

Strengthening inclusive leadership in the Pacific:

A case study of Solomon Water women and the Pathways Leadership Program

Bronwyn Powell, Lucy Habu, Michelle Maelaua, Antoinette Wickham, Shona Fitzgerald, Andre Taylor, Belinda Chapman, Brian McIntosh



STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE PACIFIC: A CASE STUDY OF SOLOMON WATER WOMEN AND THE PATHWAYS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Bronwyn Powell¹, Lucy Habu ², Michelle Maelaua², Antoinette Wickam³, Shona Fitzgerald⁴, Andre Taylor ¹, Belinda Chapman¹, Brian McIntosh¹

1. International WaterCentre Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

2. Solomon Islands Water Authority, Honiara, Solomon Islands

3. Asian Development Bank Consultant, Honiara, Solomon Islands

4. Water Practice, World Bank, Sydney, NSW, Australia

KEYWORDS

Leadership development, women, inclusive

ABSTRACT

Achieving safe water and sanitation in the Pacific demands inclusive leadership capable of addressing complex, cross-sector challenges. Women in the water sector have much to contribute, yet often face barriers effecting change. A women-only cohort from Solomon Water participated in the International WaterCentre (IWC) Pathway Program, forming a buddy group that created a culturally safe space free from traditional expectations around power and hierarchy. This environment enabled participants to redefine leadership for themselves and their organisation. The cohort reported transformative shifts in confidence, reflective practice, feedback capability, and team leadership, highlighting the impact of intentional leadership development.

INTRODUCTION

Pacific water context

The Pacific Islands have unique biophysical characteristics, including remoteness, high vulnerability to climate change impacts and diverse hydrogeology, which combined with socio-cultural diversity create significant challenges to delivery of water and sanitation services. Only 63 percent of Pacific Islanders have access to basic drinking water, and just 35 percent have access to basic sanitation, making the Pacific a region with some of the lowest rates in the world (WHO & UNICEF, 2023). The Pacific is the least urbanised region globally, and water supply and sanitation access in rural areas lags far behind urban areas, especially in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Kiribati. Based on regional averages, the rural population's access rates to at least basic water and sanitation lag behind urban areas by 42 percent for water and 46 percent for sanitation (WHO & UNICEF, 2023). Progress to close this gap is slow; at current rates, it will take more than 70 years to achieve universal access to basic water services.

Where water and sanitation services exist, quality of services is a persistent challenge, even when access rates are high. For example, in Fiji, despite 94 percent of households having water available on the premises, only 30.9 percent of households had

water available when needed and free of *E.coli* (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022; WHO & UNICEF, 2023). Sanitation services face similar challenges, with only four out of 21 countries in the Oceania region having off-site treatment of faecal sludge or wastewater (WHO & UNICEF, 2023). These access gaps and poor quality of services result in a high incidence of waterborne diseases and stunting, with, for example, stunting rates as high as 49 percent in Papua New Guinea (World Bank, 2024). The limited access to basic services results in a high health burden that compromises human capital and socio-economic development.

Water and sanitation utilities therefore have a significant challenge in delivering their legislated mandates. The performance of water utilities in these countries is hampered by financial constraints, aging infrastructure, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and under-staffing compounded by high turnover rates of staff. Skilled workers are being drawn offshore to Australia or New Zealand, leaving an eroded skill base in critical water sector roles.

It has long been recognised that women play a crucial role in managing and safeguarding water in households and at community level but are an untapped pool of talent for water utilities. In 2020, 22 percent of staff in Pacific water utilities were female, with 70 percent being in administrative or management roles and 14 percent engineers (PWWA 2022). The scale of challenges requires utilities to evolve, which, in turn, requires an evolution into an inclusive and diverse workforce. There is a need not only to continually recruit new personnel but also to provide ongoing training to upskill existing staff.

