

# WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT

## EXAMINING EXPERIENCES OF AUSTRALIAN FEMALE LEADERS RESEARCH BRIEF

IWDA<sup>1</sup> and APG5045 Gender and Development<sup>2</sup>

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### WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

The Women's Leadership Pathways (WLP) research project explores the experiences of identified, emerging and aspiring women leaders in social, political and economic spheres across five countries in Asia and the Pacific region. WLP is a multi-stakeholder, feminist participatory research project, which strengthens partner capacity, while collecting data that values women's voices and priorities. The research aims to illuminate the enabling factors that support and sustain women leaders and the obstacles they must overcome. Importantly, it examines why women are motivated to lead, given the significant barriers they face.<sup>3</sup>

The WLP research project forms part of Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE), which is a ground-breaking women's leadership program that brings together and supports individual women, organisations, and movements in Asia and the Pacific region to increase the representation of women in diverse leadership positions. WAVE's goal is for diverse women to be equally represented as leaders at all levels of society and to be able to use this power to drive systemic change toward gender equality.

To find out more about WAVE see:

<https://iwda.org.au/wave/>



Participants of the WAVE MP Myanmar Mentoring Program, 2017.  
Photo credit: IWDA

### MONASH UNIVERSITY GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH PROJECT

Since 2016, Monash University and the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) have collaborated to design a research assessment for students undertaking the Gender and Development course. In 2017, this research assessment was formulated to align with the WLP research project.

Students took part in a small pilot study involving interviews with Victorian women leaders in social, health, education, economic and political spheres to chart their pathway to leadership, drawing on the research questions outlined in the WLP research terms of reference. As part of the assessment process, students produced research reports setting out their findings and these provide the basis for this research brief. The research was reviewed and approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. As per the conditions

of the ethics approval, we have changed the names of the leaders to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Students received research methods training in life course interviewing and analysis in class. The students worked in groups and identified a leadership arena to focus their research and interviewee selection. Sixteen women identified as emerging leaders or in leadership positions from a number of diverse spheres and backgrounds were interviewed.

These interviews aimed to explore the various enabling factors and barriers women faced on their leadership journeys, and any commonalities and differences amongst their experiences. All interviewees were based in Victoria, Australia, and the specific leadership spheres that interviewees were drawn from were STEM (Science, Technology,

Engineering and Mathematics), politics, sport, agriculture, law enforcement and social enterprise.

This brief is based on a comparative analysis across these leadership spheres drawing out identified barriers, enablers and experiences which shape women's leadership journeys.<sup>4</sup>

## PERSONAL LEADERSHIP/MOTIVATIONS

A key focus of the WLP research project is to explore why, when women face barriers to entering and remaining in leadership spaces, do women still pursue political, economic and social leadership? The interviews conducted in the Australian context identified some commonalities in relation to the motivations which drive women to take on leadership roles. For example, some women interviewed indicated they not only wanted to further their career, but also desired to pave the way for young women as future leaders. The struggles and barriers which women faced were also identified by some interviewees as compelling and motivating them to start initiatives to encourage female participation in their respective spheres. As one interviewee described:

*"I'm on this thing called Superstars of STEM... Science and Technology Australia, how they wanted to help women become empowered in science and STEM careers and they went on a search for 30 Superstars of STEM to become role models and to get out and tell their story... We just launched our gender equality strategy last Friday. I'm now gender champion, it's fabulous, I'm really excited about it."*

Some of those interviewed see leadership as a 'calling' – something they are meant to do for their community. They described a sense of determination to address perceived injustices, with one participant explaining the importance of taking responsibility as an individual to drive change:

*"You often have to be the one who drives it because there's not many people that are prepared to do it... if you're going to do something, do it yourself."*

Interestingly, not all participants identified themselves as leaders. While some saw leadership as a 'practice' – something begun as a young person ("I was the captain of my primary school") and continued through life, others had been nominated to leadership positions, or found themselves in their position through a combination of chance circumstances. Still other interviewees saw themselves as not yet playing a leadership role in their field.

For example, one research participant in the engineering field stated that she did not yet see herself in a leadership role, but was undertaking academic leadership training. However, her interview revealed that she has been described as a 'rising star' in her department, and has won many awards for her contributions. This raises interesting questions around how women achieving in male-dominated fields may be acting as role models and performing informal leadership roles, even when they do not hold formal leadership positions. These questions provide opportunity for further research into women's leadership and the diverse forms this may take.

## FAMILIAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The influence of family members and familial support was a theme which emerged across the research reports as an enabler for women taking on leadership roles.

