with similar interests and ideas…"*

(Leftwich, 2012, Coalitions in the Politics of Development, DLP, p.5)

The cases selected were:

* Talitha Project (Tonga), which responds to inequality and seeks to empower young women and girls.

* Women in Sustainable Enterprises (WISE, Tonga), a network for women in business.

* Nei Nibarara (Kiribati), a women's handicraft network/cooperative.

* Response to sorcery-related violence (Papua New Guinea).

* Response to human rights challenges (Fiji), a group working to protect and promote universal human rights, including of women and LGBTIQ people.

A tentative **hypothesis** emerges from this study that suggests coalitions are more likely to challenge gender norms directly or indirectly, and promote transformational change, when they:

* are formed in response to local events and critical junctures;

* are locally driven and owned;

* share a common purpose, interests and sometimes values (or are able to navigate between conflicting values); and

* have adaptive and distributed leadership that is regularly renegotiated.

An essential criterion for success seems to be the creation of safe spaces in which coalition members and others can be engaged in processes of reframing attitudes and beliefs, often by sharing personal stories.

*"Culture is both visible and invisible … There are a lot of unwritten rules, but there are more for women than there are for men … it's the powers that aren't 'out there' that are very influential in deciding what goes on and what happens to women."* (Tonga participant)

## Factors influencing coalitions

The factors outlined below are dynamic, and interact. The interaction, for example, between various types of ownership and leadership means that one informs the other. Likewise, the nature of a formative event seems to have a lasting effect on the degree to which a coalition is locally owned. But when taken together, it appears that these four factors shape how coalitions address different types of power, and therefore the degree to which they challenge gender norms.

**Formative events:** What brought people together to 'do something' in a concerted way? For example, the torture and death of a woman in a sorcery-related violence incident, followed by extensive media coverage and a conference generated the impetus for the formation of the PNG coalition examined in this study. Whether formative events are locally or externally driven appears to mould the future shape of a coalition and how it functions.

**Shared purpose, interests and values:** Clarity of shared ground and common purpose helps coalitions increase their support base, coherence and influence. The dominant forms of common purpose identified by this study are shared values and interests. For example, the Fiji case study illustrates how shared values around universal human rights and a common purpose of fighting a constitutional amendment bound together a broad range of actors to challenge gender relations.

**Forms of leadership:** The nature of a coalition's leadership can determine its sustainability and its ability to respond to changing circumstances, broker relationships and divergent interests, and challenge vested interests. The study found that some coalitions understood and practised leadership as a process of adaptation; others understood leadership to be a characteristic of leaders. For example, the Tonga Talitha case study revealed efforts to decentralise leadership to overcome the sustainability risks of a fixed, individual leader.

**The nature of ownership:** The degree to which a coalition's agenda is locally owned and its ways of working are politically salient appears to be key to determining its effectiveness. The coalitions examined could be broadly characterised as local/hybrid variations. For example, the Kiribati coalition formed following a regional meeting and was initially supported by international donors. However, it quickly became 'localised' because its coordinator and members were I-Kiribati and they set its agenda and direction.

> "*Husbands are starting to respect their wives. As well, there are many single mothers— they are powerful now because they have money. Before they were dependent on their sons and their children for resources and now they are the decision-makers.*" (Kiribati participant)

| Key findings | Implications for coalitions and their supporters |
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| **Formative events** | |
| Formative events in ripe social and political contexts can prompt the establishment of gender-focused coalitions and strengthen the resolve of existing alliances. | • Events for events' sake do not create coalitions, but events or a process of 'coming together' that questions social norms in the right contexts can. External actors need to assess the social and political context and understand which dimensions of power are being challenged. |
| Formative events can be predominantly 'local', externally driven, or a mixture of both; however, entirely extrinsic events that are disconnected from local context are unlikely to produce or support effective coalitions. | • When supporting events with an extrinsic element (for example, facilitating a regional or international workshop on international standards), look for opportunities that are connected to local concerns and context. Avoid supporting events that are entirely extrinsic. |
| Formative events are often accompanied by greater space to challenge the status quo of gender relations. The ability to respond to these emergent opportunities is critical. | • Where there is local appetite to capitalise on an event, access to flexible support can be critical. Care should be taken by external actors to support but not overshadow informal networks. |
| In the crucial period following the formative event, a coalition's responsiveness relies heavily on the complex strategic task of finding allies to help influence agendas, particularly if they seek to challenge gender norms. | |

## Shared purpose

Aligning or 'bundling' diverse interests enables a coalition to increase its support base and influence, but requires careful compromise.

Articulation of shared values within a coalition (and having the space to work towards this) can generate a sense of solidarity and commitment to 'a greater good' beyond shared interests.

In successful coalitions, managing differences in values and interests is critical. Coalitions with space to reframe gender issues and engage in open and honest conversations about differences help facilitate engagement with invisible power and promote shared or negotiated leadership.

• External actors seeking to support collective action need to be aware of the values and interests that can both underlie and threaten collective action, or they risk unintentionally undermining their own and their coalition partners' aims.

• Providing space and resources for a coalition's shared interests and values to be debated and reinforced can be useful.

• Coalitions also need the time and space to acknowledge and address differences in their members' values and interests.

## Leadership

The nature of a coalition's leadership affects its sustainability and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, navigate towards shared values and/or interests, and broker relationships.

Shifting an individual leadership style to a more negotiated form of leadership is challenging where coalition relationships are perceived to belong to the individual.

The nature of a coalition's leadership is dynamic and likely to change through the coalition's life cycle. For example, individual leadership may catalyse coalition formation, but more negotiated or adaptive leadership may be needed to sustain the coalition.

• A coalition requires collective leadership that brings together the technical *and* political capabilities and skills it needs to be effective.

• Coalitions require leadership that enables them to respond to changing circumstances and challenge the status quo where necessary.

• However, donors need to be wary of prescribing coalition leadership structure. A coalition's leadership style needs to suit the context, issue and the stage of the coalition's life cycle.

## Ownership

'Local' ownership is important and widely lauded, but difficult to define: for instance, geographic proximity is no guarantee of shared values, shared interests or a shared understanding of and engagement with dimensions of power and gender relations.

A group's self-determination about what work to do, where, how, with whom and why can be undermined by the need to shape work to fit externally defined gender-related funding silos.

In some circumstances, 'hybrid' ownership can bring together international actors who can help to draw attention to a gender issue and amplify grassroots voices with local actors who ensure that action is taken at a national and local level.

Tension can exist between gender equality (often seen as a Western concern) and local ownership, but hybrid forms of ownership could provide space to explore this.

• Look for coalitions and issues defined and selected by local actors, but don't expect uniform or 'one size fits all' articulation of values, interests and strategies to combat gender issues.

• Be careful to ensure that funding mechanisms do not create artificial incentives for actors to come together.

• External interventions alone will not generate the ownership required for coalitions to develop and function. Consider under what conditions and on what issues more 'hybrid' forms of ownership are feasible and desirable.

• International support for issues that threaten elite interests can create a backlash, but hybrid ownership can also create space to explore differences.

• Careful political analysis is required to navigate support for what might be considered contentious issues.