CASE STUDY

Solomon Islands

The water and wastewater sector in Solomon Islands is no exception to the numerous challenges seen across the Pacific. Urban water supply to formal urban and peri-urban areas is provided by the national utility, Solomon Islands Water Authority (SIWA, also known as 'Solomon Water'). SIWA was established in 1992 under the Solomon Islands

Water Authority Act. Its primary purpose is to manage and develop urban water and sewerage services in the Solomon Islands, ensuring the proper allocation and use of urban water resources. SIWA currently services populations in four urban centres, with a total of 18,569 customers, the vast majority of which are in Honiara. The utility has a long-term mandate to expand services to other provincial capitals, of which six are not currently serviced by SIWA. However, in the short-term there are several operational and service quality challenges to overcome. These include high levels of non-revenue water (stagnant at 60 percent since 1992), insufficient water supply to meet demand and low levels of bill payment.

To meet ongoing operational and service delivery needs as well as expand services to growing urban populations, SIWA has recognised the need for organisational change. SIWA is therefore undergoing a change management process to be a customer-focused organisation, with an updated Strategic Plan to deliver on SIWA's vision, '*Safe Water for a Healthy Nation*'. The Strategic Plan recognizes that staff are fundamental to SIWA's objectives of being a high performing organization and focuses on staff development and capacity building to improve employee performance.

Like many water organisations, SIWA is a male-dominated workplace, with 24% female employees. To support the gender aspect of the SIWA Strategic Plan, there is a Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan. The Gender Equality Strategy sets five focus areas: (1) Leadership accountability; (2) Representation of Women in Leadership and Management; (3) A Gender Diverse Workforce; (4) Pay Equity; (5) Flexible Work. To make progress on these focus areas, SIWA is working to overcome challenges related to cultural norms and the finance to deliver required training.

Cultural norms in the Solomon Islands and patriarchal leadership norms challenge women's ability to speak out in public and decision-making forums. This impacts women's confidence in making contributions in many settings, including water sector workplaces. Cultures in the Pacific are changing and many women are now shifting from traditional domestic roles to the formal sector and workplaces where many have decision-making positions (Pacific Community 2023).

Societal norms are very prevalent in Pacific Island communities, and this is no less true for the Solomon Islands. There are diverse cultures in the Solomon Islands, and in some matrilineal societies, women are leaders and Chiefs, while in others men always take the leading role in making decisions despite women inheriting land ownership rights. So, it's through diverse leadership and gender inclusive leadership platforms such as the Pathway Program

that women build can build their leadership qualities and capabilities in supportive organisations.

SIWA is currently implementing the Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project (UWSSSP), which is funded by World Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Union and Global Environment Facility. As part of the UWSSSP, SIWA has included targets to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions, something measured in the World Bank results framework. World Bank is supporting SIWA to achieve this goal. Part of this support has included using the resources of the Equal Aqua Platform, which was established to address women's underrepresentation in water sector jobs. Equal Aqua offers tools to support women's career journeys by addressing the barriers in attracting women to the sector including, recruiting, retaining and supporting the advancement of women. A baseline and mid-line survey conducted through Equal Aqua for SIWA showed the share of women who are managers was below national, regional and global averages and that it decreased from 2019 to 2022 (Equal Aqua Human Resources Survey Results). Based on these results, it was agreed that the World Bank would support SIWA with leadership training for its female staff. This provides an opportunity to create peer-to-peer support and networking opportunities for women in order to break down cultural barriers that impede women's progress and support them in their career journeys.

Importance of inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership is "... a dynamic and holistic style of leadership that values diversity, seeks different viewpoints, empowers everyone to contribute, and fosters innovation and equity in a collaborative environment" (Bourke and Burton, 2023, p.1).

There is evidence that diverse workplaces perform better. Those with representation of more than 30% women are significantly more likely to financially outperform those with less than 30% women (Carucci, 2024). Having diverse leadership that is inclusive of all perspectives drives more innovative solutions and better business outcomes as well as better financial performance (Bourke and Dillon, 2018). Despite well documented benefits, women remain under-represented and globally only 18% of water utility staff are women (World Bank, 2019). Recognising the untapped potential and benefits of diversity, many organisations in the water sector are grappling with the challenges of recruiting, supporting and retaining female staff and fostering their growth as leaders.

Globally, the water sector faces a broad range of inclusion-related challenges that must be overcome to deliver sustainable solutions to our most pressing water management problems. Key concerns include

the marginalisation of certain groups from water-related decision-making processes, particularly women and girls, people with special needs, older adults, people living in poverty, and sexual and gender minorities. These groups are disproportionately affected by water policies and infrastructure decisions but are often marginalised from the decision-making processes.