For a number of interviewees, family (particularly parent(s)/immediate family) played an integral role in providing and encouraging a supportive environment as well as nurturing interviewees' interests during childhood. Political beliefs of parents seemed to have an effect on shaping their daughters' views, with one participant describing her family as "social justice" oriented, which proved to be a contributing factor in her education and career choice.

Some parents were influential as role models or mentors, being employed in the field that their daughters aspired to enter (e.g. engineering). Others provided space for their daughter's potential leadership aspirations through non-adherence to traditional gender roles and expectations.

Related to this was an emphasis on extra-curricular activities, as well as education (explored below), and instilling a mind-set in daughters that being female is not a hindrance to achieving leadership goals; something which carried through to their adult life. This was the experience for one interviewee, a retired policewoman who achieved a high ranking position in Victoria:

*"I never ever saw discrimination against women from my background... My parents treated us all the same... So, I think coming from that removes a lot of hurdles that are around in your mind... I didn't believe there were any barriers because I was a woman. And so, I haven't actually experienced any because I just continued to roll through irrespective of my gender. So, my parents were fantastic and same with my siblings."*

A number of interviewees identified support from partners and extended family during adulthood as a key contributor to developing their strong work ethic and determination to pursue leadership position. The founder and CEO of a social enterprise said in her interview that:

*"I have a really, really close loving and supportive family who always backed us to do whatever we wanted to do, my partner is amazingly supportive, he supports everything I do, and he has been willing to sit back and let me run around for a couple of years to pursue these wild ideas and not making any money and all that sort of stuff."*

For most interviewees, coming from families or households that were supportive of their interests and aspirations contributed significantly to their development by enhancing their confidence, knowledge and skills they perceived as vital for leadership.

However, there were some interviewees who did not experience a supportive family environment and identified this as a challenge to their leadership journey. An interviewee in a political leadership position described the significant destabilising impact of domestic violence in her home.

This led her to seek out stability through her education, with academic success then enabling her career in politics. Similarly, another interviewee in politics experienced familial hardships, describing her childhood as "unhappy" and suggested that many of her family's struggles could be related to their experiences during and post-World War II. Despite this, she was able to find coping strategies which enabled her to overcome this barrier.

## **WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AND CHILDCARE**

Other key enablers identified in the research reports were workplace flexibility and the provision of accessible and affordable childcare. Working full time in male-dominated spaces means that women are often required to make difficult decisions regarding work-life balance. Frequently, they are faced with the choice to either leave their employment in order to take care of their children at home, or to return to work and rely on the provision of childcare. The most challenging periods are during pregnancy, after giving birth, and during the first few years of the child's life.

Having access to reliable and affordable childcare services was identified as crucial for career progression by a number of interviewees. For one interviewee working in STEM, it enabled her to balance work and family life, particularly during

times when international travel and long hours were crucial to her role. For another, having childcare available on campus allowed her to work part-time as a lecturer while being close enough to breastfeed her child twice a day. She stated, "There are not many places in the world where you can do that..." Workplace flexibility, which responded to the work/life demands of employees was also identified as a key enabling factor by some interviewees. For example, when a participant who formerly worked in academia found out she was pregnant, she was offered flexible working arrangements:

*"[they] said do you want part-time work lecturing while you go through childbearing...and so I did that through two children...that first 6 months I was just doing one three-hour class a week, (...) as they got a bit older, my hours went up, it was a really good job while having really young children."*

## **EDUCATION**

Education was also identified by interviewees as playing a pivotal role in women's pathways to leadership, with involvement in educational institutions described as providing the opportunity to pursue interests, learn and develop skills and to meet potential mentors and develop networks. For one interviewee, being at school enabled her to pursue her interests, particularly when space was opened up by a female teacher:

*"I decided that I love maths and so as my schooling went on I wanted to study more and more maths and that was fine...we had a new teacher join our school, her name was Mrs McGill...She set up a class at the girls school and all of a sudden the number of girls wanting to do it doubled and we actually had the first applied math class. Mrs. McGill had awakened our interest and we had a physics class and all of a sudden we really started to appreciate where we could go with maths."*

Informal leadership spaces at university such as involvement in clubs and societies were also identified as enabling opportunities by some interviewees, particularly in relation to the social networks that resulted from them. For two female entrepreneurs, education provided opportunities to build their social networks, travel, valuable work and volunteer experiences and having access to mentors. In both of their careers, networks have proven to be influential in establishing their social enterprises.

Education can also provide an enabling space when the familial support systems, discussed above, are absent. One interviewee found education to be a key stabilising factor throughout her childhood, adolescence and young adult life. She stated

that difficulties in her home life made her more focused on her schooling, which saw her succeed academically.