In Australia, the Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA, 2025) identifies several inclusion-related priorities within the sector. These include increasing the representation of underrepresented groups—particularly women—in leadership and technical roles; implementing flexible work practices; fostering inclusive organisational cultures; and addressing biases that reinforce stereotypes. WSAA further emphasises the importance of inclusive leadership in reducing resistance to change and in ensuring access to mentoring and visible role models for underrepresented employees.

Inclusive leadership is associated with substantial organisational benefits. These include improved performance and productivity, enhanced creativity and innovation, stronger employee engagement and wellbeing, reduced legal and compliance risks, increased collaboration, better decision-making through reduced cognitive bias, and improved attraction and retention of diverse talent (Diversity Council of Australia, 2015; WSAA, 2025). Empirical evidence supports these outcomes. For example, Bourke and Burton (2023, p.1) reported that “... teams with inclusive leaders are 17% more likely to report that they are high-performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions, and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively”.

Practising inclusive leadership requires a range of behaviours that foster a sense of belonging, safety and inclusion and support well-functioning and innovative teams. The Diversity Council of Australia (2015) identifies key behaviours such as being identity aware (acknowledging their own biases and difference in others), relational (ensuring respect and belonging in diverse teams), flexible and agile, open and curious, and growth focussed. Similarly, Bourke and Dillon (2018) outline six signature traits of inclusive leaders: commitment, courage, cognisance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration.

Leadership development

In this paper we draw on the Center of Creative Leadership (CCL, 2020 & 2024; McCauley, 2014) to define ‘leadership’ not as a position but as a group-based social process of influence that accomplishes three outcomes (Direction, Alignment and Commitment, ‘DAC’). The first outcome being direction - a shared understanding of common goals and strategy (e.g. a shared vision for a new water management project or team). The second being

alignment - the coordination of resources and activities (e.g. aligning people, roles, activities, projects, funding and research within a team to deliver a shared vision). The third being commitment – a personal commitment to collective success (e.g. motivating and inspiring others to achieve mutual interests rather than just meet their individual needs).

Leadership is therefore about initiating and driving change. This contrasts with ‘management’ which is about doing the same things more efficiently (Kotter, 2001). Consequently, leadership capacity is needed to drive change. Professor John Kotter (2006, p. 14), a researcher and thought leader in driving organisational change, emphasised this point by stating that “*Producing change is about 80% leadership ... and 20% management... In most change efforts, those percentages are reversed. We continue to produce great managers; we need to develop great leaders.*”

This understanding of leadership leads to the belief that we will need enhanced and distributed leadership capacity in the water sector to drive transformative change towards more inclusive decision-making processes, teams, organisations and broader institutions. Specifically, we will need a cohort of knowledgeable, skilled and empowered leaders who can engage in inclusive leadership at the community, project, team, middle management, executive and political levels.

So how do we go about this? Through evidence and research based leadership development processes.

Leadership development is “the intentional effort to expand, strengthen, or foster leadership” at either an individual or group level (Center for Creative Leadership, 2025, p. 1). It can take many forms from mentoring to coaching, to 360-degree feedback, to comprehensive leadership development programs that incorporate many complementary methods such as the IWC’s international Pathway Program or domestic Water Leadership Program. A key principle of leadership development is to incorporate mutually supportive activities that involve conscious practice of new approaches to leadership (that are guided from knowledge and skills gained through structured learning, coaching, mentoring and/or experience), developmental and performance feedback, support, positive forms of reflection and celebration of progress (Kouzes & Posner, 2016; Porter, 2017; Van Velsor et al. 2010).

Effective leadership development can be facilitated by a leadership development activity “diet,” of Challenge, Assessment, Support, Reflection, and Celebration (CASRC) being the essential ingredients for leadership growth. Challenge stretches individuals beyond their comfort zones; Assessment provides honest insight into strengths and gaps; Support ensures psychological safety and

access to guidance; Reflection helps leaders make sense of experiences; and Celebration strengthens relational capacity and influence. The CASRC model promotes leadership development not a passive, internal process but as an active cycle of doing, sense-making, and relationship-building that steadily reshapes how individuals lead (CCL 2024, Gore 2016, Lombardo and Eichinger 2002, Porter 2017). Following this model leadership development programs are designed to challenge participants out of their comfort zone.

IWC's Pathway Program comprises three sequential, stackable levels aligned to CASRC elements. Delivered through structured learning, coaching, mentoring and work-based practice, it is designed to develop emerging water leaders globally.

The program aims to:

1. Provide a practical, accessible and affordable entry-level leadership program for water professionals at any career stage, strengthening their capacity to drive positive change and advance sustainable water management.
2. Build participants' knowledge, skills and confidence to address common leadership challenges, such as self-leadership, leading without authority, leading diverse teams, fostering partnerships, and navigating gender and generational barriers.
3. Support participants to develop a strong leader identity and commit to lifelong leadership growth—for themselves and others.
4. Contribute to global water-sector leadership capacity at scale, supporting progress towards United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6: clean water and sanitation for all.
5. Deliver tangible early results (within three months) while equipping participants to manage their long-term leadership development.
6. Offer a structured pathway through progressively more advanced leadership experiences, enabling participants to build capacity and magnify impact over time.

Level 1 is a ten week online training program that introduces fundamental concepts, frameworks, tools and starts the process of encouraging participants to adopt a leader identity and commit to leadership development through creating an individual development plan. Level 2 is a nine-month long work based development process that uses coaching, mentoring and buddy groups to guide participants through the implementation of their individual leadership development plan and leadership project implementation. Level 3 is like Level 2 but focusses on supporting participants to learn how to develop leadership in others.

A key principle guiding the development of the Program has been to make it as accessible and affordable as possible whilst retaining high quality delivery and developmental effectiveness. The low cost, particularly of Level 1, makes it accessible to water professionals in low- and middle-income countries. In the first 2 years of the program 168 participants from over 27 countries completed Level 1, and 10 have completed Level 2 including 6 from SIWA.

Solomon Water leadership development

In recognition of the need to build women's leadership within SIWA to achieve objectives under the Strategic Plan, ten SIWA women participated in the inaugural cohort of the IWC Pathways Level 1 program in 2024. Ten more completed Level 1 in 2025 and six of the first cohort went on to complete Level 2 in 2025. World Bank sponsored participant fees. Asian Development Bank supported co-author and the Solomon Island's first female water engineer, Antoinette Wickham, to spend time to mentor to the first cohort.

Through the Program participants learned about leadership as a practice and social change process that anyone can participate in, no matter their position. Leadership concepts, frameworks and tools were provided covering many areas including self-leadership, inclusive leadership, leading high-performing teams, building networks and strategic leadership. Those continuing into Level 2 designed individual leadership development plans which they delivered with the support of a coach via four online one-on-one coaching sessions.

Particular features of the SIWA cohorts' Pathway Program participation included management support, having work time allocated to study each week, access to the office and internet outside work hours, laptop access and establishment of a buddy group. These were all important factors in helping achieve high completion rates: 90% of Level 1 participants completed and received the digital badge and 100% of Level 2. Together with a local mentor, the participants formed a 'buddy group', supporting each other via regular face-to-face meetings, a WhatsApp group and time set aside each week to study.

Program Impact

The transformative impact on the women completing the course has been far greater than hoped, with participants reporting improvement in their abilities to drive change, improved self-leadership competencies and enhanced communication skills. Many of the participants noted an increase in their confidence to network, give and receive feedback, and solve problems. They also mentioned improved team leadership abilities, which is significant for women leading large operational and predominantly

male teams. The following story shows the impact of the program on one individual.

Impact story: Susan Makabo is the SIWA Coordinator for the Customer Connections Department. Here she shares her reflections on her leadership growth from the Pathway Program.

"I learned to develop myself from this program, especially my self-confidence. Like in the past if I went to my boss to ask for resources or new staff and he said 'I don't have time for you', then I would just leave. I would hide and then I might not go back to him. But with this program I learned to grow a backbone. When something like that happens now I will go away and think, and then go back and try again and say, 'I need this, if I don't get the resources then this won't be done'.