Notably it was the enabling environment of education, rather than the content of the education itself, which was emphasised by interviewees. Two women involved in politics as State MPs suggested that education, (particularly higher education) is not required to hold a leadership position in politics:

*"I don't like to say you have to have higher education to be, say, a member of parliament because it should be accessible to all and it isn't a criteria."*

However it was generally acknowledged that higher education yields opportunities which may not be available otherwise.

### **MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS**

One of the main factors identified by interviewees that positively impacted and influenced women's participation in their various leadership spheres has been the role of mentors and role models, including teachers, managers, family and friends. In most interviewees' life courses, there was a strong presence of mentors who were instrumental in driving interviewees to pursue goals that challenged traditional gender roles.

This includes formal and informal mentoring, from within and external to a discipline, but also during formative years. For the co-founder of a social enterprise, relatives, particularly female ones, have always played a focal role in her life:

*"...if I look to strong women in my family, we have always had quite a matriarchal family and probably my grandmother would have been quite influential in that regard for me."*

For the founder and managing director of a technology consulting company, her father played an important role in enabling the development of her core values, business aspiration and in establishing positive gender expectations:

*"...I never heard anything about if you're a woman you couldn't do it, there was never anything like that with my father...my sister and I talked a lot about how our father's work ethic and how he would give anything a go influenced us."*

The importance of female role models within their chosen profession was emphasised by many of the interviewees. For one interviewee working in

agriculture, her female supervisor created a safe and open space for other women to come up with their own reflections and decisions when viewing an issue, and these experiences have indirectly shaped the analytical mind-set that she valued throughout her leadership pathway. Professional mentors were identified as advocates for aspiring female leaders and sources of advice on how to manage politics, people and their motivations. They were also described as a mechanism for countering isolation and exclusion, with some interviewees describing how they participate in women's networking groups as a measure of self-care.

In male-dominated spaces such as the police force and sport, female role models can be particularly critical. The two retired policewomen who were interviewed were fortunate enough to have mentors who supported their career development and progression.

From their positive experiences, they aspired to give other policewomen the same opportunities through initiating mentoring sessions themselves. Another interviewee described the barrier that was created by a lack of female role models in sport and identified this as a reason that she had not focussed on professional sport sooner. She also viewed it as problematic that the emphasis was still on male athletes as mentors in professional sport, which devalues female leadership in the industry.

### **DISCRIMINATORY STRUCTURES AND GENDER NORMS**

In describing their leadership journeys, a key barrier identified by interviewees was the discriminatory structures and gendered stereotypes they faced, particularly in male-dominated professions. This manifested in a lack of access to resources, rigid workplaces with a lack of family friendly policies and inflexible practices, and being deprived of the opportunity to participate and engage in meaningful decision-making. As one interviewee commented, these factors along with the masculine and hierarchal culture in the workplace limited her career development in law enforcement:

*"The barriers I faced were more structural. I got married in 1990 and I have three children. When I had my children, there was no part time policing. So, either you work full time after having the children or you resign."*

These challenges were not confined to women with children, with another interviewee in the same profession noting that colleagues attempted to block her career progression and development on

the basis of her gender. When accessing leadership roles and senior positions, some interviewees faced barriers as a result of societal gender norms being applied to the type of work and roles deemed “appropriate” for women. Two interviewees in STEM encountered resistance from male senior academics, with one stating;

“I did have one boss...in my early career who felt that women with young kids should be at home and not at work. He was from a different generation...”

Interviewees in political leadership positions described how they had to overcome violence and discrimination during their leadership journeys, due to the traditional gender norms present in the political arena. They felt this was exacerbated by their roles as mothers, and saw their gender used against them through personal attacks to their character.

An interviewee from another leadership sphere described how she experienced various forms of discrimination and violence as a direct result of existing gender roles and norms, including sexual harassment:

“I’ve been propositioned at work and had clients say you know – do you f\*\*k on the first date – very, very direct sexist comments to me...and some of it’s just day in and day out, like you know for the men to be talking about the strip clubs the night before, it’s like that has been happening since the first day of my job.”

Another interviewee identified gender norms and discrimination as implicit and acting as a direct barrier to career progression:

“I think that’s probably making light of the fact that women are prejudiced against in a lot of instances particularly in recruitment...I’m sure there’s unconscious bias though and I’m sure that plays a big part in decisions that are made...I went through a couple of rounds of the interview process and then finally I got to a stage where they had to admit that I couldn’t go because I was a woman.”