The [Pathway] program really helped me to lead my team. I was able to have difficult conversations with my team members. In the past if someone was not performing, I would wait and then take my time because I was scared to talk to them because they are men. Because in my culture as a woman I have to respect the men. But then this program helped me to step out of my comfort zone so sometimes I ask them questions that in the past I would not ask. Now as soon as someone is not performing, I will call him straight into my office and say, what's happening? I've seen improvement with my team.

I'm also now practicing inclusive terms. Instead of saying, 'you' I start to use the terms 'we' and 'us'. 'When we do this, this is what will happen'. I find that when I do that my team openly shares their ideas and also help me. I lead a team of plumbers but I'm not a plumber. When I talk to them using inclusive terms, they share their secrets and how they do their job in the field, which also helps me.

The coaching sessions in the Pathway program really helped me. In the past when I had a problem and I would go to my boss and I'd expect him to give me the answers. But through the coaching sessions my coach asked me questions, like 'what do you think you will do?'. These sessions really helped me start to think for myself instead of getting answers from someone else.

I also learnt to accept feedback. In the past I didn't appreciate feedback, whether negative or positive. But now I start looking forward to the feedback to help me grow in my leadership journey. And this feedback also helped me to book my one-to-one sessions with my manager. In the past, the one-to-one sessions were like something that I want to run away from. But after the training, I saw that this training is very helpful and my boss can help me a lot with all the issues that I have. So now I'm one of the first to book my weekly one-to-one sessions and it's helpful for me.

Most of all what I learned is that leadership starts within myself, like self-leadership. To be able to lead my team, I have to be able to lead myself with emotional intelligence.

A key takeaway for me is that I need to keep on practicing my leadership skills. So whatever trainings that I've done, I must practice these skills before they become part of my DNA. If I don't practice them, then it won't be part of me."

In addition to Susan's story, program evaluation and participant co-author inputs have distilled important feedback and insights on program content and delivery that particularly influenced them. Emerging themes and lessons from this feedback cut across: (i) Leadership identity and self-leadership; (ii) Fostering mutual support: the buddy group model; (iii) Self-confidence through skills building and coaching; and (iv) Practising inclusive leadership. Each theme is explored in more detail below.

(i) Leadership identity and self-leadership

IWC's adopted definition of leadership as a social process of influence (CCL, 2020 & 2024) rather than something based in positional power was a new concept to most SIWA participants. When understood, this concept enabled women to assess and develop leader identities and practice self-leadership. Co-author Lucy Habu noted, *"Through the Pathway leadership program, I learned that leadership is for anyone. It's about influence, passion, and stepping forward to create change, not about your position."*

Self-leadership is the foundation of effective leadership. Before leading others, a leader must effectively lead themselves — their mindset, behaviour, energy, and growth. Lucy notes, *"I have intentionally improved my behaviours to build stronger self-leadership skills, self-reflection and self-management."*

The Pathway Program's module on developing a leadership identity was valuable. Cultural norms and expectations of the roles women will play in the home and community often translate as biases from the domestic to work sphere and constrain women's formal employment and career progression (Santana and Pappa, 2015). Cultural expectations limit women's ability to speak up in mixed-gender forums, because "the notion that men are the ones to speak and not women has been ingrained as a normal way of life" (Tavola et al. 2016). Unconscious biases can also create limiting self-perceptions. The program included unconscious bias activities which helped participants realise their own unconscious gender biases. These 'ah ha' moments prompted them to reflect on cultural and personal biases about gender and leadership in their own work and community contexts. The buddy group provided a

platform for women to discuss reflections in a safe and supportive environment.

(ii) *Fostering mutual support: the buddy group model*

The SIWA participants work across multiple physical locations and teams, and as women, have numerous family and community expectations to manage on top of their work responsibilities. Having a buddy group provided the SIWA women with an avenue for emotional support, peer learning and a safe space for feedback to help them on their leadership development journey. The buddy group encouraged a shared learning environment where women were able to share experiences and learn from each other. The group included women from diverse backgrounds, roles and experiences within the organisation. Bringing them together enabled women to broaden their way of thinking as they were exposed to diverse viewpoints. This enhanced their decision making, encouraged innovation and supported inclusive leadership practices.

In Lucy's words, *"This platform played a critical role in strengthening our leadership capability by creating an environment where women could learn, connect and grow together. The buddy group experience is a catalyst for transformation because it challenges us to reflect critically on our assumptions, behaviours and leadership habits. Through the structured dialogue, shared learning and self-awareness practices we begin to be more intentional, values driven leadership."*

The group allowed women to build trust in each other through openness, consistency and shared experiences. Trust is strengthened and valued by individuals when they feel respected, heard and confident that their contributions are valued. When working alongside their peers, women leaders are encouraged to follow through on commitments and actions. Sharing goals with each other and providing peer support creates a sense of responsibility and accountability. The buddy group platform normalised constructive feedback by creating opportunities for reflections and learning which in turn helped develop confidence.

The buddy group platform overtime became a powerful asset and network, strengthening organisational cohesion and ensuring development of women in leadership continues well beyond the initial program.

(iii) *Self-confidence through skills building and coaching*

Low levels of self-confidence is a well-documented barrier to women's leadership development than it is in men (Carlin et al. 2018; Wilkinson and Rose 2022). Feedback from the program has shown that all female participants reported higher levels of self-

confidence to tackle aspects of their work after completing the program. The one-on-one coaching sessions were identified as a critical aspect of success by Level 2 participants, helping them achieve their own development goals and tackle challenges in a confidential and safe environment. Confidence increased in tandem with willingness to try and practice new skills, such as having difficult conversations, seeking and giving feedback, networking and sharing experiences.

Addressing lower levels of self-confidence may help equalise gender disparities in organisations (Wilkinson and Rose 2022), and the strength of positive feedback from participants shows that coaching is effective in building self-confidence for women's self-leadership. In SIWA's case, the program strengthened confidence and shifted mindsets by demonstrating that women are fully capable of taking on roles traditionally undertaken by men.

(iv) *Practising inclusive leadership*

Working within patriarchal systems and normative gender stereotypes, women can face barriers to their leadership development and career progression due to systemic barriers and unconscious bias. Whilst many organisations have gender equality goals, these are often not supported with sufficient resources or attempts to address unconscious bias and entrenched disparities. Equipping women with the knowledge and skills to exercise self-leadership and exert influence can help them feel empowered and supported to address issues and tackle challenges. By adopting inclusive leadership practices women can address bias.

For SIWA, Michelle notes that now, *"when leading teams, we adapt to inclusive leadership behaviours. We are more able to provide the team with clear directions, alignments with strategy and how we can commit to the achievement of these strategies."* As demonstrated in Susan's story above, inclusive behaviours and language can increase trust in women leading male-dominated teams.

The Pathway Program supports the growing awareness within participants of their own leadership potential. Coupled with an increased appreciation of the role unconscious bias plays, participants are more equipped to appreciate and value diversity in their teams. With supported learning and coaching, participants have increased their self-awareness so they can be more vulnerable, and curious and open to others' views and innovative solutions. These behaviours are all ingredients in the recipe for practising inclusive leadership. To reinforce inclusive practices, the SIWA women leaders celebrate small wins and team achievements.

Outcome sustainability and lessons learnt

Efforts to support women's leadership allow women to increase their comfort in pushing boundaries in their own sphere, gauging the best path and strategies to make change. Aside from the conscious decision to support a women's cohort, it was up to the women participants themselves to apply the leadership theory, knowledge, models and insights from coaching sessions to make change.

The first two years of running the Pathway Program has shown that being low cost, accessible online and in a stepped approach, allowing those with time and inclination to extend their leadership practice is reaching the intended audience of senior and mid-career professionals in low and middle-income countries. Inspiring transformational stories have emerged from the SIWA women undertaking the program; particularly Level 2 which includes coaching support and a leadership development plan. Executive and management support to the cohort, including allowing women time to study during work hours, has contributed to high completion rates. The group benefitted from having an Executive and champion leader with positional authority in the first cohort to influence the Executive Management team, carve the way for the first cohort and protect study time when managers raised competing priorities.

As further cohorts join the Program, participants will support each other as mentors, building on the strengths of the 'buddy group' / team model. In the context of the wider Pathway Program more broadly, the buddy group model led to higher completion rates than individual enrolees.