Discriminatory social norms and attitudes can also impact on women’s confidence in leadership roles. Even when women were qualified and highly skilled, some interviewees revealed that they doubted and lacked confidence in their abilities to be successful leaders, particularly when pitted against men. For example, one interviewee in politics described feeling like she was “not good enough” for certain jobs, despite recognising that she had the skills.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Some interviewees also identified socio-economic factors as barriers to moving into and sustaining leadership opportunities. For one participant in the technology sector, her socio-economic background as a child and adolescence proved to be a significant factor which presented particular challenges on her leadership pathway. Being raised in a “blue collar” or “working class” family and city limited her exposure to adults in a variety of professional roles as most of the parents she knew worked in factories. As she was a first generation university student, she also faced the challenge of being less prepared and less supported at that stage of her life:

“I didn’t even know, I had no idea. I was going to university but I went into university completely blind...it’s not that you aren’t smart enough to do anything but you’re not knowing what you don’t know when you go to class.”

During her early career, she also faced financial pressure and isolation from family support. However, she was determined to succeed, and was able to develop strategies to overcome these barriers. One such strategy was undertaking temporary work to pay for living expenses and rent.

For another interviewee, obtaining financial assistance in a male-dominant environment was complicated as a female entrepreneur. She struggled to get approval from funds and investors when she first introduced her idea of establishing a social enterprise that would empower disadvantaged youth, and also faced legal barriers due to lack of support from authorised domestic and international departments.

## STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS

In finding support on their pathways to leadership women leaders looked inwards as well. The research conducted found that participants adopted mental and physical strategies for self-care and harm minimisation. They developed greater resilience through employing techniques such as self-talk, positive thinking and learning from mistakes, and described themselves as strong and optimistic. For some interviewees, mental detachment such as developing hobbies and engaging in physical exercise served as an outlet to de-stress. For example, one participant who worked in law enforcement utilised both mental and physical strategies as a coping mechanism:

“When I had a particular problem, and I do escape into art, not practicing art, but looking at art. I used

to go and sit in front of [...] my favourite painting in all the world. So if I felt that I was becoming really stressed and I needed to get out of the stress, I just go and sit in front of that for however long it took, might be 10 minutes, might be an hour or two, but I always came away feeling a lot calmer. I [also] swam every morning. And you need that because I get into the pool, thinking about all the issues and I just mentally get rid of them as I swam...And [...] if I couldn't swim I'd go for a walk."

When an interviewee experienced direct public attacks while running in an election, she overcame the emotional distress placed on her by employing the self-care measure of surrounding herself with people who supported her and who she felt she could speak to for advice.

In relation to cases of structural violence, another interviewee was able to minimise harm and manage experiences by playing into gendered roles to deflect and neutralise incidents, commenting that she "...probably just giggled it off". She also intentionally manoeuvred out of roles where gender bias or sexism were present and sought out more positive working environments. She demonstrated a resistance to the inequities and forms of violence experienced by women in business recalling:

"I remember asking in the interview how many women are in senior leadership positions...they [interviewers] were freaked out that I would ask that... [or] they wouldn't answer because it wasn't a good answer...on sexism in the workplace, I don't think anyone of my age would have not experienced sexism, and it comes in so many different forms and it's still so prevalent that it's actually really hard for me to talk about..."

In overcoming such barriers, having a strong sense of self-belief was especially important in showing society that women "can do it." An interviewee in politics said she was adamantly in "defiance of those stories about how women can't have it all", choosing to turn that narrative into a personal challenge. It is this kind of unfaltering determination which has led these women to become emerging and current female leaders in Victoria.

## CONCLUSION

Preliminary findings indicate some parallels between the narratives of Victorian women leaders explored in this research brief and the narratives of women leaders in Asia and the Pacific emerging through the WAVE Women's Leadership Pathways research project. Commonalities in enabling factors include the importance of support and training from mentors and/or other female leaders, support from partners and families and education.

In regards to barriers and challenges, certain cultural and social norms pertaining to women not adhering to "traditional" roles and discriminatory structures were shared issues despite the vastly different cultural contexts. Significantly, having a strong sense of self belief and the determination to challenge gender norms were identified as common coping strategies by most female leaders in this study and as part of the emerging WLP project findings.

The WLP Research project in Asia and the Pacific is entering the second phase of data collection and will be continuing until 2020.

For further information on the research project and for updates on progress please visit

<https://iwda.org.au/learn/research/womens-leadership-pathways/>



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<sup>3</sup> For more information please visit: <https://iwda.org.au/learn/research/womens-leadership-pathways/>

<sup>4</sup> All quotes in this brief are taken from interviews with research participants conducted by Monash University students, 2017.