Limitations of the Pathway Program include that it is online only. The SIWA cohort has managed to stay particularly engaged with the Program delivery team as face-to-face connections were possible through World Bank and Asian Development Bank supported visits to Honiara. This included co-designing and co-facilitating a workshop at the Pacific Water and Wastewater Conference in 2025.

The program is also limited to addressing individual leadership goals, relying on participants to align their leadership plans with organisational strategies and objectives. This does not ensure that organisational priorities are addressed. For example, the UWSSSP targets to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions in line with the SIWA Strategic Plan are not directly addressed. This points to opportunities to learn through doing and shape program design to identify success factors for future cohorts.

IWC, World Bank and SIWA are jointly developing a new program, currently called Wave Makers, to further build women's leadership capacity in the

context of organisational goals and how inclusive leadership can contribute to these.

CONCLUSION

SIWA sees leadership training as crucial to changing and influencing organisational culture, contributing to the organisational growth to be not only a sustainable and people-centred service provider but one that also produces outcomes that benefit the country. The Pathway Program has led to transformational changes in SIWA women's leadership practices. This includes greater self-confidence and skill in leading diverse operational teams and practicing inclusive leadership. Women are rising through the structures and taking up more leadership roles with the support of Executive Management. Key factors for success across the **Challenge, Assessment, Support, Reflection, and Celebration** (CASRC) model included:

- Participants were **Challenged** with new concepts, such as leadership definitions and unconscious bias
- **Assessment** included small group participation and leadership plan report.
- They were by a buddy group and coaching, had work time allocated for study and face-to-face meetings and management support.
- **Reflection** was facilitated through small group activities and their LDP. SIWA staff reflected through **Supported** their completion of the Pathway Program that it has helped build their understanding of leadership as a practice that requires ongoing attention and reflection.
- The cohorts **Celebrated** at the completion of the program and receiving the digital award from a reputable university, marking an important achievement in their personal development and career.

The SIWA buddy group model is notable in that it fosters collaboration, mutual support and a sense of striving together. It was an important factor in the high completion rates (90% of Level 1 participants completed and 100% of Level 2). This structured group approach to leadership development is particularly useful in isolated developing country contexts such as those in the Pacific and there is great potential to continue to grow and expand on this model.

IWC aims to grow Level 1 participants to 1,000 per year to broaden impact and leadership skills globally. In the Pacific, strengthened self-leadership, and team and strategic leadership within water institutions will make a lasting contribution to addressing complex and persistent gaps and challenges in water service delivery. Empowering women leaders and fostering inclusive leadership in water organisations contributes to collaborative, diverse, innovative and courageous solutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors acknowledge SIWA Executive Management Team for support to all women enrolled in the Pathway Program, World Bank for financial support and all members and coaches of the Pathway Program team.

REFERENCES

- Bourke, J., & Burton, K. 2023. Empowering diverse teams: Six characteristics of inclusive leaders. Business Think. Online article. <https://www.businessthink.unsw.edu.au/articles/empowering-diverse-teams-six-characteristics-inclusive-leaders>
- Bourke, J., & Dillon, B. 2018. The diversity and inclusion revolution: Eight powerful truths. Deloitte. Online article. <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/diversity-equity-inclusion/diversity-and-inclusion-at-work-eight-powerful-truths.html>
- Carlin, B., Gelb, B., Belinne, J. & Ramchand, L. 2018. Bridging the gender gap in confidence. Business Horizons. 61(5): 765-774.
- Center for Creative Leadership CCL 2020. Direction + alignment + commitment DAC = leadership. Online article. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/make-leadership-happen-with-dac-framework/>
- Carucci, R. 2024. One more time: why diversity leads better performance. Forbes. Online article. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/roncarucci/2024/01/24/one-more-time-why-diversity-leads-to-better-team-performance/>
- Center for Creative Leadership. 2024. How leadership works. Online article. <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/how-leadership-works-DAC-ccl-white-paper.pdf>.
- Center for Creative Leadership. 2023. Inclusive leadership: Steps to take to get it right. Online article. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/when-inclusive-leadership-goes-wrong-and-how-to-get-it-right/>.
- Center for Creative Leadership. 2025, April 24. The 70-20-10 rule for leadership development. Online article. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/70-20-10-rule/>
- Center for Creative Leadership. 2025. What is leadership? A definition based on research. Center for Creative Leadership. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/what-is-leadership-a-definition/>
- Diversity Council Australia (O'Leary, J., Russell, G., & Tilly, J.) 2015. Building inclusion: An evidence-based model of inclusive leadership. Online paper. https://www.dca.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2023/06/dca_inclusive_leadership_synopsis_2022.pdf
- Fiji Bureau of Statistics. 2022. Fiji Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2021. Survey Finding Report. https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS6/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific/Fiji/2021/Survey%20findings/Fiji%202021%20MICS_English.pdf
- Gore, A. 2016, September 7. This is what you need to do for a joyful workplace. LinkedIn article. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/you-need-farc-joyful-workplace-amanda-gore>
- Kotter, J. 2001. What leaders really do. Best of HBR - breakthrough leadership. Harvard Business Review, December, 85–96.
- Kotter, J. P. 2006. Transformation: Master three key tasks. Leadership Excellence, 23(3), 14.
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. 2016. Learning leadership. San Francisco, California: Wiley.
- Lombardo, M., & Eichinger, R. 2002. The leadership machine: Architecture to develop leaders for any future (3rd ed.). Lominger.
- McCauley, C. 2014. Making leadership happen. Greensborough, North Carolina: Center for Creative Leadership. Online paper. Accessed at: <http://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/making-leadership-happen.pdf> (13 November 2024).
- Pacific Community. 2023. Thematic Brief | Myths about gender equality in the Pacific. Pacific Women Lead (PWL) at the Pacific Community (SPC). Suva, Fiji. Online report. https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/cb248af3-23ac-4da6-8eeb-5d1a3ce780dc/resource/38b3e82c-ca53-4725-8d62-bf7a25f0e77a/download/spc-pwl_thematicbrief_myths.pdf
- Porter, J. 2017. Why you should make time for self-reflection (even if you hate doing it). Harvard Business Review online article. Accessed at: <https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-you-should-make-time-for-self-reflection-even-if-you-hate-doing-it>
- PWWA. 2022. PWWA Gender Assessment: Tools and latest results. Presentation at Inclusive WASH Workplaces as part of Pacific WASH Webinar series. Accessed at: <https://events.development.asia/learning-events/inclusive-wash-workplaces-pacific>

PWWA. 2023, August. PWWA Benchmarking report: Post-COVID recovery and new frontiers. Pacific Water and Wastewater Association.

Santana, L., and Pappa, K. 2015. White paper: Challenge: Developing, retaining, and promoting talented women. Center for Creative Leadership. Online article. <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ChallengeDevelopingWomen.pdf>

SIWA. 2025. Solomon Islands Water Authority: Performance Report 2024.

SIWA. 2024. Solomon Islands Water Authority Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan 2024

Tavola, H., Billy, A., and J. Kama. 2016. Advancing Australia's work on leadership and decision making, the 'next level': Scoping study on women in leadership and decision-making. Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Accessed 20 February 2026. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/solomon-islands-scoping-study-womens-leadership-decision-making.docx>

Van Velsor, E., McCauley, C., and Ruderman, M. (eds) 2010. The Center for Creative Leadership handbook of leadership development. 3rd edition. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Water Services Association of Australia. 2025. Belonging, diversity, equity and inclusion in the Australian water sector. Online report. Accessed at: <https://wsaa.asn.au/Web/Web/News-and-Resources/Reports/BELONGING.aspx> (19 June 2025).

Wilkinson, F. & Rose, S. 2022. An exploration of the relationship between self-confidence and female leadership: the role of workplace coaching in supporting gender equality. *Philosophy of Coaching*, 7 (1). pp. 50-64. doi: 10.22316/poc/07.1.04

WHO & UNICEF. 2023. Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022: Special focus on gender. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/progress-on-household-drinking-water--sanitation-and-hygiene-2000-2022---special-focus-on-gender>

World Bank. 2019. Equal Aqua. Online resource. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/inclusive-water-institutions-platform>

World Bank. 2019. Women in Water Utilities: Breaking Barriers. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

World Bank. 2024. Prevalence of stunting, height for age (% of children under 5)—Papua New Guinea. World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org>

